Edgar, Adrienne Lynn: *Tribal Nation. The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2004. ISBN: 0-691-11775-6; 304 S.

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In the last decade historians of Soviet nationality policy like Ronald Grigor Suny enthusiastically debated the impact of the Soviet state on nation-building in the non-Russian peripheries.[1] Yuri Slezkine well argued that the Soviet state promoted ethnic particularism instead of a homogenous „Soviet nation".[2] Central Asia is a very good case study to show that „nations" are a mental construction born in the mind of European intellectuals and the Central Asian educated elite. The history of Central Asia in the twentieth century resembles that of many developing countries, colonized by Europe. Without a tradition of national institutions and consciousness prior to the October Revolution of 1917, Central Asia was divided into „national republics" in 1924. After the demise of the Soviet Union the Central Asian republics did become new independent nations for the first time in their history. Insofar, a historical understanding of modern Central Asian nationhood is absolutely necessary. „Tribal Nation" describes the difficult and ambivalent process of nation-building of the Turkmen under Stalin's forceful modernization and centralization in the late 1920s and 1930s. With access to new documents from the Russian archives in Moscow (RGASPI, GARF, RGAĖ) Adrienne L. Edgar criticizes that previous works on Central Asia have often overestimated the role of the Soviet state as „maker of nations". Indeed, the interaction between the central Soviet bureaucracy and the indigenous society was complex. As the author convincingly shows, Turkmen identity was based on genealogy, i.e. the historical affiliation to a certain tribe, more than it relied on Soviet territorial and linguistic conceptions of nationhood that in fact were a European invention. When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, the Turkmen were fragmented into genealogically defined groups that spoke different dialects and were rivalizing against each other. This was also characteristic for other pastoral nomads in the Caucasus and Central Asia. From the very beginning, but more extensively under Stalin, the Soviet state was fighting tribalism as its social organization based on patrilineal kinship contradicted the concept of the modern nation state. Turkmen saw their pastoral mobility as a guarantee of independence and autonomy that was hardly congruent with Soviet homogenization. In a tribal society where rights to land and water traditionally belonged to the kin group resistance against Stalin's collectivization became inevitable. Only a small minority of Turkmen who were members of the Communist Party accepted the Soviet concept of territoriality as fundamental to Turkmen nationhood. Adrienne L. Edgar argues that political and economic self-interest was the main driving force for the Turkmen Communist elite to support the creation of the Turkmen Soviet Republic. For the upper echelons of the Turkmen Communist Party national sentiments in a socialist garment were used for pure power politics: first, to negotiate with other Central Asian nationalities over borders and economic assets, second, to manipulate the Turkmen population for charisma. As the author shows, these Turkmen Communists were russified, many of them had attended Russian schools and universities prior to the October Revolution. They were indeed the true proponents of Stalin's nationality policy in Turkmenistan in order to indigenize the Soviet bureaucracy and the Communist Party. However, according to Edgar throughout the 1920s and 1930s there was a strong protest among Russian and other non-Turkmen nationalities against the preference of Turkmen. Nevertheless, only a handful of Turkmen enjoyed privileges of the Soviet system. The majority of the indigenous population suffered from unequal treatment in education, job training and cultural life. In the late 1920s open criticism was still possible. For example, in 1927 the satirical journal „Tokmak" (i.e. „Mallet") lamented

[1] Suny, Ronald Grigor, A State of Nation. Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin, Oxford 2001.

[2] Slezkine, Yuri, Arctic Mirrors. Russia and the Small Peoples of the North, Ithaca 1994.

that „our (Turkmen) officials are ashamed of their own (national) literature“ (p. 86). The annoyance that Soviet policy of indigenization aimed at turning Turkmen into Russians, thereby betraying Turkmen national identity, was widespread. In this context, Russianness meant „living in the city, holding an office job, speaking Russian and drinking vodka“ (p. 94). Analyzing OGPU reports, the author concludes that the great purge of Turkmen communists in the 1930s was actually the result of the sweeping ethnic conflict between Russian and Turkmen communists in the party hierarchy. Moreover, the great purge of 1938 in Turkmenistan was the starting point for a more repressive nationality policy. By 1938 a law made the study of Russian obligatory for non-Russian schoolchildren. Russification of the education system, collectivization and the emancipation of Muslim women were the three pillars of Stalin's colonialism. With the massive attack on landed property, marriage and gender roles, the education of the next generation of Soviet modernizers hoped to undermine Turkmen kinship structures. Adrienne L. Edgar rejects the influential thesis made by Gregor Massell in 1974 that the Soviet regime considered Central Asian women as a surrogate proletariat. According to Edgar, the primary goal of Soviet emancipation was not the creation of a new, enlightened Muslim woman, but the extermination of the tribal society. Soviet modernizers recognized that „women have a huge influence on the life of the family and frequently even the entire tribal collective“ (p. 226). Edgar shows that below the surface Turkmen tribal society based on genealogy survived Stalinism. Kinship never lost its „vital role in providing political protection and economic support“ (p. 264). Adrienne L. Edgar's „Tribal Nation“ is a much-needed survey of nation-building in Central Asia that gives a new understanding of nationhood not from the one-sided view of Moscow central planners, instead the author examines the complex process of nation-building from the indigenous perspective, thereby breaking the russocentric interpretation of Central Asian history. Unfortunately, and this is the main weakness of the book, Edgar does not place her interpretation of Turkmen kinship structures into the broader framework of tribalism and its roots in Muslim rural society – a phenomenon that was also a challenge to modernization and nation-building in the Near and Middle East. Therefore, her interesting interpretation remains isolated without a discussion of current works by leading scholars in Middle Eastern Studies like David Hart.[3]

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[3] Hart, David, Tribalism and Rural Society in the Islamic World, London 2002.