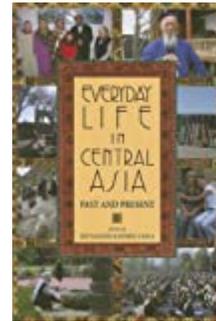




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A Review of the Everyday in Central Asia

For many people, Central Asia still remains a blank spot—not necessarily on the map, but in terms of knowledge on this large and highly diverse region. Knowledge of the region is often informed by travel accounts about a romantic and “oriental” East or, on the contrary, stories about Central Asia as a hotbed of ethnic and religious violence and war, especially since 9/11 and the subsequent incursion into Afghanistan. Within the scholarly literature on Central Asia, macro-studies on security issues, geopolitics, and international relations are most prominent. The aim of *Everyday Life in Central Asia*, the editors Jeff Sahadeo and Russel Zanca inform us, is to depart from this bird’s-eye approach and look behind abstract analysis, tables, and chronicles to examine the day-to-day experiences of ordinary people.

Nevertheless, in this volume, the contributors do not leave out macro topics, but they do give them a new twist by focusing on the lives of individuals rather than applying a top-down approach. How do people cope with uncertainties in situations where the state has withdrawn? How do they narrate and memorialize the past, and how

do they try to make sense of their changing and often unstable economic and political situations? The book tries to give answers to such questions by presenting micro-studies that are carefully analyzed and contextualized in a broader frame. Contributors touch on the topics of nation, state, insecurity, and religious fundamentalism, and discuss how contemporary state politics and priorities have influenced the lives of ordinary citizens. Furthermore, the purpose of the book, as stated by the editors, is to examine the links between past and present. By giving a diachronic perspective, the contributors show how different pasts—Russian, Soviet, and Marxist—have mutually influenced and shaped everyday lives. At the same time, they present individuals as vivid agents of change rather than as mere pawns in the political process. The book is aimed at those who want to get a vivid picture of Central Asia and seeks to “ignite the readers’ passion and imagination” by relaying the everyday experiences of people in the region (p. 3).

Just as varied as the region and its people presented in the book are the approaches and disciplines of the con-

tributors to this volume. Ranging from sociology and social anthropology to history and political science, the different theoretical and methodological approaches are held together by the overarching frame and theme of the micro-perspective everyday lives of people of Central Asia. All contributors are established scholars working in the field of Central Asia who have conducted intensive fieldwork and, therefore, are able to tell stories from firsthand experience and/or from the viewpoints of individual Central Asians. With the exception of the Uzbek historian Elyor E. Karimov, all contributors are experts from Western countries. In the introduction, the editors briefly explain the purpose of the book, its structure, and the key concept of “everyday life,” the collection’s recurrent theme. The volume includes twenty-three contributions, each no longer than eight pages, organized in six subsections. Preceding each subsection, the editors give a short general introduction about the relevance of key concepts for the region and of the essays that follow within that section.

Part 1, an introductory essay by Scott Levi, provides essential historical background that helps to locate the following contributions within the wider context. Here, Levi gives a condensed account of the complex and intertwined history of the Turkic and Tajik people of Central Asia, starting with the Indo-Iranian tribes in 2000 BC to the Russian conquest and the coming into power of the Soviets. Despite the essay’s brevity, Levi offers important insights into the problematic concept of “territory” and the question of nationalism in the Central Asian context.

“Communities” is the focus of part 2. Communal units, such as kin, clans, and villages, play an important part in the past and present of Central Asian societies, and remain hallmarks of community identity and solidarity that are crucial for people’s relation to the state and for their coping with the uncertainties of everyday life. In this section, Adrienne Edgar discusses the meaning of communities for nomadic societies in nineteenth-century Turkmenistan, Robert L. Canfield details disputes and its settlement in Afghanistan, and Morgan Liu illustrates the interethnic and neighborhood relations in the example of Osh, a city in southern Kyrgyzstan.

The wide field of “Gender” constitutes the overarching frame for part 3. Contributions by Douglas Northrop, Marianne Kamp, Elizabeth A. Constantine, and Greta Uehling illuminate how ideas about gender and gender equality were used to implement Soviet ideology and modernity. In her essay, “Dinner with Akhmet,” Uehling

presents a male perspective on gender ideologies and moralities in contemporary Tajikistan.

Part 4 comprises a diverse range of essays that are connected by the theme “Performances and Encounters.” In their contributions, Paula A. Michaels and Zanca provide firsthand insights into the concept of hospitality and idea of how to treat guests “right,” which in the Kazak and Uzbek contexts is closely connected to the quality and quantity of food. Meltem Sancak and Peter Finkes’s comparative essay show the commonalities and differences in gender relations and performance with the example of two couples in rural Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Laura Adams gives a detailed account of public and private holidays and highlights the importance of such events for the national culture of Uzbekistan. In the last essay of this thematic block, Michael Rouland traces the importance of music throughout history for Kazak self-representation and highlights the role of music and its usage in the nation-building process of the country.

Nation, state, and society, usually examined from a macro perspective concerned with security and geopolitics, are topics that hold a prominent place in the scholarly literature on Central Asia. How these large-scale processes are experienced and coped with on the grassroots level is the central theme of part 5, “Nation, State, and Society in the Everyday.” Kelly M. McMann’s essay starts this section by presenting the outcome of her quantitative research on Central Asians’ assessments of Soviet and post-Soviet governance, comparing the three countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. By presenting two case studies of people coping with economic insecurities in everyday life, McMann gives these statistics a personal face. Shoshana Keller and Victoria Clement look at the changes and continuities within the educational system. While Keller reveals the ideological dimensions behind the school system and curricula in Uzbekistan, Clement discusses alphabet reforms in Turkmenistan between 1904 and 2004. Madeleine Reeves’s essay on everyday geography in the Ferghana Valley borderlands gives a vivid account of what it means for locals (as well for a foreign researcher) to move within this border triangle of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Using an example of a bus trip with her Tajik host, Reeves nicely illustrates how changing border regimes erase old and shape new modes of identification and senses of belonging.

Continuities and changes in conceptions of religiousness and practices constitute the final section of the anthology. In the opening essay, David McGlinchey illu-

minates the claim of an “Islamic threat” by (among others) the Uzbek government and shows the ambivalent attitudes inherent in the resurgence of Islam in state and society. In looking at Islamic activists in Uzbekistan and presenting their self-understanding as Muslims and their experiences with the state, McGlinchey’s account reveals how Muslims who seek to live a devoted lifestyle may find themselves easily labeled “terrorist” or “extremist.” Speaking from personal experiences in the field, McGlinchey shows how believers get stigmatized, because of stereotypes about simple physical appearances (as, in his case, wearing a beard) that are associated with “Islamic extremism.” Everyday negotiations of what defines a “good” Muslim and “proper” religious practices are in the fore of the contributions by Sean R. Roberts in the example of a Uighur neighborhood in Kazakhstan and David M. Montgomery in his examination of Muslim ritual practices in the Ferghana Valley. Both essays nicely show the contestations that arise in the encounter of local practices of Islam perceived as “traditional” with new notions and interpretations of Islam. To exemplify the contestations between local Islamic practices and canonical interpretations of Islam, David Abramson and Elyor Karimov use the example of shrine veneration as a site to display continuities and changes of local Islamic practices and imaginaries. Sebastien Peyrouse’s essay on Christians, the main religious minority in Central Asia, closes the section and the book. Peyrouse elaborates on the (positive and negative) aspects of the region’s changing religious landscape. Although some Central Asians view newly gained religious freedom as an improvement, already established Christian faith groups, according to Peyrouse, experience this freedom as a threat and see themselves confronted with an increasing competition from new religious groups and movements emerging on the scene.

The editors present a large range of essays that offer condensed, yet substantial, scientific data. The self-contained individual essays provide a vivid and lively picture of everyday life. The presentation of diversity is one of the strengths of this book, but there is a risk that the lay reader will lack guidance and get lost in the vast amount of detailed and specialized information offered. Although organized under such large concepts as “religion,” “community,” and “gender,” the volume is a rather loose collection of essays that jump among regions, times, and topics. Moreover, the introductions to the subsections are quite brief and, thus, cannot do justice to the complexity of these concepts.

The diachronic perspectives inherent in most of the contributions help the reader to understand the region’s

continuities and changes. However, it is exactly this diachronic perspective and self-containment of the essays that make a reading from the beginning to the end problematic. Passages in single contributions are often repetitive because they discuss issues covered in previous chapters. The reader would have benefited from references to other essays touching on similar issues. It would have been helpful, for instance, to make clear in such references the connection between regions and periods, as well as their similarities and differences. This would have helped the reader become aware of the diversity in Central Asia, not only between countries or regions, but also even within such small areas as neighborhoods, as, for instance, Liu shows in his discussion.

Despite these problems, the anthology comprises information that is useful to larger issues within academia. The individual contributions provide a detailed picture of the everyday lives of people living in the region of Central Asia in Soviet and post-Soviet times. Furthermore, the essays offer even more than promised by the editors in the introduction. Most of the authors reveal another layer of analysis that reaches beyond the volume’s intended scope—giving insight into the “everyday lives” of researchers working in Central Asia and their everyday experiences and interactions with people living in that region. The stories detailed in “Dinner with Akhmet” by Uehling; the difficulties McGlinchey faced by meeting with representatives of the Muslim elite in the Ferghana Valley; or Reeves’s experiences as a co-traveler at the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik borders provide a glimpse into the actual process of research in Central Asia, its limitations and enriching encounters.

The short and precise, yet rich in detail, contributions help to turn *Everyday Life in Central Asia* into a colorful patchwork of single studies providing well-researched insights and texture that is missing in most books on the region and its people. Furthermore, the collection comprises several gems that are of great value for exemplifying broader themes and have the potential to add to the curricula of seminars dealing with related issues. With their rich and detailed content, single essays can serve as a valuable source of information for students interested in specializing in Central Asia and as examples of different approaches and methodologies applied in fieldwork. And, as intended by the editors, the book also offers to the curious reader a better understanding of Central Asian people, their histories, and everyday lives—a diversity of people who otherwise may have been conceptualized as a grey and anonymous mass, or, worse yet, as mere numbers.

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