Paradoxes of Hegemonic Discourse in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: History Textbooks' and History Teachers' Attitudes toward the Soviet Past

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Abstract

This article analyzes the creation of hegemonic discourse in a post-transformation society by examining representations of Soviet socialism in post-Soviet history text- books and in the discursive practices of history teachers in Kyrgyzstan. While the textbooks attempt to fix a new hegemonic discourse about Soviet socialism, they also contain contradictory discourses. History teachers, in turn, have appropriated the discourse of the Kyrgyz nation-state and its modernization, adapting it to their own experiences. Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan has become a new type of state, where hegemonic discourse on both the official level and in the discursive practices of its citizens is ambivalent and outright contradictory.

Keywords

Kyrgyzstan – post-Soviet ideology – hegemonic discourse – subjectivity – historical narrative – history textbooks – life stories – Russians

Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambaev and then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin met in Moscow in February 2012. To demonstrate Kyrgyzstan's spiritual and cultural bonds with present-day Russia, Atambaev repeated the famous post- Soviet saying about the USSR: "Anyone who wants to return to the Soviet Union is

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crazy, and anyone who doesn't has no heart." A relative of mine in his 60s, watching Atambaev on tv with me, exclaimed, "That's true! Eh, what a great country the USSR was!" Similarly, the first president of independent Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev,2 is remembered for the words that he uttered when opening a Russian military airbase in Kant, near the capital city, Bishkek, in 2003: "Russia is given to us [the Kyrgyz] by God and history" (*Rossiya dana nam Bogom i istoriei*).3

What do these attitudes toward the Soviet past and Russia say about post- Soviet Kyrgyzstani ideology? Has the Kyrgyz state managed to establish a new hegemonic discourse, a "common-sense" belief4 regarding the Soviet past, thus justifying its new status as an independent nation-state? How effective is the Kyrgyz state in forming new knowledge and subjectivities of its citizens?

This article analyzes representations of Soviet socialism in post-Soviet history textbooks and in the life stories of history teachers in Kyrgyzstan. It aims to explore, first, how the post-Soviet Kyrgyz state reconstructs its Soviet past in school history textbooks, and, second, how history teachers—as both professionals and private citizens—relate to this official discourse when trying to make sense of the Soviet past. I argue that there have been uneven attempts by the textbook authors to create a hegemonic discourse about Soviet socialism, but many contradictions intrude upon this incomplete narrative. Furthermore, history teachers' discursive practices demonstrate their appropriation of the discourse of the Kyrgyz nation-state and its modernization. However, how they manifest the discourse varies according to their life experiences, professional self-understanding and ethnicity among other factors. With this study, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the creation and effectiveness of official hegemonic discourse in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan as well as in other post-colonial and post-transformation societies, both in terms of

2 Askar Akaev was president of Kyrgyzstan from 1991 to 2005. He was educated at the Leningrad Institute of Precision Mechanics and Optics and obtained his doctorate in Moscow, winning awards for his scientific studies. He also worked as a senior researcher and teacher at the institute, which he graduated in Leningrad (nowadays St Petersburg). Akaev joined the Kyrgyz Communist Party in 1986 as head of the Scientific Department. Akaev resigned as president of Kyrgyzstan and fled the country after so-called Tulip Revolution of March 24, 2005.

3 The Russian military airbase in Kyrgyzstan opened two years after the U.S. Air Force began operations at Manas Air Base. Many analysts have explained the Russian base as Akaev's attempt to balance his foreign policy between the West and Russia. The Manas Air Base finally closed in 2014 after years of pressure from Moscow. Since independence, Kyrgyzstan has conducted a multivector foreign policy, with occasional tilts toward Russia or the West as needed. However, overall it remains the most cooperative state with all-important political actors in the region like, including the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China.

4 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

how official discourse is crafted and how subjects and official discourse interact. This is crucial because defining the independent Kyrgyz state's relationship to the Soviet past is an essential step toward forming its new national state identity.

This article draws on life story interviews gathered from 27 history teachers in northern Kyrgyzstan, including in Bishkek.5 Most of these interviewees (24) were born between 1948 and 1969. The remaining three were born in 1931, 1972, and 1975. With the exception of the two youngest interviewees, they had all taught during the Soviet as well as post-Soviet eras. Three teachers are male; 24 are female. Thirteen are ethnic Kyrgyz, 11 are of Slavic nationality (Russian and Ukrainian), one is mixed Russian-Uzbek, one is Armenian, and one is a Jew. Twelve of the interviewed teachers were born in urban places and 15 in rural areas of the former Soviet Union; 18 interviewees were working in Bishkek, while nine were working in northern Kyrgyzstan. One interview subject was a male teacher who came from the south of Kyrgyzstan, but he was living and working in a village close to Bishkek at the time of the interview.

Additionally, I observed History of Kyrgyzstan classes and carried out focus groups with schoolchildren in Bishkek to gauge their attitudes about the Soviet past and the history of Kyrgyzstan in general. This analysis includes all post- Soviet history textbooks in use at the time of fieldwork that deal with the Soviet past.6 Interviews were also conducted with two textbook authors, Oskon

5 My colleague, Mehrigul Ablezova, conducted 20 biographical interviews in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan (including Bishkek, Ysyk-Köl, and Naryn and Chui regions) from 2009 to 2010. I conducted seven life story interviews with history teachers and interviews with two textbook authors during fieldwork in Bishkek. We found interviewees by visiting schools and contacting history teachers. In all cases, the interviews were conducted on school grounds, some- times inside and sometimes outside of the classroom. While this analysis draws from all 27 life stories, only life story interviews conducted by Ablezova are cited or referenced in this article. All of these materials were gathered for my PhD project as a part of larger research project coordinated by Barbara Christophe on "History Teachers as Mediators between Collective and Individual Memory in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Lithuania." While the project had a collective character, the analysis of the research material and the arguments I make inthis article are my own.

6 Schoolchildren in Kyrgyzstan study Soviet history in 5th grade (age 11–12), 9th grade (14–15), and 11th grade (17–18). The first post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks appeared in the second half of the 1990s. In this article, my analysis of Soviet socialism in post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks is based on the following three texts: A.S. Myrzakmatova, O.D. Osmonov, and K.S. Moldokasymov, *Kratkaia istoriia Kyrgyzstana—5 klass* (Bishkek: Tekhnologiia, 2002); O.D. Osmonov, Istoriia *Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi; s serediny xix veka do nashikh dnei—11 klass* (Bishkek: Tekhnologiia, 2003); and M.K. Imankulov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana s xx–xxi vv.—9 klass* (Bishkek: Kitep Kompani, 2006).

Osmonov and Muratbek Imankulov, in Bishkek between August 2009 andJanuary 2010.

Whose State Is It?

David Gullette argues that since gaining independence, the Kyrgyz state and nation have been defined in terms of a "genealogical relatedness" principle based on the Kyrgyz traditional practice of giving an oral account of one's genealogy, or *sanjyra*.7 He claims that the nation-building ideology in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan is foremost based on the ideas of *sanjyra* and that the symbol of Manas, an epic hero, has played a vital role in the nation-building ideology. Other scholars have shown that in the post-Soviet context *sanjyra* has acquired new meanings and ways of production by individuals who are interested in their creation under both internal and external factors in Kyrgyzstan.8 But the ideology and practice of *sanjyra*, on both the official and individual levels, often contradict the post-Soviet Kyrgyz nation-building project based on Manas. The Manas epic does not envision the Kyrgyz nation as genealogically related Kyrgyz groups. Rather, it stresses that one person unified the divided Kyrgyz tribes to fight against an external enemy.9 A close reading of the text does not reveal his tribal belonging, only that he was buried in what is now the

7 David Gullette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State, and 'Tribalism'* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

8 See, for example, Roland Hardenberg, "Collective, Communicative, and Cultural Memories: Examples of Local Historiography from Northern Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 31, no. 3 (fall 2012): 265–276; Svetlana Jacquesson, "From Clan Narratives to Clan Politics," *Central Asian Survey*, 31, no. 3 (fall 2012): 277–292; Till Mostawlansky, "Making Kyrgyz Spaces: Local History as Spatial Practice in Murghab (Tajikistan)," *Central Asian Survey* 31, no 3 (fall 2012): 251–264.

9 Depending on the context and audience, President Almazbek Atambaev has stressed differ- ent aspects of the epic hero's deeds and identity. For example, in his opening speech of the monument for Manas in Bishkek in August 31, 2011 –the twentieth anniversary of indepen- dence – Atambaev read a verse from the Manas epic poem that says Manas made up or gathered a people (nation) from different groups and peoples. Thus, Atambaev tried to emphasize the constructivist approach to the nation in the epic and the applicability and importance of that model in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. In a speech in Moscow in 2012, Atambaev stressed that Manas was ethnically a citizen of Russia (*etnicheskij rossiyanin*) referring to the stories in the epos according to which he was born and spent his adolescent years in the Altai region of Russia. Fergana.ru, President Kyrgyzstana A. Atambaev v Moskve: "Manas – 'etnicheskij rossiyanin, available at http://www.fergananews.com/news
.php?id=18236 – Fergana News Agency, accessed October 17, 2014.

Talas region. However, although *sanjyra* is not part of state-orchestrated ideo- logical programs and events, schoolchildren do learn about heroes from the more recent past, such as Shabdan baatyr or Atake baatyr,10 whose tribal affiliations are specified in the history textbooks.11 During one of my classroom observations in Bishkek, 8th graders (14–15 years old) were asked to discuss their *sanjyras* and the kinship belonging of famous Kyrgyz from the nineteenth century, the Soviet era, and post-Soviet times.12 This particular class used Kyrgyz as the language of instruction and the teacher and all the schoolchildren were Kyrgyz. I doubt that an ethnic Russian teacher, who would likely have a multi- ethnic class, would focus on *sanjyra* for his/her students or political leaders.

Indeed, not only there are some tensions between nationalism and tribal- ism (genealogically related groups) in Kyrgyz official discourse with regard to defining the nation, but this narrative tends to exclude all the other peoples living in Kyrgyzstan. Some scholars insist that post-Soviet Kyrgyz state ideology is quite sensitive—if ambivalent—toward its non-Kyrgyz population.13 They argue that the state discourse reflects contradictory visions: Kyrgyz nationalism versus "new internationalism" and Tengrichilik versus Islam.14 In this reading, state rituals and festivals celebrating the epic hero Manas and the declared 2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood are directed exclusively at ethnic Kyrgyz. In contrast, slogans such as "Kyrgyzstan is our common home" and the establishment of an Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan were meant for the

10 Both Shabdan baatyr and Atake baatyr, members of the pre-Soviet northern Kyrgyz ruling elite, joined Tsarist Russia voluntarily in the nineteenth century.

11 See, for example, Myrzakmatova, Osmonov, and Moldokasymov, *Kratkaia istoriia Kyrgyzstana*, 110–117.

12 Fieldwork notes (November 2009, Bishkek).

13 Asel Murzakulova and John Schoeberlein, "The Invention of Legitimacy: Struggles in Kyrgyzstan to Craft an Effective Nation-State Ideology," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61, no. 7 (Fall 2009): 1229–48.

14 Ibid., 1236. Murzakulova and Schoeberlein define *tengirchilik* as follows: "Tengirchilik, sometimes referred to in English as Tengrism (in Russian, as *tengryan stvo*), is an ideology of post-Soviet origins, also enjoying some interest on the part of the political elite in other Turkic regions of the former Soviet Union, which appeals to 'Tengri,' a supposedly mono- theistic, pre-Islamic concept of a deity, as well as other customs and beliefs which are supposed to be pre-Islam. Tengirchilik is also related to the concept of 'Kyrgyzchilik,' designating the essence of being Kyrgyz." For a detailed analysis of how "political Tengrism" is being deployed in nationalist discourse in Kyrgyzstan and other Turkic regions of the former Soviet Union, see Marlene Laruelle, "Religious Revival, Nationalism, and the 'Invention of Tradition': Political Tengrism in Central Asia and Tatarstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 26, no. 2 (Summer, 2007): 203–216.

non-Kyrgyz audience. However both discourses are considered part of a single strategy: "to obtain the solidarity and loyalty of different groups within the state and when one of them does not function, the other is deployed."15 The "seven commandments of Manas," an integral part of the post-Soviet Kyrgyz nation-building ideology, includes a commandment that stresses the importance of living in interethnic harmony.16 Thus, the nation-building discourse in Kyrgyzstan reveals significant ambivalence at higher official levels.17

Teaching Soviet Socialism with Kyrgyz History Textbooks

With the help of Western non-governmental organizations, Kyrgyzstan has radically reformed its secondary education system, more so than any other Central Asian country.18 Representations of the Soviet Union in the new his- tory textbooks oscillate between contradictory discourses such as: (1) the Soviet Union was a colonial and oppressive ruler versus (2) the USSR was a nation- and state-building power and a modernizing state. The authors com- bine these contradictory discourses in three different ways that, in turn, make the textbook representations of the Soviet Union ambivalent, nuanced, and contradictory.19 First, Kyrgyz history textbooks may depict the colonial or

15 Ibid., 1239.

16 Schoolchildren in Kyrgyzstan have to learn the seven commandments of Manas by heart. They are: unity of the nation; inter-ethnic/national harmony, friendship and cooperation; national dignity and patriotism; achieving prosperity and well-being through hard and honest work and knowledge; humanism and generosity; harmony with the nature; and strengthening and protecting Kyrgyz statehood.

17 For a comparison of Kyrgyzstan's post-Soviet discursive situation with one of the most extreme cases in Central Asia, see Victoria Clement, "Articulating National Identity in Turkmenistan: Inventing Tradition through Myth, Cult, and Language," *Nations and Nationalisms*, 20, no. 3 (2014): 546–562, esp. 556, where she argues that "[President Saparmyrat] Nyyazow's discourse was pervasive and invasive." On the comparison of Kyrgyzstan as a chaotic state versus Uzbekistan as violent and Kazakhstan as a dynastic state, see Eric McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh, pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).

18 See, for example, Alan. J. Deyoung, "Problems and Trends in Education in Central Asia since 1990: The Case of General Secondary Education in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 25, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 499–514.

19 Damira Umetbaeva, "Official Rhetoric and Individual Perceptions of the Soviet Past: Implications for Nation Building in Kyrgyzstan," *region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*, 4, no.1 (Winter, 2015): 77.

nation-building and modernizing characteristics of Soviet rule and Russians as contingent on a specific historical period. Second, they may weigh the advantages and disadvantages of Soviet rule for nation-building and the modernization of Kyrgyzstan. Third, they may not even attempt to reconcile contradictorydiscourses, thus producing conflicting implications.

Below, I analyze the structure of the stories that make up a certain discourse by looking at the actors (the characters of narrative), the setting (information about place and time), and the plot (the types of action in the story, bound up together by a common theme), and the linguistic realization of the textbook narratives; that is, the "lexical and grammatical means and devices that are involved in the expression of narratives about the past."20

Images of the "Self" and "Other"

Like the discourse regarding Tsarist and Provisional Government rule in Kyrgyzstan, Soviet socialism is regarded as a form of colonial and oppressive rule in the post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks. All three eras are presented using the same organizing principle; that is, representing the characters of thenarrative as either "self" or "other."

Ideally, the "self" is the Kyrgyz people and the setting is Kyrgyzstan. However, the history textbooks simultaneously use two different definitions of the "self" for the pre-Soviet and early Soviet periods: (1) the Kyrgyz people and (2) other Central Asian (or "Turkestani") peoples who have Islam as their common religion and main point of difference from the "others"—the colonizers. Consequently, the textbook authors interchangeably label the setting of the narrative as all "Kyrgyzstan," "southern/northern Kyrgyzstan," or "Central Asia/ Turkestan." Consider the following quote about an 1898 uprising in Andijan, which the textbook authors argue happened as a result of colonial Tsarist oppression in Central Asia.

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20 Eleftherios Klerides, "Imagining the Textbook: Textbooks as Discourse and Genre," *Journal of Educational Media: Memory and Society*, 2, no. 1 (2010): 32, 33. The lexical realization of the textbook discourse means that "the narrative strands of a given textbook have their particular encoding in vocabulary choices" as "discourses 'word' or 'lexicalize' the world in particular ways." The grammatical realization of a textbook discourse happens through transitivity, "the grammatical representation of relationships between processes, associated participants, and circumstances in a clause" (Ibid., 33). Although I will not carry out explicit analysis of the textbook narratives by focusing on their lexical and grammatical realization, I believe the readers can see how the narrative strands that I discuss in this article were constructed through certain word choices and how "relationships between processes, associated participants, and circumstances in a clause" are linked with each other grammatically.

> Representatives of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik nationalities, different social layers of the population participated in the upheaval. … The main part of the population in the region practiced Islam for several centuries, which had taken root in the consciousness of the people (*narod*). All participants of the uprising considered themselves Muslims. … The uprising was directed for the protection of interests and worries of the main mass of the population. It had a national-liberation character.21

Thus, although the above-mentioned rebellion took place in the Fergana Valley and only the Fergani (multiethnic) population participated in that rebellion, the textbook authors present it as evidence of the external and oppressive rule that existed in the whole territory of current Kyrgyzstan and specifically of the Kyrgyz people's fight for freedom.

In another example, two events that happened several months apart, in different places, and with different sets of actors, are depicted as part of a single Kyrgyz national-liberation movement. According to the accounts by Osmonov and Imankulov, in June 1916 the Kyrgyz living in Kokand and Namangan districts of the Fergana Valley joined forces with Uzbeks and Tajiks in a grassroots national liberation struggle against the oppressive colonial rule of Tsarism.22 At the same time, later in the summer of 1916 the Kyrgyz people living in north- ern Kyrgyzstan also rose up against the policy of drafting Kyrgyz males to fight in World War I. According to the textbooks, the 1916 rebellion in northern Kyrgyzstan led to the "genocide"23 of the Kyrgyz nation by Tsarist Russia, forcing many Kyrgyz to flee to China.24 Ultimately, Osmonov's text mixes up different stories, actors, and settings and comes up with the following conclusion for the sake of nation-building ideology of independent Kyrgyzstan: "This struggle of the Kyrgyz people for their own land, justice, and independence became one of the brightest pages in the history of Kyrgyzstan."25

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21 Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 33. Emphasis in the original.

22 Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 35. Imankulov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana s xx–xxi vv*, 5.

23 All post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks dealing with the Tsarist period portray the actions of the Tsarist government to suppress the rebellion and then punish its partici- pants as an instance of "genocide" the Russian empire did for the Kyrgyz. They give detailed information about how many Kyrgyz were killed by Tsarist officials and Russian gulags and peasants as well as how brutally it was done.

24 Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 36, 39–40. Imankulov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana s xx–xxi vv*, 7. This event is also called *Ürkün* in Kyrgyz.

25 Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 40–41. Emphasis is the original.

In these stories the "self" (who is not a homogenous actor) is presented as a victim of the oppressive colonial "other"; a patriot who fought for freedom. However, Osmonov evaluates the role of Tsarist Russia positively with regard to the modernization, economic development, and other improvements that it brought to the daily life, health, and education of the Kyrgyz. After discussing the arrival of peasants and other settlers from Russia and how they forcefully took the land and water resources used by the Kyrgyz, Osmonov notes that they brought positive changes.

> Russian and Ukrainian villages that appeared in Chui and Issyk-Kul basins (*kotlovina*) differed greatly from the poor peasant (*bednyatskii*) Kyrgyz villages in terms of quality and outer appearance of the constructions, accomplishment (*blagoustroistvo*) of the streets and yards. *But*, under the influence of Russians changes were taking place in the construction of the houses in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz learned to construct high houses with windows looking into the streets, with hip-roof, porches and stairs. … For example, in such type of villages where the Kyrgyz lived – Tash-Dobo in Chui valley and village Darkhan in Ysyk-Köl valley, houses [of the Kyrgyz] were built along the streets and trees were planted.26

This quote typifies the contradictory way of arguing about the Soviet past and Russians in Kyrgyz history textbooks. Tsarist Russia is portrayed as colonial and oppressive when discussed in relation to nationhood, but as a modernizing power in relation to improvements in everyday life, including the political organization, education, and health of the Kyrgyz.27 Osmonov does not even try to reconcile these contradictory discourses.

Moreover, the textbook authors describe early Soviet rule as "colonialism" only in relation to some specific events, mostly happening in the southern part of modern Kyrgyzstan, while the broader narrative about the seven decades of Soviet life is more positive. For instance, after describing the tragic events of 1916, they state that the Soviet government under Lenin atoned completely for Tsarist deeds by mounting an enormous campaign to bring back those Kyrgyz

26 Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 220. I should note that Imankulov in *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana s xx–xxi vv* did not write such contradictory arguments about the Tsarist Russia's role for the Kyrgyz. Emphasis is in the original.

27 Additionally, Osmonov wrote about how the Tsarist government contributed to education, for example, by opening schools where few Kyrgyz children together with settlers' children could study secular subjects, and to improvement of health conditions for the whole population. Ibid., 236.

who had fled to China in 1916 and providing the returnees with living conditions better than even the Europeans in the region.28 This view was echoed by a history teacher, Kyrgyz by origin, in a school in Bishkek, who had a small bust of Lenin in the center of her classroom. When I inquired about the image, the response was very emotional: "I love him. But for him, the Kyrgyz would have disappeared altogether." This discourse about the early Soviet Union as a savior of the Kyrgyz nation is related to the nation-building role of Moscow in the late Soviet era, a view found in all post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks.

Chapters covering the years between 1924 and 1990 evaluate the Soviet Union in terms of how much—or little—it contributed to nation-building, state-building, and/or the modernization of Kyrgyzstan.29 Moreover, when textbooks approach the end of the Soviet period, the USSR is again portrayed as a colonial regime. The "self" in this discourse is exclusively the Kyrgyz people as constituted during Soviet times and who, according to the textbook authors, is the "owner" of Kyrgyzstan. The "other" is not only Russians and the Soviet Union, but also the Uzbeks who dared to threaten the territorial integrity of the Kyrgyz state in 1990.30 Specifically, the ownership disputes among Kyrgyz and "others" that triggered land seizures around Bishkek in 1989 and the Osh conflict in 1990 make an implicit claim that the Kyrgyz have moral right to their land. Furthermore, this moral right trumps Soviet laws and justifies fighting against Soviet rule. Consider the following statement:

Movement for democracy and freedom in Kyrgyzstan was manifested as a struggle for the right to be the owner in one's own land. Why? Starting from the 1960s the stream of Kyrgyz youth to the city began to increase. However, it [the Kyrgyz youth] faced acutely the problem of housing. It was particularly difficult for those who settled down in Bishkek and Osh. They could not queue for getting a flat because the majority of them did not have permanent city registration (*propiska*). Their requests to provide them the Land Plot for building houses were ignored by the authorities and officials. "Why we cannot build houses in our own land? How about our children? Will they also live in the corners [of other people's houses] [and be] flat renters in their own Fatherland?" – these questions disturbed the [Kyrgyz] youth but remained unanswered. … Therefore, the Kyrgyz youth in order to protect their interests and rights united in the sociopolitical movement called "Ashar" ("Pomoshch" or "Help" in

28 Ibid., 74; Imankulov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana s xx–xxi vv*, 12–14.

29 For detailed discussion of this way of being ambivalent about the Soviet Union in post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks, see Umetbaeva, "Official Rhetoric and Individual Perceptions of the Soviet Past," 80–81.

30 Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 196.

> English). The progressive part of the intelligentsia of the republic supported demands of the "Ashar" members. Thus, a political power that opposed the communist regime appeared in Kyrgyzstan. And it won its first fight.31

Thus, the idea of the Kyrgyz state and nation as created and developed by the Soviet Union has become unchallengeable and unquestioned. However, rival dis- courses also appear in the textbooks. For example, different actors are portrayed as both victims and patriots in discussions spanning the Tsarist and late Soviet periods. Although the characters and the settings of the narratives are different, the main plot in all these stories is how the rebellion of the "self" took place against discriminatory, oppressive, and colonial policy of the "other." Additionally, the early Soviet Union is depicted as colonial in southern Kyrgyzstan but as a savior and nation-builder in the north. The fact that the textbook authors oscillate between using simultaneously Kyrgyzstan—an entity that did not exist until 1924, northern or southern Kyrgyzstan, or Central Asia/Turkestan as the location of these narrative strands shows how they are trying to make sense of the past by tying it to the present situation, that of an independent nation state. We saw how Osmonov portrayed the Tsarist and Soviet "other" as both a repressive and a modernizing colonizer that brought negative and positive changes to the way of life of the Kyrgyz. As a result, an outright contradiction intruded to the discursive interpretation of the Soviet past, with only one fixed meaning: Kyrgyzstan should always have been on a trajectory toward the present independent statehood and no one consistently supported that except the heroic Kyrgyz themselves.32

Soviet Modernization vs. Post-Soviet De-Modernization

Narratives about the late Soviet period and the contemporary situation are contradictory, too. Osmonov argued, for instance, that the Soviet Union, because of "the shortcomings of the socialist way of life," brought many social and moral problems for the Kyrgyz.

> However, life itself was proving that the main problems of our society appeared in the depths of the "impeccable" socialist system and as a result of mistakes, unsolved problems, distortion of socialist economy principles and distributive justice, and conniving attitude to breaking laws.33

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31 Myrzakmatova, Osmonov, and Moldokasymov, *Kratkaia istoriia Kyrgyzstana*, 184–185. Emphasis in the original.

32 For other examples supporting this argument, see Umetbaeva, "Official Rhetoric and Individual Perceptions of the Soviet Past," 80–81.

33 Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 191–192.

According to the textbook, the most acute and widespread negative manifestation of the socialist system, on both the all-Union and republican levels, was alcoholism, which brought immoral practices for the Kyrgyz. According to Osmonov, the number of alcoholics in Kyrgyzstan was two times higher than in other Central Asian republics. As a result, "for a significant part of Kyrgyzstan's population, consumption of enormous amounts of alcohol in family or public events or even at funerals became a habit" and that "it became normal that people of different ages and generations were drinking alcohol together."34 The author thus implies that these immoral Soviet practices significantly harmed the traditional morality of the Kyrgyz people. The statement about people of different ages and generations drinking together also suggests that Soviet- borne alcohol destroyed the centuries-old tradition of age hierarchy and respect for elders in Kyrgyz society. Thus, I argue, one can understand from these arguments that if not for the Soviet system, Kyrgyz traditions would haveprotected the population from these problems.

Osmonov later addresses different aspects of Soviet socialist modernization and Kyrgyz culture in the context of the post-Soviet present. After discussing negative developments of the perestroika years, thus justifying the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of sovereign Kyrgyzstan, the author explores the difficulties, advantages, and disadvantages of the post-Soviet situation. In particular, he mentions the trend of post-Soviet "de-modernization": the spiritual exhaustion resulting from the transition period has brought about a resurgence of old, reactionary traditions and customs dating back to the worst periods of feudalism and the *bai-manaps* (the ruling elite of pre-socialist Kyrgyzstan).35 Indeed, the term *bai-manap* has acquired a new, negative meaning: someone who is uneducated, oppressive, and rides roughshod over the dignity and human rights of others. For example, Osmonov notes that people started to spend large sums of money on lavish weddings, christenings, and funerals, creating a Kyrgyz version of "keeping up with the Joneses." Consumption of alcohol has considerably increased as a way of expressing condolences at funerals. Osmonov blamed older men (*aksakals*) for their central role in these negative developments, specifically government officials invited as guests of honor, who lend their not-so-tacit approval to flagrant overspending in a country where many live below the poverty line. Moral decay is also blamed on the *nouveaux riches*, people who benefited from the first privatization wave of 1992–1995 or who earn their money in the shadow economy.36

34 Ibid., 192.

35 Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 269–270.

36 Ibid.

This argument—Soviet modernization versus post-Soviet de-modernization—implies that Kyrgyz feudal traditions are responsible for the current moral decay and de-modernization of society, but also that the collapse of the Soviet Union led to their revival. In sum, there are ambivalent, nuanced, and contradictory discourses about the Soviet past in Kyrgyz history textbooks. This goes beyond the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, who argue that official discourses seek to become hegemonic and that when it eventually happens, it will only be temporary and ambivalent.37

Broader socioeconomic, political, and educational contexts contribute to such ambivalences. The fact that the Kyrgyz predominantly practiced a nomadic way of life before 1917 makes textbook authors and most of the Kyrgyz people praise the Soviet Union's modernization projects. Textbook authors support this theory of modernization when, for example, evaluating the Soviet policy of settling the nomadic Kyrgyz.38 Moreover, Kyrgyzstan has the poorest economy, least stable government, and weakest state structure39 in Central Asia. Therefore, it is difficult for almost anyone in the country to say that the current system in Kyrgyzstan—an independent, democratic nation-state with a market economy—is better than the Soviet system. Last but not least, the role of the Soviet Union in Central Asia, and in Kyrgyzstan particularly, was not one dimensional. It varied according to the times, places, and issues. According to Cummings,

> We cannot speak of one period of Soviet rule, one region of Soviet rule, or even of uniform policies and effects across Soviet time and space, so we need to detail those differences and isolate Central Asia for our purposes. Perhaps, then, Soviet Central Asia experienced a mix of socio-political modernization, economic imperialism and culturalsemi-colonization.40

Thus, I argue, the ambivalences about the Soviet Union visible in history text- books reflect the contradictory attitudes toward the actual historical events and processes that the country faced in the twentieth century.

37 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a RadicalDemocratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

38 Umetbaeva, "Official Rhetoric and Individual Perceptions of the Soviet Past," 81–82.

39 In this context, "weak state capacity" refers to the limited ability of the state to govern andprovide order.

40 Sally N. Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 47.

History Teachers, Subjectivity, and Discursive Practices

Like the textbooks they use in their classes, history teachers have their own narratives about the Soviet past.41 Sometimes, they accept the textbook framing; but they may also challenge, negotiate, criticize, reject the official line, or intro- duce "internal displacements" to the official discourse.42 Their accounts of Soviet socialism demonstrate the hegemony and internalization of the official narrative, however, the manifestations of this hegemonic discourse in their discursive practices vary depending on their life trajectory, professional self- understanding, and ethnicity. The interviewed teachers took up "positioning politics" during their interview with the author43 and began the discussion by repeating the discourse they perceive to be required for their professional position. Yet they rapidly display more personalized interpretations about the Soviet Union when they try to make sense of themselves in the Soviet past and as citizens of current Kyrgyzstan. Below, I show differences in internalization, first, in the narratives of teachers with a downwardly social status, and then in the discursive practices of Russian-speaking teachers versus Kyrgyz-speaking ones.

Almost all history teachers presented themselves as being a loyal agent of the independent state of Kyrgyzstan. To them, loyalty means supporting efforts to teach the official history of Kyrgyzstan. As Janarbek,44 a male Kyrgyz teacher, put it, "We are assistants of the president." Almost all of them believe that they are responsible for ensuring the good functioning of the state by nurturing patriots and instilling good morals to prevent the wide-scale looting that occurred during the so-called revolutions of 2005 and 2010. Lena, a Russian teacher in Bishkek, mentioned that in her lessons she tries to engage her pupils by stressing the heroic acts of the Kyrgyz historical figures depicted in the textbooks.45 Aleksandr, a Russian teacher in Bishkek, said that Askar Akaev's time was better than Kurmanbek Bakiev's in terms of state-orchestrated events dedicated to Kyrgyz history.

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41 Umetbaeva, "Official Rhetoric and Individual Perceptions of the Soviet Past," 83–92.

42 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), esp. 28.

43 My use of the term "positioning politics" is based on the definition of "positioning," which is used to explain the processes of how subjects relate to official discourses. Marianne Jorgensen and Louse Philips define it as follows: "Positioning is viewed as an integral part of the processes by which people construct accounts of themselves in interaction with others. These processes are understood as processes of negotiation as people actively take up positions within different, and sometimes competing, discourses." Marianne Jorgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage, 2002), 110.

44 Interview with Janarbek (1961), March 9, 2009.

45 Interview with Lena (1961), June 25, 2010.

For some teachers, being a loyal state agent and a professional also means being a critically minded teacher, one who presents or acknowledges both the positive and negative aspects of the Soviet past. For example, Lena stated that the history of Kyrgyzstan should be taught to pupils "more objectively, presenting both advantages and disadvantages, not for the interests of one nation but from the point of view of objective truth." She described post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks as "intolerant" because they depict Russians in the Tsarist period as killers of the Kyrgyz, and the Soviet Union as oppressive. The teachers (mainly urban) who presented themselves as having mastered critical skills methodology reported teaching through discussions, and interactive methods, allowing pupils to express their point of view and not imposing their own, and using materials other than the textbooks (for example, newspapers, discussions from tv programs, Internet sources, etc.). They described their relations with their pupils as democratic, friendly, and open.

History teachers' perceptions of the Soviet past can be categorized in two main narratives, one that describes the USSR as an immoral, colonial, or totalitarian and economically inefficient state, the other as a regime providing moral order, a modernizing state, and an orderly and benign empire. The next section examines how images of the Soviet Union oscillate between the two contradictory visions, and it is followed by a discussion of how the ethnicity of the teachers influenced their particular relationship to the textbook discourses.

Professional Self-Understanding and Life-Trajectories

When asked to describe Soviet socialism, the history teachers often responded: "a totalitarian system," "one-party rule," "economically inefficient," "people were lazy due to the absence of work incentive," "colonial rule, which did not allow knowing one's own nation's history," or "historical truth was hidden during the Soviet times." However, two male Kyrgyz teachers wished that the Soviet Union had followed the Chinese path of more rapid economic reforms,[46] and that the former Soviet republics had stayed together with the same ideology, currency, and open borders.[47] That, in turn, would have protected independent Kyrgyzstan from the humiliation experienced due to contact with the Western world, downward social mobility, and the new national borders.

Most of the teachers described the Soviet Union as a powerful, stable, and respected state with strict order and a well-developed welfare system—all positive characteristics that are not present in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. Teachers thus tend to contextualize themselves as having been deprived of the

46 Interview with Nurbek (1958), May 23, 2010.

47 Interview with Janarbek (1961), March 9, 2009.

high social status and pride that came with being a citizen of one of the greatest countries in the world. Instead, they feel humiliated and undervalued. For example, Nurbek,a male Kyrgyz historian, reported a loss of symbolic capital in relation to his Western counterparts. He commented negatively on having a passport from an "underdeveloped country" that is dependent on foreign help and expertise. Notably, Nurbek did not attribute his perceived inferior professional position to the Soviet system, but see it as the result of becoming a citizen of a small, poor country like Kyrgyzstan.

Many teachers struggled to present themselves as critically minded when discussing the Soviet past during their interviews. They variously explained that critical approaches were prohibited during the Soviet era, or they were afraid of being punished for criticizing the system; some women said that they kept quiet because of their gender identity and were afraid of being involved in anti-Soviet activities; many mentioned the lack of alternative sources of information; the fact they were educated and raised to trust the system; or simply because they genuinely believed in the Soviet ideology. Vera, among others, said that people should not criticize the Soviet Union retrospectively: "We should not diminish lives of our parents, grandparents, sisters and ourselves, and therefore why would we tell bad sides of socialism?" In order to prove that the present is not better than the socialist past, teachers referred to current problems and shortages: "Although we have a lot of natural resources we are still poor"; "Life has not become better after the breakup of the Soviet Union"; "[Kyrgyzstan] is not united as it was in the Soviet Union […]. The clan system and tribalism did not exist in the Soviet Union and we are back to the sixteenth century"; "There is no discipline and order"; "There is no strong ideology andpatriotism."

Some were more critical toward the current education system and the global political order. For instance, Kanymgul,48 a Kyrgyz teacher from a rural part of Issyk-Kul region, complained that at her current school the budget is not administered transparently by the school director, there is no control over the quality of education, and the education process is irresponsibly managed. But when she confronted the school administration, such by criticizing the school director for shirking her teaching duties, she experienced pressure from the administration as well as from other colleagues at school to be quiet. Kanymgul commented that sometimes she thinks that it would be easier to still live in a Soviet system. According to her, the situation was better under Akaev than Bakiev because there was more openness and freedom in the country:

48 Interview with Kanymgul (1962), December 28, 2009.

> Nowadays we are in the same path as in the 1930s because you should not criticize loudly. When the *akim* [mayor] comes to a meeting and I want to tell my opinion they forbid it and say – "no, you may not." And when the governor [of region] visits they notify us immediately – "Be careful. Just say something or say nothing. Just keep silence, etc." These all demonstrate that we are going to the totalitarian regime.

Teachers also discussed whether the Soviet Union was a hierarchical or an egalitarian order. Almost all agreed that Soviet elites had privileged access to goods, services, and facilities that most of the ordinary citizens could not obtain. Thus, when citing the negative sides of Soviet socialism, they mentioned social and economic inequality. However, some of the interviewed teachers rejected attempts to portray the Soviet Union as a hierarchical society by saying, "It was much less hierarchical than it is now and the state anyway would control the Soviet elites unlike nowadays." They asserted that there is currently a much larger gap between the lives of the elites and the ordinary people.

Many teachers experienced acute feelings of lost when they had to discuss the post-Soviet education world. Inna, a Russian teacher in a rural part of Kyrgyzstan, said new interactive methods of teaching do not make sense. According to her, pupils are not ready to address history with a critical eye because they face too many social and economic issues in their everyday life, such as the shortage of textbooks or the need to help their parents in the familybusiness, at the expense of their school time.

The new pedagogical criteria introduced by Western organizations[49] have also created tensions, dilemmas, and difficulties for some teachers. This comes at a time when the country's economic problems have negatively affected the public secondary education system as a result of "the loss of school operating funds from state budgets" and because "wages, salaries, building infrastructure, curricular materials and informational technologies all suffered dramatically during the 1990s."[50] According to De Young, wages for teachers as well as "buildings, textbooks, learning materials and utilities typically were not provided by the governments until quite recently."[51] For example, when

49 The interviewed teachers mentioned USAID programs that offered courses and trainings on new methods of teaching. Larisa (1956), an ethnic Russian teacher, mentioned that she was introduced to critical skills methods by women who taught critical skills at the American University in Central Asia.

50 Deyoung, "Problems and Trends in Education in Central Asia since 1990," 501.

51 Ibid.

Svetlana, a Russian teacher in a rural area, asked her pupils' parents to donate money to purchase extra materials, they criticized her so much that she abandoned her new lesson plans.

In rural regions, many teachers cannot afford to purchase additional materials needed for interactive lessons.52 Some need to work several jobs to augment their small teaching wages and have no time for professional development. In one example of extreme downward social mobility, Janarbek reported having to spend his own money to buy a textbook for himself, then having to borrow money from one of his students just to buy bread. This loss of social status is reinforced by the feeling of having lost the respect of his students and their parents. "How can I say that this life is better than it was in the Soviet times?" he asked rhetorically. Yet in terms of professional positioning, Janarbek portrayed himself as Kyrgyz nationalist teacher and the Soviet Union as colonial and oppressive power.53 Declining social status has thus led teachers to present the Soviet Union positively compared to the current situation.

Ethnicity and Soviet Colonial Rule

The ethnicity of teachers also influences how they interpret the textbook dis- course on the Soviet past. Ethnic Russian and Ukrainian teachers often share with their pupils their own interpretations of the tragic events of 1916, Tsarist colonial policy, and the role of the Soviet Union in the development of Kyrgyzstan. Since both positive and negative images of the Soviet Union coexist in the his- tory textbooks, teachers can and do creatively interpret textbook discussions when they feel uncomfortable with them. Moreover, the non-Kyrgyz teachers complain about the low quality of the new Russian-language textbooks and focus more on teaching world history and a course of citizenship education called "People and Society."54

Contrary to the curriculum in Ukraine, or Georgia,55 in Kyrgyzstan the Great Patriotic War is still presented in a very Soviet manner in history

52 For example, Alan J. De Young, "The Erosion of *Vospitanie* (social upbringing) in Post- Soviet Kyrgyzstan: Voices from the Schools," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 40 (Spring 2007), 239–256.

53 More on this, see Umetbaeva, "Official Rhetoric and Individual Perceptions of the Soviet Past," 84–85.

54 In Russian this course is called Chelovek i Obshestvo. Literally it is translated into English as "Person and Society." In this course school children learn such concepts as democracy, civil society, humans rights, and rule of law.

55 My knowledge on this issue in these countries is based on the observation of representa- tions of May 9th in the media, mainly tv news programs.

textbooks, which pleases the teachers, especially the Russian-speakers. But most of them complained that only two hours are allocated for teaching this critical period of national history, and they usually dedicate additional hours to World War II, at the expense of other themes. Teachers can thus not only negotiate the contents, but also adjust the amount of hours devoted to specific topics according to their own preferences and convictions.

The Kyrgyz-speaking teachers also negotiate their interpretation of the text- books. Like non-ethnic Kyrgyz teachers, none of the ethnic Kyrgyz interviewees supported the view of the 1916 events as genocide of the Kyrgyz by Russians. Some pointed out the positive role of Russians and the Soviet Union for development and educating the Kyrgyz and criticized textbooks for exaggerating the degree of ancientness and greatness of the Kyrgyz nation. As Fatima, a Kyrgyz teacher from a village in Issyk-Kul, put it, "I don't know where the Kyrgyz historians take this information. … I think they have rich fantasy." Their own narratives emphasize the progressive role of the Soviet regime: "the Soviet Union civilized us from being 'dark' (*temnyi/karangy*) and gave us education"; "the Soviet Union probably was a colonial power, but in other parts of the Union"; "if not for the Soviet Union we would have been colonized by colonial empires." Gulmira, another female rural Kyrgyz teacher, asserted that no one complained when the history of Kyrgyzstan was not taught during the Soviet era, and she saw no reason why this should have bothered her or anyone else. Instead, she insisted that everyone was content with how history was taught in the past and that actually the Kyrgyz should be thankful to Russians for bringing education and civilization. She stated flatly that Russians did not do anything bad to the Kyrgyz and that she adheres to the opinion that Kyrgyzstanbecame a part of Russia voluntarily.

Conclusion

Both the history textbook authors and the history teachers agreed on the hegemony of the discourses of the Kyrgyz nation-state, its independence, and its modernization. However, a closer examination of the manifestations of those hegemonic discourses in the discursive practices of history teachers reveals that they are ambivalent and contradictory. The teachers appropriate variations of the hegemonic discourse based on their life-trajectory, professional self-perception, and ethnicity. Most of the teachers mutate, negotiate, or criticize the official state discourse about the Soviet past, and they find ways to creatively relay what is valuable and meaningful to them personally within the broader ideo- logical context. Overall, they reject anti-Russian, anti-Tsarist, and anti-Soviet

official narratives and embrace an opposing discourse about the Soviet Union and Russians as modernizers. While similar degrees of reframing the officially produced state narrative took place in the late Soviet period, as Aleksei Yurchak analyzed,56 in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan this re-appropriation occurs more openly, and teachers do not hide having personal opinions that contradict the state- backed historiography. The gap is particularly visible among ethnic Kyrgyz teachers, who often support the government view that Kyrgyzstan must reintegrate with Russia, as opposed to the official celebration of independence as the achievement of the Kyrgyz nation and its century-long fight for freedom.

56 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More.*