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“The Pillars of Our Statehood:” *Glasnost*, Soviet Networks, and National Mobilization

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Abstract

Scholars of Gorbachev’s reforms and the Soviet collapse usually note that the last Soviet leader underestimated the power of nationalist mobilization and acted belatedly, and ineffectually, to stop it. In this article, I consider the effects of the strategy that Gorbachev adopted in the wake of the Alma-Ata events (remembered as *Jeltoqsan* in Kazakhstan), when protests erupted after an ethnic Russian from outside the republic was installed as first secretary. Gorbachev realized the importance of nationalist sentiment and was sympathetic to many of the grievances raised by intellectuals. He hoped that better knowledge of the problem would help him manage it, and he counted on the intellectuals to make common cause with their counterparts across the USSR. They did so, but the all-union publications, institutions, and networks to which they turned ultimately amplified nationalist sentiment and catalyzed the movement for independence, undermining the prospects of all-union reform. I explore this phenomenon by considering the Aral-88 expedition, the role of journals like *Druzhba Narodov*, and knowledge production on the region among ethnographers and economists at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow.

Keywords

glasnost – nationalism – reform – knowledge – environment

A 1990 article in the literary journal *Druzhba Narodov* [Friendship of the Peoples] began with a vivid summary of how quickly the Soviet image of Central Asia had changed in the *perestroika* era. “Central Asia is an unknown land. Our
image of it has turned out to be a mirage,” the writer, Vladimir Medvedev, began. Before, the “popular image” of the region included “the familiar panorama of endless cotton fields, surrounded by poplar trees, giant bunts of “white gold,” graceful young women in wide pants from atlas-patterned fabric, that danced at government concerts, wise aksakals (elders), surrounded by young children. But that image had “suddenly melted ... as if a curtain depicting paradise opened and behind it appeared the darkest hell.” Instead, the world now saw “children in cotton fields under the scorching sun ... self-immolating women, earth poisoned by chemicals, rivers that were drying out.” Yet Medvedev ended his opening paragraph with a question: “could it be, that this picture of evil – was itself a mirage?”

Medvedev, a Russian who had grown up in Tajikistan, had gone on to work in the journal Pamir before moving to Druzhba Narodov. The latter was a literary publication of the USSR Union of Writers that had for decades introduced readers from one part of the Soviet Union to writers from another, via translations into the Russian language. In 1990, the editor of the journal, with encouragement from scholars working at the Academy of Science’s Institute of Oriental Studies, or IVAN, convened a roundtable in Tashkent to discuss some of the issues animating politics within the region and dominating reporting on the republics in the Soviet press, including corruption, environmental degradation, and nationalism. The roundtable in Tashkent brought together some of the leading specialists from IVAN, including Aleksei Malashenko and Sergei Panarin, representatives of Central Asian research institutes and government agencies, leaders of some of the first NGOs, as well as writers and other intellectuals. A report on the roundtable was published several months later under the title The Person of Mawaranakh: Myths and Reality.

As the quotation suggests, the report was part of a broader discussion in the late USSR about the results of Soviet development in Central Asia. It was a discussion that involved social scientists, intellectuals, artists, politicians, and activists from Central Asia, as well as ones from Russia. And the discussion about Central Asia was, in turn, part of a larger conversation about the Soviet project as a whole. But the discussion organized by the journal also points to the complicated role played by such publications and networks in the perestroika years. Gorbachev and his advisers counted on all-union networks and publications to mobilize support for perestroika and diffuse nationalist tensions. Through these institutions, intellectuals from across the USSR could band together to form an all-union civil society that would challenge

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the recalcitrant bureaucracy and party conservatives standing in the way of reform. Instead those very networks became a key site where nationalist discourse and grievance was articulated, sharpened, and transmitted.

It is often asserted that Gorbachev misunderstood the “nationalities problem” in the USSR. He underestimated the strength of national grievance and thus could not foresee that his reforms would lead to strife between groups and ultimately to calls for independence from the Soviet Union. This was the assessment of contemporary observers and it has not been challenged since. Accounts which take Gorbachev as the central actor in the drama of the Soviet collapse, no matter how sympathetic or critical they are of Gorbachev, take it more or less for granted that the Soviet Union was composed of fairly well-defined national groups, that these groups had grievances against the USSR as national groups, and that Gorbachev’s reforms brought these grievances into the public arena (first via a more open press and then via a more open political process) thus set off the process that precipitated collapse.

Scholars interested in the Soviet Union’s diversity, its status as an empire, and in the lives of people who lived in different regions, spoke different languages, followed different religions (even if officially they had largely given up doing so), and so on, have largely agreed that the nationalities problem was in effect one created by the USSR. That is, the particular “imagined community” which demanded sovereignty, justice, and independence at the end of the Soviet period were, to a greater or lesser extend depending on the case, created through the process of Soviet nation-building. The fact that grievances and claims were made on the basis of national community reflected not so much the failure of the Soviet approach to managing difference but its overwhelming success.

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One question that remains unexplored is why the *perestroika* era did not see more mobilization *across* national/ethnic boundaries. In his 2005 book, the sociologist Georgi M. Derluguian posed a number of questions about the Soviet collapse: “Why did the Soviet nationalities suddenly begin to demand something that Gorbachev ... could not deliver? ... and why did they express their demands through a nationalist discourse? Why did they not talk in terms of democratization, social reform, the devolution of economic decision-making, or ecology?” It would probably be more accurate to say that they talked about those things *through* a nationalizing discourse. Nevertheless, Derluguian is right to point to the paradox of mobilization: despite the shared concerns of intellectuals across the USSR, mobilization proceeded along national lines. A broader, trans-national or all Soviet mobilization proved unsustainable, according to Derluguian due to the “exceedingly shallow nature of those networks that might have had some potential to form the basis of an all-union Civil Society.” By contrast, many analysts of the Soviet collapse argue, national (that is republic-level) institutions proved to be incubators for separatism.

This article argues that the republican intelligentsia’s commitment to a nationalizing discourse and its abandonment of all-Soviet commitments was not a pre-ordained outcome. Many of the issues that animated public discussion in the Soviet era transcended republican boundaries. Moreover, political mobilization *within* national republics was not limited to what could be described as national grievances. Questions of environmental degradation, mass repression and its legacies, and of democratic participation could – and did – unite activists from across the USSR. Moreover, the way that the intellectual and institutional infrastructure developed in the Soviet Union to bring nationalities together (towards the ultimate goal of transcending national difference) served both to mobilize potential solidarities across the USSR, and, ultimately, to articulate difference.

In the case of the Soviet collapse, as Mark Beissinger pointed out, “disintegration ... could not have taken place without the effects of tidal influences of one nationalism on another.” This paper turns to the sites of transmission for such influences, establishing the link between their (unintended) role and

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6 Derluguian, *Bourdieu’s Secret Admirer*, 204.
7 A very helpful discussion of this argument and its shortcoming is in Mark Kramer, “Introduction to a Special Issue on the Collapse of the Soviet Union (part 2),” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, No. 4 (Fall 2003): 3–42. See especially pages 17–21.
Gorbachev’s (evolving) nationality policy. I suggest that Gorbachev was not wrong to believe he would find allies in these organizations, or that intellectuals working through these organizations would find a common language. Rather, he underestimated the extent to which the upheavals brought about by perestroika would reify national identity for these individuals.

This article proceeds as follows. In part 1 I trace Gorbachev’s evolution on the “nationality question,” drawing primarily on Politburo records assembled by his foundation. While incomplete, these records are crucial for understanding how these issues were discussed at the most senior level of Soviet leadership and how the thinking of Gorbachev and his colleagues changed over time. The rest of the article draws primarily on publications in Soviet periodicals like *Druzhba narodov* that served as platform for reformist intellectuals and allow us to excavate the rhetoric of the period as well as the networks that actors mobilized to develop and amplify their positions. I also use a handful of memoirs to further draw out the experience and positions of key actors. After the first section I turn to the way that Gorbachev’s calls for more knowledge and openness in discussing nationality problems encouraged scholarship that underlined the fundamental differences between Central Asia and the European USSR. I then look at a case where intellectuals mobilized across republican lines on ecological issues, namely the Aral Sea crisis, before turning to the way that the all-union networks and institutions used to make this kind of collaboration possible served to amplify difference expressed in ethnic terms. The intelligentsia which Gorbachev had hoped to recruit to his cause took their task as Soviet and national leaders seriously; *glasnost’,* however, forced them to confront the gap between their own experience and the problems of the people they claimed to represent.9

1  **Jelotqsan** and Gorbachev’s Approach to the “Nationality Problem”

As General Secretary, Gorbachev encountered the “nationality problem” first through the December 1986 events in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan, and then through the lingering effects of the anti-corruption campaign in Uzbekistan.

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In December 1986, Gorbachev orchestrated the removal of long-serving First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party Dinmukhamed Kunaev and replaced him with an ethnic Russian, Gennadii Kolbin. Gorbachev did not seem to think this move would be controversial, as Kunaev was one of the last holdovers of the Brezhnev era still leading a republic party. But the move led to several days of protests in the capital; interior ministry troops were called in, and as a result, at least two protesters were killed. The event is remembered in Kazakhstan as Jeltoqsan (December).

Up to that point Gorbachev’s Politburo seems to have largely avoided discussing nationality issues. But about a month after the events the Communist Party’s main decision-making body decided to address the issue head on in an upcoming plenum on cadre politics. Politburo “liberals,” like Boris Yeltsin as well as more conservative voices like the long-serving Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko spoke in favor of addressing the nationality problem. Noteworthy is that everyone who spoke up drew on the legitimizing language of glasnost’ and openness: the problem was pre-existing but hushed up by the leadership. Now was the time to address these issues openly. Nikolai Ryzhkov supported the move, saying “The question of internationalism is timely. After the events in Kazakhstan this is obvious. And there were other events just like it before, but we kept silent.” Yegor Ligachev, Gorbachev’s secretary for ideology made the point even more forcefully: “National relations were outside the political sphere, and were excluded from critical analysis: god forbid if someone said that something is amiss here.” Even Viktor Chebrikov, head of the KGB, concurred, saying that it was time to speak about relations between the nationalities, which had previously only been addressed at “celebratory gatherings.”

Gorbachev himself seems to have been slower to adopt this rhetoric. At the Politburo meeting on January 19, he largely focused on other issues. But a little over a month later he addressed the question of nationalities again after a trip to the Baltic republics. He was sympathetic to Baltic intellectuals and others who complained about being “forced to learn Russian” but not knowing

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10 Kunaev may have also suggested bringing in a Russian as a way to sideline his most likely local successor, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Brown, Gorbachev Factor, 261, 379. In any case, Gorbachev clearly did not see any potential pitfalls with imposing a Russian successor.

11 On Jeltoqsan, see also the discussion by Mark Kramer in this special issue and the extensive bibliography in the footnotes of his article.

12 A. Cherniaev, A. Veber, V. Medvedev, V politburo TsK KPSS (Moscow: Gorbachev-Fond, 2008), 121.

13 Cherniaev et al, Politburo, 123.

14 Cherniaev et al, Politburo, 124.
their own language. Once again he returned to the Alma-Ata events, speaking in typically vague terms: “We need to fine tune the exchange of national values. To do it smartly and respectfully. In Alma-Ata reactionary survivals in relations between nationalities showed themselves. And people want to feel themselves at home in this enormous country.” He returned to the topic in June during a discussion of a resolution on the work of the Kazakhstani party: “In the Alma-Ata case we acted first and then started studying the problem more deeply. At least we started studying it. We need to study more deeply, politically, what is happening.” He also seemed to grasp the stakes: “Relations between the nationalities are one of the pillars of our statehood. If it does not hold everything else will start to crack. This is a fundamental question.” Gorbachev seemed genuinely puzzled that a place that had proven so crucial to the Soviet effort during the second world war and that had developed a massive industrial base would now face these problems. (He seems to have ignored the legacy of the famine of the 1930s, as well as the various environmental issues brought about by industrialization and nuclear testing that would become so important in the years that followed). Moreover, he wondered aloud what to do about the Russian population, which made up almost half of the republic but was considered “not-indigenous” (nekoronoe naselenie). By the next spring he was clearly convinced that the nationality problem might overtake all others, turning to a metaphor of a house in danger of being overtaken by the elements: “All the doors and windows are flapping and rocks are falling on the roof,” he told Politburo colleagues and assistants gathered to discuss the upcoming Party Conference.

Gorbachev’s language – one echoed by most of his colleagues at this stage – pointed to several aspects of his approach. The first was vagueness – a quality of Gorbachev’s behavior and speech that came to frustrate even his closest allies, like foreign policy aide Anatolii Cherniaev, but that here related genuine puzzlement and a sense that he did not have the necessary information at hand. As with other aspects of his reform effort, Gorbachev trusted that expert knowledge, freed from the constraints of the Brezhnev era, would help guide the way to reform. Gorbachev wanted to get a handle on the problem and encouraged scholars to dig into the issues. During his vacation in summer

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15 Cherniaev et al, Politburo, 144.
16 Cherniaev et al, Politburo, 191.
of 1987, he asked Iulian Bromlei, head of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences to prepare a report on the nations and nationalities in the USSR, what the USSR had gotten right and what it had gotten wrong, and to make sure that it was a “an honest analysis … let him show everything honestly.”

The second, already mentioned, was the belief that this problem could be addressed through the more general glasnost’ prescriptions: more openness and discussion of the problem, and a recognition that some of the grievances being aired by national intellectuals had merit. In February 1987 he instructed journalists and editors not to shy away from addressing the problem of nationality: “we live in a multi-national country, and a lack of attention to this question is dangerous.” It helped that he could appeal to Lenin in supporting some of the claims being made about language policy: “Lenin said: a government language from above is a police state (politzeishchina). The people value respect! If you don’t have your own language, then what? Everything is tied up with language. In our country no question can be solved without taking the national question into account.” At the same time, this openness had to be accompanied by a respectful but firm line from party leadership that would channel the ambitions and grievances of intellectuals towards an improvement of intra-Soviet internationalism and away from the kind of nationalism that could tear the USSR apart. “We need to show how everything is intertwined. And then it will be clear that the heroes of extremism are pushing their people into a dead end. The majority in each people (narod) are healthy forces.”

All of these aspects were on display in his speech at a special plenum convened in September 1989 to discuss the “party’s nationality policy under contemporary conditions.” He blamed party idealogues of an earlier era for “advancing formerly widespread theses regarding the forced (forsirovannom) fusing of nations, which had been raised to the level of program directives” and which were accompanied by a decline in the “sphere of activity of national languages.” Despite the fact that these developments led to justified alarm in society, “healthy attempts to understand [the grievances] and find rational solutions were often treated as nationalism with all of the consequences that flowed [from that label].” The result of the party’s earlier mistakes was the “declining role of the national languages of certain peoples.” Therefore,

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18 Cherniaev et al, Politburo, 223.
19 Mikhail Gorbachev, Sobranie sochinenii, vol. 4, (Moscow: Ves’ mir, 2008), 368.
20 Cherniaev et al, Politburo, 345.
21 October 13, 1988, Politburo, 429.
their desire to “maintain and develop their own language, to multiply the values of their culture” were completely understandable.22 By September 1989, of course, things had already gone quite far: the previous years had already seen the first calls for independence in the Baltic Republics, the outbreak of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the emergence of Russian nationalism.

Nevertheless, the way that Gorbachev approached the problem in the wake of Alma-Ata had important consequences. First, Gorbachev’s evolving approach over the course of 1987, and his decision to fold the problem of nationalities into the broader framework of glasnost’ as a confrontation with the shortcomings of previous eras encouraged and legitimated a critical discourse. At the same time, while Gorbachev may have recognized the legitimacy of claims made by national intellectuals, he still interpreted those claims within a Leninist framework: such differences were supposed to be subsumed within an internationalist structure, and within a centralized union state.23 Second, and directly related to the first, Gorbachev’s insistence that these problems should be discussed in the press opened up a forum for intellectuals to present their positions and grievances to an all-Soviet audience. Indeed, since in many cases republican officials were more hesitant to allow the kind of press freedoms encouraged by Gorbachev, these intellectuals were able to air their positions in all-Soviet publications before publishing them in their own republics. Third, Gorbachev’s insistence that this was a problem to be studied opened up space for scholars like Bromlei, who had long been critical of the Soviet approach to nationalities, as well specialists in other fields, to question the dogmas that underlay Soviet federalism and inter-ethnic relations. Finally, Gorbachev’s approach – of respecting national claims while encouraging internationalist approaches – relied on institutions such as the Union of Writers or publications like Druzhba narodov which had been set up to unite representatives of Soviet nationalities within one all-Soviet framework. Increasingly, however, these institutions, even as they tried to play an active role in negotiating tensions between different groups, themselves became platforms that amplified nationalist claims.

23 See also Carolina de Stefano’s piece in this volume.
2 Knowledge

Gorbachev’s insistence on studying and being open about problems also had unintended consequences. In the perestroika years almost every research institute and scholarly journal hosted a discussion and passed resolutions on the need to approach their work in a new way in the context of glasnost’ and perestroika. For social sciences, this meant revisiting the ideological framework and assumptions that had guided their work and publication in earlier periods. Increasingly, it also came to mean highlighting the gap between what was assumed in earlier periods and reality on the ground. In most cases, the information presented was not new, but the way it was framed and discussed was: issues that had once been treated as shortcomings to be overcome were increasingly presented as evidence of fundamental problems.\textsuperscript{24} When it came to discussing the shortcomings of Soviet social and economic policies in Central Asia, this discourse undermined the universalist vision that underpinned the Soviet project by questioning the ideological foundations of the Soviet state.

Soviet social scientists had been trying to figure out the “paradox” of Central Asia (as one of them put it) from at least the 1970s.\textsuperscript{25} The Stalin era left Central Asia a cotton producer with limited industrial production. In the 1950s, local and Moscow-based scholars and planners argued that the region was ripe for industrialization, pointing among other things the booming population growth at a time when population growth in the European USSR was stagnating, and that the labor pool would grow even faster as farm labor became increasingly mechanized. Industrialization would facilitate the spread of the welfare state and education, lifting standards of living and making Central Asians proper Soviet citizens and socialist subjects.

By the early 1970s, planners and social scientists in Moscow and in the region began to question optimistic assumptions about the effectiveness and benefits of industrialization. Central Asians seemed reluctant to join industries; cotton was still harvested using manual labor; and both the cotton economy and industrialization were destroying the environment. Planners turned to social science research, including sociology and ethnography, to make sense of these problems. Despite the methodological and ideological limits of Soviet social

\textsuperscript{24} See, for example, Eduard Bagramov, “Natsional’naia problema i obshchesoznanie,” \textit{Pravda}, 14 August 1987.

\textsuperscript{25} Eighth joint session of the Council on Productive Forces (SOPS) on methodological issues, August 3, 1983. Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE), Fond 3, opis 1, delo 2054, 7–8.
science, the formal and informal findings of researchers who went out to study rural populations scrambled the assumptions underlying earlier development models. It found that rural families were often less poor than official statistics presumed, that they had sources of income that were not reflected elsewhere, and that large patriarchal families were not just barriers to progress but also a source of security and livelihood.\(^\text{26}\) These discussions were not secret, and the results of some of this research had appeared in specialized journals even in the 1970s.

With Gorbachev’s call for more expertise and the new policy of *glasnost’,* such research started to appear in more mainstream publications and to inform reform proposals as well as the more overtly political claims made by different actors. Bromlei, the ethnographer on whom Gorbachev had called to provide a realistic assessment of inter-ethnic relations, presented one strand of this “new thinking.” An expert on the Slavs of the Balkans, Bromlei had long been critical of the Soviet approach to ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations. In the early 1980s his works even provided a response to planners skeptical of further investments in Central Asia. Bromlei argued that Soviet planners had erred in assuming that all ethnic groups were equally suited for the same kind of labor; it made no sense to build factories for workers who would rather focus on handicrafts.\(^\text{27}\) But Bromlei was also critical of the whole ethno-territorial setup of the USSR, arguing that it deprived smaller groups of rights. *Perestroika* – and Gorbachev’s appeal for better knowledge on the nationalities problem – gave Bromlei the freedom to explore his ideas further, which he did in his reports to Gorbachev and in a series of publications that appeared in the late 1980s.\(^\text{28}\)

If Bromlei took a macro view in questioning the basis nationality policy in the USSR, his fellow anthropologist Sergei Poliakov’s challenged many of the commonly held assumptions. Drawing on decades of fieldwork in the region, Poliakov’s book, first published in 1989, claimed that the USSR had largely failed


\(^{28}\) Bromlei’s 1989 article in *Voprosy Istorii* seems to have been based on his work for Gorbachev. Bromlei, “Natsional’nyi problemy v usloviakh perestroiki,” *Voprosy istorii* no. 1 (1989): 24–41. S. Alimov points out that these were likely collective works. S. S. Alimov, “Zabyvaia etnos i natsiiu: etnograficheskie diskussii i ekspertiza ‘natsional’nogo voprosa’ v period perestroiki,” *Shagi* 7, no. 2 (2021): 79–82.
to transform rural society in Central Asia; instead, “traditional” society had penetrated Soviet institutions. The book’s genesis, impact, and shortcomings have been ably analyzed by Sergei Abashin, and I will not dwell on it here. Although published in a small print run, it found significant resonance in the USSR and was published in English as *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia*. The book seemed to provide an explanation for the phenomena that had bothered Soviet specialists for some time, and which seemed to challenge some of the main tenets of Soviet (and western) development models, namely the tendency of people to remain in rural areas, the desire to have large families, and the seeming disinterest in migration or higher education.

In the late 1980s, scholars within Central Asia and in Moscow began to make the connection between the problems experienced by Central Asia and that of the developing world for which the region was supposed to serve as a model. In Moscow, the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, which had previously focused on the “foreign East,” namely the countries of Asia and the Middle East, began to turn their attention to Soviet Central Asia. For IVAN’s economists, the similarities to what was happening in the countries they studied was clear. They undertook a number of initiatives, including a series of publications on the development problems of Central Asia, a roundtable in Tashkent, and eventually a special issue of the institute’s in-house journal, *Afrika i Azia Segodnia* (recently renamed *Vostok*). Introducing the special issue, Sergei Panarin, who had helped initiate the turn to studying the east summarized what had by then become consensus within his circle, that

Central Asia occupies a particular place in the USSR according to a whole set of social-economic characteristics. But almost all of these characteristics find analogues in the present or recent past of the foreign East. For example, Central Asia – is the largest region of agricultural monocultural specialization in our country. The cotton complex influences all social

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In this connection the Central Asian region is not comparable to any other region in the country, but has clear parallels with contemporary Sudan, as well as with certain other eastern countries in the period of colonial plantations. Central Asia ‘falls out’ of the USSR, but is close to South Asia in yet another way: it is a region not just with a high rate of population growth, but also a large concentration of the population in rural areas. And besides, unlike any other place in our country, but as in most countries of the Near East, this population has many of the characteristics of the traditional peasantry.32

These points were echoed even more forcefully in a piece entitled “A Model of the Non-Capitalist Path?” that appeared in Azia i Afrika Segodnia in 1989. The author, Muzaffar Olimov, a former translator and advisor in Afghanistan who had gone on to do graduate work at IVAN, criticized the USSR’s whole approach to development, linking the mistakes the Soviet Union made abroad to what it had gotten wrong at home. Referring obliquely to Umarov’s article, Olimov wrote “our scholarship insisted that the path of development of the eastern republics of the USSR differs in concrete ways from the evolution of eastern countries of non-socialist orientation. Only now we have discovered sharp conflicts of national, political, and cultural character, which are a result of those processes to which we have long closed our eyes.”33 Moreover, “the problems that are now confronting the republics of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, are in many ways similar to the difficulties experienced by countries of the foreign East, and this partially includes those countries that have chosen a capitalist path of development.”34 Many of these problems, Olimov insisted, resulted from the USSR’s ignorance of traditional society and the attempt to destroy it.

If Central Asia seemed to represent the worst mistakes of Soviet economic policy, it also seemed to show the way forward, precisely because, in the estimations of these analysts, it had been least affected by Soviet modernization. What would save Central Asia, in the words of one IVAN specialist, was its “great vitality, internal strength, and flexibility of its social organization, especially in rural areas.” But for that to happen, policymakers would have to adopt an approach that puts “man in his particular socialization, front and center. Man as the subject of economic activity, whom government only helps to

34  Ibid.
uncover his potential abilities.”35 In practical terms, this meant encouraging those forms of economic activity in which Central Asians already excelled, including farming oriented around families in collective and state farms.36 Olimov similarly suggested that a path forward was only possible by studying those societies that had built their development paths by drawing on “tradition,” including Japan, China, and India.37

What made this dramatic reassessment possible? Why did people who had never worked on Central Asia suddenly become among the most visible analysts writing about the region? Here I think the statement made by Medvedev is very telling. For if the popular Soviet image of Central Asia turned out to be a “mirage,” then the epistemic foundations which made possible those representations were now invalidated. The people who had long written about Central Asia were now suspect, even if they were the ones developing many of the critiques that others now operationalized and politicized. Some of the people who turned their attention to Central Asia imagined it from their own personal experience, or perhaps from their exposure to a particularly idealized image of a region stuck in time in a positive sense – one where you could still easily get fruits and vegetables that were becoming a rare luxury in Russian cities. Note that Medvedev’s bucolic “mirage,” actually had little to do with the official representation of Central Asia, which tended to focus just as much on factories, dams, and universities as it did on happy peasants.

But equally important was that for these scholars the critique of Soviet development in Central Asia was an extension of their critique of the USSR more generally. Central Asia served as a reference point that allowed them, from their perspectives as specialists on the “east,” to make their own contribution to the critique of the Soviet order. Central Asia, was for them, a sort of paradise that had been despoiled by the Soviet order. In that sense, their critique was both more backward-facing and more radical than that offered by many Central Asian critics themselves. Most of the Central Asian economists and other social scientists who critiqued the Soviet system in the late 1980s were offering an immanent critique; they were still committed to the visions of development they had been working out over previous decades. They were frustrated with the Soviet Union’s failure to deliver on its promises, but, as a whole were not rejecting Soviet models wholesale. Within the IVAN, criticism

36 Ibid, 11.
of Soviet development approaches was first and foremost a critique of the Soviet system. The comparison with the Third World was made to illustrate the failures of the Soviet system, undermining its claims to leadership in questions of historical development.

Elsewhere, however, the comparison took on a different tone. Against the background of the war in Afghanistan, some Soviet officials for the first time began to talk about Islamic radicalism as a potential threat. In a 1990 article in the journal Planovoe Khoziaistvo (The Planned Economy), two demographers, A. Avdeev and I. Troitskaia, argued that “At the present moment the USSR, in demographic terms, is a kind of scale model of the contemporary world” with an impoverished but booming population in the “south” and a relatively better off but stagnant population in the “north.” They explicitly mentioned the threat of radical Islamism as one of the possible scenarios for the growing number of unemployed and underemployed people in the Central Asian republics. Scholars of the Third World like Georgii Mirsky noted how overpopulation and rapid urbanization in developing countries had led to social and political instability and worried that the same thing would happen in Central Asia.

This new “knowledge” also fed into an emerging Russian nationalist discourse which insisted on Russia’s victimization in the Soviet Union and drew on debates around demography, economic development, and inequality to argue for ending subsidies to Central Asia. Among those who made this argument was Galina Litvinova, a legal specialist and demographer who worked in the Institute of Law and Rights in the USSR Academy of Sciences, and a member of the academy presidium’s committee on relations between nationalities. In the perestroika years she had spoken out against the diversion of Siberian rivers to Central Asia, and, when violence began to break out in the Caucasus and Central Asia, became the head of the Committee on Russian Refugees. In articles published in Sotsialisticheskaia industriia, Literaturnyi Kyrgyzstan, and Nash Sovremennik in 1988 and 1989, she argued that ethnic Russians were the real victims of Soviet economic policy, complained that saying so led to charges of “chauvinism,” made the case that Central Asia had experienced enormous economic growth in the Soviet period because wealth...

had been transferred from Russia to the regions’ republics, and worried that the large number of “dependents” within the region’s rapidly growing population would lead to even more demands for budgetary transfers from Russia to the republics. Litvinova’s articles echoed complaints of Russian nationalists, but turned them not just against the “center” but against the republics which, supposedly, had benefits from Soviet rule. Such publications, in turn, convinced non-Russian intellectuals that they were fighting not just for reform at the center but against a resurgent Russian nationalism which the center seemed increasingly unable, or unwilling, to control.

3 Aral-88

On August 30, 1988, several dozen ecologists, sociologists, and journalists gathered in Dushanbe to start a two month expedition that would investigate the conditions of the Aral Sea. The expedition was a collaboration between the journals Novyi Mir – a favorite of the Russian intelligentsia during the reformist Khrushchev era and once again at the forefront of glasnost under Gorbachev – and Pamir, the Russian-language journal of Tajikistan’s Union of Writers. The team that gathered in Dushanbe included Russians, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Kazakhs. First, the team traveled west, to the Aluminum Plant on the border with Uzbekistan, built in the 1970s to take advantage of the abundant electricity harnessed from the powerful Vakhsh river by the Nurek Dam. Though considered one of the most modern plants in the USSR, its wastewaters had already ruined crops on both sides of the border, and thousands of people had been moved in the early 1980s to avoid being poisoned by the plant’s pollution. After speaking to the plant’s management and local activists, the expedition returned to Dushanbe and then proceeded east, to the foothills of the Pamirs, then up into the mountains, turning north towards Kyrgyzstan before descending into the Ferghana Valley, crossing Tashkent, and proceeding towards the Aral Sea, and then finally turning back south.

42 See, for example, the response by Bakhodir Kamalov, “My vse zalozhniki systemy,” Ekonomika i zhizn’ no. 10 (1990): 7–16.
The expedition was the brainchild of two Tajik writers: Mumin Kanoat, then the Chairman of the Tajik Union of Writers, and Masud Mullajano v, the editor-in-chief of Pamir. In June 1988 they had approached the editor in chief of Novyi Mir to help organize an expedition that would investigate the situation. Reporting from the expedition would appear throughout the republican and all-Soviet press: in thick journals like Pamir and Novyi Mir, and in broadsheets like Pravda Vostoka, Literaturnaia gazeta, Pravda, and Izvestiia.

The itinerary was significant; previous reporting in the Soviet press had already drawn attention to the Aral littoral. Indeed, in the 1970s and early 1980s the USSR had seriously considered a massive river diversion plan that would have used underground nuclear explosions to redirect Siberian rivers to the Aral Sea. The proposal had the support of many Central Asian scientists and intellectuals, but also drew the opposition of Russian writers and environmentalists, leading Gorbachev to cancel the project in 1987. By moving from Tursunzade, up to the glaciers that fed Central Asian rivers, through the farmlands devoted to cotton production in the valleys and the steppe and on to the sea itself, the expedition drew attention to the interrelated climate problems caused by industry, hydropower, and, especially, cotton production. But it also highlighted the social costs of the Soviet system, some only tangentially connected to climate: the resettlement of mountain villagers into the valleys, the inadequate school and medical facilities in mountain villages, and so on. Most importantly, it presented these as part of a crisis shared by different groups: Uzbeks and Tajiks, Ismailis in the Pamirs, Kyrgyz villagers, and Russians and Kazakhs along the Aral Sea.

The expedition and the resulting publications were models of glasnost’. Journalists and specialists uncovered problems that had previously remained obscured, called out recalcitrant officials, and summoned the union leadership to pursue radical change. That reporting, in turn, as well as the campaigning by members of the expedition in the years that followed, would contribute to debates in the new, democratically elected Supreme Soviet of the USSR and legislation aimed at addressing the issues raised by the expedition. In a sense, this was exactly the kind of mobilization that Gorbachev envisioned when he pursued glasnost’ and further democratic reforms. People across

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the Soviet Union would unite to challenge the bureaucracy that was responsible for the country’s problems and resisted his reforms, but in the process would also develop a stronger sense of their Soviet citizenship. Tolepbergen Kaipbergenov, the Chairman of the Karakalpak SSR Union of Writers and a deputy in the Council of People’s Deputies, spoke of the Aral catastrophe as a shared problem: “We cannot forget that the death of the Aral Sea threatens not just the death of Central Asia. It will be followed by unpredictable, most likely catastrophic changes in the climate of a big part of the country. This is threatening to become a global crisis.”

Similarly, the celebrated Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov argued “we are children of one country. Whether things go well or poorly, we will divide everything equally ... Aral is a disaster of our whole people [vsego nashego naroda.]”

The anthropologist Nancy Ries, in her book on Russian responses to perestroika, noted how the journals like Novyi Mir, in this period, presented a discourse of catastrophe which undermined the goals of the intellectuals presenting this critique. The “discourse of catastrophe,” in turn, served to undermine the system by making any kind of reform seem impossible. As William Wheeler points out, however, the Aral-88 publications managed to avoid this pitfall and transcended the “discourse of catastrophe.” Here, according to Wheeler, the “catastrophic vision is revelatory, and reveals a knowledge which is prospective, using the past to look pragmatically to the future.”

Equally notable for our purposes, however, is that the discourse around Aral-88 was made possible by a network of intellectuals – scientists, writers, and journalists – from different republics and ethnicities with a shared desire to draw attention to the problem and to find a cooperative solution. It was the kind of pro-active bottom-up initiative that Gorbachev counted on to support his reforms.

That achievement, however, did not last. Indeed, the late Soviet period saw the outbreak of eco-nationalism, where environmental problems were interpreted as attacks on a particular republic or ethnic group. In Central Asia, this included a blame game where Uzbekistan was accused of deliberately

48 T. Kaipergenov, Literaturnaja Gazeta, 7 June 1989, 3.
poisoning Tajik lands, where Tajikistan was blamed for denying water to Uzbekistan, and so on. But the rise of eco-nationalism was tied up with the rise of nationalism as such, an issue that we will turn to in the next section.  

4 Amplifying Difference

As perestroika gained steam, the same fora that Gorbachev counted on to bring forth a healthy discussion regarding nationality issues and ethnic tensions started to become catalysts for articulating grievances not just at Moscow or ethnic Russians but often at neighboring republics and ethnic groups.

In 1989, the journal *Druzhba Narodov* organized a special Council on Relations Between Nationalities. The council hosted its first meeting, devoted to the subject of the “Role of the Intelligentsia in Conflicts Between Nationalities,” in June, and published the discussions in the November and December issues of the journal. The session took place in the wake of violence in the Ferghana Valley directed at Meskhetian Turks – Muslims from Georgia deported to the region under Stalin. The literary critic Leonid Terakopian, an ethnic Armenian, opened the gathering with an appeal to his fellow intellectuals: “I think our council needs to become a tribune of dialogue. Not to accuse but to listen. Not to push away but to extend a hand. Not to aggravate strife but to create zones of agreement and trust.” Many of the participants spoke up in favor of addressing the grievances of groups they represented but also those of others within a reformed Soviet framework. Yet as the editors of the journal admitted, they were only partially successful in their efforts, and distanced themselves from some of the more “extreme” statements made by speakers. And yet in the spirit of glasnost’ these views were still aired and then published in a journal read across the USSR.

Similarly, a shared concern about “national languages” disrespected by the center could be transformed into a grievance directed not at central party organs but rather at a (seemingly) more influential ethnic group. The writer Muhamadjon Shukurov (Shukuri) recalled attending meetings sponsored by

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55 Ibid, no. 11, 178.

56 Ibid, no. 11, 177.
the all-Soviet Union of Writers where people from different republics complained about the poor state of “national” culture in the USSR. Among the speakers who made an impression on Shukurov was the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov, who complained that there was only one Kyrgyz-language school in the Kyrgyz SSR’s capital of Frunze (Bishkek) and that only the least able students were sent to study there; a Moldovan deputy who complained about the switch to Cyrillic from Latin script, and even the Academician Dmitrii Likhachev, the Russian historian and cultural preservationist.57 Their speeches inspired him to write a series of articles on the state of national languages in the republic. One of the first, after some difficulty, came out in Moscow in Literaturnaia gazeta. Entitled “Kto bespomoshchen v svoem iazyke,” [Who is helpless in his own language] the article criticized Tajik writers and journalists for their poor command of their mother tongue.58 Shukurov made common cause with his fellow writers elsewhere in the USSR who feared that their language was losing out to Russian. And he turned the tables on planners and party leaders in Moscow who explained the lack of economic progress in the republics by referring to poor knowledge of the Russian language: “the main reason that today’s Tajik youth doesn’t know Russian or knows it poorly should be sought in their pool knowledge of their native language, which is the basis of the spiritual and moral self-knowledge of the individual.” He then cited a Tajik proverb: “he who is helpless in his own tongue is an ignoramus, even if he knows 200 languages.”59 Shukurov took these ideas further in an article that appeared in July 1989, where he took aim at those who accused language activists in the republics of “nationalism,” as well as specialists from the Institute of Language Acquisition of the USSR Academy of Sciences.60 Shukurov’s articles inspired a wave of letters to the editor, many from readers who agreed with Shukurov that “bilingualism” in practice meant the domination of Russian, some of which the newspaper printed, along with articles by intellectuals from other republics echoing Shukurov’s points.61

Shukurov’s networks and integration into the Soviet literary world made it possible for him to argue a position that was at the core of the emerging nationalist movement.62 They allowed him to take a position of solidarity

57 Shukuri, Hikoiathoe akandah az hayat ..., 28–29.
59 Ibid.
61 “Na kakom iazyke govorit?,” No. 37, LG, 1989; Editors’ note, LG, No. 52 December 27, 1989.
with fellow intellectuals across the USSR, from the Baltic States to Belarus and Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Yet such publications also amplified complaints directed not just at Moscow but also at neighboring republics. Shukurov’s pieces in Literaturnaia gazeta placed the plight of the Tajik language in a transnational, all-Soviet frame. But he also used his platform to draw attention to the fate of Tajik speakers and Tajik culture within Uzbekistan in all-union fora. The lack of Tajik language education and cultural production in cities like Bukhara and Samarqand and their environs concerned the Tajik intelligentsia only marginally less than the status of the Tajik language in the Tajik SSR itself. Agitation on the question led to frustration on the part of their Uzbek counterparts, who were likewise mobilizing for the protection of the Uzbek language and who could point, justifiably, to the limited Uzbek language education and cultural production among ethnic Uzbeks in Tajikistan.

The journal Druzhba Narodov tried to mediate this debate by hosting and printing a roundtable that include Shukuri and the Uzbek writer Hamid Ismailov. Yet the “Uzbek-Tajik Dialogue,” as the journal’s editors styled the journal section that appeared in September 1990, only highlighted the growing distance between the Tajik and Uzbek intellectuals and the transformation of what had been a trans-ethnic mobilization into a national one where the representatives of different groups no longer saw each other as allies. The fate of Tajik speakers also led to questions about why Bukhara and Samarqand were in Uzbekistan in the first place, rather than in Tajikistan—a historical injustice, from the point of view of some activists, attributed not just to Bolsheviks in Moscow but Uzbek nationalists and “pan-Turkists.”

A similar dynamic played out in the new, democratically elected, legislature, and particularly the upper chamber, the revitalized Soviet of Nationalities. The latter had existed in one form or another since 1924, but it was only with the first democratic elections in 1989 that it became a real parliamentary body. Over the following two years it would be the scene of lively debates and investigations into various issues brought up by the delegates or by their constituents. For the first time, independent, non-communist intellectuals became


64 Rahim Masov, Istoriia topornogo razdeleniia (Dushanbe: Irfon, 1991). At the time Rahim Masov was close to the Rastokhez movement which had agitated for the legal status of the Tajik language, among other reforms.
parliamentary delegates.\textsuperscript{65} The Soviet of Nationalities became a place where representatives were expected to raise the problems of “their” nationality.\textsuperscript{66}

As public protest increasingly took on nationalist overtones and sometimes turned violent, intellectuals used these institutions to speak out in defense of those who were being accused of causing disorder.\textsuperscript{67} Gorbachev had counted on the intellectuals to help him separate the “unhealthy elements” from those with legitimate grievances. Increasingly, however, some of the same intellectuals became more defensive about the very use of the term “nationalist” and were unwilling to play along. As Bahodir Kamalov, an Uzbek geographer and a member of the Committee for the Salvation of the Aral Sea, put it in a 1990 article, the label “nationalist” was being applied to individuals who voiced a “simple worry about the fate of one’s people, and one’s native language.”\textsuperscript{68} When violence broke out in Dushanbe in February 1990, Tajikistan’s representatives in the Supreme Soviet asked for a parliamentary commission to examine the cause of the violence and ways further outbursts could be prevented.\textsuperscript{69} They echoed the new consensus that the “extreme situation in the republic [was] caused by economic backwardness, the failure to solve economic and social problems of workers and the population of the republic, and the lowest standard of living in the country.”\textsuperscript{70} The poet Gulruhsor Safieva followed ten days later with an impassioned hand-written letter to Gorbachev. She too begged him to form a commission to examine the situation and answer people who saw this as an example of “extremism” among Tajiks: “The pain of my people has not been met with empathy on your part, and that is tolerable, since it is possible to share happiness but grief stays with a person, on his soul. And that is what has happened with our grief. The cause of the events in Dushanbe has not been evaluated!!! I am asking you, as I promised people at a meeting on

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Shakhrai2016} While there is no space to go into detail, see, for example, the suggestions and requests reviewed by a special committee the Soviet of Nationalities, reprinted in S. M. Shakhrai, \textit{Raspad SSSR: dokumenty i fakty} (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2016), vol. 2, 266–282.
\bibitem{GARF1965} State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Fond 9654, opis 6, delo 176, 22–23.
\end{thebibliography}
February in Dushanbe: I promised [them] that I would tell you about the situation of the people: poverty, destitution, social injustice, unemployment – and so forth which has driven people to extremes.”

At the 1989 roundtable hosted by Druzhba Narodov, the Turkmen writer Terkish Dzhumageldiev admitted that, however legitimate the claims made by intellectuals, they had to share the blame for some of the conflicts that followed. Dzhumageldiev compared glasnost’ and democracy to “a tub of cold water poured over a drunk’s head.” Having woken up from a drunken stupor, the intellectuals “started to pay more attention to our own house, our environment, we saw our own shortcomings. National problems came to the surface.” Suddenly aware of the problems they faced, these intellectuals “started to demand from the center laws that would guarantee the viability of national institutions. Feelings were awakened. And with them came the inter-ethnic conflicts.”

Dzhumageldiev’s rather poetic observation also suggests an important qualification to the way that Derluguian answers the questions cited in the introduction. Derluguian’s protagonist, Musa Shanibov, is an intellectual whose party career is cut short in the 1960s with the end of the Thaw and the turn to a more conservative domestic politics at the end of the 1960s; he emerges as a political entrepreneur during the glasnost’ era no longer engaged in all-Soviet institutions but rather mobilizing locally and drawing on networks that extended beyond state and party structures. Yet most of the individuals discussed here had worked comfortably within the system before Perestroika, whatever their misgivings about the USSR. Fully integrated into all-Soviet institutions, they were able to utilize those networks to advance their own agendas. Initially seeking (and finding) solidarity, and drawing inspiration from, fellow intellectuals across the USSR, they eventually turned away from those institutions and towards republic and national networks to which they felt responsible and which provided them a platform as fully national leaders.

5 Conclusion

In his memoirs, the Tajik writer Mumin Kanoat, who had been instrumental in setting up the Aral-88 expedition, lamented the state of relations between his own country and Uzbekistan. The aluminum plant on the border with

71 Safieva to Gorbachev, 1 March 1990. A handwritten note in the top-left corner indicated that Gorbachev had seen the note. GARF F. 9654, op 6, d 176, 30.
Uzbekistan may be polluting the soil in that country, he insisted, but the aluminum it produced mostly went to its aircraft factory; other plants built in the Soviet era polluted Tajik soil but sent their products to Uzbekistan as well. Then he turned to the subject of the Aral Sea: “Today the waters of the rivers do not reach the Aral, but we know that it is being gathered in eight reservoirs in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. So why doesn’t it reach the Aral? These waters, which have their sources from us, are our national waters and we have the right to use them as we see fit. But of course humanitarian law, the happiness of our neighbors and solidarity with them means we cannot leave them thirsty.”

The waters belonged to Tajikistan and to Tajiks, but it shared them as a good neighbor. Uzbekistan and others needed to recognize that fact if there was to be any hope of solving the region’s ecological problems.

The intelligentsia that responded to Gorbachev’s call was varied and interpreted the calls for glasnost’ and “speaking honestly about problems” in different ways. It is true that some of the individuals that became prominent in this period were dissidents; others, like Derluguian’s interlocutor, were semi-dissidents, making decent careers while abandoning their earlier ambitions. Yet many were successful in the Soviet system; having come of age in the post-war period, many had spent time studying in Moscow or Leningrad, were involved in all-Union institutions like the Union of Writers, published in all-Union journals and even traveled abroad with their counterparts from other republics. They took seriously their role as national intelligentsia in the Soviet context – responsible for the enlightenment of their national group while also loyal to the Soviet context. For these individuals, glasnost’ and perestroika actually posed a crisis of sorts, revealing the gaps between the role they thought they were playing and the reality. It also forced them to confront the distance between their relative comfort and privilege and the often dire conditions of their compatriots.

In his magisterial account of the end of the USSR, Vladislav Zubok argues that explanations that focus on the Soviet Union as empire and on nationalist movements as the reason behind the collapse exaggerate the latter and miss “the most crucial and amazing factor: the repeated failure of the central state to defend itself.” At least part of the answer needs to be sought in those semi-independent institutions outside the formal party and state structures that Gorbachev hoped would seed a reformist, all-union civil society. The networks and institutions that Gorbachev counted on to bring intellectuals together certainly worked, but not as he intended. Journals like Druzhba

73 Mumin Qanoat, Yoddoshho va bardoshtho (Dushanbe: 2012), 255–256.
74 Zubok, Collapse, 4.
Narodov, organizations like the Union of Writers, and the newly democratized legislature which convened in 1989 helped intellectuals from across the USSR develop a shared language of resistance, grievance, and protest. These institutions also amplified the differences between those groups; as ties between the nationalities frayed, and as they sensed a duty to speak up on behalf of the nation, their national identification grew in importance. Still, the discussions that took place in the glasnost years on questions of ecology, identity, and justice across the USSR suggest that the kind of nationalism that came to dominate Soviet politics – and has sowed conflict between many post-Soviet republics since – was not inevitable.

In recent years, scholars of decolonization have drawn attention to the way that imperial routes of trade, labor, and education fostered the opportunity for anti-imperial intellectuals to form networks where they could develop and disseminate their ideas and visions of a world after empire. This historiography has sought to correct the impression that former colonies were fated to become nation-states, often in conflict with other former colonies, by recovering the transnational nature of anti-colonial activism as well as the internationalist visions of post-colonial order these activists imagined. It is time that we began to revisit the history of the Soviet collapse, both to explore the relationship between Soviet institutions and nationalist mobilization, but also to recover those visions of post-Soviet order which now appear to be lost to history.

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75 Such works include Adom Getachew, Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 2019); Leslie James, George Padmore and Decolonization From Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).