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Driscoll, Jesse

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BOOK REVIEW

Intercommunal Warfare and Ethnic Peacemaking: The Dynamics of Urban Violence in Central Asia, by Joldon Kutmanaliev, McGill-Queens University Press, 2023, 273 pp, \$120 (hardcover), ISBN 9780228016830.

Intercommunal Warfare and Ethnic Peacemaking: The Dynamics of Urban Violence in Central Asia by Joldon Kutmanaliev is the definitive history of the Osh riots of 2010, and anyone who claims interest in the Fergana Valley should have it on their shelf. Empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated, this microstudy draws on three well-developed strands of social theory: (1) the importance of “in-group” policing norms to local deterrence; (2) how urban geography can alter the intensity of ethnic security dilemmas; and (3) the uncertainty created by the shadowy interplay of politics across local, national, and interstate levels. No short essay can do justice to such a rich contribution, but I will touch briefly on all three of these themes.

Fearon and Laitin (1996) developed a formal model showing that “in-group policing strategies” are a necessary component of a self-enforcing deterrence equilibrium. When bad things happen, it is often possible to frame events as the result of deliberate bad behavior by a member of group A. Members of group B then expect A members to punish “their” defective member, which they will have a comparative advantage in identifying (hence the “in-group” moniker). If A members do not punish their own, Bs may assume the worst: that As only look after each other, or are culturally defective in some other way, and should be distrusted. They may even retaliate, triggering counter-retaliation and a deadly spiral. Mutual fear holds the deterrence equilibrium in place.

This tracks Kutmanaliev’s narrative closely. After the unexpected regime change in Bishkek in April 2010, many bad things happened, all of which could be interpreted differently depending on whether one was hearing the story in Uzbek or Kyrgyz, and how sympathetic a mood one was in. Whether it is a flashmob targeting the former president’s neighborhood (73–4), rumors that certain mosques were doubling as weapons caches, a (false) rumor of a mass rape in a female Kyrgyz dormitory (90), various speeches by Batyrov about dignity that flirted with seditious themes (74–5, 85), the humiliation of enemies (e.g., by putting national dress on bodies soaked in gasoline and torched (102)), or any one of a dozen murders (71, 72, 75, 80, 82) – all of this stress-tested local “in-group policing” norms. Gradually, some Uzbeks and Kyrgyz decided that the other side really *did* mean them harm as a group. The result was that both sides fell back on traditional, gendered (110) scripts, tit-for-tat retaliation, and escalating atrocity (94, 104).

Kutmanaliev identifies two factors that could keep the tide of violence in check. One was innovative community policing activities by local leaders (*kvartkoms* and *domkoms*, e.g., 183–5). He shows “stable residential communities that share common social norms” (81) tended to be more successful at de-escalating violence, avoiding pogrom-like behavior, sanctioning in-group bad behavior (to communicate good intentions to the out-group), and, generally, humanize the other when stakes were high. This requires long-lived institutions and face-to-face trust, however. But by the time hundreds of mobilized Kyrgyz arrived from the exurbs – to loot police stations, acquire heavy weapons, and ultimately tip the demographic balance and rescue “their people” (152) – some neighborhoods, like Uzbek, were already relatively calm and secure. It never had much chance in some highrise housing projects, where unstable migrant populations live crushed in on each other.

You can also physically dam the tide. Kutmanaliev describes the particulars of Osh’s urban demography (“spatial security”) to explain how the ethnic security dilemma, identified by Posen (1993), was more intense in some neighborhoods and less in others. The basic model is simple, but different from the Fearon-Laitin account. If Group A doubts the government will protect them, and

a history of bad relations with group B creates fear, forming a self-defense militia may make sense (78). Since light infantry tactics can be used to go on the offense (e.g., to loot, to empty out buildings in B neighborhoods and give the property to A families) *as well as* defend, the presence of these militias can cause the other side to doubt the other's intentions (79-80, 209), and arm defensively with militias of their own. Offense-defense indistinguishability, with both sides looting police weapons lockers, creates arms racing dynamics that leave all sides worse off. Kutmanaliev's contribution is to show that it was easier to fortify certain *mahallas* than others because of the width of streets. The reader is presented with many maps and hard-to-misinterpret tables (177) to show why improvised roadblocks, and retreat into defensible enclaves (protected by rooftop snipers) was only feasible in some places. Few political scientists pull off writing that invites a tactical view, but the payoff is immense. Ethnic security dilemmas are less intense on narrow streets that can be cordoned off with flaming tires. Multi-lane thoroughfares too wide to practically blockade invite you to go on the offensive (e.g., to spray machine gun bullets for an outsized terror effect from stolen APCs). And importantly: none of this has anything in particular to do with in-group community norms.

How did it end? Why did riot not cross the threshold to civil war? One part of the explanation, hinted at but left for future research (81), is that there are shadowy connections between neighborhood-level institutions and national (and international) politics. Secret elite pacts and "riot systems" are hard to research, often the stuff of innuendo and rumor. Worse for social scientists, much of what was clearly causal *in the moment*, Kutmanaliev shows, were theories of linkage based on false suppositions and outright lies. That said, both in the literature review (46-55) and the conclusion (227-9) there are references to two-level and multi-level games. I finished the book open to the idea that there is more research to be done on decisions made in both Bishkek and Tashkent. On page 98, Kutmanaliev seems to identify the moment when the Ferghana Valley might have gone the way of Bosnia. On the 12th of June, Kyrgyz intelligence services reported that Uzbek field commander, Mahmud Khudayberdiev – the very same man who tried to bring down the Tajik peace process more than once in the mid-1990s – was seen at the Andizhan airport along with twenty planeloads full of Uzbek troops. The invasion never came, though, and so, gradually, neighborhood by neighborhood, violence sputtered out.

As a micro-study of a single event, this is a labor of love and an unqualified success. If the goal is to hold system-level variables constant by looking closely at a few days of deadly ethnic riot behavior, we can be confident we are observing the interplay of local mechanisms with fidelity. If the goal is to shed light on how to prevent this sort of tragedy from happening again, or how local cooperation can "scale up" to link a community to bargains struck at the national or international level, the book simply does not give answers. (Nor, to Kutmanaliev's great credit, does he pretend to). That said, I put the book down wondering: What comes next? What would happen if the Uzbek military, next time, were to seize territory, playing the part of the Serbs in the Bosnia simile? Ethnic war would not have "natural" boundaries. I would not bet much on the arrival of third party peacekeepers in blue helmets, either. For those of us who have absorbed lessons from Chechnya, the South Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh, and now Ukraine, Kutmanaliev's narrative can be read as an urgent warning of what a "dog that did not bark" might sound like. It gives me chills.

Jesse Driscoll 

University of California San Diego, United States

jdriscoll@ucsd.edu

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