

Kassymbekova, Botakoz: *Despite Cultures. Early Soviet Rule in Tajikistan*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8229-6419-3; XIV, 296 S.

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Tajikistan presented an extremely inhospitable environment for Soviet rule in the 1920s. The Central Asian region, bordering Afghanistan, consisted of valleys isolated from each other for several months of the year and lacked natural resources or connections to the outside world. Small numbers of Soviet officials and soldiers struggled with an impoverished population and significant resistance to a new, European-led, power. Botakoz Kassymbekova tells the story of how Tajikistan became integrated into the Soviet space despite significant cultural differences, alongside other challenges of rule. She argues that the Soviet state relied on individuals, primarily those sent by Moscow, to implant its presence and power. Empowering persons, unbound by laws, was in the Bolshevik DNA as a revolutionary party. Leninist and Stalinist leaderships placed talented, motivated individuals at the center of their strategies of rule not only in Tajikistan, but also across the USSR. Leadership was seen as key to fostering rapid and thorough cultural, social and economic transformations.

Soviet repertoires of power, as they filtered downwards and were realized on the ground in the 1920s and 1930s, constitute the focus of this study. Beyond individual rule, which provided initial successes in incorporating Tajikistan into the Soviet sphere but which lacked the stability necessary to ensure central control, Kassymbekova examines violence, law and justice, cultural and national politics and the movement of people. „The Soviet system,“ she notes, „was widely diverse in space and time, depending on the visions, tactics and interests of officials throughout the Soviet Union.“ (p. 12). As such, characterization of Tajikistan, or the rest of Central Asia for that matter, as colonial domains of the USSR are inaccurate. Soviet leaders alternated between practices of modern state-building (institution-building and economic

integration) and colonialism (recognizing cultural differences and relying on local mediators) across their territory. In the USSR and elsewhere, Kassymbekova asserts, we need to be careful about seeing modernization and colonial rule in opposition to one another. Both are strategies towards the same end: central state control over bounded territories.

Tajikistan's poverty and isolation nonetheless posed particular challenges for the first generation of Soviet leadership. The idea of Soviet rule was alien to the population and provoked widespread resistance, or emigration to Afghanistan, in the early-mid-1920s. Early Soviet officials executed carrot-and-stick strategies – with very few carrots, beyond occasional food shipments and positions in an unstable administration. Individual leaders negotiated with local strongmen to bring them onside, with the stick of military force their most effective strategy. Scarcity and violence dominated the landscape. The Soviet leadership preferred to send „Europeans“ (a catch-all term Kassymbekova uses to denote Russians, Ukrainians, Baltic and other white-skinned peoples) to construct Tajikistan as a modern state, but many bolted after suffering hunger or disease. Slowly but surely, a state hierarchy appeared, with a Tajik Communist Party Central Committee presiding over administrative, police and legal institutions. Power remained personalized, however. Hierarchies, inside and outside official circles, were made clear by those who carried guns, which Kassymbekova refers to as „certificates of state power“, (p. 52) on the restive frontier of the Soviet Union.

Applications of violence, alongside the building of a rail link in 1929, ensured Soviet supremacy, if not total control, over Tajikistan. Officials sought ways to stabilize the republic and incorporate it into the Soviet realm. First, a Tajik people, loyal to Moscow, needed to be constructed from the panoply of local, tribal and ethnic identities in the region. Unlike Arne Haugen, Adeeb Khalid and other recent scholars who have highlighted the agency of local elites in managing the process of nation-building in early Soviet Central Asia, Kassymbekova examines it from the top down. Soviet leaders aimed to favor those they would identify as Tajiks against seminomadic tribal

groups perceived as a greater military threat. Ethnic identification also served economic purposes: Soviet leaders claimed that highland peoples considered as Tajiks had actually been driven away from their „natural“ valley homes by these seminomadic tribes. They should return – and grow cotton, which central leaders saw as Tajikistan’s most valuable commodity in their statewide vision. A unified and privileged Tajik nation might also appeal to similar, agricultural Persian-language speakers across the borders in Afghanistan, and perhaps even Iran. Kassymbekova highlights this as a „deliberate attempt to construct a national movement for foreign policy objectives.“ (p. 67)

Ultimately, however, political and economic turbulence forced Soviet leaders to focus inwards in the 1930s. Soviet officials worked tirelessly to cajole locals – all too often through violence – but failed to deliver plan targets to the center. As across the USSR, the collectivization drive that underlay the first five-year plan (1928–32) provoked fierce resistance from peasants unwilling to surrender their land and livestock to the state. Another wave of Europeans arrived to supervise plan implementation; fearful of accusations that they were acting like western imperialists, Soviet propaganda highlighted how Tajiks were being liberated from highland poverty through cotton production. Resettlement, however, was a brutal process. David Guseinov, Stalin’s man to lead collectivization, and others saw themselves as „warriors for socialism“, (p. 87) ready to resort to any method necessary to achieve the plan.

Plan failures redounded on these officials. Stalin preferred to send Guseinov and others with chequered pasts – from upper-class backgrounds to former associations with anti-Soviet or anti-Stalinist elements – so they could be easily blamed for failures and discarded. Purges of officials – Europeans and Tajiks alike – characterized the 1930s, with penalties extending from expulsion to arrest, and then to death. Kassymbekova points to a fundamental limitation and contradiction in early Soviet strategies of rule: Stalin and central officials never trusted the individuals whom they so empowered to execute central power. The ultimate desire for state con-

trol from Moscow swept up hundreds, then thousands of party members and other seemingly loyal agents of collectivization and modernization. Individuals served as convenient scapegoats for political and economic failures, which could never be blamed on the state. Stalin’s personal insecurity – which had a basis, Kassymbekova notes, in officials in Tajikistan and elsewhere who questioned the wisdom of his policies – culminated in the decimation of the Tajik Communist Party and other republican elites in 1937–38.

Moscow ultimately imposes its will in this story, but the dynamic between center and local is presented as a complicated one. Individuals built their own networks – laterally or up to the Soviet capital – to protect themselves against central and other efforts at control. Bitter internal struggles among agencies and personalities undermined plan implementation. Strategies approved by Stalin to bring local administrators to heel – from an ephemeral effort to empower law and justice agencies to sponsoring a campaign to encourage average citizens to report official abuses via the press – foundered against entrenched local networks. Fractious personal and agency conflicts allowed Moscow to step in as an ultimate arbiter. The waves of purges throughout the decade, culminating in 1937–8, demonstrate central state weakness as much as strength. Moscow devoured its own agents of modernization.

Kassymbekova presents a compelling picture of Soviet strategies of rule, and the place of Tajikistan in the USSR. I was convinced by her efforts to move scholars of the USSR beyond the false dichotomy of modernization and colonialism. I was confused, however, by her unexplained inclusion of the word „empire“ in seven of her eight chapters. Given the vibrant scholarly debates over whether we can consider the Soviet Union as an empire, is this an implicit intervention? Or simply a rhetorical device? If Kassymbekova sees the Soviet Union as an empire, what kind of empire does she see? In her account, ideology, culture, ethnic identity, belief and other „soft“ factors, from above and below, exist simply as varnish. Repertoires of power, channeled through individuals but backed by Moscow’s military superiority, play determi-

native roles. The emphasis on violence, which transcended cultural differences, provides a useful corrective to recent works on Central Asia, which have focused more on culture, nationality or daily life. Tajikistan is presented as a unique realm, but no more unique than anywhere else in the USSR in the flexible, person-centered system that marked the state's first two decades.

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