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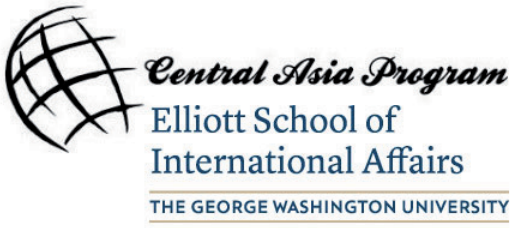

The Role and Place of Oral History in Central Asian Studies[1]

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Key Points

- Any impartial and informed public evaluation of the past, in particular the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, has, for various reasons, always been a complicated issue in Central Asia.
- There is a long tradition of history construction in Central Asia, and political pressures and official ideology have always had a decisive say in how history is interpreted.
- These "official" descriptions of the past have sometimes confirmed, but more often contradicted, the interpretations of the past as viewed through the everyday experiences of ordinary people.
- Public perceptions of history, in contrast to the ideologies and political doctrines of the time, are primarily shaped by and related to people's everyday needs, experiences, identification, and mentality.
- Any discussion of how state policies and traumatic experiences of the past have influenced the formation of current political systems in Central Asia, those purely based on "official" historical accounts and "master narratives" without oral recollections by individuals, are incomplete and often inadequate.

Recollecting the Soviet past

Throughout history, Central Asian states have experienced a number of historical changes that have challenged their traditional societies and lifestyles. The most significant challenges occurred as a result of the revolutions of 1917 in Russia, the incorporation of the region into the Soviet Union, and its subsequent independence as a consequence of the collapse of the USSR. However, any impartial and informed public evaluation of the past, in particular the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, has, for various reasons, always been a complicated issue in Central Asia.

Two of the most important and determining factors shaping public perception and opinion regarding the present and the past are the official historical discourse and the everyday experiences as lived by the population. Official historical discourses can take many forms and are very often exemplified in state historiographies, which invariably characterize the "politically correct" determinations of "good" and "bad" events of the past. There is a long tradition of history construction in Central Asia, and political pressures and official ideology have always had a decisive say in how history is interpreted. Such an approach to constructing history was practiced both in the Soviet period, with the aim of embellishing the realities of the Socialist society (well documented in the Communist-era archives), and in the post-Soviet period by criticizing the Soviet past and praising post-Soviet society-building (demonstrated by current historical literature in Central Asia).

These "official" descriptions of the past have sometimes confirmed, but more often contradicted, the interpretations of the past as viewed through the everyday experiences of ordinary people. This contradiction in depicting history is one of the intellectual dilemmas in Central Asian studies today.

One effort to utilize the tools of oral history studies, jointly conducted by the author of this essay together with colleagues from Tsukuba and Maltepe Universities, is a project which collects, records, and interprets the views of the public regarding their experiences during the period of the Soviet Union and their memories of the Soviet past in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Throughout these interviews with elderly or senior citizens, this enquiry aimed to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between the government-endorsed history of the Soviet era and people's private lives and beliefs. In doing so, the study attempts to contribute to academic knowledge concerning how people remember their Soviet past and their memories of experiences during that time. It also leads to a better understanding of how these memories relate to the Soviet and post-Soviet official descriptions of Soviet life. In addition, the study represents an attempt to examine the transformation of present-day Central Asia from the perspective of personal memories. In more specific terms, it emphasizes that people in Central Asia reconcile their Soviet past to a great extent through a three-fold process of recollecting their everyday experiences, reflecting on their past from the perspective of their post-Soviet present, and then re-imagining it. These three elements influence memories and lead to selectivity in memory construction. This process also highlights the aspects of the Soviet era people choose to recall in positive and negative terms.

The contradictions between "official" narratives and public perceptions are one of the intellectual dilemmas in Central Asian studies today

The specific focus of this study was very broad and covered, through its questions, the everyday experiences of people throughout the Soviet era. However, the most interesting responses elicited tended to focus on the periods corresponding to the respondents' most "productive" years. Because the target group of the study consisted entirely of senior citizens in their 60s and 70s, they often tended to reflect on everyday experiences during their youth and later years, from around the 1950s

onward. In addition, in terms of topics, the most inclusive responses dealt with certain traumatic Soviet experiences, relations with the state, issues of linguistic, religious, and ethnic policies, and people's narratives with respect to their nostalgic recollections. The choice of the everyday life experiences of people as the main focus of this study is considered to present a relatively apolitical picture of societal life at that time, one which has been largely ignored in Soviet and post-Soviet studies. In addition, the information provided by those interviewed in the older age group represents unique data, which, if not collected and recorded now, could be lost forever due to the passing of the generation which best remembers the social environment of the Soviet period.[2] The loss of such data would result in false interpretations, assumptions, and speculation without the opportunity for verification as to the reality of everyday lives.[3]

The public view of history in post-Soviet Central Asia and particularly Uzbekistan often falls between Soviet historiographies advocating the achievements of the Soviet past, as well as post-Soviet historical discourses rejecting the Soviet past

Recollecting the past

To facilitate an open and interviewee-friendly environment, the project used the following four techniques during the conducting of interviews.

First, special attention was paid to cultural flexibility and appropriate wording of the questions. Given the choice of structured (with strictly defined questions), semi-structured, and open-ended options for formulating questions, the study opted to use the semi-structured method, due to its better applicability to the realities of the region. Using structured interviews in Central Asia often results in short, non-inclusive, non-comprehensive answers, because of the lack of rapport between the interviewee and interviewer. Furthermore, using an open-ended interview might also have the potential risk of developing into an extensive exchange of opinions and develop in a direction that is unrelated to or far removed from the topic of everyday life experiences of Soviet times. Therefore, the semi-structured interview was used, which included clearly defined questions and some sub-questions to clarify the meaning of the main questions, with interviewees given the opportunity to develop their stories, as long as they did not depart from the main topic of the interview.

Second, interviewers attempted to establish a rapport with the interviewees by first discussing matters unrelated to the project topics, such as the general well-being of those being interviewed and the weather. In addition to establishing trust between the interviewers and interviewee, a long introduction is of deep cultural significance in Central Asia, where people are used to engaging in relatively long introductory conversations before proceeding to the issue at hand. This type of discussion, within the course of this project and daily life in general in Central Asia, develops a basis for smoother conversation and offers the chance for interviewees to become familiar with the other person and form their own attitudes towards them.

Third, following the initial entering into conversation, the interview proceeded with questions concerning topics related to everyday life experiences during the Soviet era. To facilitate an open discussion, the project employed an approach in which, during the course of the interview, interviewees' assumptions were critically assessed, or even challenged on several occasions, in order to provoke them into offering a deeper insight regarding how they came to the assumptions and conclusions

they were presenting. However, care was taken not to radically challenge the flow of the talk or discourage the interviewee from stating his or her assumptions.

Fourth, project members attempted to make the process of interviewing more "participatory" for both the interviewee and interviewer by not simply listening to the memories recalled by interviewees, but also by having the family members of interviewees and close neighbors listen and sometimes join in with their own comments, which further encouraged the process of remembering and forced interviewees to use more detailed recollections of the past to support their own logic. This was particularly the case with older generations of interviewees, who, at times, seemed to have problems understanding the essence of questions or remembering the periods in which certain events took place.

Narrating the memory

Methodologically, this project used critical discourse analysis to answer the above questions and achieve its stated task. The video/audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed. These texts/interviews were then treated as elements mediating social events that occurred during Soviet times. In the process of interviews, the topics which respondents touched upon the most related to the analysis of various actors, such as the Communist Party, the Soviet government, religious institutions, local communities and respondents, and their social roles. In discussing these topics, this study joins other studies that analyze Soviet-era social actors using techniques "to include or exclude them in presenting events; assign them an active or passive role; personalize or impersonalize them; name or only classify them; [and] refer to them specifically or generically."[4]

This study clearly reaches a few conclusions based on public recollections of Soviet times. The first conclusion is related to patterns of history construction and the role of the public in this process. This study argues that the public view of history in post-Soviet Central Asia and particularly Uzbekistan often falls between Soviet historiographies advocating the achievements of the Soviet past, as well as post-Soviet historical discourses rejecting the Soviet past. Public perceptions of history, in contrast to the ideologies and political doctrines of the time, are primarily shaped by and related to people's everyday needs, experiences, identification, and mentality. As such they often reflect not only the perceptions of people regarding their past, but also their perceptions regarding their present and imagined future.[5]

Public memories alone cannot provide a full and impartial picture of public responses to the Stalinist era policies regarding collectivization, political participation, religion, and ethnicity

Second, recollections of traumatic experiences associated with the Soviet past are often placed within the dichotomy of depicting Soviet experiences. For instance, the political violence and state policies of the Stalinist era (such as collectivization and the deportation of ethnic groups) can serve as an appropriate example of the differences between the historical discourses of Soviet and post-Soviet times. Whereas Soviet historiography describes the events of collectivization and displacement of people as a state policy, one which was painful yet unavoidable and necessary for the development of the country, the post-Soviet discourse on these issues suggests that these were primarily policies of colonization and, in some cases, involved the genocide of Central Asian peasantry and intelligentsia in order to control these republics.

However, these polar opposite perspectives do not always accurately reflect how ordinary citizens regarded these issues at that time. As this study argues, these public memories alone cannot provide a full and impartial picture of public

responses to the Stalinist era policies regarding collectivization, political participation, religion, and ethnicity.[6] Rather they represent "another venue of memory and identity transmission … operated simultaneously and competitively with history,"[7] which may need to be contrasted and counterchecked against archival data and other sources. In this sense, any discussion of how state policies and traumatic experiences of the past have influenced the formation of current political systems in Central Asia, those purely based on "official" historical accounts and "master narratives" without oral recollections by individuals, are incomplete and often inadequate. In terms of public experiences, this article emphasizes that the recollections of individuals concerning traumatic experiences, such as Stalinist repression, often reflect the positions of the narrators and their (in)ability to adapt to the conditions in which they were placed during those years. Different social/ethnic/educational/religious/ideological backgrounds greatly influence the selectivity of these recollections and explain why certain individuals recollect their Soviet experiences with a sense of rejection, while others relate to it with a sense of nostalgia.

Third, in a related manner, although the concept of nostalgia in post-Soviet countries is frequently explained solely by the economic hardships and social pressures of the post-Soviet period, this study argues that such descriptions do not accurately explain this phenomenon. Economic and social explanations for the nostalgia of respondents are obvious. However, such explanations are not the only ones, and there are a number of other nostalgia-inducing factors that are rarely discussed in the literature on this subject. From the narratives of senior citizens in Uzbekistan presented in this study, one can conclude that many nostalgic views of the past reflect the respondents' attitudes both to their adaptability to the Soviet realities and also to various aspects of their present lives. In such comparisons, Soviet modernization, freedom of mobility, justice and order, inter-ethnic accords, and social welfare are emphasized as markers that predetermine the respondents' nostalgia. In this sense, the respondents do not appear to long for the Soviet past per se. Instead, the respondents are nostalgic about the feelings of security and hope that they experienced during that era. From the perspective of the respondents' post-Soviet lives, they long to experience such feelings of security and hope again.

Different social/ethnic/educational/religious/ideological backgrounds explain why certain individuals recollect their Soviet experiences with a sense of rejection, while others relate to it with a sense of nostalgia

Fourth, in terms of specific issues such as ethnicity, this study attempts to contribute to the debate about how people in Central Asia recall Soviet ethnic policies and their vision of how these policies have shaped the identities of their peers and contemporaries. These narratives demonstrate that people do not explain Soviet ethnic policies simply through the "modernization" or "victimization" dichotomy, but locate their experiences in between these discourses. Their recollections again highlight the pragmatic flexibility of the public's adaptive strategies to Soviet ethnic policies.

This paper also argues that Soviet ethnic policy produced complicated hybrids of identities and multiple social strata. Among those who succeeded in adapting to Soviet realities, a new group emerged, known as Russi "assimilado" (Russian-speaking Sovietophiles). However, in everyday life, relations between the assimilados and their "indigenous" or "natives"" countrymen are reported to have been complicated, with clear divisions between these two groups and separate social spaces for each of these strata.[8]

Fifth, the hybridity produced as a result of Soviet experiences can be traced not only to ethnic self-identification but also to the attitude of the public towards Soviet and post-Soviet religiosity.

Such hybridity of discourse towards religion is demonstrated by the dual meanings of evaluating Soviet religious policies in the memories of those who were subjected to those policies. Among the many policies implemented during the Soviet era, it was religious policies that were the most difficult for the general public to accept. The Soviet administration promoted the rejection of religion as an official policy and utilized all means and opportunities to criticize religion and promote secular education. Many religious institutions (mosques and churches) were closed, and the buildings were converted to warehouses or other facilities, or just simply torn down.

However, there were other policies which respondents remember as initially shocking in terms of the impact on indigenous Central Asian society, but which were eventually accepted as positive because they assisted in the process of modernization. These policies are exemplified by the *Hujum* (unveiling) campaign to institutionalize safeguards against underage and forced marriage, the introduction of secular education, and the promotion of the wider integration of non-religious Soviet men and women into public life.

An analysis of the manner in which people have come to terms with their past and their recollections of anti-religious campaigns helps us to understand how life under Soviet rule not only resulted in changes in lifestyles, but also redrew the "boundaries" of "proper"/"modernized" religious life and of what is now considered to be the religious remnants of the past.

Finally, this study reflects on the recollections related to the formation of local identity and its continuity and change, by focusing on the local community of the *mahalla*. The primary message of this part of the study is that the community has historically represented one of only a few effective traditional structures that can unite representatives of various ethnic and religious groups through the creation of a common identity based on shared residence.[9] However, throughout the history of these communities, political authorities have often attempted to manipulate these institutions so as to enhance the state's legitimacy. This type of manipulation has challenged the essential nature of residents' attachment to their communities and called the authority and legitimacy of the structures of the *mahalla* into question.[10] Moreover, this manipulation has resulted in a new and pragmatic two-level mindset among the affected populace. In particular, residents increasingly exhibit ritualistic devotion to public interests (which are allegedly pursued by *mahallas*); however, particularly in the post-Soviet environment, these residents tend to pursue their private interests too, disregarding the interests of other members of their communities.

Endnotes

1. This article is part of a book project on recollections of the Soviet past in Central Asia. An edited volume in Japanese has already been published: *Soviet Union Remembered: Everyday Life Experiences of Socialist Era in Central Asia* (*Kiokuno Nakano Soren: Chyuou Ajia no Hitobito ga Ikita Shyakaisyugi Jidai*), (Tokyo: Maruzen/Tsukuba University Press, 2010)
2. For an analysis of life-history as a field of enquiry, see W. Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002): 179-197.
3. For an approach similar to that of this study, see S.A. Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," *American Historical Review* 102, no.5 (1997): 1372-1385.
4. M. Vanhala-Aniszewski, and L. Siilin, "The Representation of Michail Gorbachev in the Twenty-first Century Russian Media," *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no. 2 (2013): 221-243, here 223.
5. For details see T. Dadabaev, "Power, Social Life, and Public Memory in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan," *Inner Asia* 12, no. 1 (2010): 25-48.
6. For details, see T. Dadabaev, "Trauma and Public Memory in Central Asia: Public Responses to Political Violence of the State Policies in Stalinist Era in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan," *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies* 3, no. 1 (2009): 108-138.
7. Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," 1372.

8. See T. Dadabaev, "Recollections of Emerging Hybrid Ethnic Identities in Soviet Central Asia: The case of Uzbekistan," *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. (2013): 1026-1048.
9. See T. Dadabaev, "Between the State and Society: Position of mahallas in Uzbekistan," in A. Segupta, S. Chatterjee, and S. Bhatacharya, eds, *Eurasia Twenty Years After* (Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2012), 153-171.
10. See T. Dadabaev, "Community Life, Memory and a Changing Nature of Mahalla Identity in Uzbekistan," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2013):181-196.