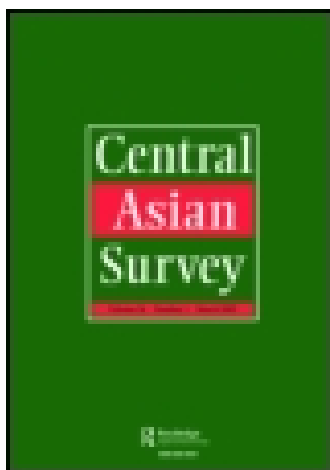


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Exploring the edge of empire: Soviet era anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia

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BOOK REVIEW

Exploring the edge of empire: Soviet era anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia, edited by Florian Mühlfried and Sergey Sokolovskiy (Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia, No. 25), Berlin, Zürich, LitVerlag GmbH, 2011, 337 pp., EUR 29.90, ISBN 978-3-643-90177-4

This volume consists, by and large, of the papers presented at a Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology workshop in April 2009. The articles in the first section are mainly by Western scholars. Despite the variety of topics, the essays share one common concern: the predominance of power relations between Soviet-time ethnographers and the researched people. Below I will argue that this power discrepancy is not exactly the case. The second section, very short but from my point of view the most path-breaking, deals with collective farm studies in the Caucasus (by Vladimir Bobrovnikov) and Central Asia (by Sergei Abashin). Both authors showcase that ‘collective farm studies’ were a kind of very general, ideologically approved frame for the real research strategies.

Long interviews with two prominent Russian senior researchers with Caucasian background – Sergei Arutiunov and Mikhail Khazanov – form the third section. The speakers touch upon multiple topics, such as a chronology of the development of ethnography of the Caucasus, ‘centre vs. periphery’ problems, and Western influence on Russian science in late-Soviet times. These two papers bring a very special and personalized perspective to the ways in which science develops. The fourth section examines the Soviet-period history of national ethnographic schools and their transformations after 1990 in four Caucasus regions: Armenia (Artak Dabaghyan); Azerbaijan (Aliagha Mammadli); Georgia (Kevin Tuite); and Circassia (Igor Kuznetsov). The fifth section, ‘Individual Contributions and their Political Constraints’, contains three biographical essays, regarding Aleksander Iakubovskii, the ‘creator’ of the concept of Uzbek ethnogenesis (Alisher Ilkhamov), Olga Sukhareva, a brilliant ethnographer and orientalist (Olga Naumova), and Alexander Chaianov, a Soviet agrarian economist (Nikolai Naumov). The last article seems a bit alien to the main topic of the volume, because Chaianov’s core expertise was in the sociology of peasant households in Central Russia.

The collection appears keen on bringing forward the spirit of *Mitforschung* (research-together), which focuses on the collaboration of ‘native’ voices with those of the ‘outside observers’. The nativity here is multilayered. At the level of the volume, the editors present the works of both Russian and European anthropologists. The other level of *Mitforschung* appear in the papers, which, for instance, explore Soviet monographs written in the 1930s to 1950s which were themselves co-authored by ethnographers from centrally located (Moscow and Saint Petersburg) Soviet institutions, and their colleagues from the various ‘local’ research organizations in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Such ‘*Mitforschung* squared’ (*Mitforschung* about *Mitforschung*) we can find, for instance, in the article by Sergey Abashin on Soviet collective farm studies. Abashin showcases that though so-called ‘collective farm monographs’ were edited by researchers from central Russia, the key role was played by local Central Asian researchers. At the same time, Abashin, as a part of the multinational group of authors of this edited collection, studies those monographs, which creates the second level of *Mitforschung*.

One can question, however, the nature of the ‘togetherness’. It appears that both in Soviet times and today ‘research-together’ did not, and does not, mean a true exchange, or working side by side. To use a metaphor alluding to the realities of South-East Asia, it reminds one of working on the same terraced rice field while being separated by a river. What this investigation of the ‘edges of the empire’ brings most sharply into view are the edges of the rift between ‘collaborators’.

Outlining the borders of this rift at the very start of the book, in its introduction, editors Mühlfried and Sokolovskiy describe the differences between ‘ethnography’, ‘ethnology’ and ‘anthropology’, explaining how it happened that, while doing almost the same work, Russian ethnographers have understood it quite differently from their Western colleagues. To explain these differences, Devin DeWeese and John Schoeberlein explore in depth the notion of ‘survival’ in Soviet ethnography as a special theoretical instrument which Soviet scholars used to represent their field data. DeWeese and Schoeberlein pose questions like ‘What was the goal of the “survival strategy”?’’, ‘Was the usage of the notion justified?’, and ‘Was it possible to protect certain customs from a repressive antireligious administration by calling them “survivals”?’ And yet, this very analysis in itself shows the depth of the rift, because these (very Western) political and epistemological concerns do not reflect what the term ‘survival’ meant for Russian scholars, which in my view was more ontological – i.e., Soviet scholars thought that ‘survivals’ really existed. Studying something as a ‘survival’ did not mean to decrease its role in culture but to show its ‘not Soviet’ nature. Of course, studying ‘survivals’ was, politically (ideologically) correct: Local traditions were mandatorily seen as small islands surviving the immensity of the Soviet modern rationalities machine. But ‘survival’ was not so much a ‘method’ or a ‘scientific instrument’ but rather a disciplinary way to demarcate its own existence, a sacral cornerstone of a sort that dates back to the Dreamtime of Russian ethnography. Curiously, in its very origin ‘survival’ is again a research-together, or more precisely an import. It derives from the translation of Sir Edward Burnett Taylor’s (1890) ‘Method of Investigating the Development of Institutions’, which was dedicated to the ‘survival method’ and which was one of the first articles published in the major Russian ethnographic journal *Ethnographicheskoe Obozrenie*. It would not be an exaggeration to say that for Soviet scholars, ‘survival’ was simply synonymous with tradition, including religious tradition and practice. ‘Survival’ was used to mark the very field of ethnography and the borders of ethnographic investigation.

At the same time, the coexistence of ‘the traditional’ and ‘the modern’ in the contemporary has been a truism for Russian ethnography. We can see it clearly in the paper by V. Bobrovnikov, who depicts his first visit into Kushtada Village in Dagestan in 1990s. He says that one of his colleagues had *a priori* divided the village into two parts: ‘traditional centre’ and ‘modern outskirts’. This is an example of the usage of ‘survivals’ today. In an article published in a 2010 issue of *Ethnographicheskoe Obozrenie*, two researchers from Moscow, Helena Larina and Olga Naumova (2010), depict the marriage-by-capture (marriage kidnapping) custom among contemporary Kazakhs. The framework denotes the whole tradition as a ‘classic form of survival’. But in the body of the text, the authors describe the very contemporary sensibilities that inform this tradition. Detailing how this custom works today, the authors, for instance, explain that bride capture allows men to avoid the payment of a large sum associated with bride-price, or *kalyim*. In other words, the usage of the term ‘survival’ does not necessarily translate into the politics of academic representation of ethnographic reality. The so-called ‘survivals’ are studied as functional, living, renewing traditions.

Having said much about borders and rifts, I still view this volume as a step towards the construction of bridges. It may be not particularly interesting for European scholars of Central Asia or the Caucasus, because the materials presented in the book have long been available in Russian and are probably familiar to them. It is, however, a good resource for those who study the

anthropology of anthropology, and especially those who want to understand the emic language of Russian ethnography.

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