Book Discussion

Sergei Abashin, Soviet *Kishlak*: Between Colonialism and Modernization *(Sovetskii kishlak: mezhdukolonializmom i modernizatsiei)* (Moscow: NLO, 2015).

Accepted version of a book review published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
Kalinovsky, Artemy M. "Sergei Abashin, Soviet Kishlak: Between Colonialism and Modernization (Sovetskii kishlak: mezhdu kolonializmom i modernizatsiei) (Moscow: NLO, 2015).", *Central Asian Affairs* 4, 3 (2017): 293-304.

Exploring "Sovietness" in Local Context

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Sergei Abashin's *Sovetskii kishlak* is an outstanding work of historical anthropology and one of the most exciting publications on Central Asia to appear in recent years. Drawing on ethnographic research and life stories collected over many years, as well as research in local archives, the book traces the history of one village in northern Tajikistan from Russian colonization in the nineteenth century through the Soviet period and up to the present day.

The subtitle of the book is "between colonialism and modernization" and, indeed, Abashin is interested in the fate of people subjected to these two, often contradictory, historical projects. Yet the book could also have been subtitled "between Soviet and Western Scholarship." The challenge for a scholar working in the late 1980s, as Abashin explains, was not just to learn a whole new theoretical toolkit, but also to avoid writing "with the signs reversed." The social sciences, including ethnography, had moved far out of the strictures of the Stalin era, when they were expected to demonstrate the march toward progress among Soviet peoples.[1] Yet even in the 1970s and 1980s there were severe limits to what social scientists could say, particularly if their findings contradicted the approved narrative of Soviet progress.

These limitations obviously frustrated researchers who knew that there were aspects of what they found that they could never write about. The openness of the perestroika era, unfortunately, led many to rather un-nuanced reassessments. Even a casual look through journals like *Sotsiologicheskie issledovania*

1 See, for example, Maya Haber, "The Soviet Ethnographers as a Social Engineer: Socialist Realism and the Study of Rural Life, 1945–1958," *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 41 (2014): 194–219.

doi 10.1163/22142290-00403003

or other social science publications of the late Soviet era shows a marked tendency among scholars to offer analysis that stood diametrically opposed to those found in earlier publications. Abashin is one of those rare scholars who was able to bridge the best of the Soviet scholarly tradition with the theoretical and empirical work done outside of the USSR. He deftly weaves in his own training as a Soviet anthropologist and historian, his introduction and engagement with various theoretical concepts he encountered since perestroika, and the way working in several intellectual traditions affected his approach to thetopic.2

For all of the advances in the history of Soviet Central Asia in the last 25 years, the region is still often treated as apart from the rest of the USSR, let alone the broader history of the twentieth century. Some of the most exciting debates in Soviet historiography over the last few decades, including those about subjectivity and resistance, have found only limited resonance in works on Central Asia. Abashin has argued for seeing Central Asia's experience with- in that broader history, and the present book is an outstanding example of how this can be done. His focus on one village does not make the book a localized ethnography. On the contrary, this is a study of how national and even inter- national processes shaped local realities. It leads to some fascinating and often unexpected findings.

One of the areas where it does so is in the political economy of the collective farm. Abashin's study of Oshoba shows that, for all the dislocation of the Stalin era and collectivization, in many ways the real changes in life on the farm came later, after Stalin's death. Drawing on a careful reading of the collective farm's accounts and labor records, as well as interviews, Abashin shows that most members of the *kolkhoz* worked on collective lands only "episodically" and in- deed spent most of their time engaged in animal husbandry, horticulture, and handicrafts, selling their products independent of the farm administration. As a result "Peasants might not have truly felt the changes that followed collectivization" (344).

It was only in the Khrushchev years and later that peasants were more firmly bound to the farm's "formal" production. Here, Abashin's study of the power dynamics within the kolkhoz and the region as a whole shows how productive a local study can be for a broader understanding of Soviet history. He

2 There is an interesting parallel here with the historian Boris Kolonitsky, who recently offered his own reflections on coming of age as a historian of the Russian Revolution during the same era. See Boris Kolonitskii, "On Studying the 1917 Revolution: Autobiographical Confessions and Historiographical Predictions," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Soviet History* 16, no. 4 (2015): 751–768.

persuasively argues that the new demands of "building communism" under Nikita Khrushchev, combined with the "trust in cadres" approach that followed Khrushchev's ouster, allowed officials at all levels to remain at their posts for years on end without fearing purges. This did not necessarily cause stagnation; on the contrary, it often encouraged officials to take initiative. Abashin relates the story of the collective farm chairman, who developed a plan to irrigate part of the steppe using a technically difficult process. Although criticized for his use of resources on a dubious project, the chairman eventually won Moscow's support and investment. Between 1955 and 1985, the area under cotton cultivation grew by a factor of 30 (364). As a result, the chairman's standing with party elites in Dushanbe and Moscow rose, which also increased his authority within the collective farm. The chairman then used this political capital to get support to construct an internal road network, a small airport, a hospital, and other facilities (369).

Abashin's careful study of local politics points to a much larger dynamic in Soviet politics and the persistence of the cotton complex with all of its negative attributes (the use of child labor, ecological damage, and so on). The persistence and growth of the cotton complex is often explained by reference to demands from Moscow or local corruption that allowed leaders to enrich themselves. As Abashin's discussion shows, however, such explanations miss the much more complicated ways that political capital was accumulated through economic initiatives and could be used to fulfill a vision of improvement that was local as well as Soviet.

The book's biggest contribution to historiography of the USSR and debates on the Soviet legacy is Abashin's discussion of "Sovietness." Here, Abashin builds on revisionist historiography and debates about subjectivity to get away from the "tradition/modernity" paradigm that has appeared so frequently in the Russian-language literature on Central Asia since the late Soviet period and often in Western literature as well. Abashin uses the concept of "Soviet- ness" to describe what is created by the interaction of people with a system that itself went through numerous permutations. In doing so, Abashin also pushes beyond the dichotomy of "resistance" and "accommodation." Some of the most useful chapters in this regard are the ones that deal with medicine (405–453) and wedding rituals (547–611). In both cases, "proper" practices introduced by the USSR became enmeshed with local traditions and even forms of knowledge. Meditating on the spaces of "Sovietness" in people's lives, Abashin shows how certain Soviet practices became part of daily life, coexisting and overlapping with practices that were deemed "Muslim" or "national," and he suggests seeing the space inhabited by people as a "mosaic, consisting of multiple sub-spaces, mixed chaotically with each other" (610).

The book demonstrates that any attempt to understand the Soviet system needs to proceed from an analysis of the system's localized permutations, rather than an identification of "Sovietness" as an ideal type against which various local realities are set. Still, it is not always clear how much distance the author is prepared to put between "colonialism," "modernization," and "Sovietness." In the example above, Abashin notes that certain territories became spaces of "Sovietness" or "Russianness/Europeanness." This is a distinction that has important consequences for our understanding of the Soviet project. Was there a distinction between Sovietness and Russianness/Europeanness? If so, it suggests that the USSR really was creating something new that went be- yond the imposition of "Western" practices and forms of knowledge in their Soviet permutation. If not, it suggests that at most the Soviet Union created possibilities for co-existence that were perhaps not that different from other imperial contexts.

This is, in short, a terrific book. English-language readers will be familiar with parts of it from various articles published over the years in our field's top journals. Nevertheless, it remains my hope that the book will eventually be translated as a whole. It would be a great resource to specialists as well as students just beginning to study the region.

A "Thick Description" of Oshoban Society

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A fair warning: you might be surprised at the urgency with which you read Sergei Abashin's *Sovetskii kishlak*, a microhistory of tiny Oshoba, an ethnic Uzbek village in the mountainous Tajik gateway to the Fergana Valley. And you might wonder if you, too, can convince a publisher to sign off on 700 pages, complete with deep asides into historiography and theory, and a habit of embedding full archival documents. However, this is a virtuosic work of ethnography that bridges anthropological and historical sensibilities and contends with the most pressing questions of Soviet and Central Asian his- tory, and it is hard to overstate its importance to these fields.

As described with candor in the introduction, the book grew from fieldwork first conducted in 1995, but the results sat for more than a decade without a prevailing question as the author consulted theoretical literature and emerging Soviet and postcolonial historiography, finally favoring the veins of Soviet

revisionism, subjectivity, and non-normative modernity, especially. The result is a Geertzian "thick description" of Oshoban society composed of an expansive web of interviews, oral histories, observations, and archival reports that extends back to the kishlak's foundation and forward to the present, and engages almost every sphere of inquiry imaginable, including Oshoba's conquest in 1875, Russian colonial rule, the Basmachi rebellion, kolkhoz governance, the rise of big cotton, Soviet health care, the *mahalla*, the practice of Islam, courtship and weddings, and even the visual culture of family photo albums. The chapters (or "essays") bristle with detail, but are each oriented toward major historiographical debates, such as the relative backwardness of Central Asian society, the nature of tsarist colonialism and Soviet empire, and the degree to which local society became Soviet.

For Abashin, village ethnography is not merely an anthropologist's tool but the gateway to a local framework that opens a more pixilated reality than would a regional or national study. This reflects his conviction, citing Arjun Appadurai, that the local is the most revelatory and generative sphere of social life, where people make sense of their world and interact with the state which is often embodied by their friends, neighbors, and kin. Abashin constructs a web of social ties, family allegiances, economic incentives, and social capital to create a picture too complex for simple causation. Metanarratives—particularly about the colonial nature of the Soviet era or the salience of the national category—crumble in the face of a more balanced, complex picture. Instead, he shows "how local community was created and recreated in different historical epochs" (51), forming and reforming under new circumstances. Traditional/non-traditional, modernity/backwardness, Soviet/non-Soviet, colonial/ non-colonial are binaries that orient his investigation, yet correspond only "ambiguously" to the facts on the ground (10). One senses that he loves nothing more than interwoven and competing sources on the same phenomenon, most obviously portrayed in the chapters "Three Views on Conquest" and "Kurbashi," which layer tsarist and Soviet, Turkestani national, and Oshoban sources—yet even these categories mask a variety of perspectives. For instance, tsarist officer reports present a simple story of bravery and conquest, masking critical local assistance and the brutality of the Russian siege. A self-scrutinizing Kokandi intellectual views the episodes through an Islamic reformist lens. Meanwhile, oral history preserves local honor and a stubborn insistence on moral victory by interpreting the village's post-conquest tax reduction as Russian recogni- tion of a formidable opponent.

Through oblast-level archives and interviews with descendants, Rakhmankula, the ambitious kishlak watchman turned rebel leader emerges from the dark of Soviet rhetoric as a local actor who retained colonial administrative

practices, controlled a leather factory, and cultivated kinship and marriage alliances, with only circumstantial ties to Islamist figures and rhetoric. The Basmachi resistance was less a "movement" than a loose network of fraying and reforming alliances, and Abashin's insistence on a local approach is especially appropriate. He is attentive both to what the local population remembers as well as what it forgets, part of his overriding conviction that people do not make decisions or recollections based on "one scheme, but according to a multitude of personal motivations which they must consciously or unconsciously consider" (175). Thus, it is especially provocative to learn how Oshobans tend to ignore the ideological clash between their native son and Soviet power, locating the conflict in a mysterious episode involving a wayward Russian girl, and retaining a positive valence for Rakhmankula that does not contradict their Soviet identities.

However, more than merely complicating our picture of rural life, for Abashin locality is the argument itself; that "in these distortions and biases [we] see the particularities of different views on reality" (49). The implication is that "Soviet" took many forms. And yet, nonetheless, certain insights seem broadly applicable beyond Oshoba. For instance, "Little Stalin," his chapter on the rise, rule, and fall of a *selsoviet* chairman, is a magisterial reconstruction of rural power relations and their transformation from the 1920s to the 1950s. Abashin demonstrates how the state entered local society through politically savvy outsiders—first bakers and then teachers—who balanced privileges and powers among themselves. However, the rules of the game changed after World War ii when the state consolidated kolkhozes in search of greater cotton yields, and expertise and transparency rather than mobilization become the critical administrative strategies as an influx of educated and Russian-speaking outsiders entered local society, leading to the removal of the chairman. Abashin's broader point—that "state and peasantry were not located on different sides of the barricades but were intimately interwoven on the local level" (249)—is well taken for other Central Asian villages.

Other chapters are equally expansive and critically informed. "Leap into socialism" engages in debates of Marxist developmental categories such as backwardness and "remnants" (*ostatki*) and depicts a surprisingly complex local economic and technological change stewarded by ambitious kolkhoz leaders. "Birth of the Oshoba Hospital" depicts a paradigmatic Soviet institution embedded in a local context. Spurning a colonial framework to characterize postwar Soviet medicine, he draws on Foucault's notion of a "strategic game" that offers opportunities to people who make decisions accordingly and ends with the anecdote of the former head doctor who retains a belief in

faith healing to make his point about local particularity. "Komsomol Wedding" traces the evolution of courtship rites and centers on the affecting story of a 27-year-old writer with a physical impairment who wielded traditional and Soviet languages and strategies (appeals to press and radio) to defeat his romantic rivals and organize the village's first Komsomol wedding in 1966—to his 16-year-old beloved. Time and again we learn how Oshoba became Soviet yet remained Oshoba.

One would have expected more treatment of local education, given the importance of teachers and the role of Russian language as a gateway to Soviet levers of power. Similarly, one wonders how the salience of being an Uzbek enclave was manifest, and if it changed over time from the Tajik SSR to independent Tajikistan. However, these are exceedingly minor quibbles.

Although Abashin avers that locality is not the same as representativeness (47) and thus that all the Soviet kishlaks were different, the resonance of his observations and theoretical claims imply otherwise. Furthermore, apart from this book, rural social histories of the region are essentially nonexistent, and his marshaling of seven different district and oblast archives will not be re- peated by foreign scholars anytime soon, leaving little Oshoba isolated on our mental maps of rural Central Asia. Thus, it is likely that we will be arguing with him about this claim for years to come.

Dissolving the Myth of an Objective Reality

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A single village is located at the center of the universe that unfolds before the eyes of readers of the book *Sovetskii kishlak: mezhdu kolonializmom i modernizatsiei* by Sergei Abashin, professor of anthropology at the European University St. Petersburg. The village lies in the north of Tajikistan's Sughd Region on territory that forms part of the Fergana Valley. Considering the valley's multiethnic environment, it is not surprising to learn that members of the country's Uzbek minority inhabit the village. In the book's approximately 700 pages, the author makes us familiar with the village's social organization, specific aspects of culture and historical events from the late nineteenth century to the present. Oshoba, as the place is called, thus becomes a model Soviet village in Central Asia and a mirror for the Soviet period in the region.

Abashin's theoretical approach is defined by the academic discussions about tradition, modernity, Sovietness, and colonialism, all of which he considers in detail in the introduction. On the basis of these four concepts, and partly inspired by the work of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (51), he develops the concept of locality, which serves as the main tool for the analysis of his empirical material. Instead of committing to only one "truth," he prefers to look at events and phenomena in Oshoba from various perspectives (45). The readiness to embrace a position of multi-perspectivity—in turn generating a sense of cultural relativity—constitutes the major achievement of this fascinating piece of work. As the author declares, he locates the book in between the disciplines of anthropology and history (51–52). The narrative evolves in a series of essays about a range of issues from imperial administration via the kolkhoz system to private photo collections, among others.

Taking a look at one essay about the imperial conquest of the area and another one about a Basmachi leader from Oshoba will be useful to better comprehend the application of Abashin's theoretical framework to the source material. The author presents the reader with three narratives of a military conflict between the Russian Army and native insurgents that took place in Oshoba in 1875. In the imperial narrative, the Russian victory as well as the minor losses the army had to suffer are emphasized, with some accounts glamorizing the soldiers' bravery and their triumph over the enemy. The national narrative focuses on the cruelty of the Russians but also the oppositional force's religious motivation. For the author, events may yet be read through the prism of a local narrative that includes both the voice of a shocked Russian soldier who witnesses the killing of an innocent child and an interpretation of the area's eventual conquest that is very different from the official version, even showing certain mythological elements. Similarly, it appears that a Basmachi leader named Rakhmankul does not necessarily have to appear in the common story about Soviet rule and local resistance after the Russian Revolution, since some sources identify him as originally a simple peasant and mullah who fights the Bolsheviks less for political reasons than as a means to legitimate his authority among the native population. Here, the author gives us a beautiful example of how political categories of Western origin that we make use of in our analyses—in this case Bolshevism—might in a local context be of lesser significance vis-à-vis other categories. Categories that, at times, can be wholly unfamiliar to us. A curious effect of the author's working method is an ongoing change in the relations between the reader and the characters, who seem to be wicked or misguided from one perspective but sensible and well meaning from another. More than once one is reminded of the literary classic "In a Bamboo Grove" by Japanese writer Akutagawa Ryūnosuke that was later turned into the

film *Rashomon*—a mystery of wildly differing accounts of a murder and the perpetrator's identity.

Abashin's book is rich in detail, and the earlier chapters especially appear to be almost encyclopaedic in style. At the same time, the author manages to make the reader care about even a dry subject such as the census. In an elegant fashion, he links the essays to one another by referring to elements he established in previous chapters. Through these techniques, we begin to grasp the complexity and strangeness of social life in this particular corner of Central Asia, which is important, as people tend to reduce the functional logics of foreign places, no matter how trained they are.

Just as the author chooses a number of different perspectives to make sense of the culture and history of Oshoba, we may take different viewpoints when reading the book. Based on my own expertise, I suggest regarding it subsequently from an anthropological, a postcolonial, and finally a Russian social science position. Most anthropologists, one is inclined to think, would categorize the book as a piece of cultural history rather than historical anthropology. While it helps us to see, for instance, the modernization and Sovietization of Central Asia in a new light, the reader is rarely forced to enter an entirely un- familiar conceptual universe, as is usually the case with the works of classical anthropology. Could it be that these features are the outcome of the author giving precedence to the archival material from Russian imperial and Soviet times, which might also explain why the later chapters about the *mahalla* and Islam are in comparison so short? If one had to, it would be possible to turn this into a vantage point for a postcolonial critique as well. Obviously, one must pay close attention to the military and administration when writing about the capture of Central Asia and the region's integration into a different system of organization. It would furthermore be unwarranted to view native society and the new order in some kind of binary opposition to one another, as both were soon entangled to a considerable degree. A more radically minded reader might ask, though, if we need to reproduce imperial categories at all, as they tempt us to interpret events or circumstances within a specific frame. Abashin himself describes and criticizes the behavior and expectations of an imperial forest superintendent who evidently wishes to subjugate the structures he encounters in the area and replace them with ones he knows (665). As a researcher, one could likewise attempt to find out what else was significant for the villagers during the period in question, although the result would naturally be a wholly other book.

Finally, Abashin's book makes an invaluable contribution to the social sciences in Russia. This is true for the discipline of Russian ethnography, which, as the author observes, still suffers from an imbalance between description

and analysis—too often, one might as well call it a complete absence of a theoretically informed analysis—and tends to present ethnographic findings as unquestionable facts (655). More generally, *Sovetskii kishlak* will also serve as a much-needed counterweight to a widespread and inexplicable infatuation in Russian social sciences with positivism. One wonders if this exaltation results from a continued wafting around of universalist notions that were commonplace in the Soviet academic tradition. Or is it possibly a reaction to the current political climate, where, to quote Peter Pomerantsev, "nothing is true and everything is possible," expressing the wish for a black-and-white picture containing no ambiguous shades? It is through historical events and personal trajectories in one hitherto nearly unknown village in Northern Tajikistan that the reader, if idealist or not, (re)discovers the multi-faceted nature of what we perceive to be our shared reality.

Author's Response

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I am grateful to the editorial board of *Central Asian Affairs* for organizing this discussion of my book, and to Artemy Kalinovsky, Charles Shaw, and Jesko Schmoller for participating in this discussion, and for their positive reviews, reflections, and criticisms. I understand that reading a book of 700 pages with lots of details, charts, and quotes is not such a simple task. It requires time and energy, of which all of us are always short. I also understand that the book is written in Russian and, in many ways, for the Russian-speaking audience, and may not always be easy for readers from other linguistic and historiographical contexts. Yet despite all these difficulties and distinctions, I think that developing a dialogue and debate is an important task, since, by viewing different perspectives and merging them into one, a voluminous knowledge of Central Asia is created, as well as a broad scholarly community which puts this knowledge to a comprehensive review, questioning and further development. As such, I am willing to accept the subtitle "between Soviet and Western Scholarship," as proposed by Kalinovsky. I even offer to see other miscellaneous options in "between," by breaking the "Soviet" and "Western" schools down into many independent lines of thought and scientific traditions.

After reading the opinions of my colleagues, I am pleased that I have been properly understood in my desire to see a complex and balanced picture of life

in the Central Asian village Oshoba in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that does not fit into the simple, binary opposition and schematic metanarratives listed in the review by Charles Shaw. The local perspective with a deep immersion in everyday life allows you to see many actors and interests, a variety of social configurations, intersectional interactions, and uneven, multidirectional transformations in Central Asian society. Using oral histories, archival, and other sources, one can counterpoise the different voices and see reality from different perspectives, recalling the methodology of the film *Rashomon*, as Jesko Schmoller notes. In this sense, "localized ethnography" gives, I think, the effect of understanding the general processes in Central Asia in imperial and Soviet times, and it also opens the possibility for comparative analysis that takes into account many specifics.

It is from this logic that I want to offer answers to the critique that was voiced in this little debate. Artemy Kalinovsky believes that there is a need to more accurately determine how identical or divergent the Soviet and Russian/ European perceptions of the Central Asians, were rightly pointing out that the understanding of the Soviet experience as unique or as imperial, similar to other Western countries, would depend on this. In my view, in the 1960–1980s, the Sovietness, paradoxically, was separated by the reference to Russianness/ Europeanness and at the same time was owned as self-appropriated, including local practices. In particular, in the chapter "Marriage à la Komsomol," I write about how these two interpretations could alternate, depending on the situation and the strategy of behavior, but not in the sense of rational mimicry and deception, and there was quite sincere acceptance of these two positions, despite the fact that from the outside they were different and even opposed to each other. The Soviet and colonial, therefore, both converge and diverge in the different personal experiences, making the Soviet Union both unique and at the same time, in some terms, comparable with other countries.

The uncertainty of the boundaries and the mosaic of the social fabric could address Jesko Schmoller's comment about the need to pursue an anthropo- logical reconstruction of the cultural world as it is created and seen by the people of Oshoba, as well as the doubt that external researchers cannot be non-colonial in nature. In my opinion, during the twentieth century, Soviet, colonial, and modern influences (identity, practices, institutions, and rhetoric) penetrated the Central Asian world, filled it with inner diversity, and are no longer considered solely as external forces or as external views. Anthropologists now see transnational, cosmopolitan, post-colonial relationships, even in their Soviet incarnation. In the chapter about the hospital, for example, I analyze the stories of doctors who explain local methods of treating the "evil eye" in the modern rational language they learned in Soviet medical school. In

the chapter about family photo albums, I show that Oshoba residents look at themselves and portray themselves as Soviet people, with all necessary attributes of this. The Sovietness in this case is part of their inner world, their own culture and life. This does not mean that I deny the existence, in Soviet times, of the hierarchy and practice of subordination, including unequal relations that an anthropologist who comes from another world has with the locals who are the "object" of the study under anthropologist categories. I just want to note that between an anthropologist and a local resident, between the global world and the world of Central Asian village, there are no impassable boundaries; many categories and practices belong equally to these two positions and are not necessarily antagonistic.

Of course, two years after the publication of the book and four years after writing it, I can already see some gaps and regret that I did not write some arguments in a clearer and more developed way. I know that the 700-page book does not encompass all the issues and problems that are interesting to discuss. I agree with Charles Shaw that it would be better to focus more, for example, on education, schools, and the role of the Russian language as a whole than how Uzbekness manifested itself in the complicated Soviet–Russian–Tajik symbiosis, which was developing in the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. At the end of the book, I list some other topics and issues that could be the subject of a separate and more thorough study. I hope that the new publications on Central Asia will criticize my book and go further by considering new cases and new conceptual schemes. Such a dialogue between authors and readers will contribute to the creation and understanding of knowledge of the region.