

INTRODUCTION

When a Tajik Communist Party member was asked at a Party Congress in the early 1930s—a decade after the Soviet takeover—what the Communist Party meant to him, he answered: “a pure, tender rose.” When asked to explain what he meant, he ran away. Another Tajik communist said he joined the Party because only Party members could buy fabric. When it was explained to him that in the Soviet Union any person, with or without Party membership, had the right to buy fabric, he replied: “Good, then you can exclude me from the Party now.” Soviet Europeans in early Soviet Central Asia regularly reported expressions of ignorance about the Communist Party but also lack of a desire to learn, to raise questions, and simply to speak at Party gatherings.² Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Muslim communists were publicly ridiculed at republican Party congresses for openly practicing Islam, accepting traditional authorities, resisting female emancipation, and generally impeding and misinterpreting Soviet goals.³ Some thought, despite reports of public ridicule, that communism would secure them five to eight wives while others hoped for a strengthening of Islam. As one of the European communists in Tajikistan put it, “People did not understand the meaning of [Soviet] words.” More importantly, “People generally could not orient themselves” within the new regime.⁴

These acts of contempt toward Muslim communists could be interpreted as crude acts of a “civilizing process” to define and impose notions of Central Asian Muslim backwardness and Soviet (European) civilization. They also can be seen as acts of legitimization of Soviet presence in Central Asia: since Muslims could not (and did not) develop themselves, there was an apt reason for the Soviet European presence in Central Asia. But performing rituals of a civilizing mission in the early Soviet project was more than an expression of Soviet European superiority or Muslim backwardness. It was also a pragmatic tactic, on the side of both Soviet Muslims and Europeans, to deal with their responsibility and vulnerability in implementing the Soviet project. Rather than understanding such narratives on Muslim backwardness as “facts” that impeded the Soviet project, one ought to treat them as mechanisms of adaptation to early Soviet state building. Performances of backwardness did not take place during educational congresses or Party study seminars but occurred as regular witch hunts staged at plena before or after a government campaign such as collectivization or grain requisitioning. Such plena aimed to identify and punish those communists who supposedly hindered plan fulfillment and, hence, Sovietization. In this context, performances of backwardness were defense mechanisms against purges and other reprimands for not achieving government plans, on the side of both Europeans and Muslims. Just as they allowed Europeans to shoulder mishaps on the “backward” nature of the region and its people, Tajik officials regularly pointed out that it was Europeans’ responsibility to teach them the Soviet way of life and that is why any responsibility should first be addressed to them.⁵ Thus, when asked why Muslim communists did not join *kolkhozes* (collective farms), some explained that it was due to their lack of education (*neobrazovannost’*) and backwardness.⁶ Even the highest and most educated officials in Tajikistan resorted to the backwardness argument. An Iranian communist who was sent to build the Soviet system in Tajikistan excused his mishaps at a Party congress in 1936 as follows: “I think that I have many defects, a lot of mistakes, a lot of misunderstanding, which need to be reeducated [*perevostpitat’*].” He was quickly and wittily corrected by a fellow Tajik communist: “Too many defects will not do. A little bit is OK.”⁷

Tactics by Soviet officials—central, intermediary, and local—to enforce, evade, and communicate the new Soviet regime in Tajikistan in the 1920s and 1930s comprise the primary focus of this book. This is a study of governance tactics, and perceptions thereof, by a ruling communist elite and their subordinates in a geographically and culturally distant territo-

ry. Its main emphasis is Soviet officials' understandings, strategies, and representations of the new system that they were tasked with and entitled to install and represent. That system, the book aims to demonstrate, was composed of multiple trajectories, considerations, and shifting tactics that were shaped by the ideas of communist justice, concerns about military conquest and governance, and physical, linguistic, financial, and political diversity and constraints. A multiplicity of ways of perceiving and carrying out these strategies lies at the heart of the investigation.

Several initial considerations and tensions shaped the book's focus. My original objective was to study what role Soviet law played in instituting the Soviet regime in Tajikistan. However, the ideologically charged language of legal material, the weakness and dependence of legal institutions upon arbitrary political campaigns and officials, the widespread resort to extrajudicial penalties by officials, and, more importantly, distrust and disregard of legal institutions and officials by the Moscow center made me ask: how should one treat material that was manipulated, distrusted, and disregarded by officials themselves? Legal quotas and statistics were constantly changed, documents and protocols manipulated to adhere to communist vocabulary and central plans, and legal officials politically isolated. Violence and repressions outside the legal framework (and documentation), which shaped and often annulled the legal realm, were crucial for understanding the written material.⁸ I, a historian—whose basis for investigation is written documents—confronted a situation similar to that of Moscow officials, who had to find ways to deal with information and language that could not be trusted. Even though Moscow double-checked their officials, turning to secret documents on extralegal “justice” or private memoirs did not (and could not) deliver “truth.”⁹ The secret police was tasked with seeking out enemies according to quotas and strictly relied on Moscow's directives on what constituted antirevolutionary activities. Rather than providing a diversity of views of Soviet officials about the state of affairs, secret reports reflected strict rules of reporting.

I asked: if official Soviet language did not become the primary means of information sharing but rather of tactics, how can a historian make sense of it? If speeches at the plena, reports of Soviet officials, and letters from the population cannot be considered trustworthy indications of what really took place or was thought, how can we make use of them? In the midst of the growing fear of open communication that characterized the 1930s, how could central leaders know they exercised control? If official language—considered to be key for modern state building¹⁰—did not become the

primary means of communication, how were policies and norms installed and communicated? Rather than treating these issues as limitations, I used them to help define my research questions in analyzing the dynamics of the early Soviet regime.

The intention changed from learning, in Rankean terms, “objective” facts about the past to understanding how knowledge and communication were constructed, perceived, and ignored as strategies of rule. As a result, instead of seeking “reliable” information about what *really* happened in every village and town in early Soviet Tajikistan, this work evolved to understand how new political actors developed strategies to secure control, communicate their rule, and develop practices of governance to sustain it. Rather than rendering reports, proclamations, and plena debates as lies, truths, or expressions of ideologies, I treat them as tactics and practices. Who used, understood, and fashioned knowledge and information in the process of state building—and how and why they did so—became my primary focus. As a result, the book analyzes several selected interrelated strategies by Soviet officials in Moscow, Tashkent, and Dushanbe/Stalinabad to imagine, define, and force through their agency under the new political regime. As an archival study, it is based primarily on written communication in which actors consciously spoke to power in terms they thought were accepted by that power. How they imagined this power and how they were shaped by new constellations of power became my primary interest. Rather than bringing in, for example, “voices from below,” I analyze how “voices from below” were constructed and ignored in the politics of rule. Instead of using the legal material as a source of truthful reflection of facts and opinions, I focused on the politics of production of knowledge for tactics of rule. While influenced by its initial legal focus, the book goes beyond its scope.

LANGUAGE AS LIE, DEEDS AS TRUTH, PEOPLE AS RULE

How can one rule if one does not trust one’s own language? Theories of modern state formation suggest that language plays a key role in the development of modern political governance. Education, news, laws, debates, and public events must be conducted in a national language accessible to the people living in a bureaucratic state. This language (or, in some exceptions, languages) is learned at school, used at work and in court, in print and other media. Linguistic diversity must be overcome through the establishment of a common, often designated “official,” “state,” “literary,”

or “high” language.¹¹ Commonly perceived as a product of industrial modernity, a state language is understood as the basis for quick and uncomplicated communication. It becomes a considerable investment of state elites because more “numerous, complex, precise, and context-free messages need to be transmitted than has ever been the case before.”¹² If, according to Ernest Gellner, in the agrarian age “some can read and most cannot,” in the industrial age “all can and must read.”¹³ This is why governments sponsor school education and ensure high literacy rates. Linguistic diversity threatens miscommunication, which leads to production failures and costs. A common standardized language is a must for an industrial state that strives for rapid production and workable governance based on conformity to signs, rules, and forms. Using the same concepts does not mean that people use them uniformly or agree on them; misunderstandings occur, but the basic requirement—general, mutual understanding of what is being said—is met.¹⁴ Significantly, the development of a common vernacular language leads to the formation of a common communicative and cultural field. Just as linguistic diversity can hinder the process of production, cultural miscommunication can also interrupt efficiency in industrial and government activities. Soviet leaders were wary of the language issue and came up with their own model.

Cautious of being labeled an imperial power and wary of anti-imperial resistance, Soviet leaders at first promoted and financed the diversity of national and various minority languages and cultures.¹⁵ Yet, although republican national languages were formed,¹⁶ Soviet leaders still aimed to develop one Soviet language for the entire Soviet Union. *National in form, socialist in essence* was Stalin’s evasive response to the dilemma:

It might seem strange that we, the defenders of the future merger of national cultures in one common (in form and in essence) culture, with one common language, at the same time are defending the development of national cultures in this moment, in the period of dictatorship of the proletariat. But there is nothing strange about this. We should let national cultures unfold and develop, discovering their potential, in order to prepare conditions for merging into one common culture with one common language.¹⁷

For Stalin the development of national republican languages was a necessary but temporary solution “until the proletariat wins throughout the whole world and socialism enters everyday life.”¹⁸ His ultimate goal was the creation of a single socialist language, both in form and in essence. The

development of a single language that transcended cultural differences, “socialist in form and in essence,” was thought to be possible because, according to Lenin, all cultures, independent of ethnicity, religion, and race, were essentially alike: they had “even if undeveloped, elements of democratic and socialist culture, because every culture had workers and exploited masses; their work conditions necessarily gave birth to socialist and democratic ideologies.”¹⁹ The support of national languages and cultural differences was an intermediate measure; the development of a single socialist culture and language was the primary goal.²⁰ This goal was partially achieved: individuals in the most remote areas of the Soviet Union from early on started using words and phrases such as “class enemy,” “revolution,” and “capitalist oppression.” Parents across geographic borders started naming their children *Traktor* (tractor), *Elektrifikatsiia* (electrification), *Revolutsiia* (revolution). Soviet vocabulary quickly infiltrated national languages—whether Russian,²¹ Uzbek, or Ukrainian—across the vast multiethnic territory of the previous Russian Empire:

From the time of the great proletarian revolution, our sociopolitical usage was enriched with a great amount of new words, which linguistically designed new political and economic notions and formulas. First decrees of the intermediate worker-peasant government, transmitted through radio . . . brought the wide masses of workers these words, maybe not always understandable to all, but dear and exciting with their emotional revolutionary spirit. . . . Revolutionary phraseology soon became property of a million masses: new words rang out [*zvuchali*] at the front, in town councils [*sovdeps*], in remote villages, in newspapers, schools, in courts.²²

Applying Foucault’s ideas²³ to the Soviet context, Stephen Kotkin argued that Soviet citizens did indeed develop a single Soviet language. This is because Soviet citizens went through “[t]he process of ‘positive integration’ by which [they] became part of the ‘official society’” through learning and appropriating Soviet “terms at issue and the techniques of engagement.”²⁴ Labeling Stalinism a (modern) civilization, Kotkin argues that the system’s strength resided in the point that people internalized and articulated politics within their social identities and learned to speak in acceptable terms. Although Kotkin admits that this process entailed a certain cynicism, he argues that Soviet citizens generally accepted and internalized the Bolshevik language, knowledge, and power. Similarly, Jochen Hellbeck, after studying diaries of Soviet citizens written under Stalin, concluded

that Soviet citizens learned and internalized Soviet language through the media and public shows and successfully merged “their subjective voices into the collective project of building a socialist society.”²⁵ While there is no doubt that Soviet citizens used Soviet vocabulary to “work the system to their minimum disadvantage,”²⁶ one is compelled to ask whether “speaking Bolshevik” as coined by Stephen Kotkin and described by Jochen Hellbeck was the same unifying cultural language meant by Ernest Gellner. Did it allow the precise and context-free communication, efficiency, and mobility necessary in modern nation-states? Did it produce *meanings, standards, and categories* that could be understood and internalized by all?

The *official* Soviet language, while widely used, contemporaries reported, stayed incomprehensible and devoid of meaning, even to Soviet officials themselves. Tajikistan’s communists, both Muslims and Europeans, complained that they did not understand plena speeches, some openly attacking the usage of abstruse words with exclamations: “Party questions should be discussed with a clear Party language,” or “Are we talking to Americans? This is a plenum, speak more comprehensibly.”²⁷ The problem of Soviet language was not peculiar to Tajikistan, nor to its “backwardness.” Officials and citizens throughout the Soviet Union “expressed frustration, alienation, and mistrust toward the ‘language of authority’ [*iazyk vlasti*] and turned away in great numbers from newspapers, agitators, and the Party itself.”²⁸ Anatoly Lunacharskii, head of the Enlightenment Commissariat in the 1920s, supported the development of the Institute of the Living Word (*Institut Zhivogo Slova*), whose aim was to teach students, agitators, and officials to speak the new Soviet language comprehensibly in order to be able to spread the Bolshevik word to the masses.²⁹ Actively supported by poets like Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexander Blok, and Anna Akhmatova, the Institute also attracted Soviet officials and intellectuals. But the Institute did not survive for long and was closed in 1924. Soviet writer Mikhail Gus, who in the footsteps of the Institute strove for the planned socialist construction of the new language, admitted in 1931 that despite attempts to rationalize the Soviet language, “[w]e still cannot talk concisely, clearly, understandably. We cannot use speech in the process of production. Here reigns looseness, inaccuracy, obscurity.”³⁰ It is not surprising that Soviet or Bolshevik language became for most peasants and workers “little more than a mystifying babble.”³¹ “He’s speaking incomprehensibly—must mean he’s a Bolshevik,” a columnist of the Moscow newspaper *Rabochaia Moskva* overheard someone saying in 1926.³²

But it was not only the listeners who were disoriented by the new phraseology; speakers themselves wrote and produced sentences they intuitively believed were necessary but could not understand. As a judicial official in Soviet Russia complained to the journal *Sotsialisticheskaia Zakonnost'* (*Socialist Legality*), judges sprinkled “high communist words” into the old language arbitrarily, without a system of understanding them, hence rendering the Soviet language not only meaningless but also “vulgar.”³³ Despite its socialist pretense of simplicity and straightforwardness, Soviet language confused and alienated both speakers and listeners: “[i]nside the Soviet language formed a totally unique, specific jargon, which the ruling people used for the people they ruled and among each other. They did not use words, but word-signals that meant something complex, but what exactly—nobody really knew or could explain, including those who uttered those words.”³⁴ The obscurity of the Soviet language was everywhere. A delegate to a Party congress in Tajikistan in 1931 asked that members of the Commission of the Central Committee explain what they meant when they wrote in their report “to highlight articulated right-wing deviation in cultural organizations that expressed in undertaxation.”³⁵ The request sparked laughter, perhaps because of the understanding that, as one commentator stated, “It seems that there is a fashion to write such things [*zapisyvat' takie veshchi*] and [people think that] if such things were not written down, then they would not be considered 100% communists.”³⁶ Soviet words were used as recently seized *foreign* words, not quite understood and not quite mastered, any time speakers wanted to appear communist regardless of the awkward nonsense they produced.

The opacity of the Bolshevik language did not simply reflect the start of a new era of transition and change; official Soviet language and speech stayed intangible and a subject of ridicule until the Soviet Union's demise.³⁷ The obliqueness of Soviet language was part and parcel of the Soviet political regime. They were not by-products or failures of the early Soviet system; they were outcomes of a conscious political design. Since Soviet leaders were “obsessed with authenticity and transparency” in their hunt for bourgeois enemies and their supporters,³⁸ they argued that words were weapons that killed and this was why people who produced “dangerous” thoughts and speeches were enemies of the Soviet regime.³⁹ Since words were considered weapons, language a battlefield, and revolutionaries' aim was to disarm enemies (real or potential), the only way to protect oneself was through self-censorship, which produced silence and fear of saying anything wrong.⁴⁰ Those who spoke, fearful of being misunderstood and

disarmed, made sure they showed that they belonged to the Soviet camp: by using Soviet formulas in their speeches, they strived to survive in the battlefield that Soviet language had become.⁴¹ And in that context it did not matter whether what they said made sense or nonsense.⁴² Rather than producing “truths,” Soviet speech became a ritual of loyalty, producing speechlessness and secrecy.⁴³ Silence, on the other hand, produced suspicion, distrust, and the perception among the rulers that they could not control the “masses” and their own functionaries. This is why Lunacharskii once demanded: “the person who is silent in an epoch of political crises is only half a person. He is obliged to speak. He is obliged to speak even when to fully speak his mind is to put his life at risk.”⁴⁴

While Soviet leaders suspected liars everywhere, they believed that they were entitled to use decrees and proclamations for propaganda purposes, even if it contradicted their parallel projects and secret operations. Official Soviet speech quickly lost credibility also due to the discrepancy, according to Terry Martin, between the Soviet government’s official, usually regarded as progressive, “soft-line” politics and “hard-line” implementation. If the first promised its citizens protection, development, justice, and equality, the second often disempowered and forced them to act against their own will and interests. This tension, according to Martin, was the result of two conflicting aims: Bolsheviks sought “mass political support” (hence proclamations of humanism) but aimed “to implement . . . core Bolshevik values, which involved a dramatic and wrenching social transformation” (hence violence).⁴⁵ In other words, the government aimed and proclaimed to satisfy what it thought was preferred by “the people,” but, on the other hand, also wanted to pursue its own agenda, even if it contradicted “the people’s” wants and needs. If, however, central officials were aware that their rule was not limited to policies, decrees, and proclamations, how did they ensure they could communicate their governance and assure its implementation? How—as my initial question asked—did Soviet officials rely on written communication that they themselves distrusted? And how should I, a historian, make use of it? Soviet central leaders had to invent new ways to communicate their constantly changing programs and projects; they also had to come up with new mechanisms to ensure their authority, the implementation of projects, and loyalty to the state.

The disregard of official language by the Bolshevik leaders was partially connected to their general distrust of modern state institutions. “We wish the state’s death,” Stalin wrote, adding that “[w]e are for strengthening of the dictatorship of the proletariat,” which, following Marxist and

Leninist doctrines, he considered the “the most powerful of all rules.”⁴⁶ For Bolsheviks, modern states’ bourgeois ruling class legitimized inequalities and injustices of the oppressive system by means of political proclamations, laws, and media to install false consciousness in the population.⁴⁷ Since language and laws were treated with suspicion, they never became ends of the Soviet leaders. Lenin and the leading Bolsheviks were also highly suspicious of laws and the legal profession.⁴⁸ Laws, in the Western European version, were necessary only under capitalism in order to celebrate, impose, and protect the interests of the capitalist elite and hence, their dominance at home and abroad. Modern state building and colonialism, according to Bolsheviks, were intrinsically interconnected. Both modern nation-states and colonial regimes were based on the same premises of capitalist oppression. In the modern nation-state the bourgeoisie ruled the masses with nationalism rhetoric (hence bourgeois nationalists) and the colonies with civilizing discourse.⁴⁹ As a result, Soviet leaders aimed not simply to overthrow colonial elites, but also to restructure the nature and means of state governance.

The Soviet response to the colonialism/modern-state juncture was a stately appropriation of industrial and agricultural production. In a society where the government managed production and property, Lenin believed that “people will become accustomed to observing the elementary conditions of social life without violence and without subordination.”⁵⁰ Since crime and violence were considered natural elements of the capitalist oppressive system, violent behavior was explained as a normal expressions of class struggle. While in a society with socialist production and socialist property, there would be no reason for crime, oppression, and injustice; in the intermediary period of revolutionary struggle for classless society, violence was considered a legitimate and natural means to achieve it. Once class inequality was suppressed, there would be no need for state monopoly on violence or laws. In the immediate period after the October Revolution, Soviet laws and courts were treated as temporary creations to fight class inequality that would eventually fade away.⁵¹ “Revolutionary legality” was implemented not by bureaucrats who followed strict application of laws—they were, first and foremost, revolutionaries who used their personal “revolutionary consciousness” to bring justice.

Language and laws were treated as means and not ends, because it was people—not alienated and oppressive institutions—whose decisions, words, and actions were the basis of the early Soviet state. For Bolsheviks, socialist governance was a personal and personalized project. Its power lay

in zealous, devout individuals who embodied purity and class empathy, which could not be provided by institutions.⁵² People, not soulless institutions, could recognize class inequality, understand the reasons for it, and bring class justice. These persons—communists—were supposed to have a natural understanding of Soviet principles, a revolutionary consciousness, a class sensitivity, and to know by the nature of their oppressed condition what class justice meant and how it was to be achieved. Communists were not to (fully) abide by laws and decrees because bringing justice went beyond laws and words. Truthfulness, loyalty, and real communist spirit could be measured only in action. A lie was not a lie if told for the higher purpose of communism; collaborating with enemies for strategic reasons was not sinful or contradictory for true Bolsheviks, who justified all methods possible to end capitalist oppression. Since the revolutionary antistate and anticapitalist principle was neither straightforward nor based on a strict set of laws and doctrines, it could not be taught, but was inscribed in one's biography. Communists throughout the Soviet Union had to prove they came from the masses, suffered from class oppression, and were ready to sacrifice themselves for class struggle and equality. Those who did not fit this profile had to be disempowered, reeducated, and, in certain cases, eliminated. Anyone could lie, abuse, and manipulate. Only truthful communists could risk their lives and prove through their actions that they were real, moral humans. Soviet officials were the basis of the regime. They were the cadres, as Stalin proclaimed, who determined the fate of the Soviet regime, who "decided everything."

The Soviet leaders' decision to construct the regime around individuals, not laws and proclamations,⁵³ was a strategy that was based on ideological premises, Bolshevik prerevolutionary experience, and pragmatism. It responded to several considerations. First, the person-based rule was perceived and could be legitimized as an anticolonial tactic. Since the modern state and its institutions were oppressive, the Soviet system would rest on individuals who could prove loyalty to the oppressed and thus possessed the communist spirit. That system was inclusive and open to negotiation, producing a large number of followers throughout the Union. Second, that system was financially advantageous. Institution building is a slow and expensive process that necessitates monetary and human investment. Human enthusiasm was considered free and could be used in any context. Third, the system of personal responsibility enabled mass-scale campaigns to be realized in short periods of time. Since the system was based on people and dependent on a wide range of membership in remote villages

of the vast territory, the Communist Party rapidly grew throughout the Soviet Union. These new communists were entitled to rule in their regions, often above and despite law as long as they pledged loyalty to the Party and implemented top-down agricultural and industrial campaigns. They could punish, civilize, and educate; they had relative liberty to experiment and implement their version of socialist justice.⁵⁴ This is why the Soviet “system” was widely diverse in space and time, depending on the visions, tactics, and interests of officials throughout the Soviet Union. Fourth, personalized rule enabled overcoming the problem of diversity and the multiplicity of traditions, norms, and languages that made up the state. Each personally appointed Soviet official responsible at each level of authority could, through connections, knowledge, and experience in their localities, connect the Soviet center in Moscow with the remotest villages throughout the Soviet territory. Soviet officials were the pillars of the vast Soviet project; they both embodied and implemented it. As a result, the Communist Party was extremely diverse: people did not have to be able to read or write as long as they expressed full loyalty, “spoke Bolshevik,” and carried out the state’s orders. In this context, their performances of backwardness were accepted as normal deviations of an expanding network and could be used strategically by new and old Party members, and by both Muslims and Europeans.

The Soviet authorities were the ultimate foundation of the Soviet state. They were enormously empowered to implement state goals. Soviet officials—Muslims and Europeans—were celebrated, idolized, and entitled to rule, develop, modernize, control, and implement the Soviet mission. Yet, though fully entitled to represent and install Soviet authority, their loyalty to the Soviet center had to be constantly observed, tested, and reinstated. While highly efficient on one side, this system, based on individuals, had limits. Soviet officials exercised vast powers in their locations, but were also perceived as a potential threat. Those who showed disloyalty or were simply considered to be potentially disloyal toward the leaders in Moscow, and ultimately Stalin, could be eliminated as traitors and enemies of the state. Officials’ loyalty in the field could produce enormous results, while disloyalty threatened the whole system’s collapse. Since the Soviet state was based on a large network of individuals, however open and flexible, this model, according to Moscow Bolsheviks, could also be used to subvert it.

By claiming and accepting privileged rights based on new Soviet categories, Soviet officials participated in and strengthened the system.⁵⁵ They quickly learned to “speak Bolshevik” and otherwise implement the rituals

of the new regime. They studied and learned Bolshevik formulas of class oppression and, in the Central Asian context, masterfully situated themselves in the “class backwardness” schemata. As previous colonial subjects of the Russian empire, they could creatively use the anticolonial rhetoric for their own visions of the post-revolutionary future. But in doing so they also shouldered responsibility for anything that could be classified as not fitting into the overall development of communism. As a result, the main founders of the Soviet regime could easily become its victims. “Speaking Bolshevik” could easily turn into “speaking enemy,” revolutionary speakers of truth into liars, and colonial oppressed subjects into bourgeois nationalists and imperialists. Since language and actions were open and flexible, the system based on individuals embodied a crucial dilemma for Party leaders: how does one check loyalty if one’s own envoys are empowered above laws and words? Flexibility on the part of state and officials could jeopardize “real” central state control. How can one trust officials who failed to implement campaigns but could legitimize them in terms corresponding to Bolshevik rhetoric? How can one prove one was truly communist if one’s words were not trusted? These puzzles inspired insecurity on the part of central leaders, who had to constantly come up with strategies to motivate, empower, and celebrate—but also check, secure, and purge—their own envoys. This dual dependence on individuals and insecurity about them marked the dynamics of the early Soviet regime throughout the Soviet Union. Overcoming the limits of personalized rule—the book argues—crucially shaped its development.

Terry Martin argues that a system of signaling by means of violence was developed to communicate central orders throughout the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ In a situation where promises and decrees were distrusted and ignored, rather than communicating what was right by means of words, the Moscow leadership communicated what was wrong by purging those whose behavior it considered so. It became a common practice that officials throughout the Soviet Union had to guess what Moscow *really* meant—and what orders, decrees, and signals they had to follow.

Signaling by means of violence, as Martin suggested, was regularly used by Moscow leaders, and ultimately Stalin. However, while useful in communicating, violence did not become an exclusive tool for governance. While highly efficient in certain situations, it was also a limited resource and had to be applied according to context. Violence alone could produce disorder and chaos and run out of control, as in the situation of Russian civil war, and therefore could not be the only exclusive tactic of governance

for the central leaders. Violence was used situationally, any time leaders felt they exercised sufficient control over a particular situation and possessed means for its implementation. Any time they felt that violence threatened their order, they sought alternative means of rule. A mixture of strategies was used flexibly—making pacts with local authorities, implementation of decrees, material support of the poor, use of show trials, amnesties, and extrajudicial violence—and all constituted the repertoire of early Soviet central power. Moscow central leaders used them according to a particular situation, fluctuating between interests, possibilities, ideology, and pragmatism. The ultimate goal was securing Moscow's control inside the Kremlin and over the vast Soviet territories. Their envoys in the field responded accordingly, seeking their role and their agency as implementers of the Soviet project. This book investigates some of these mechanisms and dimensions.

RULE DESPITE CULTURES

Soviet state building was eminently actor-centered. Yet we know very little about who carried out Soviet state building in Central Asia or how they did so. Recent historical studies on Soviet Central Asia concentrate on cultural designs and policies toward the region. In these studies, the question of whether the Soviet state should be considered a colonial empire or a modernizing state plays a crucial role. These debates are connected to those over the modern vs. colonial nature of the Soviet rule.⁵⁷ Presented by Soviet leaders as an experiment in modernization and alternative governance to Western political institutional development, Soviet policies in the East have puzzled historians. Since colonial governance is generally assumed to be based on the production of “difference” while modern state projects are based on its elimination, it is illuminating to see how the Soviet “center” perceived, constructed, and reconstructed its Asian peripheries.

Historians' attention to the cultural dynamics of the early Soviet state naturally attracted attention. The cultural turn of the 1990s and the opening up of archives coincided to produce insightful works on the cultural production of the early Soviet Central Asia. As a result, historians analyzed how Soviet officials and scholars classified and managed their subjects through ethnic, religious, and gender categories.⁵⁸ These studies produced productive debates and dilemmas about the nature of early Soviet rule and its relation to colonialism and state building. They helped to move away from the Cold War totalitarian paradigm that focused on Moscow leaders

and economic history. Yet, while the cultural paradigm contributed to our understanding of Soviet policies, it could not resolve the issue of the nature of the Soviet regime. Cultural policies, as historians have shown, were contradictory and entailed elements of both modern(izing) and colonial rule.⁵⁹ Crucially, cultural history could not explain how cultural policies were connected to the early Soviet regime of terror, Soviet economic mobilization campaigns, and other tactics of rule such as large-scale human displacements and terror against both the leading European and Muslim officials. Some historians concluded that the early Soviet state was akin to modern European states: it was based on the idea of universal citizenship and a secular understanding of polity.⁶⁰ Others argued that the Soviet state used modernization as a policy, yet should still be classified as a European colonial (even if modernizing) empire.⁶¹ More recent studies presented the early Soviet project as containing the elements and logic of both.⁶²

But these rigid attempts to classify the Soviet case—as a modern state or colonial empire—are somewhat misleading, as they treat both as separate and unrelated systems of governance, as if they developed historically on opposite premises; these studies ignore the systems' complex interrelationship in historical and analytical terms. First, the transformation of one into another took a long time and had no clear-cut boundaries in world history.⁶³ Second, modern state building also based its discourse on differences between local “savages” and “civilized” metropolises.⁶⁴ Hence, the focus on Moscow policies toward Central Asia (or any other region) can reify the separation and the view of Central Asia as a region separate from the Soviet Union, based on governance different from that practiced in “metropolitan” and other areas. It can push binary (often ethnic) divisions into rulers versus ruled, as well as perpetrators versus victims.⁶⁵ In conducting a complex analysis of Soviet rule(s) in Central Asia, we should scrutinize the *practices of governance* that developed within and in relation to them.⁶⁶ In order to understand the Soviet Central Asian relationship to the overall Soviet project, we need to ask if the type of Soviet rule there was different from the one practiced in Moscow and other parts of the Soviet Union. Did cultural differences dictate differences in governance?

Rather than treating colonialism and modern state building as normative or “neutral” sociological systems of governance—the former as illegitimate/indirect/personalized and the latter as legitimate/direct/institutional rule—it is more productive to discuss both as *repertoires of power*.⁶⁷ In the Soviet case, these were shaped in and by local and global contexts, ideas, and actors and were combined to produce an arsenal of

possibilities. In contemporary discussions about the relationship between colonialism and modern state building the Soviet experience plays a surprisingly marginal role,⁶⁸ yet perfectly exemplifies that connection. Soviet leaders selectively used tactics deemed colonial/traditional and modern because they were trying to outdo both of these systems. The focus on the modernity/colonialism dichotomy as *possibilities of governance* shifts the focus from comparing systems to an actor-based approach. It allows an understanding of how actors imagined, constructed, and used possibilities, trajectories, and perceptions of their local and global political, financial, and ideological frameworks to shape their authority, agency, and strategies of rule. For Soviet leaders, modernity, like colonialism, was a system to resist but also a set of tactics to be used. The Soviet system—due to its open and experimental nature—allowed different methodologies, practices, and repertoires to develop. This logic often acquired its own dynamics and developed in unpredictable ways—in respect to those who designed and shaped it as well.⁶⁹

This book is an attempt to redirect or, better, reconnect the focus on cultural politics to strategies, perceptions, and miscalculations of political and administrative governance. The basic explanation for my approach is based, first of all, on the assumption that top Soviet leaders realized that what they ultimately envisioned was not a conglomeration of cultures and ethnicities, but rather a regime beyond or despite cultures. Cultures were perceived and used as temporary and instrumental for various purposes, but were never the ultimate goal of Soviet leaders. Bolshevik leaders' celebration of cultural differences notwithstanding, it was understood that their rule could not fail because of them. This is not to say that cultures did not matter or exist for the Bolsheviks. On the contrary, it is because cultures mattered and differences existed that a regime that could transcend cultural differences was not simply an experiment, but a tough necessity for Bolshevik leaders who, with very few financial and physical resources, attempted to safeguard their small revolution on a vast culturally and socially diverse terrain. A scarcity of material resources and a surplus of cultural difference shaped the early Soviet system of governance.⁷⁰ This book suggests that the early Soviet state's reliance on personalized rule in the 1920s and 1930s was a tactic that provided a pragmatic yet limited response to questions of fast industrial and agricultural transformation and ambitions for centralized governance in the context of vast cultural and linguistic diversity. Even if personalized rule responded, among other things, to issues of diversity, material collected in Tajikistan described

a political regime that was practiced in other parts of the Soviet Union. Whether in Russia, Ukraine, or Tajikistan, the methods and vocabulary used by Soviet officials and ordinary citizens, reactions to the new regime, and strategies for dealing with changes were painstakingly similar. Responding to concepts and realities of difference, the regime of personalized rule attempted to overcome them.

Another reason for my approach is that during my research I found little discussion of the specifics of local ethnic cultures, religion, and issues of gender that were not linked to Soviet campaigns of collectivization or cleansing, top-down purges, economic planning, or territorial defense. National culture did not play a critical role outside specific political and economic campaigns. This work links some of the Soviet cultural policies to practices of collectivization, terror, resettlement, and planned economy.⁷¹ Critically, the focus on early Soviet governance brings the discussion of violence into early Soviet Central Asian history, a topic that is suspiciously absent from much of its history writing.⁷² Resort to physical violence was one of the crucial mechanisms that sustained the Soviet regime throughout the Soviet Union, including Central Asia. The planned yet arbitrary application of violence was an apt resource for a cultureless rule because it aimed to compensate for the absence of a common cultural language. Violence transcended cultures and differences; anyone could be disciplined regardless of what language they spoke and what cultures they understood.

Considering the Bolsheviks justified the use of violence for class struggle, following earlier Marxist doctrine, it also became a tool to advance projects and behavior *despite* cultures. Since violence was viewed as a product of class antagonism, it was considered only natural and acceptable to use it in the class struggle. The Bolshevik belief was that a gun, coupled with good intentions, was revolutionary, humane, and just. Blurring boundaries between imperialism and socialism, colonialism and state building, the Soviet political design combined ideas and mechanisms of liberation and oppression, universalism and difference. Personalized rule with resort to violence was vaguely deemed a dictatorship of the proletariat to provide a political formula of a regime alternative to bourgeois democracy and colonialism. It is important to understand that this construct was made in the context of global imperial and internal political competition, inspired by progressive ideas of global justice, limited by economic and technical backwardness, and grown from a political context of coercion. Accordingly, the Soviet terrain was supposed to be ruled by loyal zealous communists from the rows of the proletariat, who would liberate it from oppressive state

and colonial institutions. By privileging those who defined themselves as part of the proletariat, the Bolsheviks aimed to install a new method of political governance. But what did it mean for the wide postempire they were trying to decolonize and develop?

Since much of the power in peripheral localities lay in the hands of a selected official, the Soviet regime was widely diverse, depending on an envoy's understanding of his (and it was almost always a he) definition of Soviet rule. To a certain extent, this open-endedness allowed Central Asians to participate in that project and integrate their visions of a new society. They were powerful agents of the new regime. Yet personalized rule quickly created problems. Since Moscow leadership appointed individuals with different backgrounds and visions to implement Soviet goals in every region, the regime had to find ways to level various visions and interests. In the multiplicity of trajectories and interpretations, it was difficult to understand which truth and which rule prevailed. Although the Soviet repertoire of personalized rule empowered and united, say, an urban Latvian Jew and Sunni communist in Tajikistan over the message against oppression, it could not explain or provide mechanisms to determine whose behavior was truer, more authentic, communist, and correct. Soviet central leaders used this ambiguity in order to create definitions of truth according to a particular political context.

Because early Soviet governance was based on accommodation, improvisation and violence were used to institute and communicate the state's rule throughout the diverse territory. While it was beneficial to keep governance open-ended and subject to constant revision, personalized governance empowered but also frustrated central and peripheral officials. Its arbitrariness often resembled feudal and colonial rule, both to the Bolsheviks themselves and those whom they tried to emancipate and develop. Moreover, dependence upon individuals and their visions irritated central officials who sought increased centralization and homogenization of governance. They decided to abandon their own envoys when those visions contradicted political goals and when it was possible to ignore them. While open-endedness allowed space for improvisation for various actors on all levels of governance, it also turned into a burden for agents of Soviet state building.