



Despite cultures: early Soviet rule in Tajikistan

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BOOK REVIEW

Despite cultures: early Soviet rule in Tajikistan, Botakoz Kassymbekova, Pittsburgh, PA, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016, viii + 272 pp., \$28.95 (Paperback), ISBN 978-0-8229-6419-3

In 1924, the Soviet Union began a comprehensive effort to build a state for the Central Asian ethnic group of Tajiks. The Soviets insisted unequivocally that their revolutionary state-building project was anti-colonial and anti-capitalist. By developing titular languages, literatures and cultural symbols, Soviet officials intervened in unprecedented ways in what they viewed as the empowerment of populations formerly under tsarist and imperial oppression. Scholars writing during the late Soviet era have too often painted over this state-building process in Central Asia with a broad brush of totalitarian woes, whereas those writing after the dissolution of the Soviet Union tend to subscribe to reified notions of culture and ethnicity.

In contrast to these approaches and aware of their problematics, Botakoz Kassymbekova's *Despite Cultures: Early Soviet Rule in Tajikistan* proposes a new method of evaluating early Soviet history: namely focusing on *practices* of governance. Unlike earlier historians of Soviet Central Asia, the author does not limit herself to rigid categories such as 'colonial' versus 'modern'; rather, she focuses on the 'Soviet system', which, she explains, 'due to its open and experimental nature – allowed different methodologies, practices, and repertoires to develop' (16). She argues that the Soviets blurred the boundaries of socialism and imperialism, colonialism and state-building, and applied both universalistic and differential ideals to develop whatever necessary system of governance was justifiable as revolutionary (17). While adding to previous scholarship on early Soviet Tajikistan (roughly from 1924 to 1938), Kassymbekova takes great care to avoid using simplified paradigms – such as liberal/conservative or imperial/revolutionary – in her reassessment of primary sources, which are all too often taken for granted in studies of imperial Russian and Soviet history. This approach allows her to illustrate the socio-historical context of statecraft by uncovering actual processes of administration.

The author's thoughtful introductory chapter outlines her innovative and refreshing approach to the study of early Soviet Tajikistan. While reminding us that the primary source material at her disposal may be unreliable due to the manipulation, distrust and disregard of these sources by Soviet officials, Kassymbekova examines them to show how early Soviet officials developed governing practices and strategies to secure control (4). Her focus on historical actors through the use of written communications allows a fruitful analysis of how local inhabitants and state and local officials in Tajikistan imagined, defined, implemented and perceived the new revolutionary government. Particularly novel is her approach to normative sources, like legal materials; rather than focusing on the envisioned outcomes of early Soviet laws, Kassymbekova teases out production of power and actual practices of rule from these documents (especially in Chapters 3 and 4).

Also noteworthy are Kassymbekova's explanations of the empowering and disempowering of central officials through statistical reporting, public plena leading to purges, repression, and anonymous civil letters. All of these top-down planning campaigns played a critical role in producing the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. But more importantly, such planning reminded both local populations and officials in Dushanbe of the larger, more powerful state structure based in Moscow, and that central Soviet officials – though sometimes seeming contradictory and pointless in their direction – were in control of the general progression of state-building efforts. When central officials deemed certain aspects of the Soviet project a failure, like the First

Five-Year Plan (implemented 1928–1932), the Soviets blamed local officials for failing to produce the results needed in the region and standing in the way of the communist agenda (94–110). Show trials and imprisonments mounted in number as central officials set unachievable objectives and inevitably scapegoated local officials in order to preserve the central Soviet authority in the region.

To the same end, central Soviet officials called on the ‘new Soviet man’ to become a ‘denouncer’ of corrupt officials by writing anonymous civil letters to newspapers (163). Kassymbekova effectively argues that this production of a pseudo-civil society served to construct the state’s presence through an illusion of state supervision in the Tajik SSR as well as across other Soviet territories. That is not to say that all of the letters were forgeries, but her analysis shows that duplicate letters were used across different regions of the Soviet Union in an attempt to promote the impression of Soviet attention to and knowledge of corruption. These letters also show the importance of terminology and languages in studying Tajik history: proper Soviet terminology was of the utmost political importance, and the use of various languages and scripts (Russian, Uzbek, Tajik in Latin and Cyrillic) further illustrates the fluid and transitional nature of Kassymbekova’s period of focus.

Despite Cultures provides a thorough reimagining of early Soviet rule in Central Asia, with Tajikistan as its case study. The author builds her argument through eight chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. Kassymbekova includes insightful analyses of Soviet governing practices, with each chapter illustrating different Soviet tactics. Chapters 1–4 demonstrate Soviet attempts to retain what often seems a tenuous and unstable grip on the Tajik territory. From there, she discusses solidifying practices of state control in Chapters 5 and 6 before moving to Soviet attempts at creating a faux civil society in Chapters 7 and 8. In each chapter, the author skilfully synthesizes complex ideas and rationalizes contradictory terminologies of Soviet history. She includes a short but useful chronology at the beginning of her text, followed by ample endnotes, a glossary of terms, and a bibliography.

Kassymbekova’s monograph is a welcome addition to the fields of Soviet and Central Asian history as it provides innovative inquiries and analyses of Soviet attempts to subject Tajikistan to invasive legal and social policies largely unfelt prior to the October Revolution. Using Tajikistan as a case study, she successfully highlights the importance of individual actors, government and civil correspondences, and measures taken by Moscow and local officials in promoting revolutionary ideas beyond or despite the conglomeration of titular cultures, as her title suggests (16). The main strength of this work is its rigorous response to a series of issues that have up to this point remained largely untouched in Soviet Central Asian historiography: namely, how we should read early Soviet Tajik sources and what those sources tell us of the context in which they were produced. Of import to scholars of Central Asia, in particular, is the insight we gain on how local Tajiks understood, participated in and sometimes resisted Soviet attempts at socio-political transformation. Her methodology calls for further inquiry and understanding of how the practices seen in Tajikistan were applied and comprehended elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Kassymbekova synthesizes these matters admirably, and thereby provides a compelling account of early Soviet rule in Tajikistan.

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