Central Asian History as Soviet History

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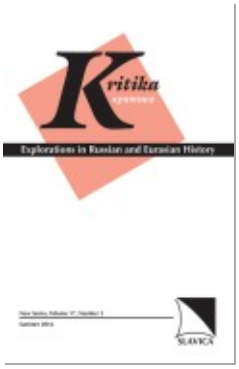

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In a spring 2015 forum in this journal, a group of established scholars discussed Central Asia's place in the field of Russian and Soviet history.[1] Are scholars of Central Asia, they asked, marginalized by—or worse—marginal to the broader profession? The current collection of essays helps answer this question. Here four young historians present research on Central Asia that is not only valuable as Central Asian history but also addresses questions that are absolutely central to the history of the Soviet Union. What did it mean to be "national," to be Soviet, to be both national *and* Soviet? How did World War II transform Soviet citizens and their relationship to one another and to the Soviet state? How did Soviet experts conceive of modernity and economic development? How did the Soviet Union represent itself at home and abroad?

Each of these essays uses valuable, hitherto underutilized sources: soldiers' letters from the front, written in Uzbek and other non-Russian languages; republican archives in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; the writings of Tajik economists; a trove of photographs from the Sovinformbiuro; oral history interviews. Timothy Nunan and Artemy Kalinovsky focus on topics scarcely explored in Soviet Central Asia— visual culture and political economy. Charles Shaw and Moritz Florin approach the more established topics of ethnicity, nationality, and Soviet identity in innovative ways. All four of these essays investigate the wartime and postwar years, crucial periods in Soviet Central Asian history that have only recently become the object of sustained attention. The essays offer a wealth of material for discussion, but I focus here on three themes that make particularly significant contributions to the field of Soviet history, in my view: World War II as a turning point in the transformation of Central Asia (and, by extension, the Soviet Union as a whole); the evolution of identities in Central Asia during and after the war; and the place of Central Asia in the intersection of Soviet domestic and foreign policy during the postwar era.

[1] "Forum: What's So Central about Central Asia?" *Kritika* 16, 2 (2015): 331–94.

World War II as a Turning Point

The first post-Soviet generation of Western scholars in the 1990s and 2000s focused mainly on the period between the revolutions and World War II, for understandable reasons. A wealth of untouched archival materials and indigenous-language sources existed for the 1920s and 1930s that was richer and more diverse than that of the later Stalinist era. From a strictly practical point of view, it made sense to gain an understanding of the early Soviet period before turning to the later decades. These early post-Soviet works focused primarily on nation making, gender, and Islam—all topics that had attracted attention from scholars well before the post-1991 "archival revolution."[2] Taken together, these monographs suggested that the Soviet transformation of Central Asia in the interwar period was incomplete. Indeed, in some ways it had scarcely begun. At the beginning of World War II, mass education continued to be rudimentary, and few Central Asians knew Russian. Most Central Asians remained mystified by, if not completely unfamiliar with, the main tenets of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Efforts to transform the status of women and "backward" family customs had met with limited success. Historians working on the 1920s and 1930s knew—or surmised—that the war and early postwar years were crucial in making Central Asia Soviet, but we did not yet have the evidence to demonstrate this. The next wave of scholarly work turned to the wartime and postwar periods, and dissertations and books dealing with this period have begun to appear in recent years.[3]

Charles Shaw and Moritz Florin emphasize the war as a turning point in the transformation of Central Asia and its integration into the Soviet "imagined community." First and most obviously, the war transformed the

[2] Examples include Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Shoshanna Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001). See also the collection of essays edited by Ron Suny and Terry Martin, *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[3] See, e.g., Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Paul Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City, 1930–1966* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2010); Moritz Florin, *Kirgistan und die sowjetische Moderne, 1941–1991* (Göttingen, V & R unipress, 2015); and Eren Tasar, "Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943–1991" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010).

young Central Asian men who served in the Red Army. As Shaw shows, Uzbek soldiers learned Russian, adapted to Soviet frontline culture, and learned to present themselves in new ways. They also mastered the Soviet culture of frontline letter writing, which included the very non-Uzbek practice of writing to girls they had never met. (In a society in which most marriages were arranged by parents, often to relatives, the radical departure represented by this practice cannot be overstated.)

The war also made Uzbekistan a more visible part of the Soviet community for ethnically Russian soldiers. In their military units they got to know Uzbeks and other Muslims, who dispensed cultural and linguistic advice to lovelorn Russians pining for girls like Inobatxon and O'g'ulxon. In the process of writing these letters, Russians came to include Uzbekistan in "a common Soviet romantic community" (539). Since the girls were illiterate, did not know Russian, and would never have been permitted by their families to form liaisons with unknown soldiers, Shaw notes that this Soviet community was an illusion. One of the strengths of Shaw's essay is its inclusion of multiple perspectives; he shows us what the letters to Inobatxon and O'g'ulxon may have meant to their authors, to the young Uzbek women themselves, and to the women's families and communities.

Kyrgyz men were also transformed by their wartime service. Florin shows that Kyrgyz soldiers came home speaking Russian and with new, Soviet ways of doing things. More broadly, the war ultimately "Sovietized" the rural Kyrgyz in a way that the rural upheavals of the 1930s had not. Early in the war, the rural population did not identify with the Soviet state's campaign against the Nazis, and it was not clear that they would willingly fight. Yet a more relaxed state policy toward Islam and more inclusive wartime propaganda made it easier for rural Kyrgyz to identify with the Soviet state. Even if they did not share Soviet ideology, they could "identify with a community of suffering and heroism that was created by war" (495). Both of these essays show the transformative impact of wartime experiences on frontline soldiers and on their compatriots back home.

Being National and Being Soviet

Identities were a sphere of profound transformation during the war and afterward. Ethnicity and nationality have been major topics of study in Soviet history since 1991, in large part because of the unexpected failure of Soviet "nationality policy" and emergence of independent states in the region. In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was intense interest in understanding the centrifugal forces that had destroyed the USSR, which gave rise to a

preoccupation with national identities.[4] More recently the pendulum has swung back toward explaining the persistence of the Soviet state and the forces that held it together. The result has been a focus on the "friendship of peoples" and an effort to take the *sovetskii narod* or Soviet people seriously as something more than an empty ideological slogan.[5]

Central Asia is an especially important locus for investigating the interplay of identities in the USSR. On the one hand, the major "national" identities in the region—Turkmen, Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh—were to a large extent a creation of the early Soviet era. On the other hand, Central Asian republics had become firmly Soviet by the end of the 1980s—so much so that they virtually lacked national independence movements and were reluctant to leave the union's fold in 1991. Understanding how Central Asians combined ethnic and national identities with feelings of being Soviet requires careful attention to the subjective experiences of people in the region.

Shaw and Florin make valuable contributions in this regard. Both authors show that an embryonic Soviet identity was forming among Central Asians and others during the war. Shaw argues that wartime letters from soldiers "illustrate how soldiers balanced national and Soviet aspects of their identities" (536). The letters, he notes, "gave Uzbek men the chance to affirm the friendship of peoples for themselves" (544).

Yet both authors suggest that this was an "imagined community" with limits and that the spread of Soviet identity was uneven. Gender was one of the most important limiting factors; Central Asian women did not undergo the same transformation that their brothers and fathers in the Red Army did. They were much less likely to have learned Russian, to have met non-Muslims, or to have visited other parts of the USSR. The Uzbek girls who received letters

[4] The founding work of modern Soviet nationality studies is Ronald G. Suny, *Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). Other important works include Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, 2 (1994): 414–52. On nationalities in Central Asia, see Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Edgar, *Tribal Nation;* Ali Igmen, *Speaking Soviet with an Accent: Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2012); and Benjamin Loring, "Building Socialism in Kyrgyzstan: Nation-Making, Rural Development, and Social Change, 1921–1932" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2008).

[5] See, e.g., Maike Lehmann, *Eine sowjetische Nation: Nationale Sozialismus-interpretationen in Armenien seit 1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2012); and Tasar, "Soviet and Muslim."

from the front did not share the Russian soldiers' assumptions about gender relations. Thus the soldiers' inclusion of them in a Soviet imagined community was illusory, with physical distance obscuring the fact that they had little in common. Florin shows that the "Soviet people" was limited by both gender and ethnicity. The darker side of the transformation of the Kyrgyz had to do with the deportations of "enemy nations" to their republic. The war led to the inclusion of rural Kyrgyz in a community of patriotism but also created new lines of exclusion between "patriot nations" and "enemy nations" (516).

Even as Soviet identity became more important during and after the war, national identities were simultaneously being consolidated within each republic. For Florin, Kyrgyz soldiers were learning to be not just Soviet but also Kyrgyz—a "patriot nation," with its own pantheon of heroic wartime martyrs. Leninist nationality policy had posited that ethnic groups had to become nations before they became socialist, but in Central Asia, becoming national and becoming socialist occurred simultaneously.[6] Among Soviet scholars, understandings of ethnicity became increasingly primordialist beginning in the postwar era.[7] The Soviet concept of nationality dating back to the 1920s was a historical and cultural construct having little to do with heredity or race. However, the "ethnos" theorized by the leading Soviet ethnographer Iulian Bromlei beginning in the 1960s had strong biological overtones. Criticized by other scholars for his "biologization of the ethnos," Bromlei ultimately maintained that the ethnos was "biosocial" in nature, with endogamy, or marriage within the group, its defining feature.[8] The strongly essentialist concept of ethnicity propagated by the maverick geographer Lev Gumilev was also influential in academic circles.[9]

Timothy Nunan and Artemy Kalinovsky both deal with the impact of rising ethnic primordialism in spheres where it might not seem obviously relevant, namely visual culture and political economy. Nunan argues that in the postwar years Soviet photographers created "a stable visual language for representing Soviet ethnofederalism" (556). Part of this language was

[6] See Tasar, "Soviet and Muslim"; and Florin, *Kirgistan und die sowjetische Moderne*.

[7] On the primordialization of identities in the Stalinist era, see Terry Martin, "Modernization or Neo-Traditionalism? Ascribed Nationality and Soviet Primordialism," in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Marlène Laruelle, "The Concept of Ethnogenesis in Central Asia: Its Political Context and Institutional Mediators, 1940–50," *Kritika* 9, 1 (2008): 169–88.

[8] Iu. V. Bromlei, "Etnos i endogamiia," *Sovetskaia etnografiia*, no. 6 (1969): 84–91; see also "Obsuzhdenie stat´i Iu. V. Bromlei 'Etnos i endogamiia,'" *Sovetskaia etnografiia*, no. 3 (1970): 87–88.

[9] Mark Bassin, *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism, and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

the use of "national types" in photography, relying on essentialist notions of nationality to determine what those "types" should look like. Photographs of Soviet Central Asian women, students, and others had to be "nationally" marked, by means of ethnic signifiers such as a "native" backdrop. Central Asians, Nunan writes, were to be depicted as modern, yet visibly national, "members of a primordial nation and yet assimilated into a supranational Soviet citizenry" (569). In this manner, much like what Timothy Mitchell has described for colonial Egypt, the photographers of the Sovinformbiuro rendered Central Asia legible to Soviet citizens as well as to foreign viewers.[10] Despite the Sovinformbiuro's determination to underscore the absence of a racial hierarchy in the USSR, Nunan notes that Soviet photographers inadvertently created images in which Central Asian visitors to Moscow were subject to "orientalizing tropes and visual hierarchies" (573). Revealingly, a Turkmen horseman was described by the Soviet press as a "handsome specimen" in precisely the same language used to praise his mount (573).

In economic debates, too, primordialist arguments about ethnicity played a role in the late Soviet era. Kalinovsky shows that both central and republican economists drew on these ideas, though with different results. Officials in the Brezhnev era sought to understand why rural Tajiks failed to take advantage of job opportunities in modern industry. Ethnographers argued that cultural obstacles were to blame and that industrial planners needed to take into account "native traditions" and values. Economists in Moscow used such cultural essentialism to argue against overinvesting in Tajikistan's industrial development. Kalinovsky shows that Tajik economists rejected these ideas, arguing that it was the socialist state, not the people of Tajikistan, that needed to adapt. For local specialists, cultural factors "needed to be understood and acted upon" (620), not used as an excuse to discriminate against Central Asian republics. Rather than expecting Tajiks to migrate to other parts of the USSR to work in factories, for example, the factories should come to the regions of Tajikistan where potential workers actually lived. To those Moscow-based scholars who argued that the industrial development of Central Asian republics would be a waste of time and resources, Tajik economists countered that regional specialization—with some republics concentrating on industry and others on providing raw materials—would perpetuate inequality.

Kalinovsky's essay demonstrates that indigenous economists had distinct ideas and approaches and did not always follow Moscow's lead.[11] Since

[10] Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[11] On indigenous anthropologists and their relationships to Moscow-based scholars, see the essays in Florian Mühlfried and Sergey Sokolovskiy, eds., *Exploring the Edge of Empire: Soviet Era Anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia* (Berlin: Lit, 2011).

most research on Soviet specialists has focused on Moscow and Leningrad,[12] shifting the focus to indigenous Central Asian scholars allows us to see Soviet economic planning and priorities from a different and potentially more critical perspective—through the eyes of people who were simultaneously insiders and outsiders. Kalinovsky also places Central Asian experts within the broader history of 20th-century debates about development and modernization. He shows that indigenous economists based in Tajikistan were far from cut off by the Iron Curtain but actively engaged in debates with scholars in the West and the Third World. This is an important corrective to the view that Soviet scholars, with the exception of the most well-connected and well-traveled academics from Moscow and Leningrad, labored in isolation until the perestroika era.

Central Asia between Domestic and Foreign Policy

For Kalinovsky, the growth of republican specialists in Tajikistan and elsewhere was linked to Soviet involvement in the Third World during the Cold War. Central Asia was supposed to serve as a model of development, and this meant, among other things, that each republic needed to have its own contingent of educated specialists. It was important to show the world that Central Asia was not a colony with policies imposed by Moscow. By the late 1960s, a well-established group of Tajik economists interacted with their counterparts in India and elsewhere and sought to influence Moscow's policies on the development of their republic. Like development economists in India, these economists saw the state as a vehicle of modernization and development. Like critics of modernization theory in the West, they argued for sensitivity to the cultural specificities of each region.

Nunan relates domestic concerns to Cold War foreign policy in the field of visual culture. He shows that the shift from anti-imperialism to anti-Westernism and anticosmopolitanism in the early Cold War led to changes in Soviet photography, including a greater focus on Central Asia and the Soviet periphery. Communist party officials demanded less coverage of "cosmopolitan" subjects in major cities. The antisemitism that was at the root of anticosmopolitanism played a key role here, since allegedly too many of the urban subjects being photographed were Jews. The focus on Jewish "enemies within" complemented the anti-Western preoccupation with imperialist external enemies. In this way, Nunan maintains, the Cold War "linked domestic visual orders with the foreign political order" (582).

[12] See, e.g., Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*.

In last year's forum, Japanese scholar Uyama Tomohiko argued that recent work on Central Asia has mainly served to elaborate on the pathbreaking works that appeared in the 1990s and early 2000s, without offering much in the way of innovative ideas or approaches.[13] I disagree with this assessment. Scholarship in the past ten years has begun to examine political economy, agriculture, the history of knowledge production, urban planning and development, cinema and photography, and other topics that were relatively neglected in the first wave of post-Soviet scholarship.[14] Studies of the Russian and Soviet periphery, including Central Asia, have also illuminated "old" topics in new ways. To cite just two examples, recent work on the devastating famine in Kazakhstan during the 1930s has breathed new life into long-standing debates about the nature of the much more extensively studied famine in Ukraine. The view of the Holodomor as a genocide specifically targeting Ukrainians cannot help but be affected by the awareness that an even larger proportion of the ethnic Kazakh population starved to death during collectivization. Research on collectivization and sedentarization in Central Asia has revised notions about the extent of resistance to the Stalinist transformation of the countryside.[15] A significant amount of this original recent work has been produced in Europe, in languages other than English, which reinforces the value of *Kritika*'s mission to move beyond a focus on Anglo-American scholarship. The freshness of recent scholarship on Central Asia may explain why so many recent Soviet history jobs have gone to scholars working on the Eurasian periphery, just as many positions in British history have been filled by historians of the British Empire.[16]

[13] Uyama Tomohiko, "The Contribution of Central Eurasian Studies to Russian and (Post)-Soviet Studies and Beyond," *Kritika* 16, 2 (2015): 342.

[14] See, e.g., Christian Teichmann, *Macht der Unordnung: Stalins Herrschaft in Zentralasien, 1920–1950* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2016); Julia Obertreis, "Imperial Desert Dreams: Cotton Growing and Irrigation in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, 1860s–1991" (PhD diss., University of Freiburg, 2009); Heather Sontag, "Photography and Mapping Russian Conquest in Central Asia: Early Albums, Encounters, and Exhibitions, 1866–1876" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2011); Stronski, *Forging Tashkent;* and Sarah Amsler, *The Politics of Knowledge in Central Asia: Science between Marx and the Market* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[15] Important works include Sarah Cameron, "The Hungry Steppe: Soviet Kazakhstan and the Kazakh Famine, 1921–1934" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2010); Robert Kindler, *Stalins Nomaden: Hunger und Herrschaft in Kasachstan* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2014); Niccolò Pianciola, *Stalinismo di frontiera: Colonizzazione agricola, sterminio dei nomadi e costruzione statale in Asia Centrale (1905–1936)* (Rome: Viella, 2009); and Isabelle Ohayon, *La sédentarisation des Kazakhs dans l'URSS de Staline: Collectivisation et changement sociale, 1928–1945* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2006).

[16] David Schimmelpennick van der Oye, "On the Edge? Central Asia's Place in the Field," *Kritika* 16, 2 (2015): 392–93.

The articles in this forum continue to bring new approaches and sources to bear on the history of Soviet Central Asia. Despite a more challenging research environment for scholars working on the wartime and postwar periods, these historians creatively combine archival documents, published primary sources, visual sources, and oral history methodology to analyze Soviet Central Asian history. Far from being marginal, it is increasingly clear that Central Asia is a vital and essential part of Russian and Soviet history, without which the latter cannot be fully understood. The "new imperial history" that has come to dominate British studies suggests that it is impossible to consider the "metropole" and the "periphery" separately. These historians have shown that the empire had a huge impact not only on culture and identity in British imperial possessions but also in Britain itself. Accordingly, studies of the imperial periphery have been some of the most influential works in British history in the last couple of decades. A similar trend has taken hold in the historiography of the Soviet Union, with studies of the periphery revising long-held ideas based on research in Russia.[17]

A final point: these four essays also show the value of Soviet Central Asian history for understanding post-Soviet Eurasia, including Russia. For example, Nunan argues that the post-Soviet Central Asian states continue to represent "national culture" visually in ways inherited from the Soviet past (583). Florin observes that the Kyrgyz today hold certain myths about the wartime friendship between indigenous Central Asians and the evacuated and deported peoples in their republic. True or not, the stories Central Asians tell about the past reveal a great deal about perceptions of contemporary ethnic relations and hopes for the future. In Kazakhstan, for example, such myths are closely related to the current view of Kazakhstan as a "Eurasian" land of ethnic harmony between Europeans and Asians. While the nostalgia for the Soviet Union that is omnipresent in post-Soviet Eurasia may evoke the USSR as a "beautiful but dead past,"[18] the study of ethnic primordialism in the postwar Soviet Union illuminates the roots of racism in the post-Soviet republics and the origins of contemporary imperial Russian nationalism.

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[17] The same trend is evident in studies of imperial Russia, though this is outside the scope of this forum.

[18] Uyama, "Contribution of Central Eurasian Studies," 343.