Ali Igmen


In the post-communist era, Kyrgyzstan has been an outlier in Central Asian political development. Although it flirted with a hard form of authoritarianism from 2007 to 2010 under the leadership of Kurmanbek Bakiev, it has had, overall, a more open and competitive society than its neighbors. The special position of Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia has attracted the attention of many Western scholars, who find the research climate more hospitable than in other countries of the region. Although most academic research focuses on Kyrgyzstan as an independent state, a few scholars have taken advantage of the greater accessibility of archival materials and interview subjects to conduct research on the Soviet era. The work under review represents one such project.

*Speaking Soviet with an Accent* asks how the Kyrgyz became Soviets, and more specifically how various cultural institutions, most notably the ubiquitous Houses of Culture in the Kirgiz SSR, helped to establish a Soviet identity among the indigenous Kyrgyz in the first decades of Soviet rule. The book opens with chapters on how the Bolsheviks adapted the Orientalist views of the tsarist era on Central Asia to the shaping of culture and identity in the Kirgiz SSR. The chapters that follow offer detailed examinations of the role of the Houses of Culture, festivals and celebrations, and Soviet theater in this enterprise. The book concludes with a chapter on the fashioning of Kyrgyzness among women and a brief comparison of identity issues in the Kirgiz SSR with those in surrounding republics and a note on the fate of the Houses of Culture, some of which have become houses of worship in independent Kyrgyzstan. Readers will also find a number of photos of Kyrgyz Houses of Culture, which often occupied imposing structures.

Using archival and newspaper sources, and some personal interviews, Ali Igmen paints a picture of the local outposts of cultural policy implementation that will be familiar, in broad brush, to any student of Soviet history. Officials issued directives from above exhorting closer adherence to party and state policy while club administrators responded from below with reports of achievements (often exaggerated), pleas for more funding and support, and complaints about the human capital they had to work with. In reporting on the staging of plays designed to sovietize the countryside, one administrator lamented the poor quality of the audience as well as the actors. What is different in this work is the local peculiarities of the Kyrgyz setting, where, for example, the Houses of Culture made good use of traditional bards, such as the akyns and manaschys, to entertain and educate citizens. As Igmen notes,
although the goal was to “replace horses with tractors and komuz [the traditional Kyrgyz stringed instrument] with violins,” [p. 50] the Bolsheviks were most effective in replacing kumyz [fermented mare’s milk] with vodka.

Following the now dominant approach in the field, the author argues that the formation of a new Soviet Kyrgyz identity was not imposed from above but negotiated between the agents on the ground and the principals in Frunze and Moscow. Of course, the capacity of the state to engineer social and cultural transformations was limited, and there was constant pushback from below, as Igmen illustrates well here. In writing about the agency of local elites, however, he may overstate the extent to which the mixing of Soviet and Kyrgyz traditions was “negotiated” between principals and their agents. The local officials do not come off in this account as terribly conscious or effective political actors but rather as frustrated and largely ineffectual administrators who find themselves caught between directives from above and the weight of tradition from below. In Igmen’s own words, the archives reveal a “sometimes haphazard, sometimes systematic process of creating culture.” [p. 5]

The book’s discussion of the Kyrgyz legend, Manas, provides a sense of the challenges facing the early Soviet leadership in the land of the Kyrgyz. What was the appropriate Soviet approach to Manas, which served to unite the diverse tribes and clans of the Kyrgyz behind a common work of sacred history? Like virtually everything else, the place in the Soviet paradigm of this cultural legacy from the pre-revolutionary era was contested, though there is little evidence in this work of exactly how that contestation occurred. Igmen can only comment on “the state’s gradual appropriation of Manas as a narrative representation of socialist heroism...” [p. 100], which was a tough assignment, given the uncomfortable fit of an orally-conveyed epic poem in a Soviet tradition that emphasized written, “scientific” history.

Because the archival evidence on the Houses of Culture in the Kirgiz SSR is drawn primarily from 1920s and 1930s, it does not speak directly to the ways in which the works of Chingiz Aitmatov re-imagined the relationship between Soviet and Kyrgyz identities. However, Igmen offers a compelling argument about the central role of the celebrated Kyrgyz writer in the 1950s and 1960s in reviving a sense of Kyrgyzness and making certain forms of national expression politically acceptable again. As Igmen and others have noted, the works of Aitmatov are politically ambivalent in that they “blurred the lines between state ideology and indigenous values, forging a powerful image that values both Kyrgyz tradition and Soviet ideology.” [134] Works like Aitmatov’s stood in stark contrast to the heavy-handed tracts distributed through the Houses of Culture. Thus, residents of the Kirgiz SSR were subject to conflicting signals about what it meant to be a Soviet Kyrgyz, messages that not only differed