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Adrienne Lynn Edgar: Tribal Nation

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Introduction

TRIBE, CLASS, AND NATION IN TURKMENISTAN

ON OCTOBER 27, 1991, the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic declared its independence from the Soviet Union. Rejecting the communist ideals promoted under seven decades of Soviet rule, the new state committed itself to fostering the “all-round development of the historical, national, and cultural traditions of the people of Turkmenistan.”¹ The president of independent Turkmenistan, a former Communist Party bureaucrat named Saparmurat Niyazov, declared that he would henceforth be known as *Türkmenbashi*, or “head of the Turkmen.” Niyazov’s regime exchanged the Soviet hammer and sickle for traditional symbols of nationhood—a flag, an anthem, and new holidays ranging from the conventional (Flag Day and Independence Day) to the idiosyncratic (Carpet Day and Melon Day).² The new patriotism found its most passionate expression in the Turkmen national oath, which was heard frequently on television and at public gatherings:

Turkmenistan, my beloved motherland, my homeland,
You are always with me, in my thoughts and in my heart.
For the slightest evil against you, let my hand be paralyzed,
For the slightest slander against you, let my tongue be lost,
At the moment of my betrayal of the motherland, its president, or its sacred
banner, let my breath be stopped.³

Just seven decades earlier, Turkmenistan had seemed an unlikely site for such an outpouring of nationalist fervor. A seminomadic people at the time of the Bolshevik ascent to power in 1917, the Turkmen were fragmented into genealogically defined groups that spoke different dia-

¹ Cited in John Anderson, “Authoritarian Political Development in Central Asia: The Case of Turkmenistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 14, no. 4 (1995): 510.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 510–13; Annette Bohr, “Turkmenistan and the Turkmen,” in *The Nationalities Question in the Post-Soviet States*, ed. Graham Smith, 2d ed., pp. 355–56 (London and New York, Longman, 1996).

³ On the national oath, see Shahram Akbarzadeh, “National Identity and Political Legitimacy in Turkmenistan,” *Nationalities Papers* 27, no. 2 (June 1999): 275; Bohr, “Turkmenistan and the Turkmen,” pp. 355–56.

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lects, were often at war with each other, and were ruled by at least five different states. The Turkmen population, overwhelmingly illiterate, was scattered over a huge and largely inaccessible expanse of arid terrain. Although these Turkmen groups claimed common ancestry, they possessed no clearly bounded territory, no common political institutions, no uniform language, and no mass culture of print and education—in short, none of the trappings of modern nationhood.

What brought about this remarkable transformation from a stateless conglomeration of tribes into an independent, apparently unified nation-state? Until recently, most Western scholars viewed the Soviet regime as a “breaker of nations,” a radically centralizing state that suppressed indigenous national consciousness.⁴ Over the past decade, however, historians have argued persuasively that the Soviet regime itself served as midwife to the separate states that emerged on its territory in 1991. The Soviet Union, in short, was a *maker* of nations. By creating territorial republics based on ethnic criteria and promoting “national cultures” within them, the Soviet state fostered national consciousness and incipient national statehood among its numerous non-Russian minorities.⁵

Because of the remoteness of Central Asian populations from modern nationhood before 1917, some scholars have dismissed the national republics created by Soviet rule as “artificial.” Like the nation-states formed out of former European colonies in the Middle East and Africa, these scholars argue, Central Asian nations were fictitious creations of their colonial masters, imposed from above with little consideration of indigenous identities and desires. A few predicted—mistakenly, as it turned out—that these nations would not survive the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶ Yet the creation of the Central Asian nations under Soviet rule is

⁴ This phrase is from Robert Conquest, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* (New York: Penguin, 1991). See also Walter Kolarz, *Russia and Her Colonies* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1967); Olaf Caroe, *Soviet Empire: The Turks of Central Asia and Stalinism*, 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967).

⁵ The earliest and most influential proponent of the view of the Soviet Union as a nation-maker was Ronald Grigor Suny, in *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). See also Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53 (Summer 1994): 414–52; Francine Hirsch, “The Soviet Union as a Work-in-Progress: Ethnographers and the Category *Nationality* in the 1926, 1937, and 1939 Censuses,” *Slavic Review* 56 (Summer 1997): 251–78.

⁶ For examples of works emphasizing the artificiality of the Soviet Central Asian nations, see Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *The Great Challenge: Nationalities and the Bolshevik State, 1917–1930* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1992): 177–79; Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 43; Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*

not in itself a reason to question their legitimacy or durability. As a vast literature on nations and nationalism has argued over the past several decades, *all* nations are “artificial” or constructed; the nation is not a primordial, organic entity, but an “imagined community” that is formed in a continual process of invention and negotiation.⁷ The notion that political and ethnic boundaries should coincide is a relatively recent idea, linked to the political mobilization of the masses and, some maintain, to the needs of modern capitalism. Like the nations of Soviet Central Asia, the majority of the world’s nations were formed in large measure through the actions and policies of states. As E. J. Hobsbawm has written, “Nations do not make states and nationalism but the other way around.”⁸

What is striking about the Central Asian nations is not that they were constructed from above, but that their architect was a socialist state bent on bringing about a global proletarian revolution. For reasons both pragmatic and ideological, the Bolsheviks became convinced that the best way to deal with their “nationality problem”—the presence of more than one hundred different ethnic groups within Soviet borders—was to aggressively promote non-Russian nationhood. The Central Asian nations were remarkable, as well, in the rapidity with which they emerged. As a direct result of Soviet rule, aspects of nation formation that took decades or centuries elsewhere—the establishment of a national territory and government institutions, the standardization of a national language, and the emergence of a mass educational system—were accomplished in Turkmenistan and its neighbors in less than a decade. Finally, the Soviet construction of nations was uniquely ambitious and comprehensive. Modern states, whether national or imperial, typically seek to create a set of “totalizing classifications” in place of the premodern blur of diffuse and overlapping identities; in this sense, the Soviet regime’s efforts to categorize its population by ethnicity were not exceptional. The Soviet state *was* unusual, however, in the lengths to which it went to elaborate these new identity categories in the non-Russian periphery.⁹

(London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), pp. vii–viii, 3; Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 302–3; Caroe, *Soviet Empire*, pp. xiv–xxiii.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

⁸ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 10, chap. 1 and 3; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University press, 1983), chap. 3; Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London and Boulder, CO: Pluto Press, 1993), p. 104.

⁹ On the “totalizing” classification systems of colonial states, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 184; on the comprehensive nature of Soviet nation-making, see Roy, *The New Central Asia*, p. vii.

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The 1920s and 1930s were crucial formative years for the Soviet national republics. In this period, the Bolsheviks engaged in a mad rush of nation-building activity, conveniently if unintentionally equipping non-Russian regions with nearly everything they would need for a future existence as sovereign polities.¹⁰ The fundamental requirement that a state possess a territory with clearly defined borders was met by Moscow through its policy of demarcating “national” republics and regions for each ethnic group. The need for administrative structures was filled by republican government and Communist Party hierarchies that duplicated in miniature those on the all-union level. Most aspiring nation-states strive for a single “national language” to replace a plethora of spoken local dialects; by supporting linguistic standardization as well as publishing and education in native tongues, the Soviet regime facilitated the consolidation of such languages. A nation-state needs an elite to rule in the name of the masses and promote “national culture”; with its policy of recruiting local nationals for service in the party and government, the Soviet regime helped to foster such elites.¹¹

The nation-making efforts of modern states do not, of course, focus solely on elites; they also seek to mobilize the masses, turning them from reluctant subjects into active and concerned citizens. Here, too, the Soviet regime did a great deal to transform the regions under its tutelage. The Communist Party leadership, assisted by the native elites it so diligently cultivated, used a variety of methods to penetrate local societies and mobilize the non-Russian masses in support of the regime. Soviet authorities traveled to distant parts of the union to survey and study the indigenous inhabitants, established village schools and native-language newspapers, and created mass organizations as venues for popular participation and state control. They sought to undermine the power of traditional elites and to ban “barbaric” practices rooted in religion and custom. So far this is a familiar story, and one that is common to many aspiring nation-states.¹² Yet the Bolsheviks intended to create not just nations but *socialist* nations, and here they parted company with other modernizers. Soviet authorities campaigned to promote conflict among social classes, enlist the support of the poor and dispossessed, and eradicate existing systems of property ownership and land tenure. In the early 1930s, they sought to bring the entire countryside under state control through the forcible collectivization of agriculture. They banned “bourgeois” and “feudal”

¹⁰ Suny, *Revenge of the Past*, pp. 98–126.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 102–6; Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities*, pp. 30–58.

¹² Historians have recently sought to analyze Russian and Soviet history within a broader framework of comparative European modernity. See the essays in David L. Hoffmann and Yann Kotonis, eds., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

forms of literary and cultural activity and ultimately imprisoned or executed many Soviet citizens as “counterrevolutionary nationalists” and “enemies of the people.”¹³

Tribal Nation focuses on the Soviet effort in the 1920s and 1930s to create a Turkmenistan that would be at once national, modern, and socialist. In many ways, Turkmenistan was a textbook case of a nation created by state fiat. It was under Soviet rule that the Turkmen first acquired a clearly defined territory, a standardized language, and other features of modern nationhood. Yet this book argues that Soviet policy was by no means the only—or even the most important—factor shaping Turkmen national consciousness. Far from being passive recipients of a national culture invented in Moscow, Turkmen themselves played a major role in shaping the institutions and discourses of nationhood in the 1920s and 1930s.

Recent works on Soviet nationality policy have emphasized the role of Moscow-based officials and ethnographers in constructing nations in the non-Russian periphery. Using newly opened archives, historians such as Terry Martin, Francine Hirsch, and Jeremy Smith have offered important insights into the evolution of Soviet nationality policy and the Soviet multinational state.¹⁴ Moscow’s role in creating nations was undeniably important, as these scholars have ably demonstrated. However, the crucial contribution of local elites in shaping Soviet nations has not received enough attention. In Central Asia, members of the cultural and political elite had their own ideas about nationhood and socialism, which they discussed with their Russian comrades at Communist Party meetings and debated among themselves in local-language newspapers. Particularly in the 1920s, when Moscow’s control over cultural and intellectual life in the non-Russian periphery was relatively tenuous, indigenous intellectuals and communists often expressed views that differed substantially from those of the authorities in Moscow.

Tribal Nation draws on an array of Turkmen- and Russian-language published sources, in addition to recently declassified Soviet archives, to analyze the interaction between the transformative policies of the Soviet

¹³ On the differences between modernity in the Soviet Union and in nonsocialist European states, see David L. Hoffmann, “European Modernity and Soviet Socialism,” in Hoffmann and Kotsonis, *Russian Modernity*, pp. 256–57.

¹⁴ Recent works examining nationality policy primarily from a central government perspective include Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*; Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–1923* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999); Francine Hirsch, “Empire of Nations: Colonial Technologies and the Making of the Soviet Union, 1917–1939” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1998); and Peter Blitstein, “Stalin’s Nations: Soviet Nationality Policy between Planning and Primordialism, 1936–1953,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1999).

state and Turkmen conceptions of identity and community.¹⁵ Using insights gleaned from local and non-Russian sources, this study challenges certain long-standing orthodoxies about Soviet nation-making in Central Asia. Among Western scholars during the Cold War era, for example, it was taken for granted that the formation of nations in Central Asia was a process controlled entirely by Moscow, with little input from indigenous populations and little basis in pre-Soviet identities. This view continues to have wide currency among specialists in Central Asian and Soviet history. Even today, some scholars dismiss the division of Central Asia into national republics as a manipulative strategy designed to destroy the region's natural unity and enhance Moscow's control—in other words, as a policy of “divide and rule.”¹⁶ Ironically, this older belief in the top-down creation of Central Asian nations has been reinforced to some extent by the more recent recognition that the Soviet state was a “maker of nations.” These two schools of thought—the “divide-and-rule” and “nation-making” perspectives—differ over the intentions of the Soviet rulers. Proponents of the former see Soviet nationality policy as Machiavellian to the core, while advocates of the latter see Soviet nation-making primarily as an effort to appease nationalist sentiment and promote historical progress. Yet both tend to underplay the significance of native involvement and local cultural and social realities in the formation of Central Asian nations.

Even in a place as remote from modern nationhood as Turkmenistan, I argue, existing conceptions of identity provided fertile ground for Soviet policies. As I show in the first chapter, a sense of “Turkmen-ness” based on genealogy long predated the Soviet era. The Turkmen population was made up of a number of tribes, subtribes, and lineages, all of which claimed descent from a single ancestor.¹⁷ The Turkmen shared this empha-

¹⁵ Unfortunately, the state archives of Turkmenistan have been closed to foreign researchers for a number of years. Instead, I was able to use the archives of the Central Asian Bureau in Moscow, which contain extensive documentation of the activities of Turkmen republican and local party organizations in the 1920s and 1930s.

¹⁶ For a recent example of this view, see Roy, *The New Central Asia*, pp. vii–viii, 3.

¹⁷ William Irons, *The Yomut Turkmen: A Study of Social Organization among a Central Asian Turkic-Speaking Population* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), pp. 40–44. The words “tribe” and “tribal” have gone out of fashion in certain fields, where they are considered derogatory. Anthropologists have argued that the word “tribe” is often used to distinguish “primitive” colonized groups from “modern” ethnic groups. In sub-Saharan Africa, scholars now prefer to use the term “ethnic group” instead of “tribe.” Among scholars of the Islamic world, however, “tribe” is a more neutral term that refers to a society organized on the basis of patrilineal descent. Moreover, tribe and ethnicity are not equivalent in Central Asia and the Middle East, where ethnic groups—be they Arabs, Pashtuns, Kurds, Druze, or Turkmen—may be divided into many constituent tribes. Susana B. C. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand* (New Delhi and Newbury Park,

sis on genealogical descent with other historically pastoral nomadic groups, whose mobility and statelessness precluded forms of identity linked to territory or the state.¹⁸ Under the right circumstances, this belief in a common ancestry had the potential to serve as a unifying factor. Although Turkmen identity had few concrete political or economic manifestations in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the idea that the tribes shared a glorious ancestry and history—and the hope that they might one day unite—had long been a staple of Turkmen discourse.¹⁹

Because of the existence of a genealogically defined Turkmen identity, Soviet historians maintained that the Turkmen had developed a “proto-nationalist” sensibility well before the Soviet period—a claim that served to underscore the historical correctness of Soviet nationality policy.²⁰ Yet this argument is misleading, since it implies that history was leading the Turkmen inexorably toward unified nationhood. In reality, the segmented genealogical structure that potentially united the Turkmen groups was equally prone to divide them. The numerous tribes and subtribes that made up the branches of the Turkmen genealogical tree had distinct identities and were often at odds with each other. While Turkmen groups were capable of uniting in the face of a common external threat, they were

CA: Sage Publications, 1992), pp. 29–33; Dale Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*, 3d ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), pp. 124–27; Richard Tapper, “Anthropologists, Historians, and Tribespeople on Tribe and State Formation in the Middle East,” in Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, eds., *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 52–53; on the relationship between ethnicity and tribe in the Middle East see also Bassam Tibi, “The Simultaneity of the Unsimultaneous: Old Tribes and Imposed Nation-States in the Middle East,” in Khoury and Kostiner, *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, pp. 131–41.

¹⁸ On genealogical reckoning among the Kazakhs, see Saulesh Esenova, “Soviet Nationality, Identity, and Ethnicity in Central Asia: Historic Narratives and Kazakh Ethnic Identity,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 1 (2002): 11–38; on genealogical identity in the Arab Middle East, see Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

¹⁹ For examples of premodern calls for Turkmen unity, see Walter Feldman, “Interpreting the Poetry of Mäkhümquli,” in *Muslims in Central Asia: Expressions of Identity and Change*, ed. Jo-ann Gross (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 167–71, 180–83.

²⁰ V. V. Bartold, *Istoriia turetsko-mongol'skikh narodov* (Tashkent, 1928), p. 33; V. Karpuch, “Iz istorii vozniknoveniia Turkmenskoi SSR,” *Turkmenovedenie*, no. 10–11 (October–November 1928): 38–39; G. I. Karpov and D. M. Batser, *Khivinskie turkmeny i konets kungradskoi dinastii* (Ashgabat: Turkmengosizdat, 1930), pp. 89–91. The argument that the Turkmen were proto-nationalist has also been made by a few non-Soviet scholars; see Feldman, “Interpreting the Poetry of Mäkhümquli,” pp. 167–71, 180–83; Mehmet Saray, *The Turkmens in the Age of Imperialism* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 1989), pp. 47–48.

equally likely to ally themselves with outsiders against rival Turkmen.²¹ In the mid-nineteenth century, the emergence of a nation based on one of the large Turkmen tribes—Yomuts, Tekes, or Ersaris—would have seemed more plausible than the formation of a Turkmen nation. More broadly, the tribal form of social organization was in many ways antithetical to the demands of the modern nation-state. In a stateless, genealogically organized society, personalistic ties based on patrilineal kinship play a primary role in shaping behavior and allegiances. The nation-state, by contrast, is an impersonal arena that stresses the equality of all its citizens and insists on loyalty to the central government. The tendency toward divisiveness in tribal society—what anthropologist Andrew Shryock has called its “contentious multivocality”—is at odds with the unity and homogeneity sought by the nation.²²

An existing conception of Turkmen-ness based on common ancestry was not the only local factor that favored Soviet nation-making efforts. Moscow’s policies were also facilitated by the presence of a Turkmen elite willing to embrace the idea of a Turkmen national republic. In the early-twentieth century, a handful of Turkmen had been exposed to new ideas of identity then circulating in Central Asia. Some had attended schools sponsored by the Russian colonial regime, which had introduced them to European understandings of nationhood. Others had come into contact with secular forms of Turkic nationalism advocated by Muslim reformers in the Russian and Ottoman empires. In part because of their exposure to these new ideas, Turkmen elites were willing to shift their primary loyalty from particularistic genealogical affiliations to the broader idea of a Turkmen nation. In fact, their support for Turkmen nationhood frequently went beyond what Moscow expected or considered desirable. As I show in chapter 3, Turkmen elites’ enthusiasm for a common Turkmen identity was reinforced in the 1920s and 1930s by the Soviet policy of nativization, which promised preferential treatment in employment and higher education to the “titular nationality” of each republic. As a direct result of this policy, a broader Turkmen identity became not merely a vague aspiration but something with real political and economic meaning.

The growing salience of a Turkmen identity was accompanied in the 1920s and 1930s by the beginning of a transformation in the understanding of Turkmen-ness. Under Soviet rule, Turkmen elites quickly learned

²¹ Saray, *The Turkmens*, pp. 56–57, 97–98; Shokhrat Kadyrov, *Turkmenistan v XX veke: Probely i problemy* (Bergen, Norway: 1996), p. 100.

²² Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination*, pp. 313–14; Schirin H. Fathi, *Jordan, an Invented Nation? Tribe-State Dynamics and the Formation of National Identity* (Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 1994), p. 30; Tapper, “Anthropologists, Historians, and Tribespeople,” pp. 68, 70; see also Richard Tapper, ed., *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 10–11.

to speak the Bolshevik language of nationhood, in which a common territory and a common language—not genealogy or descent—were the main components of identity. Chapter 2 demonstrates that many Turkmen enthusiastically welcomed the creation of a Turkmen territorial republic in the 1920s, despite the lack of attachment to an ancestral homeland among the historically mobile Turkmen. Moreover, the process of drawing national borders solidified the incipient nationalist sentiments of Turkmen elites, encouraging them to view their interests as distinct from those of other Central Asians. Similarly, although language and identity were not closely linked in Central Asian history, Turkmen elites willingly adopted the Soviet emphasis on language as a critical component of national identity. As I explain in chapter 5, they rejected proposals for a pan-Turkic or pan-Turkestanian language as linguistic imperialism, preferring to emphasize the distinctiveness of the Turkmen vernacular rather than its commonalities with other Turkic dialects. The evidence of strong Turkmen enthusiasm for the creation of a separate national language and territory casts doubt on the view that Central Asians were naturally inclined toward pan-Turkic unity.

Yet the shift from a genealogical to a linguistic and territorial understanding of Turkmen identity was incomplete. A person who dwelled on Turkmen lands and spoke a Turkmen dialect was not considered a Turkmen if the presumed genealogical link was absent. Moreover, genealogical considerations intruded repeatedly on efforts to create the elements of Turkmen nationhood. The ethnographers and officials responsible for drawing the boundaries of the Turkmen national republic in 1924 used genealogical criteria to determine which groups should be included within Turkmenistan. Genealogical issues also underlay a debate about where to situate the capital of the new Turkmen republic. Some Turkmen communists were concerned about the prospect of intertribal antagonism within the new republic, which brought together Turkmen populations that had never coexisted under a single government authority. They argued that the republican capital should be located in an area inhabited by smaller, weaker tribes, in order to counterbalance the influence of the powerful and demographically dominant Tekes. Similarly, genealogical concerns impinged on linguistic debates in Turkmenistan. Because each of the major Turkmen tribes spoke its own dialect, the need to create a national literary language raised the delicate question of which dialect or dialects should form its basis. Turkmen linguists interested in promoting national unity insisted that the new language should be an amalgam of all the major Turkmen dialects. In short, the discourse of Turkmen nationhood in the 1920s and 1930s was shaped in large measure by the intersection of indigenous concepts of identity with the new understandings of nationhood introduced by the Bolsheviks.

If Soviet nation-making is the primary focus of this book, a second and closely related theme is the Soviet attempt to bring socialist modernity to Turkmenistan. Although the Bolsheviks came to power with the intention of building socialism, the meaning of the term was vague and contested in the early Soviet years. The general orientation of the Bolsheviks was fairly clear; they valued the collective over the individual, advocated the dispossession of the “exploiting classes,” and favored rational economic planning over reliance on markets. Yet these ideological preferences did not provide concrete guidance for the construction of a socialist system. In the 1920s, there were conflicting ideas and shifting policies on such key questions as the speed with which socialism should be built and the appropriate mix of markets and central planning.²³

The meaning of “modernity” was less controversial. Virtually all Bolsheviks agreed on the need to eradicate “backwardness” in the form of prerevolutionary social structures, beliefs, and ways of life. The new Soviet leaders sought not just to create a new, noncapitalist economic system; they also envisioned the creation of a social order that would offer a model of justice, progress, and modernity to all humanity. For such a society to emerge, the old world of privilege, exploitation, and ignorance would have to be destroyed. This campaign against backwardness, Soviet authorities agreed, was particularly urgent among the non-Russian peoples of Central Asia. While the Bolsheviks grumbled about the “age-old backwardness of the Russian peasantry,” they were even more appalled by the “oppressive” and “degrading” customs of Muslim groups in the Soviet periphery. How could socialism be built, they asked, among people who bought and sold women like livestock, murdered one another in blood feuds, based their social structures on “tribes and clans” instead of economic class, and passed their lives in a fog of illiteracy and superstition? In Turkmenistan, as in the other Central Asian republics, socialism in the 1920s meant above all an attempt to replace indigenous “backwardness” with Soviet-style “modernity.”²⁴

In the growing body of literature on the forging of a socialist consciousness among the Soviet population, historians have argued that Soviet citizens learned to “speak Bolshevik” during the 1920s and 1930s, internalizing the values and norms promoted by the Communist regime. Yet these works have focused almost exclusively on Russia proper, with little said

²³ Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994), pp. 22, 33–34; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 61–62

²⁴ On eradicating backwardness, see Yuri Slezkine, “Imperialism as the Highest State of Socialism,” *Russian Review* 59 (April 2000): 228–29.

about what socialism might have meant to other Soviet peoples.²⁵ Did the Turkmen, too, learn to “speak Bolshevik”? *Tribal Nation* shows that they did, but that they spoke it with their own accents and lent it their own meanings. As a result, there were continual conflicts in the 1920s and 1930s over whose values and norms would dominate the newly established Soviet institutions in Turkmenistan.

A case in point is the Soviet attempt to promote class conflict among the Turkmen rural population. For the Soviets, class struggle was the driving force of history. In order to progress toward socialism, the Turkmen would have to replace their archaic “tribal-clan structures” with a modern class system. As I show in chapter 6, many Turkmen did learn to speak the Bolshevik language of class in the 1920s and 1930s, but they interpreted Soviet class categories in ways that made sense within the Turkmen cultural context. Infusing Bolshevik class rhetoric with Turkmen genealogical content, Turkmen villagers used Soviet terminology to promote the interests of their own kin groups and carry on older rivalries. Similarly, as I show in chapter 7, some Turkmen made adroit use of the Soviet preoccupation with class to undermine the campaign to emancipate Muslim women. The Soviet ban on traditional marriage customs was extremely unpopular among Turkmen men, who perceived it as an assault on the foundations of Turkmen culture. Seeking to frame their opposition in a language Russian Bolsheviks would understand, Turkmen communists argued that the policies of female emancipation would alienate poor and landless male peasants—the very social groups on whom the Soviet regime hoped to rely. A correct class policy, they insisted, must take precedence over solving the “woman question.”

At the end of the 1920s, Soviet socialism acquired a more concrete and radical meaning as the government launched a new revolution from above. Abandoning the gradualism of the New Economic Policy, the Stalinist regime sought to transform Soviet society through an accelerated assault on all forms of backwardness and a massive program of centrally directed industrialization. The government squeezed the resources for this transformation out of the rural population through the compulsory collectivization of agriculture, which brought the peasantry and its grain under the control of the state. At the same time, the Soviet regime stepped up its attack on “class enemies,” persecuting “kulaks” in the countryside

²⁵ On “speaking Bolshevik” and the making of Soviet citizens, see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); see also Jochen Hellbeck, “Laboratories of the Soviet Self: Diaries from the Stalin Era” (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1998); Anna Krylova, “Soviet Modernity in Life and Fiction: The Generation of the ‘New Soviet Person’ in the 1930s” (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2001).

and rooting out “bourgeois intellectuals” in cultural institutions. Among the Turkmen elite, many prominent figures were driven from their posts in the early 1930s by accusations of “counterrevolutionary nationalism.” In rural areas of Turkmenistan, where collectivization was accompanied by a drive to force peasants to plant cotton, Soviet policies provoked one of the most massive and violent popular uprisings anywhere in the Soviet Union.

In recent years, some historians have argued that the Soviet multinational state was a form of European imperialism, and that Bolshevik policies aimed at “modernizing” the Muslim peoples under their tutelage were comparable to the efforts of British and French rulers in the Middle East, India, and Africa. Even the Soviet Union’s nation-making efforts were a means of imperial control, in this view, since European powers typically codified and reified ethnic and “tribal” differences within colonized populations.²⁶ Yet historians have also pointed to important differences between the Soviet Union and the empires maintained by other European states. The Soviet regime did not subscribe to the notions of biologically based racial inferiority that underpinned most European colonial projects.²⁷ Moreover, while the word “empire” implies the existence of a privileged, metropolitan group exercising hegemony over subordinate groups in the periphery, the Soviets did not institutionalize Russian superiority. On the contrary, the Soviet state aimed at equality for all its citizens—and all its nations—under an ideology of socialist internationalism. Many of the “imperial” strategies carried out in the non-Russian periphery were used with similar effect—and with similar violence—in the Russian countryside. Among Russian peasants, as among the Turkmen, the Soviet regime tried to break down old social structures, emancipate women, and transform the rural economy.²⁸

²⁶ On the “imperial” features of Soviet rule in Central Asia, see Douglas Northrop, “Uzbek Women and the Veil: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia” (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1999); Douglas Northrop, “Nationalizing Backwardness: Gender, Empire, and Uzbek Identity,” in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 193–96; Paula A. Michaels, “Medical Propaganda and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Kazakhstan, 1928–1941,” *Russian Review* 59 (April 2000): 159–78; Roy, *The New Central Asia*, p. 11. For an interesting view of the USSR as a self-consciously antiimperialist empire, see Hirsch, “Empire of Nations.” On the consolidation of tribal identities in the Middle East under colonial rule, see Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia*, pp. 139–40.

²⁷ Francine Hirsch, “Race without the Practice of Racial Politics,” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 30–43.

²⁸ Slezkine, “Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Socialism,” pp. 227–34. For a thoughtful analysis of the concepts of nation and empire in the Russian context, see Ronald Grigor Suny, “The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, ‘National Identity,’ and Theories of Empire,” in Suny and Martin, *A State of Nations*, pp. 23–66.

Because of these distinctive features of the Soviet multinational state, it would be a mistake to consider it an empire like any other. It would be equally wrong, however, to view the Soviet Union as a rapidly homogenizing unitary state in which the gap between Russian and non-Russian regions was negligible. This study shows that there were significant differences in the ways in which Russians and Central Asians experienced Soviet rule. The equality that the Soviet Union pledged to its non-Russian citizens was impressive on paper, but not always scrupulously followed in practice. Despite the policy of indigenization, which mandated preferential treatment for the indigenous nationality and language within each republic, the behavior of local Russian communists often left Turkmen feeling that they belonged to an inferior group. Many Russians objected to ethnic preferences and undermined them at every opportunity. Moreover, indigenous communists did not enjoy the same career opportunities as their European counterparts. As I show in chapters 3 and 4, the assumption of non-Russian “backwardness”—read inferiority and incompetence—often prevailed among even the most committed communists and internationalists. The ethnic tensions that plagued non-Russian republics as a result of indigenization had no direct equivalent within Russian regions.

Soviet nationality policy created another important difference between metropole and periphery in the Soviet Union. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Bolshevik regime *encouraged* national culture and consciousness among the non-Russians, whom it considered former victims of tsarist colonial oppression, while *discouraging* overt national self-expression among the former colonizers—the Russians.²⁹ As a result, the dynamics of Soviet rule in the periphery were different from those in the Russian heartland. In non-Russian areas, there was a fundamental contradiction between nationality policy, which pledged to support the autonomy and unique identity of each Soviet people, and the construction of socialism, which sought the homogenization of the Soviet population under a centralized government. While other historians have pointed to this contradiction in general terms, *Tribal Nation* seeks to analyze its manifestations and impact within a particular “national” context.³⁰

In Turkmenistan, the projects of nation-making and socialist transformation were visibly at odds with each other. The Soviet assault on “back-

²⁹ On the status of Russians within the Soviet multinational state, see Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment.”

³⁰ Ron Suny has argued that Soviet policies of socioeconomic transformation were antithetical to nativization. *Revenge of the Past*, pp. 106–10; see also Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities*, chap. 5. More recently, Peter Blitstein has described a conflict between “ethnic” and “statist” discourses of nationhood under Stalin. “Stalin’s Nations,” p. 253.

wardness” targeted the practices that most clearly defined Turkmen identity, including their distinctive genealogical structures and practices relating to marriage and the family. The Soviet attempt to emancipate Turkmen women, which I discuss in the book’s final chapter, was particularly contentious. For the communist leadership in Moscow, Turkmen gender practices were archaic customs that could only hinder the development of Turkmen nationhood. National identity, in the communist view, was based on language, territory, and certain acceptable folkloric practices. Yet Turkmen themselves considered the customs surrounding kinship, marriage, and family life to be essential expressions of Turkmen identity. The attempt to eradicate these practices was therefore resisted as an attempt by outsiders to “Europeanize” Turkmen life.

Other aspects of socialist modernity were similarly incompatible with the fostering of Turkmen national identity. The attempt to eradicate Turkmen “tribalism” conflicted with the historical basis of Turkmen identity in genealogy. The promotion of class conflict, an essential part of constructing Soviet-style socialism, perpetuated the very social fragmentation Turkmen elites hoped to overcome as they built a unified Turkmen nation. The purges of leading cultural figures as “nationalists” and “class aliens” in the early 1930s eliminated most of the literate Turkmen capable of creating and promoting a “national culture.” Finally, collectivization and the compulsory planting of cotton violated the regime’s promises of autonomy and equal development for all national republics. Throughout the more than seven decades of Soviet Turkmenistan’s existence, these tensions between nationality policy and the construction of socialism remained both unacknowledged and unresolved. Only at the end of the Soviet era—when the new rulers of independent Turkmenistan abandoned Marxism-Leninism with few apparent regrets, while hastening to wrap themselves in the cloak of nationalist legitimacy—did it become clear which of the two policies had the more profound impact on Turkmen society.