CENTRAL ASIA RESEARCH FORUM

Social and Cultural Change in Central Asia

The Soviet legacy

Edited by
Sevket Akyildiz and Richard Carlson

ROUTLEDGE

Social and Cultural Change in Central Asia

Focusing on Soviet culture and its social ramifications both during the Soviet period and in the post-Soviet era, this book addresses important themes associated with Sovietisation and socialisation in the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

The book contains contributions from scholars in a variety of disciplines, and looks at topics that have been somewhat marginalised in contemporary studies of Central Asia, including education, anthropology, music, literature and poetry, film, history and state-identity construction, and social transformation. It examines how the Soviet legacy affected the development of the republics in Central Asia, and how it continues to affect the society, culture, and polity of the region. Although each state in Central Asia has increasingly developed its own way, the book shows that the states have in varying degrees retained the influence of the Soviet past, or else are busily establishing new political identities in reaction to their Soviet legacy, and in doing so laying claim to, re-defining, and reinventing pre-Soviet and Soviet images and narratives.

Throwing new light and presenting alternate points of view on the question of the Soviet legacy in the Soviet Central Asian successor states, the book is of interest to academics in the field of Russian and Central Asian Studies.

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Introduction

The Soviet cultural legacy

Sevket Akyildiz and Richard Carlson

Social and Cultural Change in Central Asia: The Soviet legacy is a new collection of essays written by young academics and researchers that looks at how the past continues to drive social, cultural, and political change in the five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The contributions are the work of scholars from several countries, including from Central Asia. The authors represent different academic disciplines, and they draw on a range of research methodologies, including fieldwork in the region and on written sources in several languages.

The aim of this book is to examine how pre-Soviet and Soviet institutions, formal and informal cultural, social and political practices, values and norms have affected the development of the republics in Central Asia, and how they continue to affect the societies, cultures and polities of the region. The research and analysis presented in the book shed new light and alternate points of view on the complex question of the 'Soviet legacy' in the Central Asian successor states. This book is a cultural and social study and addresses important themes associated with Sovietisation and socialisation in Central Asia and the continuity of these ideas and concepts in the post-Soviet period. We focus upon Soviet cultural production and its social ramifications, both during the Soviet period and after independence in 1991. Significantly, we focus upon themes that have been somewhat marginalised in contemporary studies of Soviet Central Asia: state education, sociology, anthropology, music, literature and poetry, film, history and state-identity construction, and problematic social transformation.

This book takes a multidisciplinary approach and examines different historical, cultural, social, anthropological, and political themes to show how and why the Soviet legacy affects the region to this day. The chapters include research derived from field work in Central Asia (Diana Kudaibergenova, Isaac Scarborough, Christopher Schwartz, and Harun Yilmaz), library and archive research (Sevket Akyildiz, Alex Calvo, Richard Carlson, Jacqui Freeman, Frederick Lamy, Barry Mowell, Alyssa Moxley, Alva Robinson, and David P. Straub), and oral history (Schwartz). All of the chapters are qualitative studies, with some authors using semi-structured interviews and participant observation. All the authors completed their chapters while studying at Western universities and are active members of Central Asian, Middle Eastern and Muslim research

communities. Several of the authors speak Russian, and some are speakers of Central Asian languages.

In comparison to other books in the field, our text is unique. Most books on the subject focus on the state and concentrate on political elites and the capitalist economic changes made since independence.[1] Often the discussion in these books can best be described as high politics with little sense of the local culture having been examined. A small number of texts cover similar topics to those of our authors but take a more anthropological or gender-study approach, and do not provide such a wealth of different methodologies, or do not cover as many countries.[2] Lastly, other books concentrate on post-Soviet society with an emphasis solely on politics, democratisation, Islam, and the so-called 'war on terror' without drawing upon the complexity of the Soviet legacy in the local society and in the mentalities of the indigenous peoples.[3]

Before examining the Soviet legacy we need to define what Central Asia means to the authors of this book. In this book we examine the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It is a distinct geographic entity with the countries bordered by Russia to the north, China (and Xinjiang) to the east, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains to the west, and Afghanistan (and Pakistan) to the south. As the focus of the book is the Soviet legacy, and as these five countries have a direct legacy of Soviet rule, and of Russian imperial rule directly before, it is justifiable that we focus upon them. Prior to the Soviet transformation, this area was occupied mostly by nomadic peoples, with a number of regional local rulers in the oasis zones in what is now Uzbekistan and in the Ferghana Valley. Also, by defining the region in this way, we exclude other regional countries that would be better included in a discussion about the wider concept of 'Eurasia'. Today, more than 20 years after independence, the singular concept of a 'Central Asia' is somewhat problematic given the changes in each country.[4] However, it is the contention of the writers of this book that despite the differences in the developments of the five countries since independence, and arguably even during the Soviet period, they all shared a common history for over 70 years, and this common history continues to shape their social and political life.

The Soviet legacy

In the last 100 years Central Asian societies and communities have experienced three forms of government imposed upon them from outside. The Central Asians went from being one of the numerous multinational peoples ruled by the Russian Tsar, to the authoritarian control of the Communist Party, to independence under another radical ideology, namely liberal capitalism. Indeed, in the last century, massive social and political upheavals were seen twice in Central Asia: first between 1917 and 1922 at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent civil war, followed by the collectivisation and political purges in the late 1920s and 1930s, then second after independence in 1991 as the former Soviet republics made the ideological and economic transition to a post-Soviet world.

How much of the past was retained in these states? There has been a tendency, particularly among governments and international aid organisations, to see independence in 1991 as a fundamental break, as a chance to rewrite society, in much the same way the Bolsheviks saw the 1917 Revolution – as an opportunity to transform the people and the society. Yet 70 years of Soviet rule does not and did not just disappear, just as traditional cultures and customs did not disappear under Soviet rule.

Reflecting upon events after 1991 today we can see that the social and cultural change in Central Asia has been gradual and piecemeal, and that each state has started in its own way. There are two main influences that are common to all the countries in the region. The first was from Western governments and international organisations that expected that the independent Central Asian states would follow the 'Western' model and globalise. To varying degrees, the countries of Central Asia have become integrated into the globalised political and economic systems; but their history was not thrown into the rubbish bin. The second main influence was the fact that the Central Asian republics had independence thrust upon them and did not have any blueprint for their new state or society. As a result, when designing these blueprints, in many cases the states fell back to using what they knew: the Soviet system.

The legacy of radical social transformation under Communist Party-rule shaped Central Asian societies in ways that could be considered beneficial, such as mass literacy and education, industrialisation, urbanisation, secularisation, and gender equality. Other legacies have proved to be more contentious, such as Marxism-Leninism, Russification, political centralisation and, in the case of Uzbekistan, cotton monoculture.[5] While Marxism-Leninism has disappeared, at least from the public discourse, many of the other contentious legacies remain throughout the region, for example the Aral Sea disaster, contamination of nuclear test sites and the environment in general and water-management problems.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union following the resignation of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev on 25 December 1991, the five republics have travelled along very different trajectories politically, economically, and culturally. As a result of their collective and individual histories of invasion and conquest by powerful outsiders, all five Central Asian societies contain a mix of indigenous and imported cultures and identities. This book will show that despite the divergent paths of the five so-called 'Stans' they have to varying degrees retained in their institutions and collective consciousness the influence of Soviet culture, or else are busily establishing new nationalist cultural identities in reaction to their Soviet legacy, and in doing so are laying claim to, re-defining, and reinventing pre-Soviet and Soviet images, heroes, cultures, and customs. But even when the independent states seek to forge new identities and culture it is the Soviet cultural model that they either deliberately set aside or seek to recast in a new light. Either way the catalyst for change has been the Soviet cultural model.

State-managed culture

The aim of Soviet socialisation and acculturation processes was to foster a universal civic culture across all institutions and in the minds of all citizens. Yet, even as the Soviet leadership coerced the masses into building a centralised state a degree of multiculturalism was written into the constitution and native folk culture, dress, music, and sports were promoted. Isaac Scarborough discusses this aspect of everyday cultural life in the example of the multinational 'special settlers' of Turkmenistan, and Alyssa Moxley looks at the influence of traditional and Western-influenced music in Uzbekistan. Furthermore, both the political elite as cultural managers, and locally based journalists, writers, artists, and educators as cultural producers were employed by the state to propagate the official doctrine and vision. Some of these employees complied and others subtly questioned the official messages; the theme of compliance and resistance is described in Alva Robinson's chapter on literature.

In comparison, after 1991 the independent governments supported modern and folk cultural practices to give authenticity to their political vision of a post-Soviet nation-state. Long gone are the days when Marxist values of racial equality and social egalitarianism were actively propagated to bond ethnic plurality. Ethnic difference is tolerated but today each 'ethnic Central Asian' republic feels the need for an authentic national folk culture and identity. Each encourages elements of their inherited shared Soviet culture, such as historiography, national literary icons, the memory of the Second World War, modern and folk sports, and artistic styles and symbols, but do so now to foster particular national interests and identities, and, equally to label neighbouring countries as the cultural 'other'. Furthermore, political and social traditions have endured since 1991, as shown by the survival of the elites and social networks since independence. Diana Kudaibergenova, Richard Carlson, Frederick Lamy, and David P. Straub examine how political cultures and traditions have endured and changed since independence.

The historical background

To put the subjects of this book in context, a brief historical overview is required. Russia's interest in Central Asia began in the nineteenth century. Imperial Russia expanded into this steppe land between the 1820s and 1846. A line of forts was first constructed on the Syr Darya River (Jaxartes River) around 1853, with the Russians founding the urban centre of Alma-Ata (Almaty) in 1854. The Khanate of Khiva and the Emirates of Kokand and Bukhara, in what is now Uzbekistan, were annexed or made into protectorates between 1839 and 1881. In 1866 the region was divided into the Kazakh region, which included the Kazakh steppe, and the land to the south of the steppe called the Turkestan Govenor-Generalship. The Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva were outside the governor-generalship but remained Russian protectorates.

In the 1917 Revolution, the Bolsheviks captured the Russian state apparatus in order to build their communist society. Following the Russian Civil War, which ended in 1922, the Bolsheviks slowly secured control over Central Asia and were

largely successful, creating a 'voluntary union of nations' and forming two autonomous Soviet socialist republics (ASSR), which they initially called Kyrgyz ASSR (roughly what is today Kazakhstan), and Turkestan ASSR, which included most of the remainder. Once the institutions of the state, the economic base and the territory were under their control, the communists in Central Asia, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, implemented a radical social transformation project designed to inculcate their vision and to modernise all citizens to what their political aims and ideology called for. The project was designed to break down Islamic practices and tribal and ethnic loyalties to create a new 'socialist people'.

One of the first stages in the Revolution was the re-ordering by Lenin and Stalin of the historic nations (*natsii*) of the region based upon territory, language, economy, and shared culture. Two processes were undertaken in Central Asia: nation-building and state-building. In balancing nation-building at the republican level (*national'noe stroitel'stvo*) and state-building (at the federal level) it was decided to create 15 new republics and a number of autonomous regions from the former Imperial Russian territory. Central Asia was reconstructed to form the Soviet Socialist Republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan (both established in 1924), Tajikistan (established in 1929), Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan (both established in 1936), with their borders more or less what they are now.

The reasons for this delimitation are debated, with some arguing that it was part of Stalin's plan to create 'modern' nation-states, which were required under the Marxist-Leninist model for development, as a way to prevent pan-Turkism-Islamism, or as a result of Russian chauvinism. In constructing the Soviet republics the titular nationalities were given a special status. Soviet nationality (or ethnicity, *narodnosti*) provided the foundation for the Soviet federation of republics, along with the civic identity of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, established in 1922). Delimitation allowed for the reorganisation of territorial space and the creation of national histories and languages. But the delimitation and promotion of the titular ethnicities was not decolonisation. As Shirin Akiner writes, 'The national delimitation … was the first step towards a far more radical form of colonisation than had been practiced under Tsarist rule.'[6]

The layout of the book

In conjunction with the national delimitation, the implementation of a radical social transformation was instituted in all of the Central Asian republics. From the 1930s onwards there was an attempt to make the people 'Soviet' through a process referred to as 'Sovietisation'. Part 1 of this book is primarily concerned with the social transformation during the Soviet era. In Chapter 1, Sevket Akyildiz investigates the key role of mass education in the building of the Marxist-Leninist consciousness and in the spreading of civic values and norms. Focusing on the newly constructed Soviet republic of Uzbekistan between 1924 and 1991, with a special attention on vocational-technical schools (trade schools) in the 1980s, Akyildiz's detailed study argues that mass education was one of the most important and successful channels for transforming society and the economy and for

spreading the communist ideology. Soviet education was designed to help embed a communist and 'modern' culture in the local space and in the minds of children and teenagers. Women's rights played a large role in this Soviet transformation, and in Chapter 2 Jacqui Freeman outlines the significance of women's liberation in the Soviet social transformation model. Adopting and adapting classical Marxism, the Soviets envisaged women as a 'surrogate proletariat' whose liberation would undermine the hold of traditional Islamic customs, such as the patriarchal family structure and gender differentiation in labour practices, and aid the development of the Sovietisation of society.

Yet the Communist Party's transformation of Central Asia was not just about removing the traditional and Islamic past, and in line with the national theories behind delimitation, the use of local culture and history was encouraged in order to create 'nations'. Local culture was also coerced or co-opted by larger Soviet cultural forms, creating a new cultural fusion. In Chapter 3, Harun Yilmaz argues that national heritage and national elements were always important ingredients of the official policy on cultural construction. He examines how Soviet officials used stories of *batyrs*, folk heroes among the nomadic Kazakh tribes, in Soviet Kazakh historiography in 1936–41. This also shows that contrary to the claims of the contemporary regimes in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states, the construction of a national past did not start in 1991, and that history in the region has been used by different people at different times for different purposes.

Alyssa Moxley, in Chapter 4, continues examining this cultural fusion by describing how in Central Asia the cultures of national identities were formed partly in opposition and partly in symbiosis with Soviet institutions. Conflicting ideologies about what is traditional, authentic heritage are especially controversial in Central Asia because of perceptions of the Soviet state as an imposing monolithic cultural force, manufacturing and imposing nationalities on its smaller republics. In her chapter, Moxley looks at how the influence of Russian musical paradigms did not dominate Central Asian forms, and how in Central Asia there was an ideologically driven programmatic development of the use of Western music and indigenous folk music.

Another area in which local and Soviet cultures collided was in cinema and literature. Barry Mowell, in Chapter 5, explores the cinema of Central Asia and the underlying political, socio-economic, and cultural factors that have varied over the course of time to influence cinematic traditions within the region. He examines the commonalities as well as the distinguishing characteristics of the cinematic traditions within the five republics before and after independence, in addition to offering an appraisal of cinema in the region as a whole. In Chapter 6, Alva Robinson looks at how socialist realism, a literary and artistic doctrine promoted by Moscow, developed in Central Asia after 1934. This chapter focuses upon two distinct yet very different Kyrgyz writers: Mirzabek Toybayev (1934–) and Chingiz Aitmatov (1928–2008).

The Second World War greatly affected Central Asia, as it did the rest of the Soviet Union. Chapter 7, by Alex Calvo, examines the Second World War in two areas. He looks at the social changes brought to Central Asia by the war, before

examining the narrative of the war by the Soviet authorities in Central Asia, the resulting memories and identity transformations in the post-war era, and the way in which post-1991 independent governments and Central Asian societies have chosen to remember these events. Another aspect of the war, and of Stalinism, was the mass deportation of people – *kulaks* (rich peasants) and 'punished peoples', minorities that were not considered trustworthy – from elsewhere in the Soviet Union to Central Asia. In Chapter 8, Isaac Scarborough studies the development of a unique Turkmen version of a Soviet identity; one that was formed with the deportations of the *kulaks* and 'punished peoples'. Yoloten in eastern Turkmenistan is used as a case study to examine communities in Turkmenistan that were formed in part by 'special settlers' and other deported populations.

When Mikhail Gorbachev became leader of the Soviet Union in 1985, it was becoming clear that economic and nationalist (especially in the Baltic republics) strains on the country were threatening the existence of the federal union. He introduced two reform concepts, one involving greater economic freedoms and a less centralised command economy, referred to as *perestroika*, and another that promoted greater openness and freedom, referred to as *glasnost*. However, the reforms were not enough, and following an attempted coup by hard-liners in August 1991, Gorbachev's resignation on 25 December 1991 effectively peacefully dissolved the Soviet Union. In its wake, there was an attempt to create a loose federation, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but each individual republic was now an independent and sovereign country. New political loyalties and new cultural identities, for the third time in the twentieth century alone, were required.

Unlike in other newly independent republics, independence was not greeted with great enthusiasm in the five Central Asian republics. Sally Cummings writes that, for example, Kazakhstan's independence was by 'default' as the dissolution of the rest of the Soviet Union left it with no choice.[7] There has also been a continuation of political control, with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan retaining their pre-independence political elite and presidents (until the death of Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan in 2006). Part 2 of this book looks at the effect of independence and how the states and societies quickly adjusted to their new independence, while at the same time retaining much of their Soviet heritage. The 70 years of Soviet rule in Central Asia was not a cultural and social dark age. Socially and politically, the transition to independence in the Central Asian states was built on, for good or bad, their Soviet legacy.

Chapter 9, by Richard Carlson, examines why there is still a democratic deficit in Kazakhstan, and Central Asia as a whole. He looks at how despite Kazakhstan becoming one of the most globalised of all the Central Asian states since independence, and despite the belief that the liberal globalisation model of free trade and civil society would quickly usher in democracy, Kazakhstan has become even less democratic and more authoritarian since independence. Carlson argues that the reasons for this lie in the liberal globalisation model, which unintentionally has created dependency and a form of social rentierism that is inhibiting the growth of democracy.

This continuity can also be seen in the persistence of Soviet social networking practices. Frederick Lamy, in Chapter 10, looks at state–society relations by examining informal social networks and how they have, or have not, altered since independence with the massive social, economic, and political dislocation brought about through economic reforms. The chapter determines that while capitalism has changed society and the nature of the social networks by making them more individualistic and responsive to monetary benefits, informal networks remain the primary method of social organisation in Central Asia.

This political continuation can also be seen in the symbols used by the new states. Diana Kudaibergenova, in Chapter 11 discusses the paradoxical situation of where the national symbols of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are still Soviet in content but anti-Soviet in form. She examines national symbols and some selected myths behind the national symbols in these three Central Asian states and shows that they were directly dependent on their Soviet legacy. Out of that examination comes the explanation of so-called 'political primordialism' with its distinctive exploration and usage of ancestral lines and particular historical and legendary images to foster political and social legitimation.

The next chapter looks at a specific case of shock in Central Asian social and political life after independence. Chapter 12, by David P. Straub, discusses how in the first year of the civil war in Tajikistan, from mid 1992 to 1993, the killings of individuals, families, and groups was systematic and victims were chosen according to their communal identity. One of the groups targeted for killings was the Pamiris (Badakhshanis). The killings were not merely civilian collateral casualties in a military campaign, but a systematic and well-organised mass murder. This chapter will show that while discrimination against Pamiris has historical roots, the catalyst that led to the massacre in 1992–93 was the involvement of Pamiri individuals and political groups in the struggle for power in Tajikistan following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

And finally, in Chapter 13, Christopher Schwartz uses his experience as a journalist and academic in the region to examine the experiences peculiar to 25- to 35-year-old literate, middle-class Central Asians, an intriguing age cohort as they came to maturity shortly after independence and remember the dislocation it caused. They are therefore unlike their parents who can still remember another life, and even unlike children now, for whom the Soviet Union and the dislocation of independence cannot be remembered. This chapter uses self-reporting, in the form of autobiographical reflections of Central Asians, to understand what, 20 years after independence, the generation of 1991 is thinking and feeling about what happened then, what is happening now, and the relation between the two.

Notes

1 P. Jones Luong, *The Transformation of Central Asia*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 2004; S. N. Cummings, *Power and Change in Central Asia*, London: Routledge, 2002.

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3 B. Dave, *Politics of Modern Central Asia*, London: Routledge, 2009; A. E. Wooden and C. H. Stefes, *The Politics of Transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, London: Routledge, 2009.
4 D. Trenin, 'Revising the Concept of Eurasia', *Russia Beyond The Headlines*, 29 January 2013. Available at http://rbth.ru/opinion/2013/01/29/revising_the_concept_of_eurasia_22305.html (accessed 3 February 2013).
5 M. C. Spechler, *The Political Economy of Reform in Central Asia*, London: Routledge, 2008, p. 10.
6 S. Akiner, *Central Asia: New Arc of Crisis?*, London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, 1993, p. 10.
7 S. N. Cummings, *Kazakhstan: Power and the Elite*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2005, pp. 1–2. See also M. B. Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 1995, p. 270.

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