

Layered legacies - an introduction

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Michael Spies, Henryk Alff (eds.)

Beyond Post-Soviet: Layered Legacies and Transformations in Central Asia



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Layered legacies – an introduction

Henryk Alff, Matthias Schmidt, Michael Spies, Rune Steenberg

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, academic interest in Central Asia experienced a boom, in particular regarding the concepts of post-socialism and transformation. Not only did the new independent states become more involved in world politics, but they also became more accessible to international research activities, especially by Western scholars. Thirty years down the road, the Central Asian republics are still often granted the epithet “post-Soviet.” While this is technically true, the region also has a pre-Soviet history of feudalism, Russian colonialism or the imperial Great Game, each of which has influenced Central Asian societies. Moreover, it has been shaped and differentiated by several more recent phenomena, such as the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, the importing and re-exporting of Chinese consumer goods, labor migration to Russia and the establishment of important institutions and initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Eurasian Economic Union or the Belt and Road Initiative – all references to important past and recent historical phases that have shaped the region in ways still visible today. As some observers have remarked, Central Asia could also meaningfully be deemed post-post-Soviet, as its particular contemporary problems and challenges seem to derive more from the concrete policies implemented by Western development agencies and international banks in the so-called “transformation phase,” meant to mark the West’s victory in the Cold War, than from any Soviet legacy (Buyandelgeriyn 2008; Pétric 2005). While still shaped by its Soviet and colonial past, the region’s social institutions, political developments and economic asymmetries closely resemble those of other regions on the margins of the capitalist world system. Military instability now emanates less from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and more from the US-led incursion in 2001, the drug trade it helped to spawn and the growing rise of Islamism and its recruiting in reaction to Western aggression in the Middle East as well as home-grown, condescending secularism (Chaudet 2006; McCoy 2017; Montgomery, Heathershaw 2016). Similarly, Central Asia’s economic marginality can be said to now reflect global value chains, the effects of the Global Financial Crisis, Russia’s economic struggles and China’s rise and geo-political tensions with the US (Fehlings, Karrar 2020; Reeves 2012) – at least

to a degree as large as Moscow’s planning decisions and ecologically unsound resource extraction and agricultural modernization in Soviet times. Thus, one should think of those elements of Soviet legacy that still play a role in current developments as belonging to one of several types of important legacies. In this sense, each social phenomenon observed in Central Asia today has its own unique combination of elements from the past deriving from what we call “layered legacies” – legacies of different phases that reinforce, interact with or contradict each other in complex ways and can have very different consequences in different local contexts (Ibañez-Tirado 2015).

This volume examines some of the on-the-ground, concrete effects of the region’s layered legacies. Eclectically zooming in closely on important topics in the region, such as urban planning, water management and access, agricultural production, communal cooperation, migration patterns, ethnicity, Islam and gender, the papers in this volume present the contemporary situation in Central Asia in light of its three most recent historical phases: the Soviet era, post-soviet transformations and capital-driven glocalization. While each contribution engages with particular topics in a concrete and mainly micro-scale manner, the overarching question explored across these different examples pertains to the relative relevance and dynamic interaction of these layers of legacies. Are Soviet structures still relevant today? How much was disrupted and determined by “shock therapy” and other forms of transformation efforts in the 1990s (Kuehnast, Dudwick 2004)? And to what degree are the Central Asian republics and its societies today affected by global socio-economic and political dynamics of power and inequality (Beyer, Finke 2019; Silova, Niyozov 2020)? Moreover, how are the policies, support and demands of China, Russia, the US, the Asian Development Bank, the IMF and the World Bank playing out locally, and what lasting structures have the different phases of modernization, development and coloniality created (Kušić et al. 2019)?

These questions were addressed in two workshops that brought together Central Asia researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds to present and discuss their ongoing research on the region.

The first workshop took place on 7–8 February 2020 at Augsburg University and was entitled “Transformation after the transformation: Central Asia in focus of human geography and social sciences”. The second one was held as a virtual workshop hosted by Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development on 4–5 March 2021, entitled “Beyond post-Soviet: Path dependencies and new trajectories of change in Central Asia”. These two events also served as the first annual meetings of the Central Asian Studies Network in Germany (CASNiG), an open network of Central Asia researchers and experts set up to exchange ideas, concepts and findings, and to promote collaboration, mutual support and solidarity.¹

This volume presents selected papers based on contributions from the two workshops, addressing contemporary issues and layered legacies in Central Asia from various angles. The first two papers focus on water. In her contribution on ‘Masculinity and water diplomacy in Central Asia’, Jenniver Sehring goes beyond the analysis of policy-level water governance. She draws attention to the individual interactions of officials in water management and through a gendered perspective scrutinizes collaborative and confrontational actions shaping water use practices. Thematically related, Kateřina Zách focuses on the material dimension of water use. Highlighting the prolonged roles of Soviet water pumps in Kyrgyzstan’s villages, many of which have now fallen into disrepair, she provides a theoretically informed study of heritage and social memory in rural Central Asia.

While also focusing on natural resource use, the next three papers address questions relating to collaborative approaches, participation and local knowledge in a dynamic social-ecological environment. Challenging established claims that cooperative-based approaches to agricultural development have largely failed, due to the negatively connoted Soviet legacy, Ottavia Cima deconstructs the role of development discourses and foregrounds the importance of in-depth qualitative research in achieving this end. Michael Spies and Martin Welp signify participatory approaches, prominently stakeholder-knowledge mapping, as an additional, highly effective and socially just tool that can support socially and ecologically more sustainable land use practices in rural Central Asia – in their case agroforestry systems. Similarly, Andrei Dörre, in his micro-level study of irrigation management

in the Western Pamirs, emphasizes the significance of local knowledge as a means of both securing access to resources under conditions of highly fragmented smallholder farming and climatic pressures, on the one hand, and sustaining community cohesion on the other.

Moving away from rural environments, Tabea Rohner and Wladimir Sgibnev, in their respective papers, investigate the social and political dimensions of urban infrastructure and development. Focusing on the monotown of Tekeli in south-eastern Kazakhstan, and addressing the lived realities of its inhabitants, Tabea Rohner calls for a nuanced revision of post-Soviet urban development outside the capital cities. According to the author, such settlements are often falsely regarded as failures. In his explorative analysis of innovation processes in Central Asia’s urban public transport systems, Wladimir Sgibnev highlights the often overlooked development dynamics unfolding outside the large metropolitan centers and thus challenges powerful discourses of peripheralization.

Finally, two more papers address critical questions related to changing identities and public discourses. Drawing on deeply contentious societal debates around the migration of Kazakhs from the neighboring countries to Kazakhstan since the early 1990s, Zarina Mukanova and Rune Steenberg explore certain types of social marginalization and inclusion as colonial legacies under the guise of post-coloniality. In her analysis of discourses around the emergence of women’s Islamic veiling in the Kyrgyzstani public, Gulzat Baialieva identifies a number of different paths for Kyrgyzstani women to wear a hijab, including pressure from their family but also individual choices in order to take ownership of their own lives and morality. Baialieva describes attitudes to veiling as reflecting generational conflicts in Kyrgyzstan: many younger women choose the hijab over traditional alternatives in order to escape the colonial stigmatization of backwardness tied to local Islam. In a globalized Islam expressed in the hijab, they find a vision of the future away from the “colonial past and postcolonial uncertain present”.

The papers each focus on topics highly relevant to contemporary Central Asia and its ongoing societal and economic developments. They provide details of transformations beyond the obsolete imaginary of a teleological “transformation phase” from socialism to capitalism and present today’s Central

¹ See www.casnig.geo.uni-augsburg.de

Asia as intertwined spaces and a phenomenon for which the post-Soviet marks but one amongst several phases of shaping influence. We look forward to more exchanges within the frame of CASNiG and hope that the present papers and the overarching concept of layered legacies will contribute to a nuanced historical understanding of contemporary Central Asia and beyond.

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