

American Councils Title VIII Research Scholar Program

Project: “Tajikistan’s Perestroika: Reconsidering Reform and its Aftermath (1985-1991)”

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Final Report

I. Overview

This final report represents a brief overview of the activities conducted and research findings collated as a result of the Title VIII Research Scholar grant entitled “Tajikistan’s Perestroika: Reconsidering Reform and its Aftermath.” The grant activities were conducted in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, between May and December 2016. During the course of these seven months, work was focused on the collection and analysis of Soviet-era archival materials, as well as contemporary memoir and newspaper sources. In addition, interviews were conducted with Soviet-era Tajik politicians, activists, and entrepreneurs. Overall, this Title VIII Research Scholar grant was instrumental for the timely completion of dissertation research, and helped to demonstrate significant gaps in the current academic literature on the collapse of the USSR. As a result, it may also provide an initial basis to reconsider the “lessons” of the Soviet collapse for US economic and foreign policy.

II. Research Goals

When I arrived in Tajikistan in May 2016, I had three major goals for the period of research ahead of me. First, I had hoped to gain access to the Central Tajik archives and to work with materials produced by the government of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic (Tajik SSR). Second, building upon earlier trips to Dushanbe and relationships established then, I had hoped to meet with Soviet-era politicians in Dushanbe, as well as with those individuals who had been

involved in the organization and implementation of economic reforms during the 1980s. Finally, my hope had been to contextualize all of this data within the broader history of perestroika and its reforms, which I had previously investigated during three research trips to Moscow (June-July 2014, February-March 2015; August-September 2015).

Together, the materials collected in Moscow and Dushanbe were intended to provide the central foundation for my ongoing PhD dissertation, which investigates the implementation and impact of perestroika in the Tajik SSR. By collating and comparing data from both the Soviet center and periphery, I had hoped to demonstrate the existence of a divergent historical narrative – one that emphasized the economic collapse of the late 1980s and helped to clarify both the causes and the consequences of that collapse. While the literature on the collapse of the USSR that has developed since 1991 has tended to either emphasize the “structural” problems of the planned economy (for example, Khanin 1991; Brezski 1999) or the “rise of nationalism” in various Soviet republics (i.e., Suny 1993; Beissinger 2002), my preliminary findings have pointed to both the general structural sustainability of the Soviet economy prior to 1985 and the direct impact of Mikhail Gorbachev’s economic reforms on both Soviet economics and the functioning of Soviet society. Rather than long-suppressed national or economic frustrations, my research suggests, it was instead the sudden economic collapse of perestroika and the attendant social upheavals it engendered that led the system to be rent asunder by 1991.

III. Research Activities

During the seven months of my Title VIII Research Scholar Program grant (May – December 2016), my research activities in Tajikistan were divided between (a) archival work, (b) secondary research in Tajikistan’s libraries, and (c) interviews conducted with local scholars and former Soviet politicians. Of these three activities, I spent the greatest amount of time working in the Tajik archives, to which I was able to secure access in early June 2016. This provided me with an extended period in which to explore the archival holdings of the Central State Archive of the Republic of Tajikistan (TsGART as per its standard acronym) and

the State Archive of Movie and Photograph Documentation (GAKFD RT). At the archives, I focused my attention on documents produced by the Tajik SSR between 1985 and 1991, although I did also work through some files from earlier and later dates to contextualize the central material. The documents I worked with included files from various Ministries, the Council of Ministers of the Tajik SSR, the Supreme Soviet of the Tajik SSR, and other state bodies. While I also attempted to gain access to the Archive of the Communist Party of Tajikistan (CPT), this proved unsuccessful; at the moment, the CPT seems generally unwilling to provide access to any researchers, local or foreign.

In addition to archival work, I also spent time in Dushanbe's libraries, including the National Library of the Republic of Tajikistan and the Library of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan. In both libraries I had the opportunity to consult the periodical holdings from the perestroika period, verify statistical and other data against Soviet-era publications, and engage with the Tajikistani secondary literature on the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period. This latter historiography was especially valuable in terms of contextualizing and properly situating my own research. It is also frequently under-cited in Western accounts, and I was keen to include many citations to local researchers' work in my study on Tajikistan.

When not in the Tajik archives or libraries, I also conducted interviews with former Soviet-era politicians, economists, early Soviet businessmen, and intellectuals involved in glasnost's burgeoning of political activism in the late 1980s. These interviews helped to fill out certain important points of back-room politicking, lobbying, and background arguments that were not included in archival or other written sources, and also helped to clarify many unclear issues I had come across elsewhere. Another helpful source for clarifying background disagreements and political conflicts during perestroika was the collection of local memoirs I acquired from local booksellers, some of which are not held in Dushanbe's library collections. Given that these memoirs have been published primarily in Tajik, I also found it expedient to take additional Tajik language lessons. These lessons allowed me to more fully and comprehensively

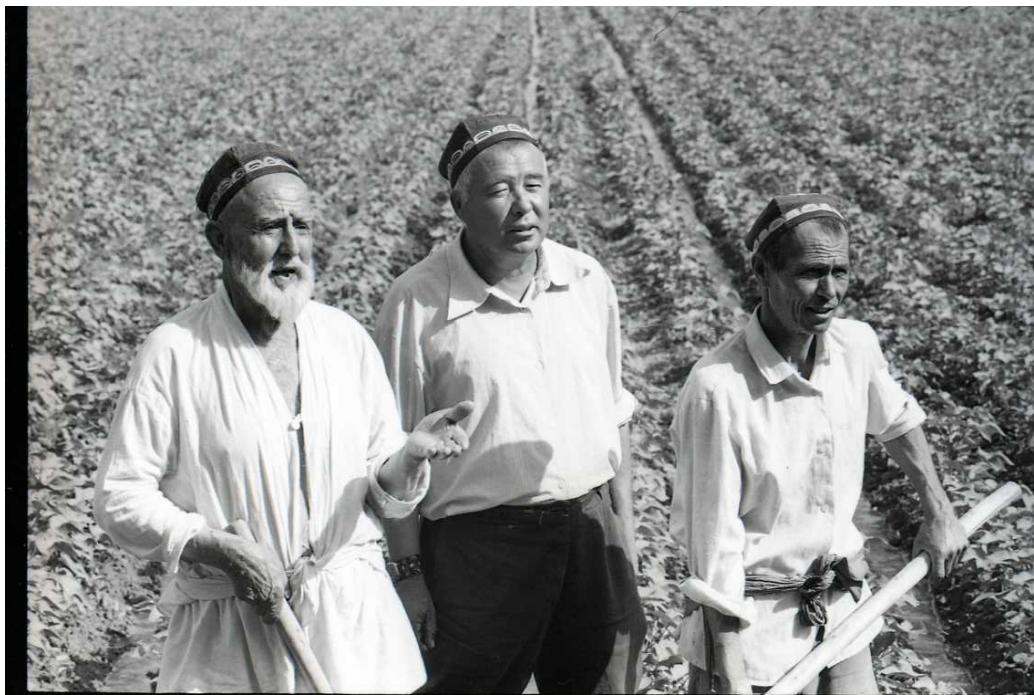
understand the memoirs, as well as to situate them within the broader expanse of sources I had collected in Tajikistan.

IV. Research Findings

The research I conducted as part of this Title VIII Research Grant was integral to my broader PhD project, which argues that the period of perestroika (1985-1991) constituted a series of territorially heterogeneous processes across the whole of the USSR. Instead of the unified wave of Moscow-centered reform or nationalist uprising it has often been depicted as, my research in both Moscow and Tajikistan has indicated that economic and political outcomes differed significantly during the period. In addition, the archival and other primary evidence collected in this study overwhelmingly point to the economics of perestroika, and especially Gorbachev's attempts to introduce elements of marketization, as central elements of the ultimate Soviet collapse in 1991.

First of all, the research I conducted in Tajikistan over the course of 2016 allowed me to properly situate the Tajik economy within the larger Soviet command economy both before and during perestroika. Working with archival records produced by the Tajik Council of Ministers, Ministry of Finance, and other related bodies, I was able to reconstruct the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic's (Tajik SSR) budget from the 1980s, as well as the levels of "subsidies" provided to the budget and the republic as a whole during the period. Countering arguments on both extreme ends of the spectrum about Tajikistan's "radical subsidization" (Zaslavsky 1992; Epkenhans 2016) or "colonial exploitation" (Umarov 1990; Nishanov 2012), the budget and transfer figures demonstrate that Tajikistan received limited central support during the 1980s. In exchange, the republic provided to the central government in Moscow shipments of raw cotton nearly equal in export and tax value to the total amount of "subsidies" sent to Dushanbe. This provides strong evidence in favor of the consistent, if slow, modernization and development of the republic, much in line with Soviet ideology and stated goals. It also indicates, at least through the mid-1980s, of the continuation of the policy of "equalization," according to which slightly higher levels of development funding should have been allocated to

outlying and less developed republics. Accounts of equalization (Gleason 1991; Martin 2001; Walker 2003) have tended to suggest that it tapered off or was abandoned by the 1970s, but this research provides strong evidence to the contrary.



Tajik workers adapt to new economic conditions. Cotton farmers in Khodzhenstskii District, 1987. Credit: M. Babadzhanov, GAKFD RT, R3 30, 0-103927.

In addition, research into the Tajik SSR's economic ministries helped to clarify the impact of Gorbachev's perestroika reforms on the functioning of the Tajik economy. Combining archival records with newspaper reports, contemporary research dissertations and memoirs, I was able to establish the growth of private enterprise ("cooperatives") during the years of perestroika, as well as the slow crumbling of local enterprises. Linking the economic trends in Dushanbe to the reforms passed in Moscow, I also managed to tie changes in enterprise behavior and budgets to the particular laws passed and implemented in Moscow. For example, by considering the annual tax receipts of the "Tajikatlas" silk factory in Dushanbe, I came to understand how, over the course of 1987-1991, the factory radically increased the percentage of profits it was able to retain from the state budget while at the same time decreasing both production and sales. Fascinatingly, the factory was operating in complete accordance with Soviet law: the 1987 Law on State Enterprises had in fact provided for the shift towards

factory control over profits and greater choice in terms of production targets and outputs.

Expanding outwards, my research demonstrates how the behavior of factories like “Tajikatlas,” when amalgamated, came to undermine the very fabric of the Tajik economy. Insofar as factories began to refuse contracts from other enterprises and attempt to produce only those products that carried the highest profit margins, many enterprises became unable to produce anything at all – their inputs simply never arrived. This then further incentivized the very same factories and enterprises to seek alternative paths for profit-making, which increasingly involved the use of cooperatives founded “under” a particular enterprise. By funneling resources and finances from the enterprise – which in many cases was now disincentivized from production – to cooperatives, factory directors were often able to semi-legally acquire a portion of the factory profits that were supposed to have been used to increase production and drive innovation. Once the reforms to enterprises and private business activity took effect in 1988 the consequences were quickly felt in Tajikistan: the economy went into recession from 1989, with drops in production and tax revenue notable throughout the final years of perestroika. By 1991 the economy was essentially in free-fall, with the republican government starved for revenue and enterprises left with hardly any inputs to produce the goods the republic needed.

Having outlined the impact of Gorbachev’s economic reforms on the functioning of the Tajik economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I have also endeavored to piece together the social and political changes that occurred in this environment. Working again with archival materials from TsGART, as well as contemporary newspaper articles, memoirs, and interviews, I have begun the process of tracking political changes in the Tajik capital between 1985 and 1991. In part, I have investigated the controversial resignation of Rahmon Nabiev from the position of First Secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan in 1985. While this has sometimes been connected to broader reform initiatives under Gorbachev (Olcott 1990) or Nabiev’s opposition to Moscow-promoted personnel changes in Tajikistan (Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013), the material I have unearthed indicates otherwise. Instead, Nabiev appears to have been removed

as the result of internal politicking in Dushanbe; Moscow demonstrated at most indifference towards his fate. Giving the lie to Dushanbe's reputation as amongst the calmest of Soviet republics, this background political maneuvering in the Tajik SSR (built around, it should be noted, networks of political patronage far more than the regionalism that has often been argued) grew over the course of perestroika. As Moscow moved away from its policy of equalization, cut its support for regional development, and increasingly failed to clear up disagreements between republics, the higher authority to which all parties in Dushanbe had been loyal became increasingly distant and less influential. Much as the economy began to fail, political tension began to grow.



The new politics of perestroika. Tajik President Mahkamov meets with concerned citizens, 1991. Credit: V. Smirnov, GAKFD RT, I1, 0-108077.

This tension exploded into the open in the now infamous “February 1990 events,” when Dushanbe was engulfed in a week of violence and rioting nominally started by rumors about the arrival of Armenian refugees. In contrast to many accounts of the riots (Kobilova 2007; Davlatov 2015; Mullojanov 2016), my research has indicated that the riots were not organized by one or another political party – but were instead the expression of pent-up political and economic frustration on the part of many Tajik Soviet citizens. While organizations such as “Rastokhez” may have helped to foment the conditions

that led to the riots – and did hold a meeting on February 09 that in some ways created the initial spark – their centrality to the actual violence was secondary to the underlying economic collapse in the republic (see Scarborough 2016; 2016a). Rioters were motivated as much by anger at the loss of their jobs and livelihoods as any loyalty to one or another political party, and even the factions that arose as a consequence of the violence within the Tajik Soviet government had a tendency to switch sides when it was convenient.

While not indicative of the final balance of powers, the 1990 riots did set the broader tone for the next two years in Tajikistan. As the economy continued to collapse, the Tajik people were increasingly left unemployed, unpaid, and without sources of support. By the summer of 1991, the USSR had essentially cut off all payments to the Tajik SSR, leaving the republic functionally bankrupt and unable to pay its bills, let alone many salaries or pensions. This left the Communist Party of Tajikistan and its leader, then President Mahkamov, open to attack following the collapse of the conservative Putsch in August 1991. Seen as an advocate of the (now defunct and disintegrating) Soviet order, Mahkamov was summarily forced out of office by angry crowds and disappointed government deputies. Yet this, too, failed to change the underlying conditions. Throughout the rest of the 1991 and early 1992 the economy continued to decline, predicating the increasingly social unrest, unending demonstrations, sectorial violence, and ultimately civil war in Tajikistan. Drawing upon established social science research linking economic downturns to civil war and social upheaval (Davies 1974; Gurr 2010), my research ultimately argues that it was the economic collapse of the Soviet order, more than any other factor, which led the newborn Tajik state to war.

V. Policy Implications

Although this research is built around the case study of a peripheral Soviet republic, it nonetheless has important policy implications for both our broader understanding of the Soviet economy and the final collapse of the USSR. On the one hand, this research project helps to elucidate the actual functioning of the Soviet economy prior to perestroika: it shows how the system functioned on the

ground, as well the imbalances and risks it faced. Rather than a deeply inefficient planned system shuddering under the weight of its own massive industries and collective farms, it demonstrates that in at least some corners of the USSR the Soviet economy continue to grow and improve standards of living into the mid 1980s. In Tajikistan, for example, while fragile, the economy grew at notable rates through the 1970s and 1980s, bringing notable improvements to larger and larger swaths of the local populace.

When the choice was made to reform the USSR, this research shows, it was made less on the basis of objective economic data and more on the assumption that only markets could lead to long-term sustainable growth. The very attempt to engrain market incentives into the Soviet system, however, was directly linked to the Soviet collapse that played out in slow motion from 1987 to 1991. The reforms to Soviet enterprises and the creation of “cooperative” businesses together broke the back of the planned system, leading to economic downturn, recession, and rebellion against a longer functioning system.

This narrative has important policy implications about the inevitable “efficiency” of market systems in comparison to socialist planned economies. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991 it has often been taken for granted that planned economies – and even over-regulation of market economies – should be avoided, insofar as the planned economies of the Eastern Bloc proved themselves “inefficient” and “unsustainable” through their collapse during perestroika. Yet research such as my own calls into question this simple equation of cause and effect: rather than fundamentally flawed, the underlying structure of the Soviet economy was instead rent asunder during the 1980s. Thus the system that collapsed was hardly the planned economy that had existed for decades – but rather a strange hybrid that included a large number of market elements. This should lead to important questions about the inherent advantages of the market over planned economic structures.

Second, this research should also elucidate larger policy questions about the causes of sectarian violence and civil war. By tracking the degradation of the Tajik economy over the course of perestroika, this project shows how economic

downturn predicated social uprisings and violence at every turn. The further the Tajik economy fell, the more incentive there was for unemployed, underpaid, and frustrated workers to head into the streets to protest. By 1992 these same workers, left without support from either Dushanbe or Moscow, were swept up into the incipient Tajik Civil War, which ultimately left tens of thousands dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. Importantly, this research helps to show that the causes of the Tajik Civil War were far more closely related to economic collapse than to the religious fervor, interethnic divisions, or regionalism that has often been suggested as its foremost triggers.

If the more primordial causes – religion, culture, ethnicity – are stripped away from the standard explanations of the Tajik Civil War, much as this research suggests they should be, then its foundations remain to be identified in the underlying social and economic structure in which it erupted. This finding also has significant policy implications, insofar as explanations for regional conflicts worldwide are often sought in one or another population’s “cultural,” “religious,” or “colonial” history. Given the experience of Tajikistan and its descent into civil war, this study suggests, such searches would be well served to consider the immediate economic experiences of the peoples who, at any or another point in time, chose to rebel or otherwise ended up in sectarian violence.

VI. Co-Curricular Activities

During the time I spent in Dushanbe in 2016, I was thankfully able to coordinate my research activities with local historians and other academics from both the Tajik Academy of Sciences and local universities. Upon arriving in Tajikistan in May 2016, I was able to establish a formal relationship with the Institute of History, Ethnography, and Archeology named for A. Donish of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan. Having become the Institute’s “intern,” I was then able to secure archival access without much difficulty, and also had the opportunity to regularly discuss my research with the Institute’s staff, including its director, Zikriyo Inomovich Akramov.

In addition, based on previous trips to Tajikistan, I had also established close relationships with academics at both Tajik National University (TNU) and the

Russian-Tajik Slavonic University (RTSU). Using these previously established contacts, I also met with professors at both universities during my time in Dushanbe, discussing my own research and learning about their current research initiatives. I was also pleased to have the opportunity to present a small selection of my initial research findings at a conference held at TNU in October 2016.

Finally, an adapted version of an article I had published in a British academic Journal (*Central Asian Survey*) was translated into Russian and published in a Tajik newspaper (*Asia-Plus*) in July 2016. This publication not only allowed me to share aspects of my work with many researchers in Dushanbe, but also expanded the field of my research, insofar as a few important former Soviet politicians contacted me after reading the article.

VII. Conclusions

The Title VIII Research Scholar Fellowship that I received through American Councils for International Education was instrumental for the timely completion of my PhD research. As a result of the fellowship, I have now been able to effectively balance Moscow-based archival evidence against its equivalent from Dushanbe, which will provide my dissertation with a unique “on the ground” perspective to the events and upheavals of perestroika. The extensive length of the fellowship and its level of financial support, moreover, made it possible to spend an extended period conducting research in Dushanbe. This meant that the archival materials collected could also be contextualized into the broader milieu of the Tajik SSR in the 1980s through the additional collection of memoir, interview, and newspaper materials. Having now completed my dissertation research, I am well positioned to finish my PhD in a timely manner.

For a detailed discussion of this research project’s concrete findings and an outline of my future plans, I refer the reader to sections IV-V and VIII.

VIII. Future Research Plans

Having now finalized the bulk of the research for my dissertation, my most immediate goal is to complete a draft of my PhD dissertation. I hope to finish an

initial draft in May or June 2017 and to then revise, submit, and defend the PhD before May 2018. As needed, I may also make a final follow-up research trip to Moscow, Russia to verify and clarify a few outstanding points, but overall am now well positioned to collate the data I have so far collected into a cohesive and comprehensible PhD.

In the meantime, I also hope to continue presenting my research findings at academic conferences. I plan on presenting some of the results of my study in Tajikistan at both an LSE seminar and an international conference on Central Asian Studies during the fall of 2017. I will also continue to seek out smaller seminars and conferences related to my topic of research, with the hope of presenting my research findings at least once more prior to the defense of my PhD in early 2018.

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