



Evaluations of perestroika in post-Soviet Central Asia: Public views in contemporary Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan



Timur Dadabaev

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Japan

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that the different and sometimes contradictory public narratives of perestroika constitute an essential part of understanding the expectations of people regarding perestroika and their evaluation in the post-perestroika years. These narratives also underline the notion that post-Soviet governments have been unable to consolidate new constructs of memory with respect to perestroika. Historical construction regarding the pre-perestroika years of the Soviet administration in most of the post-Soviet Central Asian (CA) countries is conducted along the ideological lines associated with the post-independence years in each of the republics.

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1. Introduction

Perestroika was launched with slogans of economic reform that gradually transformed into calls for political restructuring. In its struggle with the old guard of the party, the political leadership relied largely on public opinion and public support for reform. However, as can be concluded from interviews with senior citizens, there was a considerable degree of difference between the public's understanding regarding perestroika and the Soviet leadership's articulated goals. In addition, the opinions of ordinary people were highly optimistic regarding the objectives that often went unrealized. Based on interviews with elderly citizens in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, this paper investigates their evaluations of the process of perestroika and their current assessment of it. These evaluations are made from two basic positions. First, they represent the memories of ordinary citizens concerning various events that occurred in their lifetimes during the perestroika years. Second, they reconsider perestroika years from the position of the interviewees' current post-Soviet life conditions. Thus these reconsiderations also reflect the public's attitude toward present life.

Although a large body of literature focuses on perestroika and its public perception, the majority of these studies focus on Russia and other non-Asian republics of the former Soviet Union. Thus, the views of the Russian public are frequently generalized as the views of the people of the entire Soviet Union. Additionally, the views of ordinary people at the periphery are often taken for granted and not brought to the forefront. Another aspect underlining the importance of examining Central Asia's perestroika narratives is to observe whether the Central Asian countries experiences and understandings of perestroika are similar to those of other states and if the views of the CA public on perestroika have been shaped by their shared Soviet past or by other factors.

This study builds on the assumption that people in the CA republics shared the same living conditions, everyday life experiences and working environments in an economic and political system that was similar to the other Soviet republics. In

this sense, these experiences and narratives of the Soviet era can be considered comparable. However, this study also speculates that the post–independence experiences and the political, economic and social systems of these states differ significantly from one another. Supposedly, these differences have influenced not only how people shape their views of post–independence but also, and often primarily, how people recall, reconstruct, narrate and reconcile independence with their pre-independence past.

To compare and interpret the experiences of ordinary people in their everyday lives, this study raises the following set of questions. How do people recall their expectations of perestroika in the peripheral republics of the former USSR? How do people re-evaluate these expectations today? How are their expectations related to their present lives? What factors serve as yardsticks for the public in their evaluations and interpretations of the past?

The primary objective of this paper is to examine the recollections and public narratives of elderly citizens in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan regarding their understandings, perceptions and everyday experiences during and related to the perestroika years. In so doing, this paper aims to address the legacy of Soviet perestroika in the CA republics during the post–independence period. This article also seeks to tease out the nuances in the polarized official memory discourses of the Soviet past, which has been portrayed on a binary scale of either open criticism or patronizing approval of perestroika. In addition, this article aims to reveal the interconnectedness of memory, cognition and historical construction in seeking to demonstrate how they shape respondents' individual selves.

Oral interviews were used as the main method of data collection for two main reasons. First, recollections of perestroika are rapidly vanishing from the historical discourse as people of the generation who experienced perestroika pass away. Although most CA people are literate, their histories and stories are rarely reflected in the historical construction of their political states. Second, as noted by scholars of oral history, “the business of relating past and present for social Methodology has for most the time been done orally; it still is so” (Tonkin, 1995, p. 3).

2. Methodology

The project included 75 semi-structured interviews per each country, in which respondents were asked 11 general questions regarding their Soviet experiences beginning with personal recollections and views of various significant events, including perestroika (Dadabaev, 2009, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2015).

The sample group whose responses are used in this article consist of ordinary people aged 55 to 80, with a few outliers over the age of 80. Focus on this age group has been determined by the fact that the original survey did not explicitly deal with perestroika era but goes beyond the focus of current article covering questions related to experiences and memories of respondents regarding entire Soviet period. Therefore, it was imperative to have a sample group of individuals in the age groups which personally experienced the most important events in Soviet history. This is done to cover the memories of the Soviet time by those who spent the most active years of their lives in the Soviet cultural and social environment. Although the older generation of respondents was preferred by this study, the logistics of getting access to the desired age group turned out to be one of the most significant challenges. As a result, the lower age of certain respondents was around retirement age (55 for women and 60 years old for men) with no limitations put on the upper age. The lowest age was recorded in Uzbekistan where for various reasons, respondents in the older age groups felt reluctant to actively participate in the interviews (Table 1).

Table 1
Memory of Soviet Past project first-stage sample (2005–2014).^a

	Gender		Age groups			
	Male	Female	55–60	60–70	70–80	Over 80
Uzbekistan	42	32	34	24	13	4
Kyrgyzstan	41	34	0	24	39	12
Kazakhstan	43	32	0	30	36	9

^a This is preliminary data calculation as data processing is still in progress.
Compiled by author

Such wide coverage of the senior citizens provides for a diversity of recollections, depending on the experiences of respondents. At the same time, study recognizes that this age difference probably made the difference in the views and ways how Soviet era in general and perestroika (in this article) in particular were accepted and remembered later. Another contributing factor to the diversity in the views was how successful or unsuccessful in future the interviewees have become. Although the sample was intended to include representatives from each region in the three countries studied, equal regional representation was not achieved due to the limited sample size.

In terms of regional representation, in the overall sample size the utmost effort has been made to select more interviewees (5–6 people) from capitals and larger, hence more densely populated, regions, while ensuring that interviewees from the demographically smaller regions are also represented. Interviews were conducted from July to October 2006–2009 in Uzbekistan, from March to October of 2008–2011 in Kyrgyzstan and from August to October of 2013–2015 in Kazakhstan (Table 2).

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