

# WHAT WE HAVE (NOT) LEARNED ABOUT TWENTIETH-CENTURY CENTRAL ASIAN HISTORY

MARLENE LARUELLE

RESEARCH PROFESSOR OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

**Abstract:** Recently opened archives in Central Asia have allowed historians to debunk several myths about the Soviet constitution in that region. Archival research has revealed that indigenous elites were associated with the process of territorial division in the 1920s and 1930s and many of their conflicts were echoed in the central ruling bodies in Moscow. Similarly, field research has undermined the idea that Islamist movements emerged in the region only after the collapse of the Soviet Union; they have been active in the Fergana Valley since the 1970s. While we have learned a lot about the 1920s and 1930s, much more work needs to be done, mainly based on oral histories, to understand the second half of the twentieth century in this region.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the Central Asian regimes drastically reshaped their narratives about certain periods of the Soviet century while simply eliding other stretches of history. The replacement of Soviet-era ideological assumptions about national identity and the role of titular populations in governing institutions with new ideas sparked revisionist tendencies among the post-Soviet leaders. In the local narratives, some

historical figures were rehabilitated while others were pressed into the shadows. New sites of memory emerged and educational systems were adapted to conditions of independence.

Each state elaborated diversified and evolving strategies regarding the Soviet past. Turkmenistan repudiated the entire era stretching from Russian colonization to independence. Uzbekistan developed a discourse centered on the victimization of the Uzbek nation by the Russian-Soviet oppressor. In the other three states, readings were more positive, and reflected contrasting opinions on the role of the Soviet Union in transforming their societies.

Access to Central Asian archives also directly impacts the comprehension and re-writing of the Soviet experience and legacy. At one end of the spectrum is Turkmenistan, which has refused to open its archives to both foreigners and locals. Uzbekistan declassified its pre-Revolution archives but remains very cautious about allowing access to those from the Soviet era. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have allowed access, but only up until World War II. Still, the partial opening of various Central Asian archives—combined with the persistent fieldwork and research of local and foreign scholars—has enabled an assessment of the processes of reconstructing the Soviet chronicle from the eyes of the Soviet southern periphery. What have we learned and what questions remain unanswered?

### **The Role of Central Asians in Building their Republics and Defining their Borders**

To begin with, the archives have discredited the widespread idea that the zoning of Central Asia into nationalities and republics was the personal work of Stalin, presumably reflecting Moscow's Machiavellian desire to divide and conquer by creating artificial and non-viable borders. Available documents show that the titular elites were closely associated with the process of territorial division and that their many conflicts were echoed at the level of the central ruling bodies in Moscow. The border demarcations were largely decided in accordance with the power balance between political groups, nationalities, and regions; and sometimes even in line with the personal interests of Central Asian local rulers.

The Tajik elites, for example, made loud and strong claims for the inclusion into the Tajik republic of Bukhara and Samarkand, as well as part of Surkhandaria, while the Tashkenti elites laid claim to the Uzbekness of these zones, lobbying Moscow for them. Some Uzbek leaders from the Fergana Valley wanted their natal villages to be included in Uzbekistan and not in Kirghizia, a feat they managed by creating Uzbek territorial enclaves on Kyrgyz territory. The archives show that the Moscow-based Communist leaders often left such initiatives to the titular elites to solve.

Such practices were a matter of necessity in some cases because frequently local conflicts overwhelmed the central Communist leaders and they had difficulty taking decisions.

Another half-myth was that zoning was imposed from above (whether by Moscow or local elites) onto passive populations. Local communities themselves petitioned the authorities for areas of land, stretches of valley, rivers, or territories of transhumance. Some villages collectively requested to have their identity changed in order to be incorporated into a neighboring republic or to obtain a specific resource advantage, as so-called sedentary nationalities were given rights to arable lands at the expense of others. With the activation of the Commission of National Delimitation for Central Asia (1924), several villages based in the Uzbek Republic declared they were Kazakh and denounced the repression of their identity by Tashkent. A similar phenomenon occurred in the opposite direction, in favor of Uzbekistan, in the Kazakh republic. In the Fergana Valley, which was divided among three republics, the identity of mixed villages of Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities was contested by the local population itself.<sup>1</sup> The assertion that border demarcations were derived from Stalin's own personal judgments is thus an historical simplification that, by presuming an inert Soviet society, denies the autonomy of local actors in decision-making processes.

National sensitivities on issues of cultural heritage marked the Soviet narrative from the start of the 1940s right up until *perestroika*. The Uzbek, Tajik, and Kazakh Academies of Sciences requested several times, for instance, that Moscow arbitrate disagreements arising from having the same historical figures in their respective national pantheons. As with border demarcation issues, local elites were not passive actors: Party members and national intelligentsias played an essential role as mediators between Moscow and local public opinion and were able to drastically influence the center's decisions, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. In so doing, they erected a national ideology conforming to Soviet dogmas in which the population could also recognize itself. Beginning with the end of the Stalin years, there emerged a republic-level patriotism that, even if it had to put aside certain sensitive topics (especially the role of Russia in the national history), quickly took on nation-state-like attributes. The creation of national narratives by the local Soviet elites thus cleared the way for new historiographies of independence by rendering them a nation-state *prêt-à-penser* ("ready-to-think").<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Francine Hirsch. 2005. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Arne Haugen. 2004. *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; and Juliette Cadiot. 2007. *Le Laboratoire impérial. Russie-URSS 1870-1940*. Paris: CNRS-Éditions.

<sup>2</sup> Marlene Laruelle. 2008. "The Concept of Ethnogenesis in Central Asia: Political Context and Institutional Mediators (1940–50)," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian His-*

### Reassessing Islamic Revival as an Indigenous Movement

Discussions with local actors have undermined the idea that Islamist movements emerged in the region only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, Islamic revivals in Central Asia were first and foremost indigenous phenomena.<sup>3</sup>

Already in the 1920s, many fundamentalist figures like Shami-Damulla were tolerated by the Bolshevik regime because they were combating an allegedly obscurantist Sufism, and promoting a more modern, albeit Salafi, reading of Islam inspired by the Shafii school of jurisprudence (*madhhab*).<sup>4</sup> After establishing the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) in 1943, the teachings of Shami-Damulla and his fundamentalist disciples spread. The Babakhan dynasty, which ruled SADUM for three generations until independence, succeeded both in giving quasi-institutional support to fundamentalist conceptions of Islam and in introducing elements from other *madhahib* into the predominantly Hanafi Islam of Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, the Soviet authorities preferred to support fundamentalist theologians rather than conservative and Sufi movements, even though the latter sought conciliation with the atheist nature of the regime.<sup>6</sup> During the 1950s and

tory 9, No. 1 (Winter): 169-188. For the Caucasus case, see Victor Shnirelman. 2006. *Byt' Alanami. Intellektualy i politika na Severnom Kavkaze v xx veke* [Being Alan. Intellectuals and Politics in the North Caucasus in the 20th century]. Moscow: NLO; and Victor Shnirelman. 1996. *Who Gets the Past? Competition for Ancestors among Non-Russian Intellectuals in Russia*. Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, John Hopkins University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Relations between the Soviet regime and Islam during the 1920s-1930s have been studied extensively: See Shoshana Keller. 2001. *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941*. Westport: Praeger; Marianne Kamp. 2006. *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism*. Seattle: University of Washington Press; Douglas Northrop. 2004. *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. For the post-WWII period, the works are rarer. See Adib Khalid. 2007. *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>4</sup> Ashirbek Muminov. 2005. "Shami-Damulla i ego rol' v formirovanii 'sovetskogo' islama," in *Islam, identichnost' i politika v postsovetskom prostranstve* [Islam, Identity and Politics in the post-Soviet Space]. Kazan: Kazan Institute of Federalism: 231-247.

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtiar Babajanov. 2001. "O fetvakh SADUM protiv 'neislamskikh obychev,'" in Martha Brill Olcott and Aleksandr Malashenko (eds.) *Islam na postsovetskom prostranstve: vzgliad iznutri* [Islam in the post-Soviet space. A look from inside]. Moscow: Carnegie Center: 170-184. Bakhtiar Babajanov. 2000. "Sredneaziatskoe dukhovnoe upravlenie musulm'an: predystoriia i posledstviia raspada" [The Muslim Spiritual Board of Central Asia. Prehistory and consequences of its collapse] in Martha Brill Olcott and Aleksandr Malashenko (eds.). *Mnogomernye granitsy Tsentral'noi Azii* [The Multifaceted Borders of Central Asia]. Moscow: Carnegie Center: 55-69.

<sup>6</sup> Seyfettin Erşahin. 2005. "The Official Interpretation of Islam under the Soviet Regime: A Base for Understanding of Contemporary Central Asian Islam," *Journal of Religious Cultures* 77: 1-19. Ashirbek Muminov. 1999. "Traditional and Modern Religious-Theological Schools in Central Asia," in Lena Jonson and Murad Esenov. *Political Islam and Conflicts in Russia and Central Asia*. Stockholm: The Swedish Institute of International Affairs: 101-111.

1960s, the Muslims of Central Asia witnessed the beginning of a schism between Hanafi conservatives and the newer, much more fundamentalist, informal movements influenced by Hanbalism and Shafiism. As a result, in the midst of an officially atheist Soviet Union, the conservative-leaning Hanafi *ulemas* mostly disapproved of the *fatwas* SADUM issued, and countered them with their own *fatwas* of disavowal (*raddiyya*). The full magnitude of the schism developed in the 1970s around the two major figures of Mulla Hindustani (1892-1989) and his student, Mulla Hakimjan-Qori Morghiloni.<sup>7</sup> From the 1970s onward, but probably from even the 1960s, the Ferghana Valley became the main region in which fundamentalist conceptions of Islam crystallized, and a catchment basin of antagonism between Hanafi conservatives and Salafi fundamentalists.<sup>8</sup>

The doctrines of political Islam, therefore, did not arrive in the region solely via external influences from the Middle East. In Soviet Central Asia itself, there had also been considerable internal theological debate among reformers, conservatives, and fundamentalists. These opposing groups developed according to local criteria, such as regional traditions, references to influential intellectual figures, relations with the Soviet state, and particular social and economic conditions. The resulting antagonisms rendered the Soviet boundary between official and unofficial conceptions of Islam rather unstable, and greatly influenced the diversity of theological opinions in the period after independence.

### Negotiating Conflicting Legacies

Despite an official post-independence narrative largely based on being the victim of the Soviet regime, debates over “Soviet totalitarianism” are largely absent from the Central Asian post-independence scene. Central Asia has had no public trials of former Communist leaders, nor have any accusations ever been leveled at individuals, such as at security service members responsible for repressing dissidents. The only persons to have been rehabilitated are the “repressed” (*repressirovanye*) of the great Stalinist purges at the end of the 1930s—the opening of the archives in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan has enabled censuses, and victims’ families may obtain the symbolic status of a “repressed family.” Streets have been named after them and small local museums have opened in commemoration, generally at the initiative of local history enthusiasts or of family

<sup>7</sup> Bakhtiar Babadjanov and Muzaffar Kamilov. 2001. “Muhammadjan Hindustani (1892-1989) and the Beginning of the ‘Great Schism’ among the Muslims of Uzbekistan,” in Stéphane A. Dudoignon and Hitao Komatsu (eds.) *Islam in Politics in Russia and Central Asia (Early Eighteenth to Late Twentieth Centuries)*. London, New York, and Bahrain: Kegan Paul: 195-219.

<sup>8</sup> Sebastien Peyrouse. 2007. “The Rise of Political Islam in Soviet Central Asia,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 5: 40-54. See also Martha Brill Olcott. 2007. “Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia,” *Carnegie Papers*, No. 77.

members, rather than of the central authorities.<sup>9</sup> Dissidents from the 1970s-1980s are not accorded official honors, mainly because of their democratic, nationalist, or Islamic stances. In Tashkent, a museum dedicated to the victims of the Soviet regime was opened, but there is no mention of their pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic convictions, and their oppressors are only rather vaguely denounced, in an attempt not to vex any memories.

Some of the events linked to the Tsarist domination or to the first years of the Soviet regime (civil war, repression of the Basmachis, and Stalinist purges) have been denounced, yet often only in a demure fashion. However, when it comes to the post-war period, silence is the rule. The Second World War continues to be celebrated throughout the region as a great moment of national unity, as is Yuri Gagarin's conquest of space, the proof of having belonged to the world's second largest power. The Brezhnev decades are viewed as the golden years of the Soviet regime. The Kazakh and Uzbek first secretaries, each of whom ruled their republics for over two decades—Dinmukhamed Kunayev (from 1960 to 1986) and Sharaf Rashidov (from 1959 to 1983) respectively—are regarded as national heroes for having defended their nations' interests. The 2000s saw a revival of commemorations held in their honor.<sup>10</sup>

Denouncing the Soviet elites of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be tantamount to calling into question the integrity of current leaders. These leaders continue to be linked to, and renounce nothing of, their Soviet past. Even in the most anti-Soviet states of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the presidents' hagiographies, both written and in museum displays, are peppered with references to the previous regime, emphasizing that the father of the nation was also a member of the *Komsomol*, had graduated from a school in Moscow or Leningrad, won distinguished "proletarian" medals, and had moved rapidly up the Party ranks. The official memory of the Central Asian states is therefore paradoxical: honoring the second part of the Soviet century while, at the same time, narrating the alleged "struggle for independence" of the nation against Moscow, and inventing a status of "heroes of independence" for Soviet apparatchiks still in power.

### The Blank Pages of Soviet Central Asian History

Entire sections of the Soviet century in Central Asia are still poorly researched; post-1950s archives are not yet accessible and oral-history methods are still limited. Therefore, little is known about the Khrushchev

<sup>9</sup> Timur Dadabaev. 2009. "Trauma and Public Memory in Central Asia. Public Response to Political Violence of the State Policies of Stalinist Era in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan," *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies* 3-1 (July): 108-138.

<sup>10</sup> Marlène Laruelle. 2011. "Academia and the Rewriting of National Identity in Central Asia: The Soviet Union and Colonialism Issues," in Hisao Komatsu, Sahin Karasar, Timur Dadabaev, G. Kurmangaliyeva Ercilasun (Eds.), *Central Eurasian Studies: Past, Present and Future*. Istanbul: Maltepe University: 215-224.

and Brezhnev decades in the region. Yet these years are central to understanding both late Soviet culture and post-Soviet independence. This situation is not specific to Central Asia, and concerns the entirety of the former Soviet Union. However, while there is an increase in work being done on late-Soviet culture in Russia, the national peripheries have not yet been part of this trend. It appears, though, that the era was quite a crucial one, during which the majority of the population apprehended local identities, both ethnic and religious, as largely compatible with the Soviet supra-identity.

Research on *perestroika* in Central Asia is also practically nonexistent, although current rifts between elites largely took root during this period: the political liquidation of the nationalist/pan-Turkic/Islamic elites by the former Communist *apparatchiks* at the start of the 1990s still bears heavily on official narratives. The control exerted by the Kazakh authorities over the memory of the December 1986 riots, which continues to this very day, is symptomatic here. The legitimacy of the current ruling elites is grounded in a heavy silence surrounding their status as apparatchiks who refused liberal reforms and “national revival,” and this situation is likely to remain at least as long as the “founding fathers” such as Islam Karimov or Nursultan Nazarbayev are still in power.

### **Conclusion: Shadows and Light, History Versus Memory**

While the opening of various archives coupled with access to individuals have enabled a sounder view of Central Asia during the 1920s-1930s, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century remains little researched and is considered extremely sensitive by local elites. Even in the most anti-Russian states, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, official narratives prefer to overlook the controversies regarding these periods, or engage in an embarrassed forgetfulness, rather than deploy explicit strategies of victimization. The victims of the 1930s are celebrated with reservations, their oppressors are ignored, and the spotlight is placed on the Brezhnev elites, who were in total concord with Moscow. Twenty years after independence, the Central Asian states are still hesitating between victimization and responsibility. In addition, there is an immense gap between state-led historical narratives and individual memories. While official propaganda glorifies the “resurgence” of the independent state in 1991 after decades of “struggle for national independence,” personal and collective memories point to the Soviet experience and look back at that period nostalgically.