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Nationalism and identity construction in Central Asia: dimension, dynamics, and directions

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BOOK REVIEWS

Nationalism and identity construction in Central Asia: dimension, dynamics, and directions, edited by Mariya Y. Omelicheva, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2015, 171 pp., $80.00, ISBN 978-0-7391-8134-8

This collection of essays, edited by Mariya Y. Omelicheva, is an ambitious attempt to re-examine national construction in post-Soviet Central Asia, here defined territorially and historically as the five countries of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The volume examines more than 20 years of independence and nationalism processes in these five states. The eight contributions vary in themes and geographical focus, allowing the reader to dwell on a range of issues, such as the 1916 revolt in Kyrgyzstan (in the chapter by Aminat Chokobaeva), religiosity, and contemporary nation-building dilemmas.

The first two chapters concern Kazakhstan's state identity. Marlene Laruelle ('The Three Discursive Paradigms of State Identity in Kazakhstan') focuses on the hybrid state identity, where a number of identities manage to coexist. Laruelle provides a very detailed analysis of three such paradigms: kazakhness, kazakhstanness and transnationalism. The first two paradigms are usually analysed under the framework of ethnic–civic divide (discussed for example by Burkhanov and Sharipova in the same volume, Chapter 2, 'Kazakhstan's Civic-National Identity'). The third paradigm is the most interesting as it rests almost in between the other two but also locates itself in the reworked, new version of the 'people's friendship' (*druzhba narodov*) – a Soviet construct for multiculturalism. But Kazakh transnationalism is globalized, contends Laruelle. It is 'the idea that interconnectivity and globalization alter the nation-state and its integration into the world community' – an important internationalist discourse of President Nazarbayev himself (11). This final part of the chapter provides one of the most valuable findings of the book, where national identity is not contradicted by but, on the contrary, linked to the idea of internationalization and Kazakhstan's global position. This transnationalism argument also echoes Mariya Omelicheva's contribution (Chapter 6) on nation branding abroad, international communication and its domestic implications.

Burkhanov and Sharipova's chapter dwells on the debates about Kazakhstan's civic-ethnic national idea and its ambiguity. Ambiguity in nation-building discourses in Kazakhstan remains a point of heated discussion, and the authors analyse these discussions in every detail. In the final section, 'Points of Resistance', the authors critically approach the 25 years of independence and nation-building policies in Kazakhstan's divided (mainly socio-linguistically) society, arguing that de facto Kazakhstan continued to nationalize and that ethnic Kazakhs remain in a more 'hegemonic' position.

Aminat Chokobayeva's contribution, 'Born for Misery and Woe: National Memory and the 1916 Great Revolt in Kyrgyzstan', focuses on the 1916 revolts and the politics of memory in Soviet and post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Chokobayeva asks 'how much of what we remember is the result of the Soviet historical memory' (38) and how the Soviet legacy conditions this remembering and forgetting. The chapter combines discussion of intentional forgetting through the policy of history rewriting and the change of narrative from anticolonial to class antagonisms to ethnic codification. In my opinion, the 'ethnicity' aspect is one of the important attributes of the Soviet legacy that Chokobayeva utilizes, where she aims to 'explore the

changing politics of memory' (38). When Chokobayeva analyses the politics of post-Soviet memory she turns to nationalistic interpretations, where 'ethnicity' for her is a factual rather than analytical tool. She cites a number of Kyrgyz nationalists and their talk of *kyrgyn* – 'extermination' and 'genocide' of Kyrgyz people: 'Many nationalists talk of genocide or *Kyrgyn* (extermination), but others see the *Urkun* (exodus) as a misstep in an otherwise amicable and beneficial relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Russia' (46). However, there are no further explanations of the 'genocide' argument. This year marks 100 years since these events, and a number of historical conferences have been organized in Kyrgyzstan to commemorate these mass killings. Collective memory, continues Chokobayeva, 'is socially constructed, collectively shared, and selectively exploited' (46). In this short but very fruitful discussion Chokobayeva focuses on issues of silencing the memory but also reconstructing it during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, which can potentially contribute to further studies of cultural traumas in post-communist countries. She concludes that 'the various definitions of the uprising remain sharp political and patriotic tools in service of a broader ideological agenda' (49).

One of the 'comparative' or rather dialogical pieces, Reuel Hanks's 'Identity Theft?' (Chapter 7), provides a discussion on 'othering' and delimitation of national narratives (or 'political imagination', if we use Caroline Humphrey's definition) in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The deliberate divisions in these two identities, Tajik and Uzbek, led to the variations in national myth making but also a clear focus on 'othering' or differentiating one identity from the other – Uzbek from Tajik and vice versa. However, 'the overlapping cultural, historical, and physical boundaries of the two *ethnie* make the divorce contentious, as each uses similar, and in some cases identical symbols to reinforce its mythomoteur and identity' (124).

In a conceptual sum, the volume applies the 3D approach – dimensions, dynamics and directions. Dimensions aims to explain the complex manifestations of nationalism. Dynamics represents continuities, but is 'more concerned with legitimations of the present power politics and relations' (ix), which, however, is usually associated with discontinuity and disruptions in the region rather than continuous narration of the past. Finally, directions is concerned with the implementation of nation-building projects in these states.

Individual contributions still required in-depth contextualization and historical explorations for each identified case in order to explain the legacies in which new policies of nation building are located. This in-depth contextualization provides a great contribution to the study of individual cases and might increase the volume's interest for the wider public, students and scholars on the region and beyond.

This approach to the Soviet legacy has influenced the field of post-Soviet nationalism studies, but there are only a few works available where this static approach to legacy as temporal placeness is successfully interrogated. Soviet legacy is an important factor in the study of post-Soviet nations, but what are more crucial perhaps are the new analytical frameworks to focus on how this legacy works in different cases beyond just the regional paradigm. In other words, where the Soviet legacy turned into a discursive competition between the past and present in the Baltic states and in Ukraine, it provided structures for nation building in many post-Soviet states. A new way of looking into this legacy would be the problematization of the multiple discourses and more extensive comparisons across the post-Soviet but also post-communist space.

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