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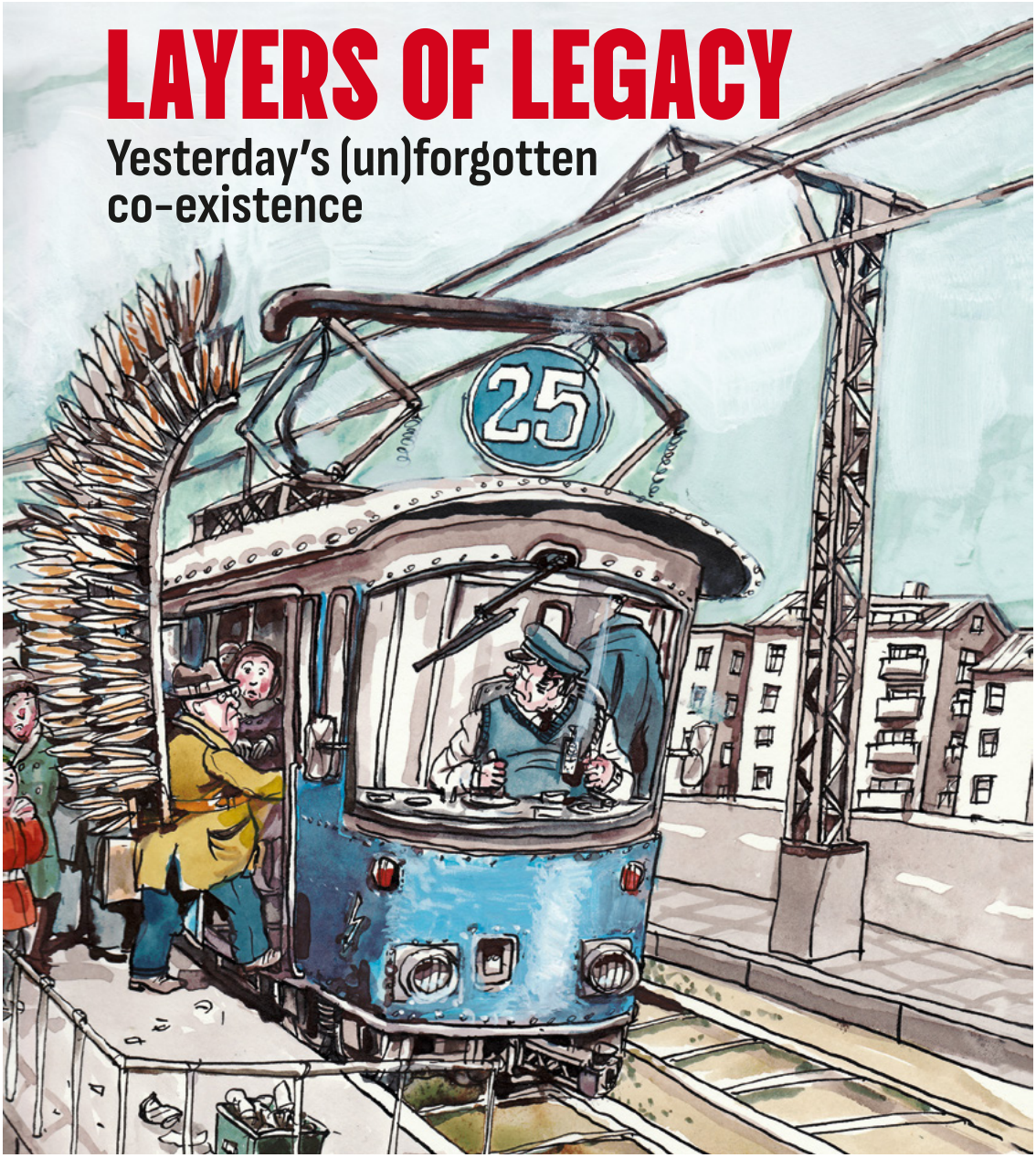
LAYERS OF LEGACY

Yesterday's (un)forgotten co-existence



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The controversy about Tajikistan's history textbooks

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Among its Central Asian neighbours, Tajikistan's history textbooks still most closely resemble official accounts from the Soviet era. They stress the evils of the Russian Empire's expansion to the region. At the same time, they also remain fairly positive about Tajikistan's Soviet experience, underlining the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic's contribution to the Soviet state. Perhaps as a result, they have been caught in Russia's crosshairs.

School textbooks are telling examples of official interpretations of history. They exemplify the narratives that are taught to children as part of their civic socialization controlled by governments. In countries that gained independence after the Soviet collapse, the shifts in historical narratives have been intrinsically linked to the reimagining of these countries' Soviet past by attributing them with new meanings through the prism of post-Soviet nation-building processes. With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the debates about history textbooks gained a new momentum, and a new meaning. They became part of epistemic decolonization not only from the Soviet Union, but also from contemporary Russia that has monopolized Soviet heritage – presenting it as Russian, and not as common to all states that participated in its making.

Unintended controversy

In Central Asia, a serious bone of contention for Russia concerns the changing interpretations of the Russian expansion to the region in the second part of the 19th century. This consequently affects discussion surrounding the Soviet state's establishment following the Bolshevik revolution. In particular, Kazakh and Uzbek historians and political scientists increasingly describe these processes as colonial expansion and point to genocidal processes against the local population as a way of exercising control and ensuring subordination. In turn, a growing number of Russian historians and politicians insist that this is fake history and simply amounts to teaching Russophobia to new generations. To prove their argument, they point to what they see as the economic and cultural backwardness of Central Asia in the 19th century, as well as the benevolent impact of the Russian Empire on local communities – as if without realizing that this narrative per se reveals the colonial mindset characterizing, for instance, European colonial powers' attitudes towards Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Unlike its neighbours, in Tajikistan the decolonization debate has so far been rather muted, with no major announcements and official repositioning on the local impact of the Russian Empire and later Soviet rule. To some extent, this careful approach is typical for the country's government. As their modus operandi since the end of the civil war in 1997, Tajik decision makers have been avoiding controversies in international politics. Moreover, given its dependence on Russia, which is the destination for about a million Tajik labour migrants, the authorities have particularly avoided provoking Russia. But the pro-Soviet narratives in Tajik textbooks are not only an outcome of the country's fragile relations with Russia.

Unlike its neighbours, the Russian and Soviet decolonization debate in Tajikistan has so far been rather muted.

The recent controversy concerning Tajik history textbooks is rather paradoxical. With relatively minor changes, over 34 years of its independence Tajikistan has largely maintained the Soviet-era anti-Russian Empire and pro-Soviet narrative in its textbooks. However, due to Russia's recent reinterpretation of its history and glorification of the Russian Empire, Tajikistan, like its more actively decolonizing neighbours, has fallen victim to an attack by Russian politicians. In October 2024, a political controversy erupted on Telegram after a provocative post was published by the Russian State Duma Deputy Mikhail Matveev. Matveev is a member of the Communist Party of Russia and, remarkably, one of the country's most vocal anti-migrant politicians. In the previous months, he proposed a bill to deprive natural-

ized Central Asian labour migrants and their families of Russian citizenship for evading military service in Ukraine. He also called for the establishment of separate "Tajik battalions" as part of the Russian army fighting in Ukraine.

Provocative test

This time, in his Telegram post, Matveev called the Tajik history curriculum "anti-Russian propaganda". This is because, as he wrote, in Tajik textbooks the Russian Empire's expansion to the territory of modern-day Tajikistan is described as an "invasion", "occupation" and "colonization". To further bolster the accusation that Tajikistan's policies are Russophobic, he referred to what he described as the "genocide" of ethnic Russians in Tajikistan during the civil war in the 1990s.

Even if Matveev's announcement came from a personal social media channel, it should not be seen as such. In contemporary Russia, the boundaries between governmental and private statements are blurred. Often, politicians and prominent TV personalities make provocative statements about Central Asia in their own name. It is important to remember that the State Duma could not present them as the official position because they are too controversial. In this way, the officials send shockwaves that exert constant pressure and simultaneously test the reactions of neighbours, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in Russia's international relations with Central Asia. This has been the case, for example, with the former President and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who in 2022 questioned the sovereignty of Kazakhstan on social media, calling it an "artificial state" and claiming some of its territories as "Russian territories". In that case, the provocation did not end well. In the face of negative reactions from Kazakhstan, the post was later deleted, and Medvedev claimed that his account was hacked.

Surprisingly, Tajikistan, in contrast to its usual calm and reserved approach aimed at avoiding disputes, especially with Russia, responded to Matveev's provocation. The government did so in a similar way to Russia, without making any direct statement but by relying on a personal social media channel of a high-level politician. A few days after Matveev's post, the press secretary of the foreign ministry, Shohin Samadi, published a reply in the Russian language on his own, publicly accessible Facebook account. Instead of defending the Tajik history curriculum, Samadi pointed to Russia's own history textbook titled *The History of Russia* for ninth graders, which was officially approved for use in Russian educational institutions.

I consulted this source. It is evident that when describing the Russian Empire's conquest of Central Asia, the Russian textbook uses a politically neutral tone. The conquest is ambiguously called an "expansion of relations with Central Asian ter-

ritories". This passive form of speech is often used to tone down the military character of this event and subsequent governance in the region. For instance, without attributing responsibility to the Russian army for the military annexation of one of the Central Asian polities in the Ferghana Valley, the Khanate of Kokand, and its transformation into the imperial entity called Russian Turkestan, the textbook enigmatically states that "in February [1876], it [the Khanate] was abolished." Still, even despite these linguistic attempts to tone down the historical events that are described, the official Russian textbook in fact describes the processes of conquest, occupation and forceful annexation of Central Asia by Russia – and this is what Samadi pointed to.

Along with the Tajik intelligentsia, most Russians left the country in the 1990s due to fighting and poverty.

In his Facebook post, Samadi also referred to Matveev's accusation concerning an alleged genocide of ethnic Russians in Tajikistan in the 1990s. In fact, the Tajik Civil War between 1992 and 1997 was an interregional conflict of a political nature and involved two fighting blocs. The first one was a pro-government faction of former communists that was dominated by people from the Khujand and Kulob regions. The second was the opposition coalition that gathered liberal democratic reformers from Gorno Badakhshan and Islamists from the Gharm region. At the time of Tajikistan's independence, ethnic Russians made up over seven per cent of its population. Undeniably, like other inhabitants of Tajikistan, they suffered as a result of the civil war, but there was no specific targeting of ethnic Russians. Along with the Tajik intelligentsia, most Russians left the country in the 1990s due to fighting and poverty. Currently, according to the recent census, ethnic Russians represent only 0.3 per cent of the population.

In rebutting Matveev's accusation of genocide, Samadi wrote: "I would like to say the following: this is a real incitement of interethnic hostility and discord. Such statements do not bring anything good, except damaging the Tajik-Russian strategic partnership and alliance." While he used the word "I" rather than speak on behalf of the government, in light of the centralized form of governance in the country, his post should not be seen as an expression of a personal position but rather a carefully agreed statement. In this way, Tajikistan's foreign ministry avoided an escalation, but nonetheless signalled its calm yet firm position of dissent on the matter. In fact, Samadi finished his post by cordially proposing to discuss this case through official diplomatic channels at the next Tajik-Russian inter-parliamentary forum.

Matveev, however, replied furiously. In a series of disrespectful posts, he misspelt Samadi's name and ignored his position in the government, instead calling him "a *certain* Shahin Samadi" and referring to the politician by his first name, which is insulting in Russian. Matveev also announced that he, "a doctor of history

and professor", could indeed "give a couple of lectures". In his show of ethnic and political superiority, Matveev announced that "our empire in the 19th century was forced to protect itself," and so it conquered Central Asia.

As he continued, back then as now, Russians "invested more in the development of this region than they received". Here, he referred to the millions of Tajik and other Central Asian labour migrants who currently work in Russia, thereby presenting their remittances earned through hard work in hazardous conditions in an atmosphere of widespread xenophobia by the public and state authorities alike as Russia's gift to the region. To these offensive remarks, there was no answer from the Tajik side. There could not be any, given the country's position of vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia in the international arena.

What Tajik textbooks say

What do Tajikistan's textbooks actually say about the country's history? The Russian conquest of Central Asia is described in the Tajik-language textbook titled *The History of the Tajik Nation* by Namoz Hotamov, which since 2015 has been taught in the ninth grade. The textbook is critical of the Russian Empire's expansion into the region, directly pointing to its colonial character, but it also does not praise the previous local governments – criticizing them for feudalism.

Referring to three local polities, the Emirate of Bukhara (which encompassed the territory of nowadays Tajikistan), the Khanate of Kokand and the Khanate of Khiva, the text argues: "the rulers, khans and emirs had unlimited rights. They relied on big landowners, feudal lords and powerful priests, and committed all kinds of tyranny against the peasants, craftsmen and artisans." Against this background, the Russian Empire's expansion into Central Asia completely reshaped the socio-economic relations and even had some positive effects. According to the author, it put an end to slavery; brought about innovations in the banking system, agriculture and production; and, importantly, brought an end to frequent conflicts between local rulers.

At the same time, the Russian Empire followed only its own interests, which were mainly economic. The construction of factories and railways in Central Asia, as well as the start of the cotton production, predominantly served the internal market of the empire. Due to the American Civil War (1861–66), the Russian Empire was no longer able to import cotton from that country and so it decided to grow it in Central Asia. The empire thus did not have any "enlightenment mission" towards the region and the life of peasants did not improve. The textbook even argues that French rule in Tunisia and Algeria was "very liberal" compared with how

the Russian governors of Turkestan treated the local population. Citing a Russian military historian named Alexey Abaza, the author says that the French system would not be suitable for the "semi-savage people of Turkestan". As a result, the handbook claims that the tsarist government created "a unique colonial system" that was based on a "heavy system of exploitation".

The text also argues that one of the biggest disadvantages of Russian colonial rule in Central Asia was the artificial and long-standing division of Tajik people living in Central Asia along the Panj river. While those living above the river would be incorporated into Tajikistan, the ones below the river became citizens of Afghanistan – which was under British influence. The interests of the local population had no meaning to the colonizer.

It might seem that this clearly negative vision of the Russian Empire outlined in the 2015 textbook results from a rethinking of the past through the prism of current nation-building priorities. This, however, is not the case. As a matter of fact, the book is strikingly similar in its content to previous Soviet-era and post-Soviet history handbooks used in Tajikistan. It largely draws on official Soviet narratives about the Russian Empire, from which the Soviet government wanted to distance itself to show its benevolent impact on Central Asia.

Soviet Tajikistan

The establishment of Soviet power in Central Asia, including Tajikistan, is described in the textbook *The History of the Tajik Nation* by Nozim Hakimov. It was released in 2017 and since then has been used by students in the tenth grade. As for the historical facts, in 1924 Tajikistan became an autonomous part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic and in 1929 it was "upgraded" to a separate status as the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. Surprisingly, the foreword of the book seems very critical of the Soviet Union, in particular when it comes to the national and territorial delimitation in Central Asia that took place in the 1920s.

Pointing to a manipulation concerning who would be considered Tajik, and where the territories of Soviet Tajikistan lay, the textbook argues: "Historians and politicians of the Soviet period … loudly proclaimed that the Tajiks, after a thousand years of statelessness, had now obtained statehood during the Soviet era. But they silenced the fact that the official languages of the Turkic and Pashtun governments of Bukhara, Kokand and Afghanistan were Tajik and Dari. Another group of Tajiks living in Iran and China was completely forgotten [in the Soviet project for Tajikistan]. In the 20th century, the history of Tajik statehood was considered only within the territories of Russia and its colonization of Bukhara."

Yet besides this striking, openly critical remark on Soviet national engineering, the rest of the textbook gives a diverging interpretation of the events by identifying a different culprit. Instead of attributing fault to the central government in Moscow, it mentions the negative influences of "enemies of the Tajik people" – pointing to the pan-Turkic intellectual movement in Central Asia which, presumably, engaged in manipulations against Tajik interests (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Uzbek are Turkic languages, while Tajik is related to Persian).

The textbook fiercely condemns the local opposition to Soviet rule, the Basmachi movement. The Basmachi were rebels from the Ferghana Valley who were guided by Muslim beliefs and opposed the Russian Empire and later the Bolsheviks. They were active between the mid-1910s and late 1920s, when the remaining Basmachi groups fled to Afghanistan. While the Basmachi saw themselves as a religious liberation movement aiming to free Central Asia from foreign rule, in Soviet historiography they were portrayed as selfish bandits.

In the same official spirit of the Soviet era, Hakimov's textbook continues to describe them as merciless robbers who "did not hesitate to betray their people and religion to protect themselves". As it is elaborated, "the lives and religion of the peaceful population had no value to the Basmachi … The last morsel of food, clothing, tools and even the peasants' children were considered the personal property of the Basmachi … They used the population as their shields." Consistently referring to a "class conflict", the textbook thus sees the establishment of Soviet power in Tajikistan as a local version of the clash between the socialists representing the working class and the bourgeoisie owning the means of production. In the Tajik case, it was a conflict between Russian and local socialists and the Basmachi, who were attributed with all evils. This interpretation of the Basmachi is perhaps the most striking example of the persistence of Soviet-era narratives in contemporary Tajik historiography.

In the same spirit, the book praises the Soviet Union for improving working conditions, building schools and collectivizing the land to later divide it among the peasants. Overall, rather than reinterpreting Tajikistan's Soviet period, it again largely repeats the narratives from previous local Soviet-era and post-Soviet textbooks.

Changing views

When asked by journalists about Tajikistan's Soviet experience, the country's high-level politicians avoid giving a definite answer. They often reply that it is too early to judge this era. They seem to be unsure what to do about this period of history, as they themselves often identify with it personally. Consequently, they dele-

gate the interpretation of the Soviet period to future scholars. This overall reflects a positivist, globalizing understanding of history as an "objective" discipline, rather than one that is socially constructed and composed of multiple micro-histories.

The country's scholars, even those of the younger generation born after 1991, remain sceptical of the term "decolonization". They tend to see it as offensive to their country. Arguably, this reflects an underlying pride in Tajikistan's contribution to the Soviet state. According to this logic, calling the Soviet period colonial would deprive Soviet Tajikistan of agency and strip it of ownership as part of the Soviet project. In multiple conversations that I have had with the Tajik intelligentsia over the last few years, Tajiks' active participation in the Soviet army during the Second World War to stop Nazi Germany was often mentioned to me as an argument in favour of the Soviet Union. Here, personal family histories of grandfathers participating in anti-fascist mobilization serve as powerful examples.

Overall, Tajikistan remains fairly loyal to its Soviet experience and this is visible in school textbooks. This, however, does not mean that no reassessment of contemporary Russia has been taking place. If previously relations with Russia were viewed by many politicians and the population alike as an extension of the Soviet idea of brotherhood between two nations, this has been slowly changing over the last three years. This is due to a wave of forceful conscriptions of Tajik migrants to the Russian army; an uptick in social xenophobia and discrimination in Russia; a state-led anti-migrant campaign; violent police raids; and illegal deportations. Of course, all of this has helped to serve as a powerful eye opener.

Meanwhile, the controversy about Tajikistan's history textbooks is far from over. In January 2025, the topic was raised again, this time officially in the Russian State Duma. In his speech, the Deputy Sergey Mironov from "Just Russia" expressed his outrage that in Tajik textbooks the Russian Empire's expansion to Central Asia is described as an occupation. He has also unfoundedly claimed that these textbooks are printed with Russian taxpayers' money and, concluding, announced: "Of course we need to put things in order here." ЁЁ

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