



Cahiers d'Asie centrale

26 | 2016

1989, année de mobilisations politiques en Asie centrale

Introduction (English)

Olivier Ferrando



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/asiecentrale/3224>
ISSN: 2075-5325

Publisher

Éditions De Boccard

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 November 2016
Number of pages: 21-26
ISBN: 978-2-84743-161-2
ISSN: 1270-9247

Electronic reference

Olivier Ferrando, « Introduction (English) », *Cahiers d'Asie centrale* [Online], 26 | 2016, Online since 30 November 2016, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/asiecentrale/3224>

Introduction

Olivier FERRANDO

In collective memory the year 1989 symbolises the end of communism in Europe. However, it was not until 1991 that the Soviet Union disappeared and the five Central Asian republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – became independent states. Yet from early 1989, even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, several early warning events took place in the region: the defeat and withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan after ten years of a war in which a large number of Central Asians were engaged; the cessation of Soviet nuclear testing in the Semipalatinsk Polygon in Kazakhstan; the outbreak of the first interethnic tensions in the Ferghana Valley, especially in Uzbekistan and on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border; the adoption by each republic of a Law on Language, which guaranteed, for the first time in their history, an official status for national languages. Many moments that show how the events of 1989 have marked the recent history of Central Asia.

This new issue of *Cahiers d'Asie centrale* is dedicated to the study of the social and political transformations that took place in Central Asia in 1989, with the aim of understanding to what extent this year, which is so symbolic in world history, constitutes a founding moment of political mobilisation in Central Asia, despite the continuation of the Soviet regime till the end of 1991. This issue is the result of two symposia organised in 2014 by the French Institute for Central Asian Studies on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall: the first one in Bishkek, in partnership with the Kyrgyz National University named after

Balasagyn and the German foundation Friedrich Ebert;¹ the second one in Paris in partnership with the Centre for International Studies (CERI) of Sciences Po.² Covering a wide disciplinary spectrum (history, anthropology, sociology, political science), this issue consists of ten articles written in equal numbers by Central Asian and Western scholars. It provides objective analyses as well as field testimonies of scholars who experienced – and, for some of them, took an active part in – the events discussed here.

In the first part of the book, we explore the new forms of political culture and discourse that developed in Central Asia in the late 1980s in the context of the new policy of reconstruction (*perestroika*) and transparency (*glasnost*) initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev. In the first article, the Czech scholar Slavomír Horák shows how the appointment of Saparmurat Niyazov as head of the Communist Party of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1985 proceeds from this willingness to reform political practices inherited from his predecessor, Muhammetnazar Gapurov, in power since 1969. However, the various political alternatives proposed by opposition groups, particularly from 1989 onwards, will be either marginalised or repressed, such that the author considers this new political culture of Turkmenistan to represent “the transformation from Soviet style to another form of authoritarian development, in this case under the guidance of one single person [Niyazov]” (p. 29). By contrast, in Kazakhstan, the politics of openness and transparency found a positive response. As the Kazakh historians Arajlym Musagalieva and Ulbolsyn Sandybaeva argue, the decree on “Additional Measures to Restore Justice for the Victims of Political Repression in the 1930s, 1940s, and Beginning of the 1950s,” published in Moscow in 1989, allowed journalists and scholars to revisit the “dark pages” of the history of the Kazakh SSR. Research into the national movement Alaš and the Stalinist camps established in the territory of Kazakhstan, and the transformation of these camps into museums “encourage the development of a critical discourse on the totalitarian past” (p. 70). This new political discourse on the narratives of the past and the constitution of a historical memory constitute, according to the authors, “impor-

¹ “1989 : Also a Key Year in Central Asia ? A New Look at the Sociocultural and Political Changes of 1989,” 19-20 September 2014, Kyrgyz National University Balasagyn, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (<https://ifeac.hypotheses.org/1520>).

² “Social Mobilisations & Geopolitics in Central Asia,” 14-15 October 2014, Centre for International Studies, Sciences Po, Paris (<https://ifeac.hypotheses.org/1615>).

tant symbolic resources for the state to help building the nation” (p. 52). Finally, the British anthropologist Madeleine Reeves assesses the practical implementation of the policy of *glasnost* by observing the media coverage of the ‘Isfara events,’ a series of trans-boundary disputes along the border of the Kyrgyz and Tajik Soviet republics during the spring and summer of 1989. Through a comprehensive analysis of newspapers at three different levels of the Soviet publishing hierarchy – central publications issued in Moscow, republican newspapers published in the two capitals, and the local press from each side of the border –, Reeves explores the challenges posed by the transformation of authoritative discourse into ‘constructive speech,’ at a time of mounting commentary on the relationship between truth, rumour and interethnic conflict. The author argues that there is a “need to provincialise our understanding of perestroika: that is, to recognise the plurality of forms and speeds that reforms took in different parts of the Soviet space” (p. 82). The differential narration of the ‘Isfara events’ provides “an insight into the tensions that emerged at the time between openness and containment, between guidance and the maintenance of social order” (p. 85).

The second part of the book consists of four articles exploring the process of political mobilisation in Central Asia in 1989, in response to the social, economic and cultural discontent of the population. Markus Göransson studies the role played by former participants of the Soviet-Afghan War in the political system in the Tajik SSR, particularly in 1989, which was in many ways a pivotal year, since it featured both the return of the last Afghan veterans and the passing of the Law on Language, which proclaimed Tajik as the only state language in the republic. The author provides new insights into the role that the war played in the political formation of veterans and presents their different positions in the context of the political changes that took place in the late 1980s. He argues that “the war had both subversive and conservative influences on political discussions” (p. 116). On the one hand, soldiers who were fighting on behalf of the Soviet ideal came back from the front with an entrenched pro-Soviet sentiment. On the other hand, many Tajik translators and interpreters had been introduced to the Persian culture in Afghanistan and, once back in Tajikistan, could join in growing discussions on culture and language. It is precisely this moment that the historian Isaac Scarborough addresses in his article on the development of

the political organisations Ru ba Ru and Rastokhez in Dushanbe. Focusing on the 12-month period between the first public demonstration in February 1989, calling for the adoption of a law on Language, and the urban riots of February 1990, he acknowledges that “the political genius of Ru ba Ru and Rastokhez was to provide a space in which the economic frustrations of perestroika in Tajikistan could metamorphose into a political movement with contours greater than the economic downturn that had caused its rise” (p. 163). Under the auspices of Ru ba Ru and Rastokhez, economic discontent became a “platform for mobilisation and political opposition on cultural, linguistic, and nationalist grounds” (p. 165). For the Kyrgyz historian Ajdarbek Kočkunov, the failure of Soviet economic politics is illustrated by the housing crisis, which broke out in Frunze (now Bishkek) in May 1989. Inherited from a historical inequality of access to land and housing between the city dwellers – predominantly Slavs – and the rural Kyrgyz, this crisis took the form of an illegal land grabbing campaign in the periphery of Frunze. Described as a “social revolution,” this movement gave rise to the first Kyrgyz civic organisation, Ašar, which campaigned for access to housing but also promoted “the national and cultural revival of the Kyrgyz people, the opening of archives on Stalinist political repressions, the rehabilitation of victims, the implementation of economic reforms, the democratisation of public life, and so on” (p. 189). All these topics illustrate the vitality of political mobilisation in the Kyrgyz SSR in 1989. On this basis, Olivier Ferrando focuses on the ethnic dimension of collective actions that arose in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the late 1980s. By observing the structures and discourses of various ethno-political mobilisations, he shows how the actors of civil society – both ethnic organisations and activists – act as a “lobbying power to mobilise their community (the minority) and address demands to state authorities (the majority)” (p. 205).

The third and last part of the book proceeds from this logic of ethnicisation of collective actions, through a review of three tragic examples of violent escalation of political mobilisations. The Kazakh scholars Gulnara Dadabayeva and Dina Sharipova provide an unprecedented study of the conflict which took place in the oil town of Novy Uzen (now Žanaozen) in Western Kazakhstan in June 1989, killing between five and one hundred people, according to sources, and forcing into exile 3,500 people of

Caucasian origin. Portrayed by mass media and officials as a manifestation of ethnic hatred between Kazakh and Caucasian minorities, this conflict actually lies in an emergent dynamic of “economic nationalism.” Indeed, the economic policies conducted by Moscow authorities towards the oil-rich region produced poor socio-economic conditions for the local Kazakhs, who experienced a “high rate of unemployment [and a] the lack of housing, foodstuff, and other social benefits enjoyed by shift workers” (p. 237). The authors consider therefore that the conflict of Novy Uzen is not the expression of primordial ethnic hatred, but rather the result of “unfulfilled economic expectations [which] led to insurgent nationalism, later transformed into [...] economic nationalism” (p. 229) within the Kazakh population. In his article, the Tajik political scientist Parviz Mullojanov attempts to explain the February 1990 riots in Dushanbe, which marked the tragic end of the twelve months of peaceful mobilisations reported by Scarborough in his article. Initiated by the spread of rumours suggesting that several thousand Armenian refugees had been provided with housing at the expense of local families, the disturbances quickly assumed an open anti-government and political character, resulting in riots and the death of twenty-five people. Drawing on the investigative reports of the time, but also on new sources, published more recently, Mullojanov reviews the four official versions arguing a conspiracy of either the liberal-democratic opposition, the Islamist opposition, the leaders of the Tajik SSR against their First Secretary, or the KGB central apparatus in Moscow. The author considers that the last version is the most convincing as “the KGB’s initial intention was to organise controlled disturbances of nationalistic, reprehensible [...] character, and blame Rastokhez for the organisation, thus discrediting the party on the eve of the elections” (p. 262). But the KGB officials did not expect the mobilisation would take an open anti-government form and lead to uncontrollable riots that would prefigure the upcoming ideological clashes of the Tajik civil war (1992-1997). The book concludes with Zajraš Galieva’s historiographical review of the most violent conflict of perestroika in Central Asia. Although the clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh region occurred in June 1990, they can be seen as a continuation of political mobilisations initiated in 1989. Galieva recalls that, in addition to the economic crisis faced by the Kyrgyz SSR, and even more acutely by the rural oblast of Osh, and the lack of responses from local and national authorities, it was actually the activism of ethnic organisations that

contributed to the exacerbation of interethnic relations as early as 1989, by introducing the idea of a “national exception” (p. 278). Reviewing the results of a sociological survey carried out in 1996 about the fears and expectations of a population experiencing continuous interethnic tensions, the author believes that the authorities of independent Kyrgyzstan had all the elements to undertake a comprehensive peacebuilding programme through a range of socio-economic measures to support the development of the South, precisely where the Uzbek minority is concentrated, but also to address the cultural and linguistic needs of the Uzbeks, particularly in the field of education (p. 290).

Taken together the articles make it clear that 1989 is a pivotal year in the political development of the Central Asian republics and their experience of collective mobilisation that would eventually lead to their independence. But 1989 also illustrates the symptoms – either tragic or fortunate – of stato-national societies under construction. It is therefore no surprise that all the trends observed in 1989, with few exceptions, were confirmed after independence: the assertion of the supremacy of national languages and titular nations in each state; the persistence of authoritarian regimes under the guidance of a single leader, exemplified by Niyazov’s Turkmenistan; the central role of intelligence services in the containment of opposition movements as revealed by the events of February 1990 in Dushanbe; the dilemma faced by the media in reporting events that could threaten the power and the established order, such as the press coverage of the Isfara events, etc. But the most striking is that leaders have apparently not learned the lessons of the most tragic moments of this period: in June 2010, exactly twenty years after the 1990 troubles, a new interethnic conflict broke out in Southern Kyrgyzstan; in December 2011, the Kazakh government suppressed a demonstration of oil workers in Žanaozen, the same Novy Uzen of the July 1989 conflict and probably the same employees, or their descendants. And how can we understand the persistence of sporadic but unsolved tensions between Kyrgyz and Tajik villagers in the Isfara valley, along a border that has become international but is still indeterminate? Undoubtedly many efforts remain to be done to overcome the legacy of 1989 in Central Asia.