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Peoples' internationalism

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

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SUMMARY ENGLISH

In her thesis Jansen analyses the way Soviet orientalists wrote the history of Central Asia, through the prism of the Tajik SSR, one of the region's constituent Republics. Focusing on the post-war period she argues that Soviet orientalists imagined the Central Asian past as part of a wider, global historiography. While she suggests that Soviet orientalists consciously adopted and reworked the work of pre-Revolutionary Orientalists, she emphasizes continuities rather than discontinuities showing how a distinct understanding of human development was preserved throughout the Stalin era in the main academic institutes of the USSR, including the Institute for Oriental studies in Moscow. This cultural worldview was tightly linked to a humanistic, philological inspired methodology.

In particular, Jansen focuses on the non-Western "Asian" voice within this Soviet Orientalist tradition. In doing so, she adds to a burgeoning literature that explores anti-colonial articulations of internationalism, arguing that an anti-colonial internationalism had long existed in the anti-colonial imagination, and indeed had long-standing roots in local practices and intellectual traditions. It is this anti-colonial "peoples' internationalism" that she sets out to trace through the biography of a leading Asian intermediary within the field of Oriental studies: Babadzhan Gafurovich Gafurov, the head of the Institute for Oriental Studies from 1956 until his death in 1977.

One continuity highlighted in the thesis is the centrality of culture and non-territorial, "spiritual" elements in the global worldview of Gafurov and his fellow Central Asians that acted as intermediaries between the USSR and the non-Western world, as representatives in international organizations such as UNESCO and the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization (AAPSO). This thesis shows how, rather than seeking to abandon concepts such as world civilization or humanism, the anti-colonial "Asian" activists in the USSR sought to decolonize such

concepts and to expand, in particular, the notion of unified time that lay at the root of Western thinking about modernity. One way to do so was to emphasize the historically productive force of spiritual connections and solidarities, and their continued centrality in (and relevance for) processes of 'world making' in the modern, contemporary period.

Within the Socialist Camp, this cultural approach to historical development was contested. If cultural and religious traditions were thought to have created strong solidarities and communities in the past, they were regarded as secondary in the post-Revolutionary period – in which “traditional” identities had been substituted for a collective consciousness derived from Revolutionary statecraft and national liberation. Also within the international arena provided by UNESCO, visions of an Afro-Asian spiritual modernity and humanism were contested. Responding to pressures at home and abroad, Soviet Oriental studies came to increasingly reverse its language of cultural and spiritual solidarity, eventually imagining world cultural history and the place of Central Asia through a fragmented lens: the history of multiple nations and regions instead of a united but temporally and geographically dispersed humanity. This shift, Jansen concludes, was entangled with the gradual differentiation and marginalization of philological Oriental studies in the USSR, in UNESCO and possibly the world.