

SPECIAL ISSUE

Central Asia: Coming to Terms with the Past — Coping in the Present

Introduction

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In this special issue of ASIEN, “Central Asia” refers to the newly independent states of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan as well as Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Afghanistan. The papers presented here do not actually cover every part of the area thus outlined, and many other delineations of “Central Asia” also exist in other contexts. Viewed through the lens of perceptions of the past and strategies of the present, however, shared historical and contemporary experiences seem to form a meaningful basis for investigation. These include the effects of inclusion into the realms of neighboring regional superpowers that exert(ed) quasi-colonial rule; the rampant effects of rapid modernization predominantly induced by ideologies initially alien to the region, but finally embraced by more than just a minority of the population; deprivation of cultural autonomy, which almost caused the extinction of previously omnipresent cultural features like local languages, customs, and belief systems; and the subsequent recovery of these aspects of local life in more recent years, albeit under different conditions due to global entanglement. None of the sub-regions we look at share all these features, nor do they share those they have to an equal degree. All the more challenging is the task of scrutinizing the regions in an attempt to uncover their diversity rather than simply presenting a generalized “big picture” of Central Asia.

At first sight, coming to terms with the past and coping with the present seem to echo the “problem paradigm” apparent in so much writing on Central Asia. Indeed, many Central Asians find they do not just face the eternal challenges of everyday life, like making a living and searching for happiness, but face a world in a state of ever more rapid and often unexpected change that is hard to comprehend. They experience a loss of certainty that brings about new options and difficulties that call for reorientation yet again. Real lives in Central Asia today unfold against a *dispositif* of phenomena that can be characterized as “messy” at best and are subject to reflection

and debate. Among other things, these factors include the demise of the Soviet Union and the ensuing necessity for new states to be built up on politically shifting ground, or for existing states to rebuild themselves with massive foreign intervention while cherishing the illusion of self-determination; the demise of the state-planned economy, which for individuals and groups resulted in the challenge to accommodate to hesitantly emerging economic models theoretically based on competition, but in real life demanding no less cooperation than before; and the erosion, or at least verbal devaluation, of ideological premises on a large and small scale, which opened the way for plurality, but also resulted in restriction and determinism.

The aim of this volume has been to assemble a selection of papers analyzing the manifold ways in which people cope or come to terms with the past and present. Particular emphasis has been put on the inclusion of discursive and non-discursive behavior, which are intrinsically connected in our experience, although often tackled in isolation from one another by different scholarly disciplines. To what degree this interdisciplinary approach has been successful will be decided by the reader. Another goal was to bring fresh material into the debate. All the papers here are based on research on materials hitherto understudied (such as memoirs and journalistic writings) or newly acquired in recent fieldwork. Although the length of the papers has been limited, we have not only presented abstractions drawn from our materials, but have also made a point of letting respondents' voices be heard, often from languages that may not otherwise be accessible to a broad scholarly audience.

“At present, Central Asia is overburdened with its past,” as one scholar of Central Asia has put it.¹ For individuals and communities of action, the past and present are irredeemably entangled in their daily lives; coping with the present implies grappling with a personal and collective past. Our investigations have revealed a wide range of ways in which people cope with the challenges they face: “remedial as well as preventive” (Ildikó Bellér-Hann) and proactive (Lutz Rzehak), from occasional and structural, individual and communal self-help (cf. Christoph Wenzel and Ildikó Bellér-Hann) to strategies of concealment and avoidance (Jeanine Dağyeli and others), from calls for recognition and participation to calls for vengeance (Thomas Loy), from accommodation (Jesko Schmoller) and resourceful industriousness (Diana Lange, Ingeborg Baldauf) to nostalgia (Ines Stolpe). In all our investigations, thinking, speaking, and writing have proved to be commensurate with other acts, which emphasizes the assumption that “actions *and* words matter and make a difference” in real life.²

1 Anatoly Khazanov: “Authoritarianism and its consequences in ex-Soviet Central Asia”, in: Canfield, Robert L.; Rasuly-Paleczek, Gabriele (2011): *Ethnicity, Authority, and Power in Central Asia. New games great and small*. London/N.Y.: Routledge, 19-38: 25.

2 Jackson, Michael (2006): *The Politics of Storytelling. Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 14 (with my own emphasis).