

Forging Soviet Citizens: Ideology, Identity, and Stability in the Soviet Union, 1930-1991  
September 5, 2014 to July 5, 2015  
Dushanbe, Tajikistan; Almaty, Kazakhstan

## **I. Research Abstract**

My dissertation utilizes archival records and oral histories to consider how citizenship evolved between the mid-1930s and the Soviet collapse. My research shows that beginning in the mid-1930s, the Soviet regime placed increasing emphasis on citizenship as a participatory institution and that people reacted positively to this idea. Archival sources include official publications, citizens' letters discussing constitutions and party programs, and propaganda campaigns, textbooks, and curricular development. Oral history interviews highlight personal dimensions of citizenship. Through research in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan (and eventually, in Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan), I consider the USSR's geographical complexity and the diversity of individual experience. My dissertation sheds light on how citizenship was cultivated and practiced, and how it contributed to the longevity of the Soviet state.

## **II. Research Goals**

To clarify our understanding of Soviet identity, my dissertation asks four primary questions. First, how did the Soviet state and Communist Party develop a sense of Soviet identity? Second, how did ideas of being Soviet evolve over time? Third, how did this identity differ across the Soviet Union? Finally, how did individuals respond to state ideology and understand their own identities during the Soviet period? To answer these questions, I focus concretely on the changing ideology of the "Soviet people" (*sovetskii narod*), the work of institutions like the Ministry of Education and civic organizations,

citizen letters, and individual memories, in order to understand how Soviet identity emerged through active involvement in the state, what I call “participatory citizenship.” I spent nine months conducting archival research and oral history interviews based in Dushanbe, Tajikistan (3 months); and Almaty, Kazakhstan (6 months), and anticipate another year of research in Russia, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine.

This builds on my previous work on the ideology of the “Soviet people” in the Soviet Union’s central newspapers, *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, and on research conducted during preliminary research trips to Russia and Ukraine in 2013 and 2014, and in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan in 2014-15. The concept, I previously argued, emerged in the mid-1930s to promote popular patriotism and loyalty when war loomed imminent. Following World War II, however, this ideology expanded to encompass notions of participatory citizenship: Soviet citizens were called to be actively involved in their state.

I extend this argument with my dissertation, through both archival sources and oral history interviews. In archives, I specifically consider the development of Communist Party propaganda; the work of public and civic institutions that delivered this ideology to Soviet citizens; and citizen letters written in connection with the Soviet constitutions (1936, 1977) and party programs (1961, 1986). Oral history interviews, building on countless conversations I have had with former Soviet citizens over the last decade, help me consider how people constructed their identities as they interacted with official ideology and state institutions.

Taken together, my research casts Soviet citizenship into a new light, challenging and building on existing literature in two key aspects. I focus squarely on Soviet identity, which historians have largely ignored or dismissed in favor of the smaller unit of ethno-

cultural “nationalities” (See: Martin 2001; Slezkine 1994; Hirsch 2005; Suny 1993).

Scholarly attention to nationalities policy has illuminated how the Soviet Union created, coopted, and exploited ethnic identities, but it has simultaneously contributed to a poor understanding of the overarching Soviet identity. Following Kate Brown (2004), my research, in contrast, returns the focus to Soviet identity. Yet for Brown, Soviet identity was assumed only in the absence of alternatives. I take ideological mobilization more literally to suggest that the state actively, increasingly, and successfully cultivated a Soviet identity, which often complemented national identities. That these identities could be mutually constitutive represents fresh insight into Soviet identity formation.

I also cast Soviet citizenship as an intuition into new light, building on exciting new studies like those of Serhy Yekelchuk (2014) and Denis Kozlov (2013). Rather than being simply imposed on Soviet citizens from above, my research suggests that, beginning in the 1930s and particularly in the decades following Stalin’s death, the Soviet state actively promoted concepts of citizenship that encouraged its citizens to envision themselves as active participants and contributing members in Soviet society.

### **III. Research Activities**

#### **a. Tajikistan (September to December 2014)**

Upon arrival in Tajikistan, I encountered numerous difficulties and obstacles for conducting my planned research. Although I found my way to the archive within the first week of my arrival, the process of getting approval for working in the archive took up nearly two months of my short 3.5 month research period planned for the country. As I waited for permission to use the archives, I spent most of my time engaged in Tajik

language study, and I was able to do a little work in the newly opened (2012) National Library. Work in the library, unfortunately, proved to be fairly inconvenient, as the collection was fairly limited, and the process of ordering made it extremely difficult to work efficiently. I was nevertheless able to look through several school history textbooks and other academic curricular materials.



**The National Archives of the Republic of Tajikistan. To the right, outside the main building. To the left, at work at my workspace inside the archive.**

By the time I finally received permission to use the archives, which occurred in early November, I only had a few weeks remaining in country, but I was fortunately allowed to take photographs. In order to maximize my time, I spent most of the remaining six weeks taking photographs of documents, and I was able to collect about 5,000 pages worth of materials, most of which I had only a passing familiarity with. Given my time constraints, I focused primarily on collecting documents from the Ministry of Education. Although I certainly succeeded in gathering many documents, my research in Tajikistan was fairly haphazard, particularly as documents I ordered for reading were often lost or otherwise unavailable. As a result, I anticipate using the

materials collected in Tajikistan mostly as a means of illustrating the broader narrative I will construct with my dissertation, based primarily on documents collected in Moscow and Kazakhstan, since the materials from Tajikistan themselves are too disparate to talk of developments over time except in very general terms.

In addition to spending time at the National Archive of Tajikistan, I was also able to conduct several interviews and held many more informal conversations with residents of Dushanbe, as well as in a small village nearby. Although I was unfortunately unable to conduct as many interviews as I would have liked, the interviews and conversations I did conduct enriched my understanding of how people experienced Soviet history. One Tajik man, born in the 1960s, telling me of his childhood games of “Nazis” and “Soviets” with the kids in his Dushanbe neighborhood, offered insight into the meanings of ethnic identity, where “Uzbeks” became a catchall for people from another street, differing from their “own” (ethnic) Uzbeks, who lived on his street. Another man, an ethnic Uzbek who lived in a village a couple hours from Tajikistan, told me of his trips to Moscow and Leningrad for “theoretical” purposes, to report back about his visit to Lenin’s Mausoleum and other major sites to his fellow workers on the collective farm. Interviews were conducted in a way so as to encourage people to speak as freely as possible, in order to get the best possible understanding of how they remember and construct their memories.

**b. Kazakhstan (January to July 2015)**

In Kazakhstan, in contrast to Tajikistan, I encountered no difficulties in accessing the archives, and I was able to begin my work from the very week I arrived. Fortunately, the local office for American Councils made preliminary contact with the two archives where I conducted research: the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan

(APRK), which houses most documents of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, and the Central State Archive (TsGARK), which houses documents of the Soviet state apparatus. These archives operate in a very professional, predictable manner, and the atmosphere was extremely conducive to conducting research. Because of the extended period in Kazakhstan, as well as my regular processing of my archival notes (for the most part, photography is not permitted), I was able to research Soviet education policy, curricular development, and propaganda methods in Kazakhstan thoroughly, covering nearly all of



my intended timeline for my dissertation. As a result, I anticipate that that materials collected in Kazakhstan will play a more central role in my dissertation.

**Outside the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Almaty), December 2014.**

In the communist party archives (APRK), I worked primarily with documents of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan. In particular, I focused on

ideological initiatives and campaigns, foremost those related to Soviet schools and education and those assorted with the creation and practice of civic rituals – including public celebrations of Soviet holidays; the registrations of births, marriages and deaths; and election campaigns. Because I was able to work in the archives over an extended period of time, I was able to collect documents from every decade of Soviet history. This gave me insight into how the republic-level communist party influenced curriculum and interacted with citizens over several decades. In the State Archive, I was able to delve concretely into materials of the Ministry of Education, as well as files of Obshchestvo Znanie (“Knowledge Society”), which promoted and popularized Soviet ideology among the adult population through public lectures and conferences held across the USSR.

Alongside work in the two main archives in Almaty, I was also able to conduct research the State Library, where I looked at educational materials, as well as materials relating to civic rituals. These included many textbooks from the post-Stalin era (unfortunately, the library preserved almost no school materials from the first decades of the Soviet Union’s existence). I also collected materials that gave example ceremonies for conducting civic rituals—including instructions for how to register births and deaths, how to mark the receipt of first passports, celebrate enlistment in the military, and conduct funeral services, and offered detailed plans for celebrating public holidays.

Finally, as in Tajikistan, I also conducted interviews and had informal conversations on matters relevant to my dissertation. Although I anticipated it would be easier to find willing interview participants in Kazakhstan, I was surprised to find many people were extremely hesitant to speak with me on the record.

#### IV. Important Research Findings

Research in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, both in archives and through interviews, has illuminated methods and tools used to develop a sense of Soviet identity. In particular, my research brings into focus several key components that contributed to deep identification with the Soviet state: education and socialization, both of children and adults; Russian language, which served as an important means of communication within the Soviet Union; movement, which gave citizens a sense that they belonged to a bigger country; and civic rituals, including registration of births and marriages, as well as participation in elections.

Education, more than anything, was central to developing a widespread sense of Soviet identity in the country, particularly as mandatory education ensured that essentially all Soviet citizens passed through the Soviet system. In schools, students encountered state narratives of Soviet identity from the earliest phases of their education, both in and out of school. In pre-school institutions and elementary schools, children were taught to conduct themselves as good citizens, which was reinforced through Octobrist and Pioneer programs, and eventually through the Komsomol. Materials from alphabet books and primers, whether in Kazakh, Tajik, Uzbek, or Russian, taught young citizens to appreciate the Soviet Union as their home. As students grew older, they



Left: teaching materials for Kazakh history from the 1960s and 1970s from the National Library of Kazakhstan. Right: pages from Turlugulov's History of the Kazakh SSR (1963 Kazakh edition) for fourth grade students. This section is titled "What the Soviet state has given to Kazakhstan's workers," and features a photograph from Leninogorsk (now Ridder).

continued to encounter ideas of Soviet identity through language study (foremost through Russian language, discussed in greater depth below), history classes, and civics classes.

Research in both archives and in libraries highlighted how Soviet curriculum contributed to a sense of Soviet identity that often dovetailed with national identity. Beginning in the 1960s, for example, the state mandated the study not only of Soviet history but also republic history in every union republic. Teachers were encouraged to take advantage of local history wherever possible, including the visiting of monuments and memorials. This gave children a sense of how local history fit into the larger history of the Soviet Union, and into Marxist theory more broadly. Materials highlighted pre-Soviet revolutionary movements, the establishment of Soviet power, the rise of the local working class, victory in World War II, and the continuing struggle towards establishing communism. According to a methodological pamphlet for teachers of fourth grade history, incorporating the history of the Kazakh SSR was intended to “broaden and concretize the knowledge of students in patriotic history” and to “develop in students a feeling of passionate love and loyalty to the Soviet fatherland, and socialize them in the spirit of internationalism and friendship of the peoples” (Turlugulov 1973, 4–5).

Even once formal education ended, the Soviet state still strove to educate adult citizens through continuing education programs, propaganda campaigns, and public lectures. Schools strove to train parents to be partners in the education and socialization of children, and adults were also expected to participate in the life of the state. After its founding in 1947, Obshchestvo “Znanie”, which operated at the All-Union, republic, and local levels, became especially involved in promulgating Soviet propaganda to adults, foremost through lectures and conferences that citizens were expected to attend in their

places of work and in their communities. My research confirmed that Soviet patriotism, friendship of the peoples, proper child rearing, and Soviet history were frequent topics in lectures held across the Soviet Union.

Russian language, too, played a central role in uniting citizens across the Soviet Union, particularly once Russian became a mandatory school subject in Soviet schools beginning in 1938. Although I had not initially planned to discuss the importance of Russian language in my dissertation, my research confirmed the need to discuss its role in greater depth. Although the language itself had obvious ethnic connection to the “great Russian people,” my research suggest that the Soviet state actively often tried to deemphasize the language’s ethnic undertones. Instead, Russian was often more commonly described as the “language of Lenin and Stalin,” praised for its ability to allow citizens to communicate with each other and to expose students to leading scientific research and thought – including, of course, the classics of Marxism-Leninism.

The unique role of the Russian language was further emphasized through oral history interviews. For example, when talking to a group of teachers who had been trained and began their careers as teachers in Soviet Tajikistan, I was corrected when I wrongly referred to the teaching of Russian as a “foreign language.” The teachers, practically in unison, corrected me that Russian itself was considered a “second native language” in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, interviews confirmed that many citizens felt that Russian generally opened the door to communicating with fellow citizens, making it easy for people to communicate with their fellow-citizens, whether in their ethnically mixed neighborhoods at home, or when traveling for work, leisure, or military service.

While school curriculum taught students theoretically of their connection with fellow citizens, and widespread Russian language proficiency equipped citizens with the necessary means to communicate with fellow citizens, interviews and conversations with people underscored the degree to which the population of the Soviet Union was extremely mobile, far more than I had expected to encounter. Even in villages, I was particularly struck by the degree to which people moved within to Soviet Union, for a variety of reasons, including for employment, tourism, and military service. Although

**Oral history interview subjects in their homes. Clockwise from top left: an elderly Tajik woman in Dushanbe; a middle-aged Tajik man with me in a Tajik village; an Uzbek couple in Dushanbe; a Ukrainian woman who insisted on a pre-interview cooking lesson just outside of Almaty; an Uzbek couple with me in Dushanbe.**



this finding was not entirely unexpected, I was struck by the extent to which even people living in very remote places traveled around the Soviet Union. Such experiences, as implicitly confirmed by many subjects, helped people envision the Soviet Union as a single country and placed people into direct contact with people who belonged to

different ethnic and linguistic groups, contributing to a sense of unity. This became more pronounced after World War II, which was seen in Soviet propaganda as a common victory for all Soviet peoples.

Finally, alongside education, Russian language, and direct contact with different places and people in the Soviet Union, citizens of the Soviet Union also took part in the life of the state through participation in civic rituals, which further contributed to a sense of Soviet identity. Although there were some initial experimental attempts to inculcate new, distinct practices in decade following the revolution (See: Stites 1989), these were gradually abandoned while the Soviet Union pursued policies of indigenization, industrialization, and total war in the 1930s and 40s. Under Khrushchev in the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, state policies suggested a revived interest in establishing new Soviet rituals. These “new” rituals, as they were called in the 1960s, helped citizens mark major life events, from birth, when children would be registered for the first time, to marriage, and ultimately death. Special rituals also marked the first day of school, receiving one’s first Soviet passport at age 16, and enlisting for military service, and retiring after the end of a long career.

In the State Library of Kazakhstan, for example, I found several books that highlighted the main orders for conducting these civil ceremonies and celebrations (in both Russian and Kazakh), including various pictures demonstrating how some of these ceremonies took place. In the preface to one such book, the editors noted, that these rituals, traditions, and holidays were an “important component of Soviet culture and the socialist way of life,” and an important means of “communist socialization (vospitanie)” (Zhubasova and Beisekov 1984, 5). Archival documents underscored how the state, both

at the All-Union and republic levels, saw the popularization of these rituals as an important part of developing a sense of belonging to and identification with the Soviet regime. In the 1970s in particular, cities and villages actively promoted these new civic celebrations through the construction of new marriage palaces, improvements to their Houses and Palaces of Culture, and official participation in these rituals. Much like the study of history, these rituals often incorporated aspects of local culture – such as incorporating Kazakh national music, the celebration of holidays of local importance (though not ones explicitly understood to be national(ist) in origin). This promoted the sense that certain forms of national identity were understood to be compatible with the growing sense of Soviet identity.

## **V. Policy Implications and Recommendations**

Instead of trying to understand why the Soviet Union failed, my research considers why the state endured and seemed stable until its very collapse. Policy implications are two-fold. First, despite the initial promise of the so-called third-wave of democracy that gathered momentum in the wake of Soviet collapse, authoritarian systems have demonstrated considerable longevity. Although scholars have effectively demonstrated the processes by which democracy develops, enduring authoritarianism remains understudied and poorly understood. A nuanced understanding of how the Soviet Union developed and maintained public support despite denying citizens the rights and privileges enjoyed in liberal democracies suggests a new understanding of why undemocratic systems persist and thrive. Non-democratic practices of citizenship have powerful implications for the resilience of authoritarianism, a matter of particular

relevance in the former Soviet Union, where countries continue to draw on Soviet conceptions of citizenship. This became particularly during Kazakhstan's recent presidential elections (April 2015), in which I noted how Soviet modes of participatory citizenship continue to inform and shape post-Soviet rituals. Campaigns to encourage election participation—including demands from workplaces—bear striking resemblance to voter mobilization campaigns of the Soviet era (see especially: Yekelchik 2014).

Secondly, identification with the Soviet Union has implications for former citizens and affects domestic politics across former Soviet space. The Soviet experience shapes popular expectations about the role and function of government in daily life across the former Soviet Union. Through oral history, my research sheds light on how ordinary people understand the conditions under which they currently live. Memories of the past are highly intertwined with experience of the present, and my research highlights strengths and weaknesses of evolving post-Soviet authoritarian regimes. In many cases, particularly evident in Tajikistan, post-Soviet states' failure to provide the basic services that were provided by the Soviet state suggests major weaknesses and possibilities for looming instability. At the same time, the Soviet experience, as informed by my research and experience in the archive and on the ground in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, suggests that states can encourage active participation in civic life and secure a fairly widespread level of support from the population at large. Many citizens felt like they played an active role in the life of the state, and this contributed to the Soviet state's longevity, even as they lacked the basic rights afforded to citizens in more democratic polities. This approach continues to inform post-Soviet states' attitudes towards their citizenries.

## **VI. Co-Curricular Activity**

While in the field, particularly while in Kazakhstan, I made numerous contacts with US diplomatic officials and with local scholars, although most contact remained on an informal, personal level. I tended to meet locally based diplomats and NGO workers in social settings, often at informal events hosted or sponsored by NGOs (including American Councils) and the US State Department. These included an opening for a World War II photo exhibition, hosted by the US Consulate General in Almaty, attending lectures given by visiting scholars, and other assorted events. I also met several times with Charles Martin, the Public Affairs Officer at the Almaty consulate, and we frequently discussed matters of Kazakh history and contemporary politics.

Also valuable to my research was the informal interactions I had with local researchers and archive staff. While working in archives, I had regular conversations with other historians working in the archive, mostly professional historians based at local universities, and on several occasions, I received really helpful feedback on my research and project more generally. Other visiting scholars, mostly American researchers, also added nuance to my understanding of my topic.

## **VII. Conclusions**

As a whole, my research suggests that Soviet identity was a far more developed institution than has been commonly asserted by historians, particularly in years since the Soviet collapse. My dissertation suggests that this identity slowly emerged through calls for patriotism in the 1930s, in the drive up to World War II, but that this identity took on new forms, particularly in the decades following Stalin's death, when leaders began to

emphasize civic rituals, including celebrations of personal life milestones, as well as participation in elections and public holidays, as essential components of a “Soviet way of life.” I also suggest that this way of life was often understood to complement national identity, rather than working against it, evidenced in the way that the Soviet state incorporated republic-level and local history into school curriculum and local elements into civic rituals. Through oral histories, finally, my research suggests that these ideas of Soviet identity, as expressed through participatory citizenship, were broadly accepted and even embraced by the population as a whole, which challenges the conventional wisdom that the Soviet Union collapsed because of the state’s inability to inculcate a popular sense of Soviet identity to the population as a whole.

### **VIII. Future Research Plans, Presentations, and Publications**

Given the ambitious scope of my dissertation, I anticipate spending an additional twelve months in the field completing my dissertation. This will include approximately six months in Russia, three months in Uzbekistan, and three months in Ukraine. Together with my research conducted in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, these research sites will enable me write more accurately about the Soviet Union as a whole. Following the completion of my research, I anticipate spending the next two academic years writing my dissertation. Chapters will be prepared for sharing through presentations, small-group workshops, or among trusted colleagues, and one or two chapters may additionally be prepared for publication as articles. According to common practice in history as a discipline, I anticipate adapting the final dissertation into a book in my first years of

(ideally) teaching, to be published in the years after completing my Ph.D., and I intend to develop course and lecture material with the research I have gathered for my dissertation.

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