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Before The “Founder of Peace”: Remembering Anarchy in Tajikistan

The treaty ending Tajikistan’s civil war was signed two decades ago in June 1997, but the task of crafting a national narrative explaining the war is ongoing. Teachers, museum curators, documentary filmmakers, clerics, and overseas Tajik patriots living among the diaspora are competing to find the correct words to print in elementary school textbooks and engrave on war memorials. We can already make educated guesses about what most of them will say. The primary antagonists in Tajikistan’s tragic post-independence civil war will be faceless and historically inert forces, such as the Soviet historical inheritance, state weakness, and post-independence euphoria. A few criminal troublemakers, inspired by foreign ideologies, will be the villains. The war will be cast as tragic and needless—a failed attempt by Islamists to violently seize power. *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan* (*Origins* hereafter) represents the most serious effort to date in challenging and denaturing this hegemonic narrative. Triangulating many meticulously assembled historical facts, including a unique dataset of oral histories, Tim Epkenhans has curated what will surely be the seminal account of Tajikistan’s slide into civil war.

Origins is a rare academic volume, combining theoretical sophistication, area expertise, mastery of Islamic legal arcana, staggering linguistic competence, wit, calibrated anger, and a genuine commitment to writing a story with Tajik protagonists. As an annotated guide to the trove of primary-source material on Tajikistan’s civil war, it is going to be hard for anyone to surpass. Some passages are written from a place of outrage and others are distillations from what could have been a much longer book. As a result, *Origins* contains some disputable, sometimes sweeping, psychological and sociological claims, such as the assertion that the proliferation of pro-Iranian sentiment in the late 1980s did not constitute a “radical break” with the Soviet paradigm (67). This may well be true, but some survey data on the point would have been preferable to an opinionated editorial voice. Epkenhans intuits, correctly, that most readers will not notice and those that do notice usually will not really care. I didn’t. *Origins* is a treasure.

Though Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan all experienced the same jarring transition to independence as Soviet institutions imploded, none had a war. Tajik institutional failure, therefore, must have been the result of calculations and miscalculations made by Tajiks, not the legacy of over-determined structural forces. Epkenhans emphasizes two causal variables: embedded regional identities and gender-mediated Islamic belief structures. These provided ready raw materials that political entrepreneurs could convert, with effort, into engines of fear, hatred, and resentment—the ordering devices for intercommunal violence. What sets *Origins* apart is the care with which the author critically examines the content of these elites’ speech acts. Fluent in Persian/Tajik and Russian and unusually familiar with contemporary Islamic practice, Epkenhans is well-positioned to present a revisionist history of the Tajik opposition. In my reading, he describes bumbling improvisational democratizers, pushing agendas of social justice and redistribution. It was, in retrospect, a high-stakes game of chicken.

Refreshingly, neither Orientalist stereotypes nor anti-Muslim bigotry have a place in this volume. Bias cuts in the other direction. Acting as a kind of devil’s advocate, Epkenhans problematizes attempts to impute intent by taking certain radicals at their word. How “real” were the fears of Islamism, Salafism, or attempts to export Iran’s revolution? This is a hard question to answer, of course, but, for Epkenhans, many out-of-context extremist statements could—should?—be perhaps read more sympathetically. A population was seeking dignity and beginning to experiment with free speech and contested elections for the first time in living memory. Not all

authoritative discourses have power to serve as focal points for mobilization when established structures, like class, disappear. One group of elites latched onto conservative religion as a focal point and another demonized that first group. A lot of people were clearly making things up as they went along, in Persian, using Islamic idioms. Close linguistic and cultural ties to Iran allowed the geopolitical imaginary to get wildly out of hand. In my reading, Epkenhans describes an accidental escalation spiral.

Was the spiral driven by the actions of a few ruthless people -- Kengae, Turagonzoda, Nabiev, and a few others? Or was it driven by what were essentially out-of-control cascades that are beyond human agency? It is impossible to answer definitively. Not everyone was in an institutional position to threaten to cannibalize state assets during the turf wars in the transition to independence. It is clear that enough primary source documents survive to speculate, in an informed way, about the motives of the people that weaponized their charisma to build private armies. It is important to Epkenhans that his heroes and villains are remembered as people: not faceless subalterns, not thugs, and certainly not alien foreign spies. He is relentlessly critical of the reductionist move to blame "Islam spread by foreigners" for this war. A great strength of *Origins* is Epkenhans's unusually detailed attention to footnotes and chronology, chronicling *many* mostly-forgotten *failed* attempts to jockey for influence as the state collapsed, or consolidate power over violence, by a *variety* of social actors. *Origins* reproduces party platforms and conspiracy-laden manifestos (126). Sequencing the order in which various demands emerged, and exploring counterfactuals in depth, is a thankless interpretative project, easy to dismiss as Sisyphian. The value of this kind of labour in the Tajik case is immense, however. It hammers home how unpredictable and haphazard events must have seemed to participants at the time. Afterwards, cascading mobilization processes often have the feel of being over-determined. Only through the eyes of a careful historian can human agency emerge.

The fifty-page description of the conventional phase of Tajikistan's civil war should chill readers to the bone—all the more so when they grasp that the side that committed the most atrocities is the side that earned the right to compose the winner's history. Epkenhans is carefully ambivalent on the role of ideology, Islamic or otherwise, in the act of killing. I hunger to know whether academic specialists and security personnel in Moscow and Tashkent were as restrained and analytic in their judgements. They must have known about the scale of the killing, at least in broad brushstrokes, in real time. The authorial decision to eschew KGB archives, and largely omit the "top down" Moscow perspective on events in favour of a "bottom up" story, limits the scope of inference. Epkenhans is limited to reporting a great deal of speculation and second-guessing about what foreign elites would do (and of course they were not all that foreign at the time). At a minimum, matching up the Epkenhans timeline with KGB, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and other state archives is a worthy task for some ambitious future historian.

As the title implies, this is a story of the war's origins, so the narrative ends somewhat abruptly in 1992. Though the war continued for another five years as an insurgency, the narrative concludes with the installation of Emomali Rahmonov (now Rahmon) as head of state. This man has scripted himself as the hero of the Tajik story, the "founder of peace" (354-5). It has been a very useful script from the perspective of regime security. So long as the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Global War on Terror are used as framing narratives for Tajikistan's post-independence tragedy, it is not difficult to attract foreign assistance to build Tajik state capacity. In practice, this pool of rents helps keep the regime in power. This paradigm of understanding has calcified into intellectual

habits that are difficult to directly challenge. After more than a quarter century, Rahmon's Hobbesian neo-patrimonial order probably *does* feel natural to most Tajik citizens. The problem with Hobbesian legitimacy is that it may not survive sustained exposure to the critical reinterpretation of the country's foundation myth Epkenhans has presented. If so, the author is not just reinterpreting history. He may be playing with fire.

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