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Featured Review

Tajikistan in the Soviet Century: Forced Emancipation, Uneven Modernization, and the Roots of Post-Soviet Civil War

Zamira Abman, *Coerced Liberation: Muslim Women in Soviet Tajikistan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2024), 232 pp.

Isaac McKean Scarborough, *Moscow's Heavy Shadow: The Violent Collapse of the USSR* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2023), 274 pp.

The two books under review focus on Soviet Tajikistan, the southernmost republic of the Soviet Union, bordering Afghanistan to the south and China to the southeast. Established in 1924 as part of Soviet Uzbekistan, Tajikistan occupied a position as the “periphery of the periphery” within the Soviet hierarchy of national republics. Yet, unlike many other marginalized regions, its geopolitical location at the frontier with Afghanistan and China ensured that it was not neglected by Moscow. Tajikistan’s elevation to the status of Union Republic in 1929—the highest rank within the Soviet system of national republics—underscored the geopolitical significance that the Soviet leadership attached to this strategically sensitive territory. Not only did geographical location matter; Soviet Tajikistan was the only nation within the Soviet Central Asian space that spoke Persian and maintained deep historical and cultural ties to the broader Persian world centered in Iran. Despite this unique geographical and cultural positioning, the young Bolshevik state forcefully incorporated the region and eventually Sovietized it in the 1920s and early 1930s (Botakoz Kassymbekova, *Despite Cultures. Early Soviet Rule in Tajikistan* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), pp. 14–18). The two books under review, despite their different focuses, both examine the long-term effects of Tajikistan’s sovietization policies and its abrupt collapse in the second part of the 1980s in a broader sense.

COERCED LIBERATION

In *Coerced Liberation*, Zamira Abman traces the Soviet state’s policies aimed at women’s liberation and societal mobility from the 1920s till the end of the Soviet period. It shows how, during the Soviet period, women in Tajikistan experienced contradictory pressures. In the 1920s, Bolshevik reforms sought to dismantle patriarchal traditions by undermining the traditional institution of marriage and declaring gender equality, but by the 1930s, the state reinforced family values, banned abortion, and promoted motherhood as women’s “natural role.” While a few women entered politics, science, or education, the majority—especially in rural areas—remained bound to early marriage, veiling, polygamy,

and farm labor. World War II drew more women into the workforce, but they continued to face the “double” or “triple” burden of wage labor, domestic chores, and childcare, leaving emancipation largely rhetorical. Despite visual changes like the replacement of veils with headscarves, Islam remained integral to daily life, with both rural and urban women blending Soviet and Islamic practices. By the Brezhnev era, the regime tacitly tolerated many customs, illustrating that Soviet secularism never eradicated Islam but instead reinforced it as a marker of belonging.

Abman’s monograph is divided into six chapters, with the introduction and epilogue standing out as separate, context-setting parts. In the introduction, Abman correctly points out the limitations of the existing literature, which has often confined itself to the eventful years of the 1920s and 1930s when analyzing the Soviet state’s women’s emancipation policies. While most of the literature has focused on the eye-catching but short-lived revolutionary campaigns of the 1920s, such as the unveiling and women’s inclusion in the Soviet workplace, *Coerced Liberation* continues this story into the post-WWII period and the final years of the Soviet era. Ultimately, the continuation of women’s liberation policies was not as revolutionary as it was in the 1920s. As Abman argues, the Soviet state’s emancipatory initiatives failed to achieve their stated goals: they neither fostered strong, locally rooted advocacy groups for women’s rights nor reflected a genuine commitment on the part of the Soviet center to women’s emancipation.

The first chapter recounts the well-documented women’s emancipation campaigns of the 1920s. Abman argues, through analysis of the Zhenotdel’s work in Tajikistan, that Muslim women’s emancipation was not a Soviet priority. Activists faced scarce resources and logistical hurdles, while Soviet rule relied on trial-and-error governance and tolerated local norms. Chapter two examines rural women’s experiences as collective farm laborers, showing that many came to see themselves as part of the socialist economy. Chapter three highlights the failures of emancipation policies, as rural women remained the most disadvantaged group in the USSR—marked by low education, early marriage, and confinement to patriarchal traditions—while industrialization and education centered on urban areas. Chapter four shifts to urban women, who gained from better schooling and jobs, often escaping rural traditions. Many advanced not only through reforms but also due to disrupted family structures, which weakened patriarchal control. Chapter five explores the *zhensoviety* (women’s councils), expanded after 1956 to transform Muslim women. Though presented as grassroots, they operated under party control, alienated rural women, and ultimately reinforced gender roles while deepening urban–rural divides. Finally, chapter six analyzes Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign, which misread Islam’s cultural role. While it reduced veiling and expanded women’s work, religion endured across rural and urban life, and by the Brezhnev era, Islamic customs were tacitly accepted. Soviet secularism thus reinforced Islam as a marker of belonging rather than erasing it.

In short, after the initial revolutionary attempts to liberate women from household chores and traditional social structures, from 1935 to 1982, the Soviet government instead promoted traditional family models, rewarding large families with bonuses and medals but investing little in childcare or welfare due to its focus on industrialization. The shortage of daycare forced rural women to depend on extended families for childcare, reinforcing patriarchal traditions. As a result, women carried a “triple burden” of agricultural labor, domestic chores, and childcare, which deepened gender inequality in Soviet Tajikistan. Although government reports acknowledged their desperate situation, Moscow continued to demand higher productivity from women in collective farms.

There are many points on which readers can agree with *Coerced Liberation*: the persistence of patriarchal structures, the contradictory nature of Soviet policies (emancipating women while simultaneously burdening them with additional responsibilities), the failure to build sustainable women’s advocacy groups, and others. At the same time, one cannot help but notice the author’s ambivalent stance on the question of coloniality and the colonial nature of the Soviet regime. Emancipating with one hand while demanding higher productivity with the other—can this be perceived as a colonial mindset, or is it simply wishful thinking of Soviet high-modernism? Similarly, emancipation without providing adequate opportunities, such as social facilities and welfare programs in rural areas, raises questions about how such policies should be explained.

Another problem one may find in *Coerced Liberation* is the author’s attempt to delineate sharply between urban and rural women’s experiences. In Abman’s analysis, Soviet reforms produced a “russified” and small cohort of elite professional women who became culturally isolated from the vast majority of their counterparts, who remained confined within both rural patriarchal society and the colonial structures of Soviet rule. The question here is whether the boundary between urban and rural women was as clear-cut as the author suggests. Urban women may have been russified and culturally different from the majority of rural Tajik women, yet they were still expected to conform to gendered social expectations—even within urban spaces (pp. 90, 126). If Tajik women moved to the city, became culturally “different” (p. 66) but continued to face the same gendered constraints, how can one argue that they constituted a “separate category”? The author tries to draw clear-cut boundaries between urban and rural Tajik women, but this raises questions: how solid were these boundaries in practice? Is it not more compelling to suggest that, despite the urban–rural divide, people continued to maintain and foster familial and social ties that blurred this rather nominal boundary? Urban women may have adopted new cultural practices and gained greater access to education or employment, yet their lives remained deeply embedded in kinship networks and gendered expectations that spanned both rural and urban settings.

MOSCOW'S HEAVY SHADOW

In *Moscow's Heavy Shadow*, Isaac Scarborough examines the abrupt failure of the *perestroika* reforms launched by Mikhail Gorbachev and his liberal economic advisers, showing how these reforms unraveled into socio-economic collapse and culminated in a violent Civil War in Tajikistan. Scarborough criticizes the common Western and Russian narratives that blame the Soviet collapse on long-term factors like ethnic hatreds, the flaws of socialism, or the inevitable march of history toward democracy. This perspective, the author argues, absolves the architects of *perestroika* reforms of responsibility and minimizes the importance of the reform period (1985–1991) itself. The author contends that to understand why the USSR collapsed when it did, one must analyze the “real content and consequences” of Gorbachev’s reforms (p. 7).

The book’s structure moves between Moscow, where reforms were designed, and Dushanbe, where their consequences were experienced. Consisting of eight chapters, the book draws on archival records from both cities, along with memoirs, interviews, and newspapers, to provide multiple perspectives on the collapse. Chapters from 1–4 cover the initial phase of *perestroika* (1985–1989), contrasting the stability of pre-reform Tajikistan with Gorbachev’s conviction that radical change was necessary, and detailing how these reforms began to undermine Soviet society. Chapters 5–7 describe the descent into disorder between 1990 and early 1992, analyzing the February 1990 Dushanbe riots, the disintegration of state institutions by mid-1991, and the final collapse of the USSR in December 1991. Chapter 8 and the Conclusion detail the outbreak of the Tajik Civil War in May 1992, showing how populist politics and the lack of a state monopoly on violence led to open conflict. The conclusion narrates the bloodiest phase of the war (May–December 1992) and argues that Tajikistan’s experience was emblematic of the broader pattern of violence across the former USSR caused by the conditions of the Soviet collapse.

Moscow's Heavy Shadow enters a rich stream of secondary literature, much of which diverges on the origins of the Tajik Civil War. The existing literature on the Civil War in Tajikistan explains its underlying causes in terms of the rise of nationalism in the region, the presence of regionalism within Tajik society, and the severe economic downturn of the early 1990s, which led to competition over scarce resources. According to Scarborough, nationalism, regionalism, and the competition for scarce economic resources all fall short of adequately explaining the outbreak of the Civil War. These were, he argues, consequences rather than causes (p. 141). Instead, he situates the roots of the conflict primarily in the economic disruptions brought about by *perestroika*. For him, the underlying causes of the Civil War lay within *perestroika* itself—its failed experiments in economic restructuring and political liberalization.

Tajikistan was the least developed republic among the national regions (p. 53) and was tied to the rest of the USSR through “thousand threads of

plans, fulfillment orders, spare parts, raw materials, finished goods, and work directives" (p. 28). People in Tajikistan generally lived in stability, looked to the future with optimism, and were largely content with their daily lives. This was not the case in Moscow, however, either among the ruling elite around Gorbachev or among the well-to-do residents of the large cities. Within Gorbachev's circle, the prevailing view was that the Soviet economy was rotten and structurally flawed, requiring radical reform. Yet, as the author demonstrates, the economy on the eve of reform, though in decline, was still relatively stable, growing at 2–3% annually compared with the average 6–8% rise of the 1960s (p. 32).

Gorbachev's *perestroika* reforms aimed to decentralize and revitalize the Soviet economy; however, in Tajikistan, they proved devastating. Policies such as agricultural re-centralization, legalization of cooperatives, deregulation of foreign trade, decentralization of the state order system (*goszakazy*), price liberalization, republican self-financing, and privatization dismantled the centralized mechanisms on which the republic depended. Instead of creating a socialist market with capitalist elements, these reforms led to corruption, industrial decline, and social dislocation. Newly empowered cooperatives exploited loopholes to siphon state assets, while the dismantling of centralized state orders left Tajik factories without essential supplies. Liberalized prices and deregulated trade drained subsidized goods from Tajik markets, redirected raw materials into prestige imports, and worsened shortages.

By early 1991, the Tajik government was effectively bankrupt, with empty coffers and paralyzed industries. What emerged was not a transition to a socialist market economy, but rather an endless cycle of corruption, shortages, and economic decline that exacerbated social frustration. In summary, Scarborough's central argument highlights that various economic initiatives were implemented in Moscow without considering the vulnerabilities of the less developed national republics. This lack of consideration ultimately undermined stability and led these republics into crisis. The Tajiks, who were generally not enthusiastic about the radical changes initiated by Moscow, lacked the means to influence decisions that affected their future. Thus, Moscow's heavy shadow loomed over the crisis in Tajikistan.

Rather than engaging with the book's general argument, which is straightforward yet convincing, I would like to raise the issue of Soviet statistics and the assumption that socio-economic stability on the eve of *perestroika* in Tajikistan was genuine. Even if the population believed that their lives were steadily improving under the Soviet regime, to what extent was that perception rooted in reality, and how much of that was simply wishful thinking? The author's argument regarding stability prior to *perestroika* and gradual social improvement largely relies on the retrospective views of urban elites, as well as economic data concerning salaries, purchasing power, and results from sociological surveys. However, perspectives from the city-dwelling middle class

may be highly subjective, and both economic and sociological data may not completely reflect the reality on the ground. Notably, Gorbachev and his inner circle “simply did not believe the official statistics” (p. 36), indicating skepticism about the reliability of reported data. Moreover, people’s perceptions in Central Asia tend to be positively oriented toward the future. Despite the economic hardships and forced social displacements they experienced in the post-Soviet era, many Central Asians often report higher levels of happiness compared to those in developed societies.¹ Could this suggest that people in Central Asia did not necessarily view their present or future in a negative light, but rather accepted and internalized the framework of a “good life”?

Another issue that may arise is the significance of the local agenda and the extent to which Tajikistani actors’ activities have influenced the Moscow-led reform initiatives. In examining pre-World War II Soviet Central Asia, it is often argued that Moscow’s policies were locally negotiated to align with the existing cultural and social expectations. In the case of Tajikistan, Artemy Kalinovsky’s book, *Laboratory of Socialist Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), illustrates that Tajikistan was not merely a passive periphery; it was an active site where Moscow’s development agenda was negotiated locally, resulting in a unique form of socialist modernity that combined ideology with pragmatism. In contrast, Scarborough’s narrative of collapse emphasizes economic disintegration and Moscow’s top-down reforms, giving limited consideration to the social and institutional legacies that had maintained stability for decades.

This does not mean that Scarborough completely disregards the key Tajikistani actors who interacted with Gorbachev and his circle during this period. Rather, it suggests that, in his account, the Tajikistani figures portrayed appear largely as passive subjects upon whom Moscow acted, rather than as agents shaping their own destinies. One could further explore how Tajikistani leaders engaged with these *perestroika* reforms—and how that engagement may have influenced the eventual collapse of the Soviet order and the pattern of the Civil War as it did.

TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF SOVIET EXPERIENCE AND LEGACY IN CENTRAL ASIA

To what extent were violence and stability integral to the Soviet experience? How can these two extremes be balanced within a single country like the Soviet Union? The topics of violence and relative stability are likely the two most important aspects linking the two books under review. The Soviet experience, with its contrasting elements of subjugation and violence, set against a backdrop of

1 Doi Kaito, “Conceptualizations of Happiness Among University Youth in Uzbekistan,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 57, no. 1 (2025), pp. 51–78; Alexandru Cojocaru and Mame Diagne, “How Reliable and Consistent are Subjective Measures of Welfare in Europe and Central Asia?” *Economics of Transition* 23, no. 1 (2015), pp. 75–103.

forceful development and relative stability, presents a conundrum for historians who often find it challenging to use multiple explanatory tools. Tajikistan's history within the Soviet sphere illustrates what small nations experience under imperial structures: subjugation, development, and abandonment, all without proper consideration for the subject society—the Tajiks.

The central problem these two books raise is agency—who had to decide, and who had to comply. In the Soviet order, major initiatives were brought into light in Moscow's ministries and only then dispatched to the republics for "implementation." Prior scholarship has rightly noted how local cadres interpreted, tweaked, and or tailored center-made directives to meet local social and cultural conditions. Zamira Abman illustrates how local Tajikistani actors implemented women's emancipation policies, but she does not provide a clear answer for why these policies were never fully embraced or championed by the local community. The very phrase *Coerced Liberation* signals that reform arrived as an external mandate, not a locally authored project; unsurprisingly, it was seldom rooted in community institutions or gained champions beyond the state's apparatus.

Inadvertently, *Moscow's Heavy Shadow* reveals a similar nature of the Soviet order. The *perestroika* initiatives emerged as part of Moscow's broader reform design rather than as a local strategic choice. Scarborough's analysis shows how republican elites became intermediaries rather than authors of policy—compelled to execute, not to decide. Together, these works reveal that the Soviet order systematically denied the national republics genuine agency. It offered participation without sovereignty, initiative without accountability, and responsibility without real choice. In the end, both authors' accounts make clear that the tragedy of the Soviet periphery lay not in its failure to modernize, but in its inability to claim ownership of the pace, trajectory, and content of its own modernity.

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