

Contesting History in an Uzbek Village

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Until I left this country I really believed it was a great place. What else could I have thought from what we were told and from the books I read in school and at home? --A villager who emigrated

This essay deals with emerging histories according to residents of a collective farm (kolkhoz) village and nation-state elite. Naturally, the title refers to the contesting of existing written history, but also relates to different viewpoints among fellow peasants in one village. I also wish to examine the way in which elite and peasants understand the importance and relevance of history in the here and now.

At the heart of this essay is my interest in the nature and legacy of Russo-Soviet colonialism. As I hope to illustrate by example below, the colonizers furthered their power base by convincing the empire's lowliest subjects that their own mission had the hopes of collective betterment uppermost in mind. Dirks (1992:7-8) speaks of the softening and disguising of conquest and rule as "rulers aligned themselves with the inexorable and universal forces of science, progress, rationality, and modernity," and also "displaced many of the disruptions and excesses of rule into institutions and cultures that are labeled as tradition."¹

Back in November of 1993 I recall spending part of another lethargic afternoon with some of the local graduate students at the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences' History Institute as I whiled away time waiting for a visa from the Internal Affairs Ministry to begin my fieldwork in the countryside. For a while talk concerned my prospects for learning about seminal events in Soviet history from the collective farm villagers among whom I was planning to work in the Ucqorghon district of Namangan province. One woman in particular couldn't understand why I thought this undertaking would prove valuable among "uneducated people." "Well, go ahead and interview them," she told me, "but don't forget to do your work in the archives and libraries; that's where you'll really find out about that history. Kolkhozniks can't tell you very much." I cannot say that all the others shared her viewpoint, especially a few young anthropologists who had already worked in the Samarkand and Andijon provinces. They have begun focusing on the personal stories of farmers' lives, from which much Soviet ethnography is bereft.

Months later, after completing fieldwork and conducting archival and library research in Tashkent I attended a one-day conference on the "Freedom Fighters of Central Asia." (The new term is *Istiqlol Harakatchilar*.) This conference focused on reappraisals of the anti-Bolshevik forces that operated throughout Central Asia after the Revolution and sporadically until the mid-1930s. Throughout Soviet history their label was "Basmachi," which translates as "oppressors or attackers." Until the fall of the USSR, they had always been reviled officially. But there in Tashkent in 1994 they were officially repackaged--ideologically and intellectually--as those who tried to liberate all of Central Asia from foreign invaders.²

I mention these instances because both encounters reminded me that while it has been well and good to criticize Soviet power and the inscription of history by the Soviets for nearly three years in academic circles, there remain an absence of and occasional contempt shown toward the personal accounts of rural Uzbeks. To me it appears that historical discourse again restricts itself to those omniscient enough to have jobs or a role to play within the academy. Historical knowledge discloses hierarchical feedback such that the rural and un-urbane are kept from contributing to debates about the Russian colonial and Soviet periods. It is not my intention to indict those Tashkent academic elite I worked with and came to admire, though it did strike me as unfortunate that the prevailing outlook of history from above, inherited from the Soviets, still operates today. The Academy of Sciences continues to print the one and only official version of Uzbek history, and the richly textured hues of individual accounts, oral histories, and micro-level perspectives that capable scholars there could bring to light are noteworthy for their absence. I think this is a staid political and ideological dispensation with which a new generation of Uzbek scholars would do well to reject.³ If it can be said that one component of a colonial legacy is the ability of a dominating system to erase history from common memory that does not correspond to imperial memory, then surely the Soviets can count themselves successful in many instances with regard to rural Uzbekistan. However, exceptional is the colonial power that is capable of making people forget that they have forgotten (cf. Watson, 1994:14).⁴ Thus, many people in the collective farm village of Boburkent know that anti-religious policies prevented them from practicing their religion correctly, and that because feudalism and capitalism were vilified indelibly as forms of inhumane economic life, the pre-Soviet period was only marked by dire poverty and foul exploitation, according to the only texts they ever knew.⁵ But be that as it may, they are sure these past forms of knowledge may be relearned.

What interested me about the expression of a will toward seeking knowledge was how individuals might really go about that process or attune themselves to issues about national or local history. While almost all of the middle-aged adults I worked with had high school literacy, few people spent much time reading. The kolkhoz library still operated and received six periodicals sporadically, including three newspapers that were dailies (somewhat). Unfortunately, the library was rarely open, and when it was it often served as a place to chat and snack for schoolgirls and library assistants. The head librarian attributed the generally low level of readership to the fact that "times are difficult now and people work too much and are too tired to come here whenever they have a chance to rest. I don't want this job myself, there's so much to do at home."

I later learned through her that the village school's assistant principal had written an essay on the history of Boburkent. And because this was the only written document of its kind about the village, I implored her to secure a copy for my use. After weeks of constant pestering and many mindboggling complications, she obtained the document.

Reading the essay after having painstakingly copied it out was rather a letdown, for it was no lapidary work. The author spent more time on issues of flora and fauna than on more exciting issues of land tenure, local institutions and social life, as far as I was concerned. Nevertheless, it enabled me to confirm oral claims that the area had long been famous for its melons and squashes before those fields were supplanted by King Cotton.

To return to the question, however, how people disinter the past, the answer lies in favor of television and radio, and popular pamphlets and books dealing with medical, heroic and cultural themes at local marketplaces. Most of these street texts are cheap, pulp editions written less in a scholarly than in a mass-based manner. Prominent works here include the medical writings related to nutrition by Avicenna, the biographical rendering of Amir Temur's martial exploits, and a slim selection of writings by Ismoilbek Gasprali (The great educator and Pan-Turkish of the 19th century), Avicenna's book, *Tabobat Durdonalari* (The Medicinal Pearls), made the rounds of households in our village. These well-thumbed works were perused avidly and read aloud partly for enjoyment, but also partly in the hope that some of the dietary cum medical advice offered in the 11th century might still apply to medically deprived Uzbekistan of the late 20th century.

Few people are concerned with history on a day-to-day level only for the sake of affirming the triumphs of their nation in the past or for trumping the achievements of personages with whom they believe they share an ethnic constitution. But this is exactly how the national state and its controlled organs, especially the mass media, usually present historical revisions in attempting to remodel affirmative national history.⁶

The concerns with the past in the village are mostly personal and experiential. Restoring honor to relatives criminalized during the Soviet period is very topical to the people with whom I worked. They are also very interested in what agricultural life and society were all about before the Revolution. In the case of "Great October," what seems a very broad or abstract category of cultural history actually has very direct effects on gender divisions in cotton work. Furthermore, they are curious about the nature of village political power and leadership, and the potential for economic growth and well-being that could result from knowledge of the social intercourse between landowners and peasants.

Of the myriad complaints connected to cotton's legacy, one in particular is generally shared, and this is the crucial role of women in nearly all facets of the harvest. Men complain about this a good deal, but do little to take on the women's work themselves. They argue that Soviet power demanded such work of women in efforts both to make them equal with men (concretely by taking them outside the walls of the household), and because the intensification of this cash crop required it.⁷ Today along with issues as disparate as excessive drinking and immoral behavior, the Soviet system or, simply, the Russians are blamed for undermining supposed traditional community structures and family order.⁸ In Fanon's words it was a part of "cultural destruction undertaken by the occupier." (1965:38)⁹ Women's complaints focus on their inability to devote themselves to the household. They are bitter about the fact that only Uzbek women had to do cotton work. As one woman angrily told me: "Russian women never did this kind of work.¹⁰" Such negative outlooks toward both the USSR and its main national group betray the colonial characteristic of forced cultural change at the expense of a subordinate national group rather limply.

Regarding landlord-tenant relations, I was told, for example, that peasants didn't suffer the kind of economic exploitation alleged in Soviet writings about rural Central Asia's economic history, that landlords cared about the peasants, "gave us new clothes in winter, always made sure we had enough to eat, and threw periodic palov parties for us." Paradoxically, the same

people who refuted the Soviet position regarding rural class relations also claimed most people were on the side of the Communists, especially if they came from poor families. Initial support, however, does not mean sustained support.

A few years ago the titles of various political offices were changed in an effort to make them reflect the more traditional notions of vested authority. One such changed name was that of the village council(man), formerly known as the qishloq sovetlshuro. It is now oqsoqol. This term oqsoqol was traditionally a term of respect reserved for elderly men whose intelligence and leadership abilities conferred popular honor on them, and oqsoqol became a juridical institution based on Islamic law within the villages. Now, however, the term applies to a kolkhoz bureaucrat, who has barely reached the age of fifty.

The failure of the national state to change the existing, Soviet-like political structure in ways other than cosmetic inspires little confidence. Upon first hearing some middle-aged men discuss the oqsoqol, I was confused and asked for clarification. One man interrupted another who was explaining the new terminology to me, saying "He's not a real oqsoqol just a party hack whom you should look out for." The case of the oqsoqol is but one of many wherein governmental attempts to redress the effacement of local institutions by colonial action fail to consider desires based on traditions and history of local constituencies. Much like Chatterjee and other Subalternist writers have shown us in regard to India, the Uzbek government has not been able to transcend Soviet means of rule regardless of the nationalist idiom it chooses in order to reject that former system.¹¹

It is true that even during the most orthodox Soviet times, Uzbek cultural heroes, such as Navoi, Babur and Ulughbek, were touted throughout the USSR. But only certain figures were exemplified because they easily fit into master tropes of Soviet domination, such as literary enlightenment and scientific progress brought to backward peasants. Moreover, the gains of Communist imperialism would have proved short-lived had not some historical agency and grandeur been attributed to all of the Soviet republic's titular nationalities--the imperialism could be bald-faced but only to a degree.

Rehabilitation of family members who were disgraced, arrested, deported or killed has been of enduring importance to all former Soviet citizens since the mid- 1950s. In Uzbekistan admissions of wrongdoing on the part of the state have come more slowly than in other countries of the C.I.S. There was a kiosk owner in Boburkent who always struck me as freewheeling and

happy-go-lucky. Whenever we saw one another he wanted to sit me down for a shot of booze. He sold expensive items and nasvoi (a mild narcotic). But when he heard about my interest in personal histories, this young man approached me and proceeded to talk about the fate of his grandfather's name that had been cleared only two years earlier for anti-Soviet activities, His grandfather had been a spiritual man, insisting on keeping religious activities within the village, and actually spoke out against Communism's denial of God in public settings. "You can't understand, he said, what it was like to grow up here with that family background behind you. When our government cleared his name, gave us the letter and apologized on behalf of the country, they gave respect back to my grandfather's name. Since you're here, you should know about these things; you should understand how we lived. It's really nothing at all like the lies you've read. We didn't make sacrifices for the Soviet Union because we always wanted to, we just never saw any other way out and we never knew anything about the rest of the world."

Understanding how they lived became every bit as important to me as understanding how people live now. I realized that I had a unique opportunity to learn directly about political, economic and sociocultural events and processes, such as the Revolution, Complete Collectivization, WW II, the Rashidov years, etc. from a truly mass perspective, since the majority of Uzbeks are rural peasants. Now that I've made a modest start I realize that an enormous amount of time and on site experience are necessary to gain people's confidence, share my publishing ideas with them, and, most importantly, to get the fuller stories that may serve as a formidable counterweight to the high-toned and impersonal types of Soviet and now Uzbek history and ethnographies.

Thinking back to the young historian's comment about needing to do my work in the libraries and archives, I must admit that she had a good point: village memories are clearly not narrative history. However, there are village histories to be made, and this will only come about when scholars listen to and work with villagers through employment of both oral memories and existing texts to forge new histories. Such projects will begin fulfilling both the hopes of rural Uzbeks to gain a more accurate portrayal of the modern local past and the Western scholars' desires to better know this postsocialist world. In the words of Rubie Watson (see endnote 3 below for full record, 1994:4-5): "It is difficult to imagine how we can perceive the transitions from socialism that are now taking place if we do not first understand what preceded those transitions. " And we all know that the post-Soviet peasantries have been neglected in this sense.

Notes

1. Dirks, N.B. Editor. 1992. Colonialism and Culture. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
2. For a concise and well-researched essay on the historico-economic reasons for the Basmachi activities, and one that stresses why Soviet and Western positions about the Basmachi have been so at odds, see Lorenz, R. 1989. "Economic Bases of the Basmachi movement in the Farghana Valley (pp. 277-303)," in Muslim Communities Reemerge: Historical Perspectives on Nationality, Politics, and Opposition in the Former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Edited by Edward Allworth pp. 277-303. English edition, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989).
3. I realize it is one thing to make these smug pronouncements from the comfort of one's safe U.S. home and quite another to have to live under and work within the present Uzbekistani state. Nevertheless, I could not but take this very intellectual position.
4. Watson, R. S. Editor. Memory, History and Opposition under State Socialism. Santa Fe, NM.: School of American Research Press. In her introductory essay, Watson makes this salient observation about socialist societies: "No state is completely successful in domesticating the old to construct the new; in practice, there are always varying degrees of success. official historians, try as they might, are unable to turn their fellow citizens into blank pages upon which the new can be inscribed.,,"
5. There was a very limited number of Soviet works devoted to regional histories of the Uzbek countryside aside from the handful of published ethnographies devoted to single collective or state farms. The one enormous work devoted to the history of Uzbek villages is the seventeen-volume *Ozbekiston Sovkhozlar va Kolkhozlar Tarikhi*. It was written over two decades, but is not exhaustive. Most collectives have at least a few of the volumes of this set in their libraries, and people are generally familiar with it, though few have read any of it. While I never found the entry of Ulughbek kolkhoz (formerly Leninchi) where I worked, I did read several entries of other Fergana valley kolkhozes in regions with which I had some experiential familiarity. The entries follow the universal Soviet Marxist historical style, to which I've alluded in the text, and most of the essays are concerned with Soviet history. They are bloated with facts and figures about the quantified material improvements in kolkhoz conditions, and single out only those people who achieved awards and honors for service to the collective and state.
6. Uzbekistan's situation is much like that of other post-colonial countries. Shahrani's (1994) discussion of what he disliked as a part of his formal education in Afghanistan may well be comparable to the more vernacular sentiment of many rural Uzbeks when bombarded with images and texts of the overblown exploits of medieval Central Asian figures who have now been appropriated as Uzbeks. Shahrani sees such state concerns as alienating and irrelevant: an almost fanatical search for the glories of some remote historical past combined with total disregard for present social and demographic realities...." [27] See his article, "Honored Guest and Marginal Man: Long-Term Field Research and predicaments of a Native Anthropologist," in Others Knowing Others: Perspectives on Ethnographic Careers. Edited by Fowler, D. D. and D. L. Hardesty pp. 15-68. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

7. Massell, G. 1974. The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia 1919-1929. Princeton Univ. Press: Princeton. His book remains the nonpareil study of Soviet transformative activity within the Central Asian countryside. The premise of his work is the conversion of village women into an ersatz working class based on their cultural and economic development under conditions of deep gender discrimination. Their "objective oppression made them ripe for socialist liberation and full social equality with men. Kolkhoz women's attitudes about socialist equality and liberation are varied, but the irony of several middle-aged women telling me that they had neither the desire to work outside the home nor to do the work men do (they consider that they do farm more work than men anyway, often referring to themselves half-jokingly as mard ael. This may mean a "tough" or "courageous" woman, but may also translate as a woman who seems like a man because of her crushing work burdens) certainly made me question the universality and smugness of aspects of Western liberalism and Marxism.

8. To understand just how destructive such a line of thought can become under circumstances of extreme poverty and widespread alcoholic abuse, see Stefan Sullivan's (1995) *Interethnic Relations in Post-Soviet Tuva*. Ethnic and Racial Studies 18:6488. I don't mean to suggest that the state of Uzbek-Russian relations has decayed to the level of Tuva.

9. In a caustic way, Fanon reads the French activities regarding not merely the removal of the haik but the exposure of Algerian women in general to a wider world in a way that is redolent of comments Uzbek men made to me about the Soviet policies toward bringing women into all facets of the labor force; Fanon refers to it as "destructuring culture." See Algeria Unveiled (New York: Grove Press).

10. In Sharikhonchek approximately 12% of women with families work only within the household's physical space (hovli); more than 60% remain employed in the public sector, which here includes office work for the kolkhoz itself and agricultural labor within the farm's 11 brigades.

11. I am thinking mainly about Chatterjee's 1986 book, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a Derivative Discourse. London: Zed Press, in relation to the problems that formerly colonized leaders face in de-coupling their political outlooks and courses of action from the previous power. I would argue that the situation for Uzbekistan is actually dissimilar to India, because so few of Uzbekistan's current governmental leaders ever fought against Soviet power or even supported its disintegration and the idea of an independent national Uzbekistan.