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Peoples' internationalism

Central Asian modernisers, Soviet Oriental studies and cultural revolution in the East (1936-1977)

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CONCLUDING REMARKS.

In the introduction to this thesis I suggested that a critical examination of Gafurov's biography might allow us to identify a distinct historical perspective that I have named peoples' internationalism. Characteristic for this historical worldview is that it emphasized the historical agency of non-state actors and invested culture with a historically productive force. In the previous chapters, I have tried to outline how this historical perspective played a guiding role in various research projects conducted by both Soviet and Asian scholars, arguing that these aimed to reform and modernize society through its educational institutions. An important end-goal of this 'revolution of the mind' was to carve out a place for the East in modernity; while encouraging the unification of local cultural traditions into translocal national heritages, these were simultaneously presented as part and parcel of a global world culture and humanism. The aim to increase awareness among local communities of their particular cultural history and heritage played a key role in this agenda. For this reason, its strategy was in many ways akin to that of cultural nationalists who supported the cultivation of culture as a source of self-worth and community; allowing a group to find its place within a broader world culture or civilisation, regardless, initially, of political projects of state formation and centralization.

While some historical accounts have tended to reduce global (or transnational) narratives to simply imperialism by another name, oppressive of more authentic "local" identities, this thesis has attempted to highlight some of the ways in which we could understand peoples' internationalism as a global perspective that succeeded in maintaining both an anti-colonial and local agenda of cultural revolution. On the one hand, peoples' internationalism provided legitimacy to the Soviet state,

whose model of centralized state-building was often at the expense of the agency and culture of sub-state communities. At the same time, as the first chapter shows, the attempt to imagine a “broader” history of the Tajik people was rooted in transnational approaches of pre-revolutionary humanities scholars as well as local Muslim modernisers. As the global commitments of the archaeologist Boris Litvinsky, who contributed much to Gafurov’s biography show, these historical narratives and approaches allowed Gafurov to preserve the ideal of a global ‘whole’ that at the same time was strongly entangled with a broader, Islamic imagination. It also allowed him to contribute to a local tradition of Muslim modernism that sought to reform society through education and propaganda, and that counted on the solidarity of fellow Muslim modernisers beyond Tajik boundaries.

This thesis’ understanding of Gafurov as a “multi-lingual local” makes possible a more nuanced understanding of some of the ways in which global narratives allowed for the preservation and internationalization of local, Asian agendas and imaginations. Accordingly, while the second chapter provides an overview of Gafurov’s role in the making of historical narratives in the Soviet (Stalinist) Tajik context, the third and fourth chapters follow Gafurov’s work and biography to the international scale. The first two chapters are thus intended to illuminate how peoples’ internationalism conflicted with a rival approach of historical development as closely entangled with a vision of modernity that emphasized state-based processes of development. The following two chapters, on the other hand, highlight how state-based approaches of history and culture conflicted with peoples’ internationalism in the wider ‘global’ contexts of Afro-Asian solidarity, European world making in UNESCO, and wider Cold War geopolitics.

The thesis has also tried to provide a brief glimpse into the political lives that narratives of peoples’ internationalism inspired, suggesting that such narratives served widely different political agendas. Indian politicians such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Mawlana Azad supported

peoples' internationalism as a foundation for a pluralistic state-building agenda that might grant equal recognition to the contributions made by Muslims as well as other (notably Hindu) communities to the history of India in the world. PRC resistance to peoples' internationalism showed how its critics were also inspired by agendas of state-building: in the case of Mao Zedong, resistance to narratives of cultural, spiritual or "meta-physical" unity served the rationalization of a "realist" historical narrative that emphasized the legitimacy of the PRC's territorial boundaries. Indeed, from the late 1950s onwards, the PRC took the lead within the wider socialist camp in advancing a territorialized, state-centric approach of culture in the vein of Stalinism. Taking a still different approach – and juggling at times apparently incompatible interests – Soviet orientalists attempted to preserve a historical vision that emphasized the historical agency of non-state actors and expansive cultural imaginations in holding to their transnational and literary commitments. As the case studies in the final chapter and epilogue indicate, in fact they were doing so in an international academic climate that was increasingly prone to rejecting "fuzzy" and in-between identities.

Having highlighted how, for Soviet orientalists, Central Asian research provided the basis for an alternative regionalism that recognized the expansive nature of human history and development, the epilogue illuminates several moments in history when peoples' internationalism was rivalled by different regional imaginations. Many of these emphasize the apparent objectivity of geo-natural phenomena, such as continents or ethno-local affiliation. For instance, in 1973, the Union of Orientalists shed its "oriental" denominator for its imperialist connotations, replacing it by more "objective" regional identifications. In the same vein, the Indus Valley Land strove to replace the idea of civilisation with a rooted vision of Indus Valley as a territorialized community of ethnic groups, presenting this community as the natural outcome of the world's historical process. At the same time, other rival internationalisms emphasized High Culture, while foregoing of its porous, local roots. The case of Joseph Braginsky's

Central Asian literature project reveals, for instance, that states responded by defending the transnational unity and “purity” of non-territorial traditions by rejecting its fuzzy borders and internal variations. This idea of civilisation as the (historical) sphere of influence of distinct modern nation-states or regions with firm borders was also popularized in Eastern Europe, where peoples’ internationalism competed with a cultural regionalism that presented the region as heir of a distinct Western civilisation or heritage.^[1] Finally, the case of UNESCO’s *History of Central Asian Civilizations* also identifies the culture of professional neutralism as a rival of peoples’ internationalism that encouraged a modern cultural regionalism as demarcated by the cultural spheres of influence of modern centralized states. In the end, as such, it was the lack of sensitivity towards the sub-state agenda of internationalism displayed by European institutions that encouraged the marginalization of Central Asia studies in UNESCO, as well as of the broader vision of peoples’ internationalism it sought to defend. While all of the cases addressed above warrant further research, this thesis proposes that to fully understand their aims and effects, they should be measured against the ideal of a non-state, locally rooted peoples’ internationalism and the vision of a different global modernity with which it was entangled.

[1] For Eastern Europe embracing a West European civilisational identity distancing itself for instance from the Islamic East, see Mark, Jacob, Rupprecht, Spaskovska, 1989, especially chapter 3.