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Abstract:

The collapse of the U.S.S.R in 1990 had a variety of wide-ranging and long-lasting effects throughout Central Asia. Having awoken from more than seventy years of colonial rule, the newly independent States and peoples found themselves in a tenuous position. Economic, Political, and Social upheaval sent reverberations throughout the region and had a direct impact on the citizens of these new republics. This paper focuses on the experiences of the individual-- the ways in which the collapse affected the daily lives and concerns of the population. In order to fully understand the implications of the Soviet dissolution, a focus has been placed on several important and high-risk groups: women, ethnic minorities, and religious adherents. These individual stories complement the history of the collapse and are meant to give a personal context and increased insight into the days leading up to and following the Soviet collapse. In focusing on a wide-ranging and inclusive set of participants, an effort has been made to best capture the collective memory of Central Asia in regards to the U.S.S.R. Specific attention has also been focused on the development of national identities in the wake of regional independence.

The conventional view among Kyrgyz was that their own past set them apart from the other Central Asians. Their nomadic past, community, and identity seemed to define a discrete space for them, one that was surrounded by sedentary Central Asians, whom they derogatorily called “sarf”¹

Methodology:

While a select few of the individuals were sought out, the majority of participants in this project have been selected at random. This haphazard approach might, at first, seem to be indicative of poor planning; after all, how does one focus a topic without a set response group? In this situation, however, the most important concern was an emphasis on what the participants felt was most relevant--not the researcher. As a result, personal narratives have been selected which frame the historical and cultural context of the Soviet collapse.

It is important to reinforce the anecdotal nature of this study. These personal narratives are just that--personal. In choosing to focus on the individual, this paper forgoes the possibility of reaching any widely encompassing conclusions. With that being said, the experiences of these people gives a unique insight into the realities of what the Central Asians and other Soviet citizens faced; indeed, their voices are nothing less than a window into their past. Thus, while no sweeping generalizations should be made from these disparate experiences, the stories told here can help elucidate the historical context of the Soviet and post-Communist periods.

¹ Igmen, pg 63

Most interviews for this study have been conducted in Russian. In accordance with Internal Review Board's requirements, each participant has been asked to sign two documents: the first, consent of participation which reinforces the voluntary nature of the study, as well as a request for permission to document the interview with audio recording. Most subjects opted out of the latter option, but agreed to a verbal request for taking hand-written notes of the interview. In order to protect the identity of the interviewees, each has been given a pseudonym.

Introduction:

Imagine the unthinkable: tomorrow, you awake at your usual time to start another seemingly routine day. Considering the hour, you are likely still groggy from your peaceful slumber. Planning the day ahead, you are simultaneously dreading your morning commute while fretting what you and your family will have for dinner. Hoping to catch a quick glimpse of the daily weather, you flip on the morning news-- and then your life changes forever. It hits you like a punch to the stomach: your country has collapsed. The safety net of governance and stability has been ripped apart, all in a matter of hours.

This seems like an unlikely scenario. You might even be a bit indignant at the thought of it happening to yourself and your family. One needs not dig too deep, however, to find perhaps the most prominent of historical examples-- The Soviet Union, an Empire whose power and influence dominated two continents and projected

the communist specter world-wide. Few could have had the POIGNENCE to predict the untimely demise of the Soviets

Often, the Western World is exposed to a single paradigm of the U.S.S.R: that it was, without any opposing opinions, a malevolent force--both at the global and domestic levels. Consequently, the collapse of the Soviet Union hardly seems worth a second-thought; indeed, many might bid good-riddance and goodbye. These biases, unfortunately, do not tell the complete story of the U.S.S.R. The flaws of the Soviet Union are widely known; so pervasive, in fact, that they often overshadow the beneficial programs implemented by Moscow. While the misgivings of Eastern Europe towards their larger and more powerful neighbor have been thoroughly explored, the Soviet citizens beyond the Urals have received much less attention. The aim of this paper is examine the historical memory of the Central Asian people, the Kyrgyz in particular. The exploration of this phenomenon has one overarching goal: to understand the enduring legacy of the Soviet period and how it has shaped the contemporary society in these States.

In order to best contextualize the feelings of the individual towards the larger historical consensus, this paper places a particularly high emphasis on the subjective analysis of Collective Memory. While perhaps offering a less concise and more biased viewpoint when compared to the typical textbook, the individual stories of the Kyrgyz people enable an important and new dimension of history to surface; the vast majority of knowledge about Central Asia comes from either Russian documentation or Western researches—little comes from within the region.

Consequently, while Wertsch makes a point to warn that “collective memory is often assumed to be the handmaiden of a group’s identity project and hence little concerned with truth conditions”², the alternative is reliance on the similarly biased opinions of outsiders. While documenting the Kyrgyz perception of the Soviet Union and its legacy is the main aim of this paper, an understanding of Kyrgyz perspective is vital in doing so. As a result, a combination of historical consensus and individual opinions are weaved together to form a tapestry that, while perhaps not completely factual, gives greater insight into the sentiments of the indigenous population of Central Asia. In order to do this, the distinction between historical memory and historical consensus must be made apparent:

“Remembering what “we” did or what others did to “us” is a sort of invitation to create an image of who “we” are in the first place. In contrast to analytic history, which aspires to keep the identity of the narrator distanced from narratives about the past” Wertsch pg 11

=Many of the conversations that follow are biased and based on little more than the views and opinions of an individual. Reinforcing this reality is not meant to belittle the potential insights that these offer, but merely to remind that they are neither comprehensive nor unprejudiced.

² Wertsch, pg 8

Historical Background: Central Asia Prior to the U.S.SR

While tribal customs and affiliation have remained integral parts of the Kyrgyz identity, the policies of the Soviet Union have left a clear and discernible impact on the nation and its people. As Sahadeo contends, Central Asia was not unfamiliar with foreign invaders; indeed, many of the most renowned figures in region came from outside the heart of Inner Asia. Genghis Khan, Timur, and Babur are notable examples of powerful aggressors who united a diverse landmass and remain, to this day, popular symbols in the Central Asian psyche³.

The first major concentration of political power in Central Asia came with the rise of the Achaemenid Empire, an early Persian dynasty. Coming into prominence in the sixth-century B.C.E, the Achaemenids established a pattern of Persian influence which is still a powerful force in Central Asian culture, especially in regards to Tajikistan and parts of Uzbekistan. It was not until the formation of the Sasanian Empire, however, that Persian influence became a dominant force in the region.

While these empires were, by nature of their constituencies and borders, diverse in their own right, none were as foreign to Central Asia as Russia. The history between the Turkic and Slavic cultures stretches almost as far back as the birth of the latter; the early Kievan Rus' States soon found themselves under Mongolian influence. In 1480, however, the tides of power began to shift as Ivan the Great led Muscovy to victory against the nomadic confederations⁴. This transfer of power, the shift of dominance from beyond the Urals to Russia proper, ushered in an era of

³ Sahadeo, pg 13

⁴ Levi, pg 29

expansion for the Slavic peoples—and soon, by 1865, they would extend their influence to as far as Tashkent, the historical heart of Central Asia⁵. In doing so, the Russian Empire would become the first true outsider to rule over the Turkic and Persian population; while others had conquered and assimilated themselves into the region, these new invaders were less disposed to undergo cultural conformity. As Sahado explains: “The Russians [were the] most disruptive of patterns and culture of everyday life”⁶. Rather than facilitate a transfer of knowledge through congenial exchange, a one-way track transfer of knowledge was instituted—one where “modernity” flowed from Moscow to Tashkent.

Prior to the expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia, nationalistic sentiment was a decidedly foreign concept; Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and others identified themselves as Turkic and were closely associated with their individual tribe or region. While a Kyrgyz individual certainly considered themselves to be *Kyrgyz*, this was a more tribal relation than one concerning nation-states. The modern-day political borders, a result of Moscow's artificial gerrymandering, were never concretely formed and remain a tenuous issue in Intra-State relations. The Uzbek cities of Bukhara and Samarkand have a majority Tajik population, while the Kyrgyz city of Osh has always been an Uzbek stronghold.

⁵ Levi, pg 29

⁶ Sahadeo, pg 13

Crafting a Soviet People:

In contrast to Imperial Russia, The Soviet period was an era of converging cultures. While Russian was, by default, the strongest and most influential of these forces, the rich traditions and values of the Central Asians were not as readily disregarded as some suspect. Lenin, in particular, was of a strong persuasion to promote a sense of equality and harmony among the multitude of Soviet ethnicities.

Aida:

One woman I spoke with, a girl at the age of twenty-two when the U.S.S.R collapsed, articulated a particularly strong nostalgia for her former nation: "We all believed that we had a common identity--that Uzbeks, Ukrainians, and Kyrgyz were all the same citizens. Yes, we still had our ethnicity, but our [status as] Soviet citizens came first". This encompassing identity, that of the Soviet citizen, kept the various minorities integrated into the larger national scene. While Moscow was far away, the sense of belonging to a larger movement was an obvious draw for many on the outskirts. At the same time, this distance was, of course, an alienating factor-- one which, in some cases, inspired independence movements. In Central Asia, however, this Soviet identity had a unique effect of uniting a region under a political banner.

As the women went on to explain: "this is why we did not have tension [a reference to the strain of relations between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks], we are still close to the Turkic people of course... but it's different now". The loss of a unifying force has left the Central Asian people and, more importantly, the new Republics grasping for a way to preserve the uniqueness bestowed upon them by Moscow. Political borders,

artifices which do not reflect historical trends, are a sore-spot for many throughout Inner Asia; indeed, the preservation of their nation-states has been the predominate concern for political leaders from Tashkent to Almaty.

Guljigit:

He began with a bombshell of a statement: "The October Revolution saved us as a nation". This was going to be interesting. In 1916, Guljigit explained, the last Tsar, Nicholas II, launched genocide against his people--one squarely aimed at wiping out the Kyrgyz people. It all began with World War One, a tragic event where thousands of young Turkic men were shipped to the front-lines and forced to bear the brunt of the Russian war movement. "We started to protest", Guljigit explained, "and were immediately targeted by the Tsar". According to his own grand-father's estimates (statistics which I could not verify), forty-percent of the Kyrgyz population was wiped out in reprisal. In addition to this substantial percentage, Guljigit claimed that another thirty percent of his people perished as they fled across the borders to China. While the validity of these figures is questionable, it was clear that Guljigit felt strongly about the intentions of Imperial Russia towards their Turkic subjects.

The Soviet Union, he explained, changed this. Rather than being part of the borderlands, Kyrgyzstan became a part of the Motherland—in the processes, becoming integrated into the Soviet socialist ideology. Guljigit credits Lenin with this turnaround; "Communism was our religion, and Lenin our Mohammed", he explains,

giving constant reverence to the man he sees as preserving—if not fully protecting—his people’s culture and continued existence.

Historical Background:

As outlined in the previous section, the Russians were hardly the first outsiders to impose a new regional order in Central Asia. They were, however, according to Sahadeo, the most disruptive of these foreigners⁷. Whereas the Persian, Turkic, and Mongolian invaders shaped the evolving landscape of Central Asia’s path to the modern day, it was the U.S.S.R that firmly established a decisive and often brutal road to “modernity”.

Why is it, that after generations of foreign interference and control that the Kyrgyz maintained their cultural and social traditions? In short, the nomadic lifestyles of the Kyrgyz—and in many cases, their Turkmen and Kazakh cousins—allowed these people to preserve their own sense of identity in the face of impending hordes from both the East and West.

The sense of nostalgia was apparent in many interviews, Igmen explains the deep sense of respect that many in Central Asia still have for the former USSR:

Kyrgyz elderly still celebrate the “Great October Revolution”, as well as Nouruz, and Kyrgyz families, who still display Lenin’s portrait next to their shydraks[carpets which decorate walls], do not separate their Kyrgyz-ness from the narrative of the Bolshevik Revolution”⁸

⁷ Sahadeo, pg 13

⁸ Igmen, pg 142

In a way, one might view this as evidence that the Soviet Union left a major impact on the Kyrgyz identity. At the same time, it is easy to see how the resilience of Kyrgyz culture embraced the soviet spirit without losing its unique character.

The Creation of Independent Central Asia:

Understanding the growing popularity and wide-spread adoption of Manas as a cultural and national hero is important in framing the Kyrgyz identity; Anderson argues that literature and novels are the tools which shaped modern Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia—and continue to offer ways in which new nations can differentiate themselves.⁹ The nomadic nature of the Central Asian peoples offers an interesting paradox: having relied on (and celebrated) their oral tradition, written stories and knowledge of their past are imperfectly recorded at best.

As discussed before, the Kremlin standardized the Turkic languages with a Cyrillic format and proceeded to increase the literacy levels of the region dramatically.

Ivan

While a good number, and perhaps even the majority, of people I spoke with expressed a deep nostalgia for Soviet times, none was as pronounced as Ivan's. As a young man, he worked for the Ministry of Internal Affairs as a courier of sensitive information. His youth, he explained, was a time of relative security and (subjective)

⁹ Anderson, pg 35-36

prosperity; he was often able to purchase jeans off the black market at a substantial cost of 200 rubles, or the average monthly salary at the time. At the risk of sounding sensational, I can honestly remark that his eyes were glazed over with a sense of fondness for these days; clearly, he was a man who missed the U.S.S.R.

This was an interesting contrast compared to the opinion in which he held modern Kyrgyzstan. "I was a citizen of a great nation", he began as we settled down to reminisce of a time long since past. "More importantly, the future was always secure. My country needed me and I felt a sense of self-worth", Ivan remarked, repeatedly referring to an age in which he felt a now lost sense of grandeur had thrived. "It's [the Soviet Union's] end is the greatest crime of my lifetime", he contested, with no degree of exaggeration on his face; indeed, his animated hand gestures insinuated that his emotional responses were as genuine as the translator was attempting to convey them as.

His high regard for the U.S.S.R notwithstanding, Ivan was, at the same time, a man who appreciated the modern amenities that independence had brought Kyrgyzstan. A great enthusiast of rock bands, he had taken up the mantle of file sharing with no small degree of enthusiasm-- piracy on the internet has quickly replaced the black-market as the go-to provider of Western entertainment and luxuries. While present-day Kyrgyzstan boasts a selection of goods which range from Korean, Turkish, Russian, and American origins, the situation which immediately followed independence was much less dynamic. Now he points out – everyone has jeans.

Rustam: The Pragmatic Nationalist

Rustam was, without a doubt, a man who cherished his Kyrgyz identity. There was not a hint of hesitation in his response, as I inquired about whether his nation had benefited from independence. "Most", he conceded, "think the Soviet Union was better... but we are a nation. Every [country] needs to develop. It needs to use its language and remember its culture". Kyrgyzstan, he confided in me, was never allowed to do this during the Soviet period; even now, riding the wave of independence, he was not entirely sure that the traditions and culture of his people would be protected.

"Before [during the Soviet era], we spoke Russian. We even began to name our children with Russian names, and now look: Arabic is spreading, maybe even replacing Russian". Rustam did not look angry as he said this, he was not as emphatic as his wife had been in her worries; rather, he looked sadder, like a man who could see a rising tide but had little to help him fight its impending crash. "When will Kyrgyz [the language] be left alone?" he asked, more to himself than the translator. He was not anti-Russian or against the revival of Islam; indeed, he respected the former and was a participant in the latter. Rather, he wanted his country to form its own way, what he really desired was what has eluded Kyrgyzstan for the past fourteen years-- true independence from Moscow and the other parties that parlayed for influence in Bishkek.

The "Reemergence" of Islam

When speaking of the Muslim World, few would turn their thoughts to the Soviet Union. Why should they? An atheist empire by definition, the U.S.S.R hardly seemed a stronghold of Islam. Many, as a result, might be surprised to find that the Soviet Union had a Muslim population that ranked fifth in the world in terms of sheer numbers¹⁰. After becoming independent, Islam came back into the public sphere in Kyrgyzstan—when Askar Akayev was inaugurated as Kyrgyzstan's first president, he held the Koran in one hand and the constitution in the other (though given the respect he showed towards the latter, his commitment to the former is uncertain)¹¹.

Most individuals I approached were unwilling to delve too deeply into the topic of Islam. While the Kyrgyz population is predominantly Muslim, the secular traditions of the USSR effectively pushed Islam out of the public sphere for more than forty years. Recent years, however, has seen a reemergence of the region's traditionally dominant cultural force.

Ahmed:

One day, I had the fortune of stumbling upon a mosque; though small, it was centrally located and had a large gathering of worshipers. Walking about the structure, I noticed a middle-aged man sitting alone on a bench not far from the entrance. Having never been inside a mosque, I approached the man and asked in Russian if I

¹⁰ Eickelman ,pg 3

¹¹ Karagiannis, pg 72

was allowed to enter. Immediately, my poor Russian (or perhaps it was my shorts) gave away my already lackluster disguise. Clearly, I was no Slav. The man, who for variety's sake I'll refer to as Ahmed, proceeded to elicit my surprise by changing the language of our conversation to English. After begrudgingly surrendering my place-of-citizenship, Ahmed was not only willing but indeed eager to take me inside his place of worship.

Before going inside, Ahmed explained, I would need a toplee (hat). Taking me across the street, Ahmed brought me to a bazaar which apparently specialized in many hats of Central Asia (the people of the region seem to have a particular knack for arguing over who's national hat belonged to who first). Picking up a subtle brown and white specimen, Ahmed declared that this was exactly what I needed; not being in any position argue the practical applications of tradition hats, I quickly agreed and moved to purchase my ticket for entrance into the mosque. Ahmed, however, immediately waved away my payment and purchased the hat for me! A gift he said, for his new American friend.

Equipped with new (and I must say rather novel) headwear, I was finally prepared to accomplish one of my long-time goals of experiencing the splendor of the mechet from within. Upon entering, there was little more than a slight amount of attention given to my arrival. It was, to say the least, an interesting experience; I had never before witnessed the rituals associated with Islam. Not wanting to overstay my already generous welcome, I decided to exchange contact information with Ahmed with the hopes of interviewing him later.

Anara: The clash of Secular and Religious Education

Anara, a school-teacher, still harbored a deep sense of respect and admiration for what the Soviet Union achieved. Having worked in the education sphere her entire life, her observations regarding the subsequent decay of Kyrgyz public schools and institutions were particularly enlightening.

This was never the case during Soviet times, she claimed. Education was a primary concern and a central piece of the Kremlin's plans for Central Asia. The level to which Anara held the Soviet method and practices approached undeniable heights. "If there were still Soviet students", she began, "AIDS would never have reached us here [in Kyrgyzstan]". Without a doubt, Soviet pedagogy occupied a lofty position in her mind. It is not surprising, considering this predisposition, that when asked about the importance of the Russian language in Kyrgyzstan, that Anara was adamant in one belief: that without it, her students would lag terribly behind those in other countries. They were already at a disadvantage, she explained, without the resources that the Turkish schools provided. Take away the Russian textbooks--or rather, the ability to comprehend them-- and the hope for education in mathematics or the sciences was effectively made all the more difficult.

This worried her; that was certain. This fear, however, was matched if not surpassed by another: the growing Islamification of secondary education. Turkish private schools (institutions not funded by the Turkish government) are both a boon and threat to Kyrgyzstan; on one hand, she remarked, they offered an education of

higher caliber than what the local schools could provide. At the same time, they often indoctrinated Muslim messages into their curriculum-- something which clearly made Anara uncomfortable.

In reminiscing about the former U.S.S.R, Anara repeatedly came back to focus on what she saw as the growing threat of Arabic and Muslim influences. When I first brought up the subject of Islam she countered my question--"in what language do you speak with God?", she demand. Caught off guard-- I was the one with all the questions, or so I had thought-- I hesitated before responding. After a bit of thought, I gave her the answer she was clearly anticipating: English. "Of course", she agreed. At first, she left me completely bewildered by remaining silent; was she also speaking to God in English? That seemed unlikely given the purpose of the translator I had brought along. Finally, she explained: "You speak with God in English, the Germans pray in German, the French in French". Now we were getting somewhere. "Why, [then], should we pray in Arabic?" she questioned.

She was apparently not alone in questioning this situation. Recently, she explained, Kyrgyz politicians and celebrities had refused to use Arabic versions of the Koran. Instead, they took up the mantle of using Kyrgyz as the language of worship. She was, after all, a Muslim, and her qualms were not with the religion but rather the foreign influence it invited.

Commentary:

This has been a central concern and obvious obsession of the West in Central Asia: the dangers posed by a rise of Islamic extremism and terrorism. While the preoccupation is understandable, the basic foundation for such worries is flawed; Central Asia is not, and has rarely been, a breeding ground for radicalism.

While in Kyrgyzstan, I had the chance to hear remarks made by Roza Otunbayeva, the former president of Kyrgyzstan, at an event hosted by the Central Asian Studies Institute. Ms. Otunbayeva made an excellent point of focusing on the practical realities of the day, rather than preoccupying oneself with the theoretical "what ifs". After a talk given by an Afghan expert on the dangers of the 2014 U.S. pullout, Roza asked a pointed question: had the researcher ever actually been to Afghanistan? The answer, which was more than a bit shocking, was no. "These big scary monsters", she replied, referring to the possibility of religious extremism spilling over into Central Asia, were just that: scary monsters, just like the ones we feared under our beds as children.

Islam never left Central Asia. More importantly, in examining the current status of the religion in the region, care must be taken to see it in its indigenous state. Projecting Wahhabism or other radical movements from the Middle East serves to do nothing more than alienate the moderate majority.

The Future of Women: The Demise of the Soviet Heroine?

Olga:

Olga's profession is that of a travel consultant; she organizes trips, many of which she personally participates in, throughout Central Asia for expats and other visitors. While her job might sound pleasantly interesting, her own background is, perhaps, even more so fascinating. Born in Kyrgyzstan, but now an American citizen, Olga identifies more with her ethnic than national heritages—she's Russian, and a proud one at that. It's certainly not hard to imagine why: fluent in three languages (Russian, English, and Turkish), an American degree, and living a decidedly upper-class lifestyle in Kyrgyzstan, Olga has all the trappings of starring in the “Real Housewives of Bishkek” (minus the husband and convenient access to television production companies). Oh, and she is breathtakingly beautiful. Indeed, this is a woman blessed with the stereotypical looks that many Americans, or at least the male ones, associate with Slavic women.

This emphasis on aesthetics has a purpose; Olga's story revolves around the societal preconceptions which surround the Russian woman: morally bereft, wealthy aspirants with a heart more frosty than Mother Winter herself. While these are, of course, generalizations, Olga contends that to the majority of Kyrgyz and other Central Asian males, they represent the opinion of the majority, not the exception—“Kyrgyz men fear us”, Olga explains, “We do not take orders from them or let them control us”. Proud of her independent nature, Olga concedes that her

position as a Russian woman has complicated her business dealings: “Sometimes Kyrgyz men won’t do business with me”, she explains. This does not seem worry her too much—“it’s not important”, she shrugs, “most of my money comes from the foreigners...I think they prefer Russian guides, we know more”.

Whether she knows more than the average Kyrgyz guide or not, Olga has not always found her forays into the neighboring countries to be easy. Two years ago, while she was leading a group of expats around Uzbekistan, she was solicited for prostitution by the driver she had hired. “I was outraged!” she exclaims, and when I asked if this would have occurred during Soviet times, she replied with a resounding never.

Olga views her former country as sliding backwards, increasingly influenced by Middle Eastern culture and missionaries. I asked whether she planned to continue staying in Kyrgyzstan or move back to America, an opportunity most Kyrgyz would only too much enjoy. She answered that recent events and trends worried her; that she was saving and hoped to move as soon as possible. While her business was here, she couldn’t see a future for herself or her potential family. “I have to think of my future daughters”, and—in the eyes of Olga—that future seems to away from the complex gender politics of Kyrgyzstan.

Yvonna:

Olga’s sister, Yvonna enjoyed a similarly privileged lifestyle. Unlike Olga, however, Yvonna lacked American citizenship and had never left her country of birth.

It was hard for me to understand what exactly Yvonna's profession was; she claimed to be a dermatologist, but had never received any formal training in anything remotely medical. Either way, Yvonna enjoyed an existence which can be compared, if not equated, to an American doctor.

. After explaining the general concept of my research, Yvonna seemed a little contemptuous of my goals—in her opinion, little had changed in Kyrgyzstan since the fall of the U.S.S.R, I was wasting both hers and my own time. When I presented my first question: “What’s the biggest change in your life since the dismantling of the Soviet Union”, she scoffed—“what do you mean, I still live in the Soviet Union!”. A bit surprised, I asked her to expound on why she felt this way; her reasoning was both generally interesting and particularly poignant in understanding the deep socio-economic divides of her country.

A relatively rich Russian women, the life of Yvonna had, indeed, experienced little change in the past two decades. Prior to the independence of Kyrgyzstan, her family had, in her own words, been “powerful” (though she refused to explain in what way). She went on to explain that her father frequently imported (presumably illegally) goods from Eastern Europe. When I asked what types of items, she pointed to my living room cabinet and told me it was clearly Romanian.

Wherever her wealth came from, Yvonna was direct in expressing her desire to be surrounded by like-minded (and pocketed) people. She argued that outside of the lower-class in her country—an arguably large demographic given the average \$2000 GPP of her Kyrgyzstan—that discrimination between ethnic or gender roles was

almost non-existent. Sure poorer people envied her, she explained, but her status as a wealthy woman buffered her from feeling the effects of any social or economic plight.

I couldn't help but ask Yvonna a relatively impolite question—"was she living life in a bubble". To my surprise, she laughed. It wasn't a bubble, she suggested, but rather a cloud. While Yvonna gave me an utterly interesting and certainly unique interview, I left the meeting with more than a small desire to see her come crashing down to reality. Her sister had told me that she would be a nice contrast to herself, and of that she was certainly correct.

It was not until after our interview that it occurred to me that Yvonna should be one of the individuals most invested in Kyrgyzstan; she stands the most to lose from any sort of instability. It was odd then, I thought, that she was not concerned at all with politics (she had told me that she did not vote and that she worried little about the proposed language laws). She spoke no Kyrgyz and, unlike her sister, had little skill in the English language. As far as her daughters were concerned, she saw no need for them to learn either language either—her family, it seems, occupied a lofty post, one which was a remnant of Soviet times. I hope, for her daughters' sakes that the next revolution does not take aim as this bastion of anachronistic privilege

Bermet:

Bermet, a Kyrgyz woman who owns and operates a local cantina at one of Kyrgyzstan's major universities, could not have been a starker contrast to Yvonna. A self-made entrepreneur, she was adamant that Kyrgyzstan was not only the most

business-friendly of the Central Asian states, but also the most proud to celebrate its successful women. At the same time, she explained, there have been some worrying trends in recent years. Of these, she placed a specific emphasis on the Kyrgyz tradition of “bride napping”. According to Bermet, the occurrence of these activities has spiked since the 1990s, with women become ever more vulnerable to the sexual exploitation which often follows kidnapping.

For Bermet, this was an issue that struck close to home – many of the young women she employed were victims of this activity. Eventually, Bermet began to focus her hiring on women who had experienced this injustice. These individuals, she explained, are one of the most at-risk segments of the Kyrgyz population; after being “despoiled”, many families insist that the women marry her abductor. If she refuses, she’s liable to end up an old babushka.

While she was realistic that her impact was small, Bermet’s insistence on making opportunities for those shunned by many of their families and friends was an impressive expression of human empathy. Many of the young women she employed had gone onto universities or found better paying professions—Bermet was proud of them.

Wanting to know more about the phenomenon of bride-napping, I asked Bermet to explain its origin. It was a “tradition”, after all—was the revival of this activity a way for the Kyrgyz to celebrate and reinforce their independence? Bermet answered no. In her opinion, bride-napping had only become popular in recent years and was not an integral part of Kyrgyz identity. Instead, she claimed, this was merely

a way for men to get what they wanted—or perhaps who in this case. Bermet explained that often a man would bride-nap a girl who he barely knew, some of who were already in relationships.

I wondered, at this point, if she had ill feelings about the increased influence of the Islamic World on Kyrgyzstan; were countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran making it harder for Kyrgyz women to maintain their rights. No, she replied; rather, it was the West that made it hard for her fellow countrywomen. The casual attitude towards sex and open relationships is what she considered harmful to the status of women in her country.

Bermet had worked hard to further herself and her family; other women merely used their bodies to advance their position. It was an interesting turn-around; while I had considered the influence of conservative religious influences, Bermet was the first individual to suggest that liberal attitudes might be equally, if not more, to blame.

Conclusion:

Notions of identity and the perception of an individual's place in society continue to shape the trajectory of Kyrgyzstan—and, indeed, the whole of Central Asia. With the most recent incident of ethnic strife being in early July, 2013, the contention between minority and majority populations is hardly on the decline. There is, by most accounts, a serious potential for combustion. Often, I was surprised by some of the conversations; did this person really believe what they just said? Eventually, I came across a quote which put it into a much better perspective:

“It is all too common to hear someone from another mnemonic community confidently assert something about the past and catch ourselves thinking, “She can’t really believe that, can she?” Perhaps the most striking point to keep in mind, however, is that the other person is likely thinking the same about us”¹²

I don’t doubt that the majority of the interviewees were genuine in their beliefs and declarations. It’s simply important to understand that racial relations in Kyrgyzstan can oftentimes be passionate—and impartiality was not often encountered.

. This existence, however, is closely tied with the historical development of U.S.S.R in general and the Kyrgyz State in particular.

In order to understand and help alleviate the current conditions of conflict in post-Soviet Central Asia, it is imperative that an understanding of the values, traditions, and overall belief systems of the local people be understood. This, in turn, necessitates more than an examination of one segment of the population: its reputation as being a hotbed of ethnic tensions overshadows a far more important fact about Central Asia—that it is, and has been for centuries, a region rich in diversity which ranges from ethnicity to linguistic.

In many ways, the Kyrgyz Republic finds itself in the adolescence of its independence; to be perfectly colloquial, things are tough. Under the surface of headlines and rhetoric, however, are the individuals who live their lives in an increasingly modernized world. While there is no easy answer to the developmental

¹² Wertsh, pg 6

challenges that Kyrgyzstan faces, the Republic finds itself as the sole example of democracy in the region and a nation which is dynamic, if sometimes unstable. Most of the individuals I spoke with were optimistic, almost all were certain that pragmatism would prevail in the end.

Kyrgyzstan and its people have not been dealt a particularly enviable hand—either in the realm of geopolitics or economics—but it's one in which they seem to find a grand sense of pride. While identity was, as is often the case, contentious subjects in this country, the people of Kyrgyzstan (not solely the Kyrgyz people) have a rich and interesting history and seem to be on track for an exciting future.

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