Book Discussion

Artemy Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan.* Cornell University Press 2018. ISBN1-5017-1556-9. xiii + 316 pp.

Accepted version of a book review published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
Khalid, Adeeb. " Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan. written by Artemy Kalinovsky", Central Asian Affairs 7, 1 (2020): 111-122.

A Model of Development

Adeeb Khalid
Carleton College
akhalid@carleton.edu

Growing up in Pakistan, I first became interested in Soviet Central Asia because it represented an alternative model of modernity and development to what Pakistan had experienced since its independence. How to bring industrial modernity to the formerly colonized world was one of the most pressing questions of the era of decolonization and the Cold War and the Soviet experience in that regard was seen by many as worthy of emulation. Those concerns vanished in the blur of the massive transformations initiated by
M. S. Gorbachev. With the demise of the Soviet Union and the seeming triumph of neoliberalism, talk of alternative models of development was consigned to oblivion. The new historiography of Central Asia that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of the archives focused primarily on the late imperial and early Soviet periods, with interest devoted to the emergence of national identities, imperial governance, Soviet nationalities policies, gender, and above all, Islam. Historians of Central Asia had little interest in the late Soviet period and in the questions of development associated with it. Now, Artemy Kalinovsky has brought Central Asia's experience in the late Soviet decades back into the scholarly conversation. His new book knits together the histories of Soviet development models, the Cold War, and social change in Tajikistan in the post-Stalin period. *Laboratory of Socialist Development* is one of the first monographs in English to focus on the post-World War ii period in Central Asia and the first to make systematic use of Tajikistani archives. It goes beyond the themes that have preoccupied historians of Soviet Central Asia and tackles questions of economic policy and modernization in the Soviet south, and it does so by placing Soviet Central Asia in a truly globalcontext.

doi:10.30965/22142290-00701004

In the early years of Soviet power, Bolshevik leaders had hoped to use Central Asia as the "threshold to the East" for revolutionizing the colonial world. The enthusiasm for exporting revolution fell away under Stalin but was revived in a new form by Khrushchev. The decolonization of Asia and Africa provided new opportunities for Soviet diplomacy, and Soviet Central Asia became a central ideological battlefront in the Cold War. No longer a threshold for exporting revolution, Central Asia was now presented as a model of development for the "Third World," an alternative path to modernization for countries emerging from colonialism. And yet, it turned out that Central Asia, and Tajikistan in particular, were still "backward" and underdeveloped, with little industry and cotton serving as the main contribution to the Soviet economy. Central Asia then experienced what Kalinovsky calls a second postcolonial moment (245) when Khrushchev gave local leaders a much greater say in policy debates and engaged them in Soviet diplomacy with the Muslim world. Kalinovsky presents a fascinating account of how Tajik experts and politicians were able to use the foreign policy needs of the time to argue for greater investment by the center in their republic. The Soviets had to practice their own version of decolonization in Central Asia — Soviet domestic policy was deeply intertwined with Cold War competition across the globe.

The book links Soviet development policy with foreign policy concerns on the one hand and with transformations in Tajik society on the other. Kalinovsky traces the emergence of a Tajik cultural and technical intelligentsia in the years of the Second World War and later, with a particular focus on Tajik economists. It was they who argued for new patterns of industrial development that would make use of the republic's abundant labor supply. Dynamic interaction occurred between central and regional planners with considerable debate and differences of outlook. Through these debates we learn a great deal about the way Soviet central planning operated in practice. In the 1950s and 1960s, Soviet development efforts in Tajikistan bore great similarity to what was going in the decolonizing world: investment in infrastructure, education, industrialization, and above all, the construction of dams. The Nurek dam was supposed to produce large amounts of hydroelectricity and pave the way not just for heavy industry but also for urbanization and civilization. Nurek city was one of many new cities built across the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s, part of a Soviet urban utopia that was to be a model for the rest of the world.

None of these development dreams came true in the way the planners had imagined. Tajik villagers showed little inclination to move to cities or to join the labor force in the new factories. Other achievements lagged behind stated goals. Many villages were still without electricity at the end of the 1970s, and

the mechanization of agriculture seemed to be sliding backwards. Abundant rural labor combined with shortages of spare parts and mechanics meant that it was easier to use manual labor than machines. By the 1980s, many Russian economists had come to argue for innate cultural differences that kept Tajiks (and Central Asians in general) from industrial labor, thus putting into question one of the key universalist principles underlying the Soviet project. Yet the fact that the dreams were not realized *in toto* did not mean that nothing changed in Tajik society nor that the Soviet experience was little more than a failure (or a "failed transformation," as the title of a late Cold War-era book put it). Kalinovsky provides a nuanced account of the ways in which the Soviet development project transformed rural life. Large-scale resettlement campaigns moved people about (it was easier to bring people to the welfare state than to bring the welfare state to the people), but many Soviet values, from the aspiration of "culturedness," through models of work, to the very notion of development, took deep root in Tajik society.

One of the great merits of the book is its explicitly global focus. "Development" was the object of desire shared by most twentieth-century states, regardless of ideological orientation or Cold War allegiance. Kalinovsky engages deeply with the literature of development to remind us of the common ground between Soviet and American projects of development. Everywhere, development produced unexpected results, and it never panned out as planned. The outcomes in Tajikistan seem less odd when placed in this context. This is one way of normalizing the historiography of Soviet Central Asia. Another virtue of the book is its eschewal of the obsession with Islam that has marked the work of many recent Western scholars of Soviet Central Asia. Too many scholars have sought to find Islam everywhere in late Soviet Central Asia, as if Islam were the only thing worth writing about. Kalinovsky discusses what being Muslim meant in Tajikistan, but he keeps the focus on what reallymattered.

The book is based on a rich variety of sources. Kalinovsky combines detailed archival work in Dushanbe and Moscow with research in the Soviet periodical press, and he taps into novels and films as well, but his most interesting sources are the oral history interviews he conducted with many of the figures that he writes about. Kalinovsky is not the first historian to use oral history sources for work on Soviet Central Asia, but he succeeds splendidly in using the method to bring the world of late Soviet Tajikistan to life through these interviews. The book is a pleasure to read, and it has given me the rare opportunity to write a review in which praise does not have to be accompanied by criticism. Scholars in several different fields will likewise read this book with profit.

Soviet Past Romanticized

Tim Epkenhans
Freiburg University
tim.epkenhans@orient.uni-freiburg.de

Artemy Kalinovsky's groundbreaking study discusses the socialist development paradigms and strategies in Soviet Tajikistan during the Cold War period. Drawing on rich archival sources, autobiographical accounts, oral history interviews, and published material, Kalinovsky retraces development discourses in the Soviet Central Asian periphery. As a case study, he tells the intriguing story of the construction of the Norak dam and its hydro-electric power station in southeastern Tajikistan between the late 1950s and the early 1980s. This story deals with ambitious local cadres, "internationalist" civil engineers (and their families) who built the world's tallest dam (Norak retained this title until 2013, when Jinping-I was commissioned in China) against all odds of the Soviet planned economy. This is a story that has not been told with such an attention to detail and context. While the Soviet planning authorities had only a transient dormitory town for the construction period in mind, the engineers and construction workers from various parts of the Soviet Union had a different idea and almost incidentally built the socialist model town of Norak, cleverly outwitting the Soviet planning authorities by delaying construction of the dam indefinitely. Eventually, they made the town of Norak their placid home in the later days of the Soviet Union, in which the Soviet version of high modernism actually seemed to work, including visions of "internationalism" and "peoples' friendship." Concomitantly, the book does not limit the discussion to development discourses in the Soviet periphery but instead ventures beyond the Soviet Union and demonstrates how Central Asia was a "laboratory," or perhaps a showcase, for the Soviet version of development and modernity to the larger postcolonial world, such as India, Iran, or Afghanistan. In a dense and fascinating narrative, Kalinovsky depicts the entanglement of Soviet Central Asia with global trajectories of development.

However, the objective of this roundtable discussion is primarily a critical evaluation of *Laboratory of Socialist Development*, and therefore I should address four points of critique as well. First reflecting on concepts and paradigms of development after the Second World War, Kalinovsky builds his arguments on a theoretical framework that combines James C. Scott's ideas on high modernism (in *Seeing like a State*) with Michel Foucault's thoughts on governmentality (in *The Birth of Biopolitics*). Unsurprisingly, these *en vogue* theories work

very well for the general conceptualization of development and societal transformation in the period under discussion; however, their application remains cursory and underdeveloped throughout the main part of the book. In particular, I would have welcomed a stronger integration of Foucault's concepts of governmentality (for instance in Chapter 5).

Second, Kalinovsky identifies three moments of decolonization in Tajikistan during the 20th century with the 1917 Revolution, the post-Stalin period and finally independence in 1991. While I do agree that all these three moments are decisive watersheds in the history of Central Asia, I hesitate to subsume them under the label "decolonialization" since it dilutes the analytical value of the category "decolonization," in particular if we look at the post-Stalinist period. Sharaf Rashidov in Uzbekistan might have been glorified as an authentic Uzbek hero of decolonization *after* 1991, but to consider his political project in the 1960s as "decolonial" overrates his agency and personal discretion.

Third, the book does not intend to narrate a conventional political history of Soviet Tajikistan, and considering the scope of the study with its original focus on global entanglements, this is certainly the right decision. At the same time, however, Kalinovsky frequently refers to the political history of Tajikistan, for instance in the case of the 1st Secretary of the Tajik Communist Party, Tursunboy Uljaboev, who was purged by Khrushchev in 1961, or the academic Muhammad Osimi (or Asimov), who was the long-term Chairman of the Academy of Science who shaped the composition of the Soviet Tajik intelligentsia like few others. To fully appreciate these ventures into the political, even an informed reader might need some more historical background. Furthermore, Kalinovsky rarely mentions the contentiousness of these protagonists within Tajikistan's society (Osimi, for instance, contributed to the political polarization on the eve of the civil war).

Finally, the autobiographical texts, the oral history material, and the interviews Kalinovsky integrates in his narrative of the construction of Norak (both the city and the dam) are fascinating and rich in detail. Like many personal accounts of the last Soviet generation, these narratives contain a high dosage of nostalgia romanticizing the mature socialist society, including the perception that the Soviet model of development actually worked in the empire's periphery for some years. Kalinovsky's respondents were part of this self-confident Soviet elite that experienced the implosion of the Soviet Union and Tajikistan's independence as a decline and a personal reversal of their social status. Indeed, the Tajik society experienced in the 1960s and 70s a period of relative stability and even modest prosperity (compared with the Bolshevist and Stalinist period); however, at the same time, alternative personal accounts and oral history interviews by representatives of marginalized parts of the

Tajik society (such as people from Gharm, Zarafshon or Kulob) report high degrees of structural and physical violence. Unquestionably, Kalinovsky does not conceal the repressive and authoritarian nature of the Soviet system, but at times these tropes of nostalgia and romanticization from the last Soviet generation should be scrutinized more critically.

However, these are minor points of critique. Artemy Kalinovsky's *Laboratory of Socialist Development* offers intriguing insights to a period of Soviet history which is yet under-researched. The book integrates a plethora of sources into an original narrative of Soviet politics in the periphery and—importantly—in a larger global context.

Development Domesticated: Postcolonial Aspirations in Soviet Tajikistan

Malika Bahovadinova
Visiting Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Manchester
bahovadinova@gmail.com

Artemy Kalinovsky's *Laboratory of Soviet Development* (Cornell University Press, 2018) takes the reader to Nurek, a small city in the South of Tajikistan, in order to talk about development in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union and decolonization in the Soviet Muslim periphery. This broader story, told about but also "around" the construction of what was then the world's tallest dam, becomes a social history of the Soviet development project in the late 1960s. The "around" of the narrative situates Nurek within the larger history of Soviet anti-colonial politics, 20th century modernization and development agendas, and the local (Soviet and Tajik) intellectual and economic environments. Together, these intertwined narratives help Kalinovsky to effectively demonstrate that while the Dam construction proved more than possible, it was also limited in its capacity to ultimately deliver "development."

Laboratory of Soviet Development tells a layered story about conflicting ideas of what constitutes development. This story includes conflicts over the distribution of resources, the incorporation of religious practices into the Soviet project, and many other dialectics of practice. This was the lived and debated field where things were not as binary as official Soviet (or Western) ideology might have suggested. The particularly *Soviet* project of development emerges as one containing diverse and at times irreconcilable understandings of what it is supposed to involve, giving Central Asians voice and agency in forming and implementing the project. It was the extension of Soviet state power and

its infrastructure, Kalinovsky argues, which reduced Moscow's control over the use of resources and the infrastructure projects it was funding (246). It is also in this slippage of control over what constitutes fair membership in the Soviet project and claims on its benefits where Kalinovsky identifies the pulsation of anticolonial sentiments and demands made in the Soviet periphery against the state.

In many ways, the choice of a dam and city construction site, together with the large-scale geographic transformation this implies, is an ideal setting in which to consider the emergence or enaction of categories of "development." Here Kalinovsky insightfully presents the debates about bringing the Nurek Dam to Tajik SSR as a way to prove the USSR's anticolonial commitment to the Third World. These geopolitical aspirations were also strategically utilized and applied to promote national and republican aspirations of modernity. (Watching the challenges of balancing national interest and international prestige in the enactment of the Soviet modernization project, one wonders how nation- building projects have featured in postcolonialism more generally.) This balance was contrasted with the demands of earlier nation building projects often voiced in ethnic terms, which were presented by the central authorities as examples of selfish ethnic nationalism. Kalinovsky sees in Tajikistan's later de- mands for greater inclusion a "decolonizing moment," and he invites us to do the same (44). It is in the seeming contradiction of local Soviet citizens reinforcing their sense of ethnic, cultural, and religious difference and acting to promote these difference *within the system* where he sees the potential for de-colonization from within (43–45).

This narrative of change from within does seem somewhat curious, it should be noted, against Kalinovsky's analysis of the social transformation of local labor on the Nurek construction site. Here, he writes that, "a Russian man or woman would act as the elder brother or sister to a young Tajik man or woman, teaching them a specific craft and introducing them to their new life" (154). It would seem that becoming Soviet and making claims to the Soviet project still existed somewhere liminal, still requiring a worker to adapt to a "new life." Kalinovsky shares this sense of ambiguity but considers it less a contradiction than space for fruitful research: "[N]ot everyone became 'Soviet,' and many people remained marginalized. Looking at those who were part of the system, however imperfectly they fit in, is fruitful precisely because it reveals not only what it took to become Soviet, but also how the system had to change to accommodate diversity" (13).

By foregrounding its discussion of Soviet development in the larger processes of 20th century modernization and development projects, *Laboratory of Socialist Development* further challenges ideas about the irreconcilability of Western and Soviet ideologies—or, at least, of both systems' practices of affecting and

bringing about social change. Kalinovsky dedicates a later chapter to the issue of Tajikistan's cotton monoculture, as well as the agricultural and urban arrangements that tended to trap local labor in villages. He also discusses the production of urban elites from amongst industrial workers and expatriates from the USSR's European cities, which brought a certain colonial tone to this development (Chapter 7). This is also not so dissimilar from current development in the form of donor-driven aid, and in many regards Soviet development comes out as less peculiar than one might expect. In this light, the Soviet Union emerges as somewhat more normalized in its actions—but less so valorized, given its strong anticolonial and internationalist commitments abroad and at home.

Methodologically, Kalinovsky uses a variety of sources and analytical approaches and presents a complex story of the Soviet developmental experience, zooming in and out from the individual, the region, the Soviet Union, and the world. In doing so, the book deperipherizes Central Asia, positing its experience as an inherent element of discussions in Moscow about what constitutes equality, rights, cultural autonomy, and Sovietness in general. The title, however, containing as it does the word "laboratory," already discursively allocates to the region its place as a space of underdevelopment; thus the assumed "need to develop." Central Asia may have been central to debates and modernization and development, and the Soviet project may have provided unprecedented space for local influence, but the region was still the space to be developed. In this regard, one is left at the end of Kalinovsky's fascinating book with a question: does this all mean that because the model could have worked, but did not work, it should be evaluated on its nominal promise? In the end we are we left with unanswered aspirations for modernity (195), and the question re- mains: was this the promise or premise of development, a dream deferred or adream denied?

Development, Underdevelopment, and Dreams Deferred

Artemy M. Kalinovsky
University of Amsterdam
a.m.kalinovsky@uva.nl

A roundtable affords one the rare opportunity not just to read the assessments and critiques of scholars one has learned from, but also to engage with their questions. I am grateful to the editors of *Central Asian Affairs* for organizing

this discussion, and to the participants for taking time to read the book care- fully and raise issues. I hope my comments below can help clarify some of the points that Adeeb Khalid, Malika Bohavodinova, and Tim Epkenhans bring up in their reviews.

The first concerns the word "laboratory." As I've written elsewhere, I have come to doubt that choice since the book came out. The issue is not so much that the term implies that the region had a "need to develop," as Malika Bahovadinova says, but rather that a laboratory implies a closed space for experimentation. Bohavodinova is right that Central Asia was treated as a region that "needed development," but, unlike a laboratory, it was neither closed off from the rest of the Soviet Union nor was it a space for experimentation. Rather, as Adeeb Khalid helpfully suggests, it was presented as a model. That is, its own historical experience could be studied and the lessons applied by other developing countries. Externally, Central Asia was usually presented as a model of successful development; the "need to develop" was employed internally, sometimes strategically by Central Asian actors who were trying to attract investment. At the same time, economists, planners, and party officials did treat individual projects as laboratories, in the sense that they tried to see whether policies applied in one case (for example, the steps taken to recruit workers at the Nurek Dam) could be scaled up.

What I found unique about the Soviet case was not that it wanted to uplift supposedly "backward" areas (which was typical of colonial and especially late colonial practices), but rather the way that Soviet ideology created the space to challenge the hierarchies implicit in the whole idea of elder brothers helping younger ones. Tim Epkenhans writes that the "decisive watersheds" in the history of Soviet Central Asia should not be subsumed "under the label 'decolonization' since it dilutes the analytical category" of the term. But in the book I am not treating the term as an analytical category; I do not assign myself the task of figuring out whether the USSR can credibly be called a decolonizing power. I am more interested in the effect that *claiming* to be anti-imperialist has on internal dynamics, on Soviet foreign policy, and on the relationship between the two.

Equally important, I think, is that Soviet practices—often unintentionally—themselves produced backwardness. As Adeeb Khalid writes, at the dawn of the Soviet Union's re-engagement with the developing world, "Central Asia, and Tajikistan in particular, were still 'backward' and underdeveloped, with little industry and cotton as the main contribution to the Soviet economy." And yet, that backwardness was not simply the result of neglect, but rather of explicit policies. One could speak not simply of "underdevelopment" as a lack,

but actually as a result, along the lines of thought of radical critics like Andre Gunder Frank and Walter Rodney in the 1960s and 1970s.1

I appreciate Epkenhans point about theory. I made the choice to limit my theoretical discussion to cases where I was not simply inspired by the theoretical work, but where I thought my research was actually challenging that work somehow. I return on a number of occasions to Scott precisely because I think his account of High Modernism neglects the many different layers of intermediation and negotiation involved in "High Modernist" schemes. What I found was actors at all levels recognizing the shortcoming of their "sight," their reflection on those shortcomings, their search for new epistemologies and ultimately revision of earlier plans. Foucault's lectures on biopolitics and governmentality helped me think in particular about the role of knowledge in the way that welfare states operate, but also in how internal critiques lead to the revision of models and policies. The chapter most inspired by Foucault's work was actually Chapter 3, on the role of social science and social scientists, rather than Chapter 5.

Epkenhans is also right that we have to be careful when we work with the narratives of the "last Soviet generation," and especially of those who seemed to be benefit from the Soviet system. However, I would not draw a sharp distinction, as he seems to, between people who were beneficiaries and those who experienced some kind of violence or oppression. Besides my discussion of forced resettlement and coercion in Chapter 4 and 7, I also try to show how many of the privileged elites had either directly experienced coercion or repression or were children of people who did. That goes for many of the cultural and technical elites discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, as well as the "hero workers" in Chapter 6. At the same time, the value of these narratives is precisely what they reveal about how the speaker choses to see themselves and their life story. When we look at the formation of the elite in the post-war period, it is important to ask how members of this elite saw themselves in relation to the wider society. Their self-perception had consequences. Many of the economists and social scientists who wrote up plans for industrialization in the post-war peri- od grew up in difficult circumstances, but saw themselves as having success- fully attained the benefits of Soviet modernity; the personal narrative came across strongly in interviews I conducted as well as in memoirs. Nostalgia

1 Andre Gunder Frank, *The development of underdevelopment*. (Boston: New England Free Press, 1966); Walter Rodney. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa:* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1973).

aside, it makes one wonder: what was the effect of this self-perception on the kinds of plans they drew up? Did their own experience shape their expectation about how others would behave? Could it be that it blinded them to certain realities?

Malika Bahovadinova ends her review with a question about how the Soviet project should be evaluated. I'm not sure we can evaluate it, at least not in the sense of defining whether it worked. First, any criteria we set up will reflect our own preferences (or biases). Second, the goals change over time. Finally, what studies of development show is that the effect of any initiative is rarely quite what the planner imagines it will be. As Adeeb Khalid writes, "the fact that the dreams were not realized *in toto* did not mean that nothing changed in Tajik society and that the Soviet experience was little more than a failure." Yet some of the problems unleashed by development are the result of an initiative "working"—the destruction of the Aral Sea being one example. One could argue that Soviet development worked politically, in the sense that it bound people to the Soviet project. Yet even here success was contingent. My point in calling Soviet development "A Dream Deferred" was to illustrate how much the project relied on people believing that things were getting better and going to get better; that their lives would improve materially; that the gap in inequality between the region and the wealthier parts of the USSR would close; and so on. Yet this was a problem not limited to Central Asia, but one, I would suggest, characteristic of the Soviet project as a whole.

Many of the gaps I identified in the historiography at the start of this project are rapidly being filled. Historians of development have begun to pay more attention to the Second World and to the link between knowledge, politics, and practice.2 Historians of the Soviet Union have become much more interested in Central Asia; scholars of Central Asia have also used their research to think about Soviet history more broadly.3 Finally, we have seen excellent research on

2 This is reflected in recent overviews of development history, including Corinna R. Unger, *International Development: A postwar history* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018); Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Macekura, Stephen J., and Erez Manela (eds), *The Development Century: A global history* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), especially Alessandro Iandolo and Priya Lal's chapters. I would also single out the work of Eric Burton; see, for example: Eric Burton, "Socialisms in Development. Revolution, Divergence and Crisis, 1917–1991," *Journal fur Entwicklungspolitik*, 33, no. 3 (2017), 4–20.

3 A good example is Isaac Scarborough's close study of perestroika in Tajikistan, which puts into sharp relief the problems of Gorbachev's economic reforms more generally. Scarborough, Isaac McKean. *The extremes it takes to survive: Tajikistan and the collapse of the Soviet Union, 1985–1992*. (Diss.) The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), 2018.

the cultural links between Central Asia and the postcolonial world, though there is plenty more to be done.4

Of course, I don't expect my book to be the last word on any of these issues. Indeed, I've ended the project with more questions than I had when I started. Among other things, I am still trying to sort out how, exactly, Central Asian economists, for all their engagement, may have been influenced by international discourses; the relationship between "informal" economic practices and the planned economy; and the legacies for Soviet approaches to development in the post-Soviet era. More broadly, I am still wrestling with where the Soviet experience fits in histories of empire and decolonization, and what that might mean for understanding post-Soviet Central Asia. Whose dream was socialist development, anyway?

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4 See, for example, Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (Montreal: McGill–Queens University Press, 2020); Masha Kirasirova, "Building Anti-Colonial Utopia: The politics of space in Soviet Tashkent in the 'long 1960s,'" in Martin Klimke et al. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties* (London: Routledge, 2018), 53–66.