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Back to the Future: The Aftermath of Soviet Modernity in Tajikistan's Pamirs

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In October 2013, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon travelled to the country's mountainous Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, an area often referred to simply as the Pamir(s). Among other places, he paid a visit to the Wakhan Valley, which is divided by the border river Panj between Tajikistan on its northern banks and Afghanistan to the south. The presidential committee preparing the visit had a short stretch of the adventurous and bumpy Wakhan road freshly tarmacked to smooth the president's ride from his helicopter to a nearby farm run by border troops. The astonishingly plentiful potato harvest there, to which the president himself bore witness, was rumoured to have in fact been brought from another area outside the high-altitude Pamirs, where soil is more likely to yield such abundance.

In this essay, I explore the link between a demonstratively rich potato harvest, the condition of public infrastructure, and legitimacy of political rule in Soviet and post-Soviet Tajikistan. Borrowing Barbara Adam's (1998) notion of the timescape, the president's visit created an *event timescape* – a node where different temporalities and their qualities converged. Temporality, as I employ the term here, points to the *perception* of time and its course as well as the positioning of people therein. Rath-

er than indicating just a temporal condition, reference to particular time periods invokes distinctive forms and qualities of life that correspond to respective features of the built environment.

During the Soviet period, people living in the Pamirs came to relate to public infrastructure and services, and the state as the provider thereof, in a particular way. Communist utopia conveyed "ideologies of development" to a society liberated from socio-economic injustice (Kalinovsky 2018: 7). In the Soviet Union, this translated into comprehensive state interventions that targeted every sphere of life, helping and accelerating the process towards the desired future. In the Central Asian socialist republics of the Soviet Union, immense efforts were invested in their material, cultural, and socio-political "progression" from "backward" peasant, trading, or pastoralist communities entangled in "local traditions" to modern Soviet socialist societies. Thus, a sense of time was deeply inscribed in state interventions as well as in daily life. Transforming "backwardness" into Soviet modernity meant to constantly "improve" and "progress" in order to make the present past and to follow Lenin (et al.)'s vision into a communist future.

The provision of consumer goods, paid employment, welfare services, and so forth by the state was part of the larger project of social engineering, which ultimately aimed at creating "a new [Soviet] man" and a new society according to communist ideals (Kalinovsky 2018: 7). Correspondingly, as people in the Pamirs see it, having been a Soviet citizen granted not only material wellbeing but also membership and participation in modern society (Mostowlansky 2017; Reeves 2014). In this way, the building of public infrastructures and the provision of services was central to the making of Soviet citizens. Moreover, the success of the Soviet system, the legitimacy of Soviet rule that is, depended on the state's ability to meet its promise of improving living conditions through the provisioning of goods, services, and opportunities (Verdery 1996: 25).

The scale of actual provisioning varied enormously and corresponded with the particular political and socio-economic significance assigned to a place at a certain time. The south-eastern tip of the Soviet Union, today Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, was of special interest to the central Soviet government as it constituted part of the Union's outer border. Situated at the Soviet Union's periphery, the Pamirs moved to the centre of state attention, which granted parts of it especially generous provisioning (Reeves 2014; Roy 2000; Shaw 2011). The small town of Ishkoshim at the entrance of the Wakhan Valley is a case in point. Founded in the early twentieth century by the Tsarists as one of their remotest military posts at around 2,300 metres above sea level, Ishkoshim developed under Soviet rule into a district centre and showcase of the good Soviet life, as its material set-up attests. Today the town features tarmacked streets lined with pavements and poplar trees as well as one- and two-storey apartment blocks endowed with central heating and little garden plots in the backyard, all built in the Soviet period. The settlement boasts a school, kindergarten, library, and hospital complex that cater to the entire district, as well as a *klub* event venue including a theatre, a stadium for sport events, administrative offices, as well as a military base. From Ishkoshim, an asphalt road runs up the valley, erstwhile connecting the villages along its course by bus, while

During Soviet times, the Lenins of villages and towns, like this one here in Murghab, pointed towards an ever greater time to come.
Photo: Tobias Marschall, 2015.

the town's airport granted access to regional hubs within a few hours (at least for the few who qualified for air transport). Crucially, in the electrification programme which was carried out across the Soviet Union, households in the Wakhan Valley were provided electricity, and the tandoor (clay oven) yielded to the *petchka*, the modern electrical oven – if bread was baked at home at all anymore and not bought in one of the shops offering state-subsidized consumer goods.

In the 1990s, Soviet modernity and progress came to an abrupt halt. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the state welfare system and the infrastructure through which it was implemented largely collapsed. At the beginning of the post-Soviet era, Tajikistan descended into civil war shortly after its independence. Consequently, highly qualified personnel left the country; offices, schools, hospitals, and apartment blocks remained cold in winter; equipment vanished, fuel was hard to come by, and shelves in stores remained empty. In the Winter of 1992-1993, internationally organized humanitarian aid prevented people in the Pamirs from suffering starvation. From the mid-1990s onwards, emergency supplies gradually gave way to more persistent development interventions designed and financed by foreign donors, governments, and (I)NGOs. Among these, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) – a group of development agencies operating under the aegis of the Aga Khan IV, the current leader of the Nizari Ismaili Muslims – soon became the most prominent and influential actor. [1]

In some crucial ways, the AKDN has taken over the role of the Soviet state with regard to providing fundamental goods and services in vital domains of life, such as health care, education, electricity, and disaster management. Although access to such resources has become more restricted and competitive than was the case within the Soviet welfare system, the Aga Khan IV is admired for his capacity to provide, praised for his generosity, and, regarding those aspects, explicitly framed as a successor to the Soviet state. The Tajik state, on the other hand, has not fulfilled

View on Ishkoshim in Tajikistan and the border to Afghanistan along the river Panj.
Photo: Tobias Marschall, 2013.

people's expectations in terms of the provision of goods and services, or in simply maintaining what existed. Instead, roads and other public infrastructures in the Pamirs keep crumbling, hospitals and schools remain poorly equipped, their staff underpaid and libraries closed, pavements crumle and the aiport in Ishkoshim serves as practice ground for novice drivers. For many Pamiris, material decay and lack of employment and state services do not pose practical challenges alone but also affect their self-perception vis-à-vis their notions of modernity and their place therein. The course of time has reversed here, taking people back into a past from which the Soviet era appears again like the desired future.

Summer 2015, the Wakhan road dissolving.
Photo: Carolin Maertens.

Despite such decay, or precisely because of it, the relationship between infrastructure and political legitimacy persists in post-Soviet Tajikistan, although in a state of tension. The arrangements for Rahmon's visit in 2013 suggest that the state regime must address decay and insufficiency – and that it has to deny both. Yet, demonstratively declaring the situation to be the opposite to the reality only emphasizes the dilemma that the regime cannot escape: If the president had been bumped along on a bad road to a meagre potato harvest meant to feed border troops then this would have undermined his claim to authority by admitting the state's inability to provide; staging prosperity and optimism amidst decline, on the other hand, mercilessly reveals the actual discrepancies. Well trained in dialectics, the Pamiri audience noticed the contradictory implications of the president's performance and jokingly

The Lenin statue in Murghab serves as a flagpole for the ensign of Tajikistan on the occasion of a state organized festival on Youth Day in May 2015.
Photo: Carolin Maertens.

calculated how often they would have to invite the president for the Wakhan road to be tarmacked in its entirety.

During the event timescape created by the president's visit, the diverging temporalities of local residents and the state regime confronted one another. Travelling on this bumpy road takes people back in time, as they say, implying a qualitatively "backward," pre-Soviet state of affairs. Impoverished living conditions, lack of welfare services once available, loss of occupations that provided not just income but a sense of purpose and a place in the contemporary modern world – all this adds to a sense of living a life in regress. The president alone, it seems, proceeds smoothly towards an optimistic future.

Back to Lenin. In the Pamirs, promises of the communist utopia were substantiated by a very material modernity. Today, that future lies irreversibly in the past. Yet, Lenin has not been abandoned and attempts on the part of the state to cover up this inconvenience fail, quite literally. In contrast to the crumbling roads around him, Lenin is well taken care of and, gleaming in blinding white, stubbornly keeps pointing back to the future.

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Notes:

[1] The great majority of people in the Western Pamirs adhere to this branch of Shi'a Islam.

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