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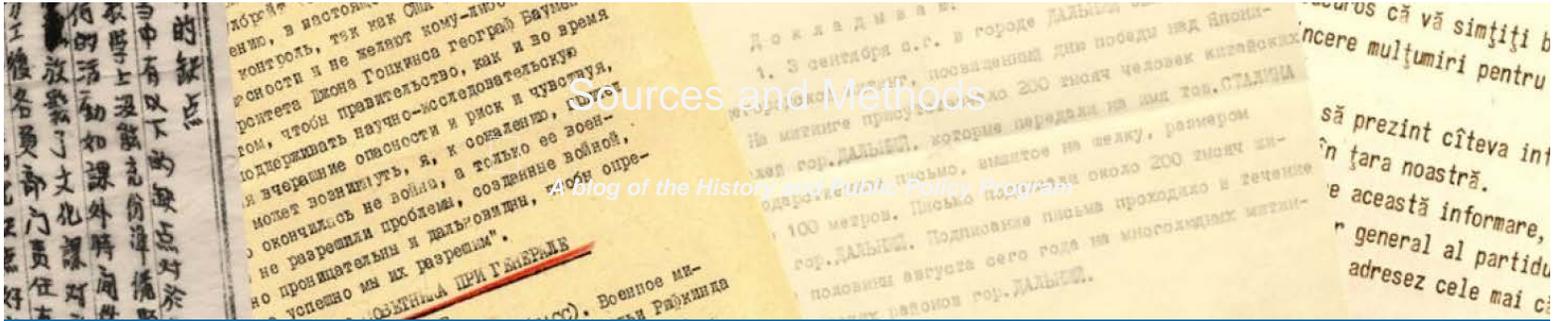
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## Central Asia and the Global Cold War

August 8, 2018 By Artemy M. Kalinovsky

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## A View from Russian and Tajikistani Archives

On May, 1, 1960, Francis Gary Powers took off in a U-2 spy plane from an airbase in Pakistan, flew over Afghanistan and into Soviet airspace, where he proceeded to photograph industrial and military installations before being shot down near Cheliabinsk, in Siberia.

By demonstrating that Washington had superior technology and was willing to violate borders to spy on the USSR, the U-2 overflights undermined Khrushchev's overtures to US President Eisenhower. Khrushchev, already under pressure from security elites, was forced to effectively sabotage a planned summit with Eisenhower in Paris, abandoning discussion of nuclear issues and instead berating and lecturing the US president. Powers was publicly tried and sentenced to hard labor, until he was finally traded for the spy Aldrich Ames.

The story of Powers' flight, capture, and return to the US is one of the best known incidents of the Cold War. Usually forgotten, however, is that Powers' flight over Soviet territory began when he crossed the border from Afghanistan into southern Tajikistan. In August 2015, 55 years after the flight took place, [an article in Tajikistan's Russian-language AsiaPlus](#) sought to correct this omission, explaining to readers that US authorities were clearly intrigued by the industrial construction underway in the vicinity of the capital.

It is unlikely that Dushanbe was the CIA's main priority at the time, but the article does underline an important fact: by 1960, Tajikistan and other Central Asian republics had come to play an important role in the Cold War. The reason was not strategic. The Kingdom of Afghanistan, which bordered the Soviet republics of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, was a stable neutral state friendly to the USSR.

Rather, over the course of the 1950's, Tajikistan and its neighbors played a crucial role in the ideological battle to prove that the Soviet Union offered the best path forward for newly-decolonizing states looking to cement their sovereignty and transform their economies. As former colonial territories with cultural ties to South Asia and the Muslim world, the Central Asian republics could play a particularly important role.

Back in 2000, historian Mathew Connelly urged his colleagues to "[take off the Cold War lens](#)" when approaching the study of decolonization and the international history of US relations with the so-called "Third World." Connelly's point was that neither post-colonial elites nor US policymakers thought in explicitly cold war terms when they engaged each other, and forcing their actions into cold war frameworks would blind researchers to other dynamics at play.

This was my own assumption when I first began planning what was intended to be a study of politics in the Central Asian republics after Stalin's death. Both in popular perception and in historiography, Soviet foreign policy was made in Moscow. The rest of the vast territorial expanse of the USSR hosted military bases, provided material for nuclear weapons, or resorts for summit meetings. To my own surprise, however, I kept bumping up on evidence of the Cold War's presence in the region.

But if one could spot relics of the Cold War in Europe in the shape of walls and checkpoints, or even in the form of faded and rusted "fallout shelter" signs in the Brooklyn neighborhood where I grew up, in Tajikistan, where I did my research, the superpower confrontation announced itself more subtly yet just as certainly as it might in Berlin. There was the the Indira Gandhi Central Research Library of the Academy of Sciences, the name evidence of the special role Tajikistan was given in Soviet-Indian friendship during the Cold War. But it came through most clearly in the memories of people whom I met, both spontaneously and deliberately. Many professionals had worked abroad as translators, engineers, and economic advisers; many others were veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Even those who had never been abroad recalled how important they found global politics during their student days in the 1960s and 1970s.

Not surprisingly, it was not the European Cold War that was on people's minds, but what Odd Arne Westad called the "[Global Cold War](#)"—the superpower conflict entangled with the struggles of decolonization.

As I argue in my recent book, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Cornell University Press, 2018), the Cold War transformed how Moscow related to the region, how local politicians related to Moscow, and how the emerging elite, studying at rapidly expanding universities in the region, saw the world.

That book is primarily about development – about how knowledge and practice impact each other, and how people interacted with and shaped the Soviet institutions that were meant to transform the region. But I found that I could not make sense of the politics of the era, nor of the projects I was describing, without wrestling with the Cold War context. Moscow had to prove that the USSR was truly anti-imperialist, not simply the Russian empire in different guise, and that it had the answers to problems of economic development faced by post-colonial countries.

To the extent possible, Moscow preferred Central Asians to make these claims themselves, opening up opportunities for travel and interaction with the outside world. But local politicians, intellectuals, and writers, also used the opportunity engendered by this attention to change Moscow's policy in the region: by calling for greater investment in industries, for example, or challenging cultural policies.

During the Cold War, scholars like Alec Nove and Donald Wilber had written about the attraction of Soviet economic development in Central Asia for other developing countries.<sup>[1]</sup> In the early 1980s, Karen Dawisha and Yacov Ro'i were among those who noted how the USSR was not just using Muslims but starting to turn to Islam as a source of support in the Middle East.<sup>[2]</sup>

While the above scholars recognized that Soviet Muslims, on balance, were an important asset in Moscow's foreign policy, others, like Alexander Bennigsen, argued that Soviet Muslims represented a potential pressure point and the greatest reserve of resistance against Soviet rule.<sup>[3]</sup> For Bennigsen and like-minded scholars, the USSR's engagement with the Muslim world beyond Soviet borders would only hasten the activation of that resistance.<sup>[4]</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, a number of historians have continued to debate whether the Soviet Union was an empire or not, and whether it makes sense to speak of the Central Asian republics or those of the Caucasus as colonies of Moscow.<sup>[5]</sup> The approach I took in my recent book was to incorporate this debate, but to focus primarily on the tensions between Moscow's commitment to anti-colonialism at home and abroad and the obvious inequalities in power and economic development between Moscow and the former peripheries of the Russian Empire. I argued that we could see the Soviet era, and particularly the post-Stalin era, as an experiment in whether the legacy of colonialism could be overcome.

The documents that follow represent a selection of sources found in Moscow and Dushanbe archives. There is no central file or collection of documents related to Central Asia and Soviet Foreign Policy. Moreover, as foreign policy was not the primary aim of my research, I did not spend much effort working in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where access is in any case often unpredictable.

Rather, the documents presented here come from a variety of holdings, including the Central Committee files housed at the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI),<sup>[6]</sup> the files of the Ministry of Education at State Archive of the Russian Federation, the archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, as well as the Central State Archive of the Republic of Tajikistan and the archive of the communist party held at the largely defunct Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Dushanbe.

These documents allow us to see how Soviet officials hoped to make use of Central Asia and Central Asians; they also show us what kind of possibilities opened up for Central Asians and how the latter responded to these new opportunities. The documents also give us some sense of the interactions that occurred.

Not surprisingly, however, the documents only give hints regarding two other questions. First, what did the intended audience of these presentations think? Were those predisposed to think about the USSR as just another colonial empire come around to seeing it as a genuinely emancipatory power? Were those looking for models of development more impressed by what they saw in Soviet public diplomacy than what was offered by Chinese or American outreach? And second: what did Central Asians take away from these interactions?

The archival materials clearly show that their claims were challenged, and Soviet emissaries give detailed accounts of how they parried questions regarding issues of cultural autonomy, economic development, or even religious freedom. Naturally, however, they could not write back to their superiors that they developed doubts themselves.

These two questions are difficult, but not impossible to answer. The first question, however, requires research far beyond Soviet archives. It calls for studying travelers to the Soviet Union, especially those from the so-called Third World who were often taken on trips to Central Asia. Such a project is beyond the capabilities of any one researcher, and I gave up my own ambitions in this regard fairly early in my research.<sup>[7]</sup>

The second question requires moving beyond archival sources. Luckily, many of the travelers left behind memoirs; some are still alive and willing to be interviewed.<sup>[8]</sup> These sources present a somewhat more nuanced picture: while travel or work abroad could certainly make one identify even more strongly with the Soviet Union (as accounts published in the Soviet era almost always suggested), they could also push one to reflect more critically on life back home.

The Tajik literary historian Hudoynazar Asozoda, for example, served two stints as a translator in Tajikistan – one before the Soviet invasion, and one after. He recalled that some Afghanistans insisted that groups like the Tajiks had little real autonomy in the Soviet Union. Asozoda knew that both Soviet and Afghan intelligence services were probably keeping an eye on him, and so he could not really engage in such discussions. Still, he noted, “the views [of his interlocutors] were not without effect on my world view.”<sup>[9]</sup>

## Documents

**Document No. 1**, “Regarding Soviet propaganda in the East and Our Cultural Ties with Countries of the East,” is part of a long memo prepared by Yuri Zhukov (1908-1978) in 1958, at the height of Soviet optimism about engagement with the Third World.

Zhukov, the Chairman of the State Committee on Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries, saw the entire post-colonial world as being in play: “...although the countries of the East are currently part of the capitalist system, their further development does not necessarily need to lead to the strengthening of that system.” Zhukov urged Soviet leaders to be more proactive in challenging western powers in the post-colonial world, and to make full use of its own “East.” Rather than allowing the imperialists to call themselves the “free world” in opposition to the USSR, the Soviet Union needed to demonstrate its own democracy at work, first and foremost in Central Asian and the Caucasus. The people to carry out this propaganda work, Zhukov argued, were “wonderful [Central Asian and Caucasian] writers, economists, historians, philosophers, people who know Asia and Africa, speak and write in the languages of these countries.”

In telling the Central Committee of the CC CPSU to mobilize intellectuals from Central Asia and the Caucasus, Zhukov may have been preaching to the choir. Nikita Khrushchev was already establishing close relations with some prominent Central Asians and drawing them into his travels to the Third World.

**Document No. 2** provides an example of the kind of advice they provided in return. Here, Sharof Rashidov, already a well-known journalist and writer then occupying the largely ceremonial position at as the Chair of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR, offers a series of recommendations for what the Soviet Union can do domestically to improve its image among Muslims, in particular. He urged Soviet leaders to make full use of the physical heritage of Islamic culture within the USSR, but also to demonstrate that religious practice was allowed and respected: “we need to clearly demonstrate to international delegations the freedom of Muslims to practice their religion in our country, to show mosques, mazars, seminaries [*dukhovnykh uchilisch*] and religious monuments.”<sup>[10]</sup> He pointed out, however, that “many mosques, mazars and religious monuments in Uzbekistan are in a poor state and are not being used for their intended purpose.” Soviet authorities needed to remedy this situation so that they could properly counter imperialist propaganda. Not only did the Soviet Union invest in restoration in the coming decades, but Rashidov’s career got a boost: he became first secretary of the Communist Party of the Uzbek SSR, and eventually a member of the all-Soviet Politburo, both posts he would retain until his death in 1982. He continued to play a leading role in Soviet public diplomacy towards the Third World.

**Document No. 3.1** and **Document No. 3.2** gives us a peak at the personal ties that developed as part of this public engagement. Here, the family of Pakistan's ambassador to the Soviet Union approaches Nuriddin Mukhitdinov for help arranging a trip around Central Asia. Mukhitdinov, an Uzbek party leader, had recently become the first Central Asian to join the inner-most circle of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – the presidium, as the Politburo was known between 1952 and 1956. Pakistan was a US ally, not a Soviet one, during the Cold War, but in the late 1950s Khrushchev tried to make inroads with Islamabad, partially through economic aid. Whatever the actual successes of Soviet outreach, the two letters presented here nicely demonstrate the role Mukhitdinov, Rashidov, and other prominent Central Asians were expected to play.

**Document No. 4** is a note from Bobojan Gafurov, another figure heavily involved with Soviet public diplomacy in this era. A journalist and former first secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan, he had also defended a thesis under the guidance of the famed Russian orientalist Aleksandr Semenov. In 1956 Khrushchev brought Gafurov to Moscow and installed him as head of the Institute of Oriental Studies, which was also charged with playing a more active role in studying the foreign East and engaging with it. Gafurov led the institute until his death in 1977, and remained active in Soviet outreach throughout. Indeed, a year before his death he would go to Saudi Arabia and even perform a pilgrimage to Mecca.

As suggested above, interactions between Soviet Central Asians and post-colonial elites could lead to some awkward questions. **Document No. 5** provides a fascinating example of this in the form of an exchange between a newly appointed ambassador from the Kingdom of Morocco, and Mirzo Rakhmatov, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan. (Rakhmatov would go on to several ambassadorial postings of his own, including as envoy to the Yemen.) Rakhmatov boasted about the construction of the Nurek Hydropower Dam, then just getting under way, which prompted the Moroccan ambassador to comment that Morocco also had a large dam, but that it was still controlled by the French. What would the Tajiks do in a similar situation, he wondered. The question was doubly awkward: first, as has been documented most recently by [Jeremy Friedman](#), Moscow's approach towards Europe, where it sought normal state-to-state relations and support from the working class, was in tension with its avowed support for national liberation movements and criticism of neo-colonialism. The question, which invited Rakhmatov to denounce the French, thus put him in an awkward spot. But the question also suggested a more problematic relationship between sovereignty and economic development. How Tajik would the Nurek dam be? Not surprisingly, Rakhmatov evaded the question.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Document No. 6.1** and **Document No. 6.2** take us into the realm of people-to-people contacts. As a number of historians have recently noted, the USSR became active in promoting foreign travel starting in the 1950s.<sup>[12]</sup> But Soviet travelers were also expected to be emissaries of the Soviet Union and all that it represented. As these notes requesting Tajikistan's Union of Writers to nominate members for planned trips to the Middle East and several African countries, Central Asians had a particular role to play; thus, the union was asked to produce "at least one woman who could talk about changes in the lives of Tajikistan's women during meeting with members of the public in Tunisia and Morocco." More generally, "in selecting candidates it is important to keep in mind that participants in the trip should be able to speak about Tajikistan's achievements in agriculture, industry, science, and culture."

**Document No. 7** presents the account of Kh. K. Karimov, the head of the Persian Department at the State University of Tajikistan, who accompanied a Soviet exhibition on education set up in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. At the time, Afghanistan was still a monarchy experimenting with Parliamentary rule. The exhibition took place less than a month after students demonstrations at Kabul University led to a violent crackdown and shook the political elite. (Among the participants were founders of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, which would seize power in April 1978.) One particularly interesting aspect of this account is the reference to a "refugee from Samarkand," someone who fled to Afghanistan soon after the formation of the Soviet Union. Interactions between emigres and their descendants and Soviet Central Asians were not uncommon, and they always presented a political challenge, as the exchange recorded here illustrates.

As already noted, scholarship on literature, culture, and history of the "East", collectively known as "Orientalism" (*Vosstokovednie* in Russian.) The Soviet tradition of studying non-European cultures was contrasted to the "bourgeois" tradition, but the term itself time did not have the negative connotations it would soon acquire in the West. **Document No. 8**, which comes from the archives of the Russian (formerly Soviet) Academy of Sciences, includes a report from the Institute of Oriental Studies in Tajikistan, as well as the response of Yuri Gankovsky,

one of the USSR's premier experts on Afghanistan. Praising the work of scholars in Tajikistan, Gankovsky also noted that "the activity that our Tajik orientalists carry out, their fruitful contacts which they develop with adjacent countries of the East, make more difficult and constrain the anti-Soviet activity of our ideological and political opponents."

Central Asia was also supposed to demonstrate Soviet achievements in turning poor agricultural societies into modern, industrialized ones. In the 1960s there was even some enthusiasm for studying industrialization in Central Asia to offer lessons for countries of the Third World. As I discuss in my book, interest in a Central Asian "model" for the Third World among Soviet scholars and politicians had petered out by the early 1970s, but the idea of showcasing achievements (and promoting more limited forms of cooperation between Central Asian republic and foreign countries) did not. [Document No. 9.1](#) and [Document No 9.2](#) presents a fragment from the high-point of enthusiasm for "modeling" the Central Asian experience in 1965 – a report from an Uzbekistani academic on a conference held in Tashkent for planners and economists from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Soviet Union would continue hosting such conferences in Tashkent and other Central Asian cities until the collapse of the USSR. From the late 1960s, it would often organize workshops, training programs, and academic conferences through the United Nations Development Program.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 took the importance of Central Asia for Soviet foreign policy to a new level. Some scholars and officials in the US expected or hoped that Central Asian Muslims would refuse to fight or would even turn their arms against the Soviet Union.<sup>[13]</sup> In fact, Moscow relied heavily on Central Asians as translators (primarily for Dari, but also for Pashtu, Uzbek, and other languages), but also as advisers, intelligence officials, and soldiers.<sup>[14]</sup>

In recent years, a number of oral history projects have delved into the experience of these participants and what they brought home with them. Many, it seems, came back from Afghanistan proud of their service and confident of their Soviet identity. Some, however, did come back very critical of what the USSR had done and a few even channeled their dissatisfaction into political activity during the perestroika era.

The [final document](#) presented here comes from a collection of autobiographical notes collected from veterans in the final years of the USSR by the state archive of what was then still the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>[15]</sup> It is the account of a Tajik gunner who served in Afghanistan between 1981 and 1983. It not only illustrates that Central Asians were fighting in Afghanistan but that they were represented in different ranks (this soldier was commanded by a fellow Tajik, a major); it also shows the way some soldiers at least internalized the official narrative of the war. Collectively, accounts like this one are also of interest to students of Soviet counter-insurgency, as they give an insight into how the USSR conducted its operations during the war.

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[1] A fairly early example was Raymond Kent, "Soviet Muslims, the Arab World, and the Myth of Synthesis," *Journal of International Affairs* 13, no. 2 (1959): 141-148. Alec Nove and J.A. Newith, *The Soviet Middle East: A Communist Model for Development* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966); Charles K. Wilber, *The Soviet Model and Underdeveloped Countries* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); Norton Dodge and Charles K. Wilber, "The Relevance of Soviet Industrial Experience for Less Developed Economies," *Soviet Studies* 21, no. 3 (January 1970): 330-349. See also Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, "Soviet Central Asia: A Model of Non-Capitalist Development for the Third World," in Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *The USSR and the Muslim World* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 181-205.

[2] Martha Brill Olcott, "Soviet Islam and World Revolution," *World Politics* 34, no. 4 (1982): 487-504; Karen Dawisha, and H. D'Encausse, "Islam in the Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union: A Double-edged Sword." in *Islam in Foreign Policy*, ed. Adeeb Dawisha (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 160-177; Yaacov Ro'i, "The Role of Islam and Soviet Muslims in Soviet Arab Policy," *Asian & African Studies* 10, no. 2 (1974): p157-189.

[3] See, for example, Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet Union* (New York, 1983). An excellent overview of Bennigsen and like-minded scholars can be found in Will Myer, *Islam and Colonialism: Western Perspectives on Soviet Asia* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[4] See Artemy M. Kalinovsky, "Encouraging resistance: Paul Henze, the Bennigsen school, and the crisis of détente." in Michael Kemper and Artemy M. Kalinovsky, eds., *Reassessing Orientalism: Interlocking Orientologies in the Cold War Era* (London: Routledge, 2015), 221-242.

[5] See, for example, the recent review article by Moritz Florin, "Beyond Colonialism?: Agency, Power, and the Making of Soviet Central Asia," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 18, no. 4, 2017, 827-838.

[6] The RGANI files cited here are also part of the microfilm collections held at Harvard University, the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, and the British Library. However, RGANI, which is currently closed for renovation, has continued to declassify documents on the 1970s and 1980s. Scholars planning to use their files for the first time would be well advised to start with the microfilmed collections, if possible, since this allows for quick scanning of documents. RGANI, at least before the renovation, only allowed researchers to take notes by hand and charged 50 rubles per page for photocopying.

[7] But see, for example, Tobias Rupprecht, "Paradise Lost and Found: Latin American *tercermundistas* in the Soviet Union" in ed. Thomas C. Field Jr., Stella Krepp, and Vanni Pettina, *Latin American and the Third World* (forthcoming)

[8] Collecting these memoirs, which are often self-published and had print runs of as few as 100 copies, presents its own challenges. I provide a full list of memoirs consulted for my research in the bibliography of *Laboratory of Socialist Development*. I am also working with Dr. Isaac Scarborough to digitize these and other memoirs from Soviet Central Asia.

[9] *Ibid.*, 291.

[10] Note that Rashidov is using the Russian term here; the Islamic term would be "medresa," though that term can also refer to an educational institution teaching secular subjects.

[11] It is worth noting that this document was found among the files of the Council of Religious Affairs, the state body that oversaw religious institutions in the USSR, underlining again the way religious heritage was used in public diplomacy and the way that different organizations were mobilized for this purpose.

[12] Anne E. Gorsuch, *All This is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Anne E. Gorsuch, and Diane P. Koenker, eds., *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Indiana University Press, 2013); Kathleen E. Smith, *Moscow 1956: The Silenced Spring* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

[13] See Kalinovsky, "Encouraging Resistance."

[14] On veterans, see Kalinovsky, "Central Asian Soldiers and the Soviet War in Afghanistan: an Introduction," in Marlene Laruelle, ed. *The Central Asian-Afghanistan Relationship: From Soviet Intervention to the Silk Road Initiatives* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 3-20, as well as the interviews with veterans in that volume. See also Markus Balasz Goransson, *At the Service of the State: Soviet-Afghan War veterans in Tajikistan, 1979-1992*. (PhD Thesis: University of Aberystwyth, Wales, 2015). On public diplomacy during the war, see Eren Tasar, "The Central Asian muftiate in occupied Afghanistan, 1979–87." *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 2 (2011): 213-226.

[15] My thanks to Timothy Nunan for pointing me to this collection back in 2011.

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