BOOK REVIEW

Introduction on the Book Review Roundtable


Located in Central Asia and bordering the north of Afghanistan, post-communist Tajikistan experienced a vicious five-year (1992–97) civil war only months into its independence from the Soviet Union, a war which, according to Islam, Iran and Central Asian historian, Professor Tim Epkenhans of the University of Freiburg, took anywhere from 40,000 to 100,000 lives out of a then population of 5.5 million. Tajikistan’s civil war thus took the second highest toll by way of body count in the post-Soviet space after the two Chechnya–Russia wars in the 1990s, which had resulted, according to The New York Times, in an estimated 160,000 dead.

It is fair to state that the causes of the Tajik civil war were multiple, including the spread of Islamism among a segment of the population which had been inspired by their Persian speaking kin in Afghanistan and Iran, in addition to serious economic dislocation in the immediate aftermath of communist rule, and the consequent scramble for control of state-owned resources on the local and national levels by armed groups strengthened by ethno-regional and ideological fervour. The war pitted an alliance of neo-Soviets primarily based in the capital city Dushanbe and the southern Kulob region against Islamists largely made up of individuals of mountainous eastern Gharm origins, many of whose parents and grandparents had voluntarily moved in the Soviet era to the newly irrigated southern Vakhsh valley to become state cotton farmers in Tajikistan’s southern Qurghonteppa region, which became the violent epicentre of clashes during the civil war. The Islamists also had allies: Anti-communist and anti-Russian Tajik nationalists, ‘democrats’ and ethnic Pamiri Ismaili Muslims. Together, they eventually formed the armed Islamist-dominated United Tajik Opposition, which for a while functioned from northern Afghanistan where the fighters had sought sanctuary with tens of thousands of ordinary (largely Gharmi households from Qurghonteppa fleeing for their lives) and where they were likely receiving financial aid from Iran and shelter and combat training from Afghan warlords.

Shedding light on the background of Tajikistan’s civil war is all the more relevant and timely given Tajikistan’s 1,400 km border with Afghanistan, and given the increasing incidences today of violence in Afghanistan by newly established Islamic State terrorists and sympathisers, some of whom are
nationals of Central Asia, and given the unresolved issues facing the Tajik government and society from the civil war era, including lack of political pluralism, heightened income disparity, lingering poverty, a corrupt justice sector, engrained patriarchy and continued violations of human rights. Below are four reviews of Professor Epkenhans’ important study, followed by his response.

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BOOK REVIEW

Intervening in the Course of History: Male Autobiographical Accounts of War


Tim Epkenhans’ book is an exceptional and very important study on the little-known Tajik civil war of the 1990s. The book is a particular contribution to the study of civil war cause analysis more generally due to its sources, including 25 autobiographical accounts of Tajik political actors as well as poets and intellectuals. The Tajik civil war was one of several post-Soviet wars of decolonisation, yet, the one that received the least attention and remained the least understood. Non-Tajik authors used to look at the war through narratives that blamed the Soviet Union for having produced regional animosity (mahalgaroi) that reproduced a traditional society ruled by clans fighting over power and that considered the Soviet Union responsible for the rise of Islam as militant opposition. In contrast, Tajik authors – as much as their narratives differ – agree in that they blame ‘external actors’ for orchestrating the ‘senseless’ civil war. The autobiographical sources provide an interesting glance into inner-Tajik debates, conflicts, narratives and explanations as to why the war erupted. In this meticulous work, Epkenhans has translated and compared these accounts and unravelled the complexity and controversies of Tajikistan’s civil war. The focus is on the Tajik capital Dushanbe, the political theatre where debates, political intrigues and economic experiments turned into demonstrations and distribution of arms.

The book is organised into nine chapters, each combining a specific historical moment and a thematic issue such as the role of culture, privatisation of violence, political practices, postcolonial discussions, Islam and masculinity. The wealth of details is contextualised through these thematic fields that guide the reader through individual lives, key situations, geographic locations and the dynamics that finally spiral down into a civil war. Autobiographies are retrospective interpretations of a conflict and hence an important source for legitimating past action. This allows Epkenhans to focus on how local actors describe the causes of the civil war. The Tajik elite explains the war retrospectively, first, as regional cleavages that set the order of alliances, along which mobilisation took place and, second, as ‘imposed’ from outside (by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Iran and/or Russia). This, Epkenhans explains, is a way to deny responsibility for an actually complete state failure (p.10). Until violence went out of control in 1992, there had been no external funds intervening in Tajik political struggles. After the war had broken out, external
forces began to interfere in various ways, yet the outbreak of the civil war (1990–92), which is the period the book is dealing with, is the responsibility of Tajik failed politics and the post-Soviet economic collapse.

Epkenhans’ account begins in the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic in 1987 to capture what he calls the ‘post-colonial moment’ (p.53). This period sets the stage for how elites emerged out of ‘life-time cadres’ that the Soviet Union had promoted and turned against their colonisers by activating new discourses. One of these discourses is the mythos that nationalist intelligentsia promoted of the abundant resources Tajikistan would have and that Russia had exploited. This gross overestimation of economic potential of Tajikistan overshadowed the actual dependency of the elite from resources from Moscow. By the end of the 1980s, horticulture had become an important source of income for rural populations (p.41). However, rather than solving the collapsing economy, the urban-based intelligentsia was busy redefining an ‘authentic Tajik person’, a conflicting process that goes on until today.

A crucial moment in the outbreak of armed fights was the privatisation of violence (chapter 6). Whereas the demonstrations in two squares (‘ozodi’ [freedom] occupied by the opposition and ‘shahidon’ [martyrs] organised in response to it in favour of the regime) began as political peaceful camps, the distribution of weapons and roaming gangs quickly led to an escalation of violence in Dushanbe. In such crucial moments of political density, events may no more happen in sequences but in parallel and simultaneously inviting ‘violence specialists’ (Bakonyi 2011) such as criminals, gang leaders, and local heroes to join into the conflict, creating confusion and an escalation of violence. It is in this context that the former convict Sangak Safarov turned from a local ‘thief in law’ into a key political actor and the most successful warlord of this civil war. In absence of a national army and in a dubious action, the ‘Popular Front’ was formed under his lead. By 5 May 1992, violence was completely in the hands of private actors and Tajikistan spiralled down to complete state failure (p.247).

Throughout the book, Epkenhans has given space to contradictory narratives of male authors and interferes only where appropriate with interpretative suggestions giving the book an incredibly rich, vivid and lively character. The only shortcoming of the book is the ignorance of women’s accounts. Women feature exclusively as victims. While this is the way male Tajik authors in the autobiographies look at Tajik society and the conflict, poetry written by women, diaries and speeches, even if rare, has demonstrated women’s various roles in this civil war (e.g., Gulrukhsor 2003). Yet, this specific masculine perspective does not diminish the worth of the book. On the contrary, Epkenhans’ focus on masculine concepts and narratives (chapter 7) opens new perspectives on the role of gender at the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union. ‘[The javonmard [young man] becomes a representative of a post-colonial authentic Tajik culture and the opposite of the Soviet man’ (p.256). The ‘javanmardi’ (upstanding youth) values (courage, decency, modesty, fidelity, hospitality, generosity, good conduct and honour) (p.254) establish across ideological divisions and allow criminals, youth leaders, as well as politicians to claim Tajikness for themselves. According to Buri Karim, one of the autobiographical authors, ‘javanmard’ is first of all a ‘male Tajik political activists’. With this chapter,
Epkenhans has offered a new possibility for civil war studies more generally, namely to consider the ‘masculinity’ concept along with political struggle and privatisation of violence. Most studies consider wars as masculine per se and gender simply adding the female perspective. Hardly any study has inquired into the role of masculine concepts in shaping a post-colonial society and the collapse of state.

With regard to the autobiographical accounts, Epkenhans notes that they do not follow a Persianate literary genre, which suggests that Soviet modes of autobiographical narration have replaced pre-Soviet genres (Baldauf 2015). Such autobiographical accounts are marked by self-reflection within a specific historical period and the wish to understand oneself as actor in history. This reminds us of Jochen Hellbeck’s analysis of autobiographic writing of the intelligentsia in Russia. The intelligentsia was concerned with intervening in the course of history and did so through reflexive autobiographic writings by referring to idealised notions and even by interpreting their own role as heroic (Hellbeck 2004, p. 278). Against this background, the autobiographical accounts about the Tajik civil war are not simply reports of events (often inaccurate because of having been written retrospectively and out of a specific political position) but perceived as ‘legitimation of their actions’ (p.14).

The many details, names and dates should not prevent a reader unfamiliar with Tajikistan from reading the book. The study is a crucial contribution to cause analysis suggesting to pay more attention to elite competitions, interstate relationships, fragile economies and cultural mobilisation than to structural approaches and orientalist arguments.

References

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BOOK REVIEW

A Rare Use of Five Critical Issues vis-à-vis the Tajik Civil War


Tim Epkenhans applies a rather unusual but appropriate research approach. He explores the Tajik conflict through the lenses of historical narratives of leading political figures who played key roles during the civil war; his analysis is thus ‘actor oriented’ and focuses on recollections of key players that shaped the course of events. To reconstruct the historical context, Epkenhans relies on a ‘neglected genre’ – 25 memoirs and autobiographical accounts written by key actors as well as media reports – with the research task of exploring the causes of the Tajik civil war, covering the period between Soviet perestroika (1985) and the first outbreak of violence in post-Soviet Tajikistan (May 1992).

Epkenhans pays attention to at least five critical issues that have not been sufficiently discussed in the past. One is the role of personalities in history. The Tajik conflict is in particular distinguished by the lack of transparency in decision-making processes. The memoirs used by Epkenhans are written by the most influential Tajik politicians, the majority of whom were directly engaged in the process of discrete talks and couloir agreements prior and during the civil war. A focus on such personalities in the conflict, which have normally been underexplored by authors, makes this book a seminal contribution. Often authors have omitted the role of the majority of key players in inspiring or resolving the inter-Tajik conflict. For instance, the agency of Qahhor Mahkamov, the first President of Tajikistan, is still regarded too positively by many – both by local (Tajikistani) and international authors. In reality, Mahkamov was one of the key contributors in inspiring interregional and interethnic tensions in Tajikistan and thus laying the foundation for the Tajik civil war.

President Rahmon Nabiev’s role is even more controversial. His capacity in inspiring and influencing the conflict is often overestimated. In reality, by April 1992, Nabiev had found that he was unable to influence the course of events and the majority of key actors’ memoirs brightly describe this dramatic process of Nabiev’s gradual but steady alienation from political power. Here Epkenhans states that ‘the origins of the Tajik civil war go back in history to pre-Soviet and Soviet Central Asia’ (p.2), indeed, the last two decades prior to the
civil war (1970–80s) – the period when Jabbor Rasulov, Mahkamov, and Nabiev ruled the republic – played an especially important role in laying the foundations for the conflict.

Another important issue is the number of casualties and atrocities of the civil war. This issue is often purposefully disregarded in narratives by both sides of the conflict, one can assume mainly for political reasons. However, today, the issue of civil war atrocities is assuming a growing political significance and is turning into one of the main ideological and political instruments in the two sides’ political confrontation. Recently, Tajik state TV openly accused Iran and Tajikistan’s now banned Islamic Revival Party of targeted assassinations and contributing to the killing of tens of thousands of civilians during the civil war. In response, the Tajik opposition media sources launched a series of recollections of the massacres and political repressions committed by the pro-government side.

Yet another critical point raised by Epkenhans is that of mahalgaroi (regionalism). As he correctly puts, mahalgaroi in Tajikistan’s civil war was more of an ‘ordering device’ than ‘an impelling force’ (p.8). Indeed, regionalism (as well as traditional civic networks, mahallas [neighbourhoods] and village councils) was an instrument and a means of public and political mobilisation. A related issue is the relationship between the interethnic tension and competition over resources. Epkenhans is correct to assert that one of the conflict’s generating factors was competition over land and water resources between ethnic Tajiks (Gharmis and Pamiris) from one side and ethnic Uzbeks and Arabs from another – though the case of Russians and Europeans is more complicated. There was relatively less competition between Russians and locals (mainly Tajiks and Uzbeks) over resources and jobs because the Russian-speaking population was engaged mainly in the industrial sector, while locals preferred agricultural occupations. A similar situation was seen in the academic and educational sectors where Tajiks preferred mainly the humanitarian sciences and constituted the majority of the Communist Party’s (CP) leading cadres, while Russians constituted the majority of technical intelligentsia and had an informal quota for certain positions within the CP structures and universities.

The final critical point raised by Epkenhans is that of the role of the Tajik intelligentsia. Based on anecdotal evidence, he is correct that the Tajik civil war was not ‘a conflict over the idea of Tajikistan’ and that the line of division was along the question ‘where to locate national history, culture and language in a larger regional context or on their societal and political vision of a future Tajikistan’ (p.8). At the same time, I would not overestimate the role of geopolitics sentiments; for the majority of civil war participants, the issue of access to power and resources was much more important than the issue of future geopolitical orientation of independent Tajikistan. For instance, a considerable number of leading representatives of southern Kulobi intelligentsia initially supported the [ethno-Tajik nationalist] Rastokhez Party and often expressed extremist and anti-Uzbek and anti-Russian views. However, as soon as the open conflict started, the overwhelming majority of Kulobi ‘democrats’ joined the pro-governmental People’s Front uniting their efforts with the northern Leninobodis and ethnic Uzbeks against their fellow albeit mountainous, ethnic Tajiks.
Also raised by Epkenhans is the role of external factor and foreign interference. There is no doubt that internal causes played a crucial and decisive role in promoting the civic conflict in the country. However, what we should admit is that foreign interference made a considerable and decisive contribution in promoting the conflict making it more sustainable and protracted. We have already a series of recollections and memoirs of the Russian Special Forces officers where they describe in details their direct and large-scale involvement into the Tajik conflict at least since the end of May 1992. The first group of the 15th GRU (Russian Special Forces) Brigade (officially stationed in Uzbekistan with the majority of officers and troops having been Russian citizens) was deployed in Qurghonteppa and Kulob already by June 1992. The Uzbek support to the People’s Front was even more crucial, as without food aid, military supplies and ammunition, which Uzbekistan regularly delivered by air to Kulob, the People’s Front would not have been able to withstand the opposition’s blockade.

In his recollections, Safarali Kenjayev largely avoids the subject of his close and direct contacts with Uzbekistan’s political leadership and personally with the now deceased Uzbek President Islam Karimov. For instance, we know of his direct subordinates who followed him in his trip to the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 25–26 October 1992 right after his failed military attempt to seize Dushanbe. The same is with Kenjaev’s unexpected disappearance on the eve of 16th Session of the Tajik Supreme Council (Parliament) in November 1992, which brought to power Emomali Rahmon, the current President of Tajikistan. It was expected that Kenjaev would be one of the main candidates to the position of the Parliament Speaker; his disappearance, thus, facilitated the election of Rahmon to the position and ensured the ultimate victory of Kulobis in their struggle for establishing control over the Tajik Parliament. We know today that Kenjayev was transported to Uzbekistan as a part of an internal agreement between Moscow and Tashkent. An underexplored issue is what is referred to as ‘hybrid war,’ i.e. informational and propaganda support and assistance to the People’s Front rendered by the Russian and Uzbek media. This support played a crucial role in undermining public support to the pro-opposition Coalition Government.

All told, Epkenhans’ book is a balanced combination of unique methodology, rich data, and rare analyses. It is also a valuable contribution in the conflict resolution literature and post-Soviet studies.

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BOOK REVIEW

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 probably 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 (p. 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 emphasises 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 democratisers, pushing agendas of social justice and redistribution. It was, in retrospect, a high-stakes game of chicken.

Refreshing, 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 problematises 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 mobilisation when established structures, like class, disappear. One group of elites latched onto conservative religion as a focal point and another demonised that first group. A lot of people were clearly making things up as they went along 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 – Kenjaev, Turajonzoda, 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 cannibalise state assets during the turf wars in the transition to independence, and it is clear that enough primary source documents survive to speculate, in an informed way, about the motives of the people that weaponised 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 (p. 126). Sequencing the order in which various demands
emerged, and exploring counterfactuals in depth, is a thankless interpretative project, easy to dismiss as Sissiphean. 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 mobilisation processes often have the feel of being over-determined. Only through the eyes of a careful historian can human agency emerge.

The 50-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 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’ (pp. 354–355). 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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BOOK REVIEW

Significance of Agency, but also Affective Geopolitics in the Tajik Civil War


Tim Epkenhans aptly refers to his book as ‘a detailed historical narrative’ of the events leading to and surrounding Tajikistan’s civil war ‘based on [eight] autobiographical accounts, a hitherto less consulted source’ (p. 360). A focus on the Tajik memoirs is what makes his work particularly valuable and unique. Epkenhans’ timeline of analysis is the critical near-three year period between February 1990 (when the anti-Armenian housing riots happened in Dushanbe) and December 1992 (shortly after the 16th Session of the Tajik Supreme Soviet took place, appointing the then Emomali Rahmonov as head of state). Epkenhans concurs with other studies that the outbreak of the civil war can be attributed to a combination of regionalism, ideology, resource scarcity and elite competition. And he is in no doubt correct that the origins of the civil war go ‘back in history to pre-Soviet Central Asia . . . and to seven decades of Soviet transformation’ (p. 2). He puts particular focus, however, on ‘agency’ or ‘actor oriented’ (p. 3) analysis of the civil war when dissecting the memoirs of the pro-governmental and opposition personalities.

On the governmental side were characters like President Rahmon Nabiev, whom Epkenhans asserts was likely an alcoholic, and whom the memoirs refer to as a weak and indecisive leader, one describing him as a ‘president without any sagacity and competence’ (p. 315). A chief agitator on the government side who repeatedly appears in Epkenhans’ analysis is Safarali Kenjaev, the powerful and divisive chairman of the Supreme Soviet whose vehement accusations broadcast on national TV against the chief of police (MVD) Navjavonov, an ethnic Pamiri, became the initial excuse for anti-governmental demonstrations at Shahidon (Martyrs) Square in Dushanbe, beginning on 26 March 1992 and lasting 52 days, by which time Kenjaev and Nabiev arranged for arms distribution among pro-governmental demonstrators on Ozodi (Freedom) Square, only blocks away from Shahidon – what ultimately began ‘a vicious cycle of revenge and counter revenge’ (p. 5) (i.e., the Tajik civil war).

Another incendiary personality was the former Soviet Islamic mufti of Tajikistan, Haji Akbar Turajonzoda, whose defection to the opposition early on appeared as a symbol of temporary ‘unity between the official and
 unofficial (or parallel) Islam ... the only such achievement in Central Asia’ (Akbarzadeh 2006, p. 1120). A piece of news footage from the era (according to my recollections) shows Turajonzoda giving a speech during the sit-ins on Shahidon Square, where he refers to the then post-Soviet authorities in power as kofirs (anti-Islamic infidels, a particularly dangerous label and insult). Only a few months into the civil war, however, as Epkenhans tells us, Turajonzoda had taken on a far more conciliatory tone, telling a Russian reporter: ‘My credo is a democratic secular state in which religion will be separated from the state’ (p. 201).

A question for comparativists is: What are the factors, aside from agency, that allowed for such a brutal war to take place in one post-Soviet country but not in its neighbouring state, Kyrgyzstan, for example, which also has its own ethnic and regional divides, and experienced a near-identical Soviet history as Tajikistan? I posit that when comparing Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the key differences seen, in addition to agency, are political culture and geopolitics, the mixture of which has negatively affected Tajikistan’s post-independence transition, including a partial inducement of its civil war. Of the two, I will focus on geopolitics.

Geopolitics by way of blaming external influences does show up in the memoirs, but only by way of conspiracy. Epkenhans points that aside from Ibrohim Usmonov, a professor and former advisor to Rahmon and member of the National Reconciliation Commission, all the other accounts of the civil war point at external hands and conspiring powers (chiefly Uzbekistan and Russia). Even Rahmon and the United Tajik Opposition leader Abullo Nuri had during their peace negotiations agreed that ‘a hidden foreign hand’ had ‘imposed the civil war on the Tajik people’ (p. 10), with Nuri having said that ‘[t]he insurgents who started the Civil War in our country were not Tajiks. The war was imposed on the people of Tajikistan from outside’ (p. 129). Epkenhans is correct that siding with ‘conspiracy theories’ is ‘a narrative strategy to rationalize their authors’ failure ... and to acquit them of any responsibility for the outbreak of the civil war’ (p. 131).

I argue that two affective geopolitical factors which indirectly but significantly contributed to the civil war were: One, the Iran factor, as in the 1979 Islamic Revolution; and two, the Afghanistan factor, as in (a): the 1979 Soviet invasion and its ultimate retreat and defeat by the Islamist Mujahideen in 1989, and (b): the subsequent toppling of the once-communist Dr. Najibullah’s government and the fall of Kabul to the Mujahideen in 1992. To be fair, Epkenhans does state the Iran and Afghanistan factors, referring to them as ‘historical events [that] fundamentally influenced the discussion in Tajikistan’ on nationalism and influencing the anti-Soviet colonial ‘discursive space’ (p. 66). He writes that both of these 1979 events ‘triggered an unprecedented politicization of Muslims [not only in Tajikistan, but] in [all of] Soviet Central Asia’ (p. 186). He also writes that the ‘Tajik Afgancy’ (i.e., Tajikistani veterans of the Soviet-Afghan war), for example, ‘played a significant role in the nationalist movements of the late 1980s and many became involved in the fighting during the [Tajik] civil war’ (p. 7). Just prior to independence of Tajikistan,
the later Tajik-American poet Bozor Sobir (who died in Seattle in May 2018 at age 79) had read a poem in Tajikistan’s parliament titled ‘On penitence’, which reads: ‘it is shameful to wear medals won from killing your brothers’ (i.e., for Tajiks or Muslims killing other ethnic Tajiks or Muslims in Afghanistan) (quoted in Khudonazar 2004, p. 9).

In addition to sharing the longest post-Soviet border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan shares a similar ethnic makeup with much of Afghanistan. Furthermore, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and their respective civil wars, have been ‘neighbors in both space and time’ (Tousley 1995, p. 15). It can be posited that the fall of Kabul to the Afghan Mujahideen in April 1992 was an inspiration for Tajikistan’s opposition, who only weeks later engaged in a violent conflict of its own over the political spoils in Dushanbe, with the violence soon engulfing the southwestern part of the country where the majority of the casualties took place. I thus argue that for Tajikistan, the geopolitics of ‘proximity to an epicenter of violence’ (i.e., Afghanistan) was a significant factor inducing its own civil war (Foroughi 2002, p. 49).

As physical proximity to Afghanistan and exposure to it by the Tajik Afgancy during the Soviet-Afghan war negatively affected Tajikistan’s fate, Tajikistan’s affective attraction to Iran (as any Iranian who has visited Tajikistan can testify) and its 1979 Islamic Revolution has had its significant share of influence on Tajikistan as well. Epkenhans tells us that the Islamist-dominated demonstrations by the presidential palace in spring 1992 in Dushanbe had quickly united the opposition, including ‘avowed atheists [who] were overwhelmed by particular atmosphere of the moment …’ (p. 228). According to Akbarzadeh, the demonstrations prior to the Tajik civil war included rhetoric ‘closely resembling slogans of the Iranian revolution’. Sobir had also penned a poem on Tajikistan evoking ‘images of blood and martyrdom that have come to dominate Iranian revolutionary poetry’ (Akbarzadeh 2006, p. 1124).

Epkenhans concludes his book with an important observation that the ‘failure’ of nationalism in Tajikistan was not due to ‘the lack of nationalist cohesion’, per se, ‘but the inability and unwillingness [of leaders] to transform an ethnic-based, romantic idea of nationalism to its more inclusive civic alternative’ (p. 362). Much of the war rhetoric surrounded what can be called ‘Tajik chauvinism’ on both sides of the conflict, what President Rahmon has in the past 26 years regularly reinforced with his reference to ‘millati Tojik’ (i.e., ethnic Tajiks, as opposed to all Tajikistanis regardless of ethnicity). Epkenhans even reminds us that Rahmon designated 2006 as the ‘Year of the Aryan Civilization’ (p. 63). The most important contribution of Epkenhans’ unique book, one hopes, is a lesson from history and the importance of avoiding violence and seeking peaceful change rather than war.

**References**


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First of all, I would like to thank all the reviewers for taking the time to read my book and their intriguing comments on its content and to *Civil Wars* for agreeing to publish this review panel. After Payam Foroughi informed me about the review roundtable in 2017, I started rereading the *Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan*, bracing myself for the reviews and anticipating critique on issues I would address in a different form today. I expected criticism for at least three themes and topics: First, I had (and still have) the impression that I did not elaborate the issue of contingency sufficiently and fully, both from the empirical and the theoretical points of view, and in particular the link between agency and contingency in the specific historical constellations (for instance, the rise of field commanders in the early days of the civil war). Second, I should have invested more time and space for discussing masculinities in Soviet and post-Soviet Tajikistan, particularly the relevant social imaginaries, the institutional context and importantly the relational aspects of masculinity. Finally, I should have expanded the section on the autobiographical sources and elaborated in greater detail the particularities of the source genre.

To some extent, the reviewers mentioned these issues, but highlighted a range of other themes and topics which are at the least as relevant and important as the ones I have anticipated. Parviz Mullojonov kindly shares his first-hand knowledge on the origins of the conflict and reminds us of the early involvement of Russian special forces, in particular Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), supporting the militias from Kulob as early as June 1992. Based on a few autobiographical accounts, I have referred to their involvement (p. 291f.) but should have consulted a broader range of sources documenting the Russian military involvement that might have tipped the military balance in favour of the ‘People’s Front’ already in the Summer of 1992. Importantly, Mullojonov raises a topic I have indeed largely ignored, i.e. that of ‘hybrid warfare’ and the Russian media’s role in undermining public support for the interim government in Dushanbe between May and September 1992. My ignorance on this issue is to some extent related to the primary sources I have consulted, but Mullojonov addresses here a highly relevant question for future research.
While lauding my perspective on masculinity, Sophie Roche simultaneously (and rightly) criticises my ‘ignorance of women’s narratives.’ Indeed, the autobiographical accounts I have consulted for the book were exclusively written by male protagonists and the few oral-history-interviews I included in my analysis cannot compensate for this imbalance. Roche kindly reminds us of Gulrukhsor Safieva’s *Zan va Jang* (*Woman and War*), which was published in a private printing house in Bishkek in 2001 (second edition 2003) and which I was not able to locate during my literature search in Central Asia. In a strict sense, however, Gulrukhsor’s account is not an autobiography similar to the 25 accounts I have consulted, but a collage of individual memories of women during the civil war in Tajikistan. As one of the ‘People’s Poets of Tajikistan’ since the late 1980s, Gulrukhsor moulds the fragmented memories and narratives into a compelling portrayal of women confronted with extreme violence during the civil war. At the same time, however, these narratives do not explicitly reflect on the origins of the violence and political narratives I was primarily interested in. Importantly, Roche comments on the changing nature of the autobiographical genre in the Soviet and post-context Soviet and I readily admit that – related to my academic pedigree in Iranian studies – I focused too much on the Persianate literary tradition and therefore ignored the Soviet literary tradition.

Jesse Driscoll uses the 1997 Peace Accord as his point of departure and reads the text through the lens of the post-conflict trajectories as well as the contemporary efforts by the Rahmon administration to form a hegemonic narrative on the origins and the causes of the civil war in Tajikistan by silencing any form of dissent from this version. Importantly, and perhaps due to his own seminal work on warlord coalition politics in Tajikistan and Georgia (Driscoll, 2015), he raises – with some justification – the issue of the researcher’s attitude towards the different actors she/he is conducting research on within the context of violence and atrocities of a civil war. In particular the question of how ‘real’ the fears of Islamism and the Islamic Revival Party (IRP) in the early 1990s were and my sympathetic reading of the IRP’s interviews, announcements and declarations during the tumultuous time of political polarisation. Through the analysis of the autobiographical material (and complementary sources), I reconstructed a particular post-colonial moment, in which Islamism (and Islam as such) was an important marker of authenticity, Self and cultural dignity. Eventually, I found among the combatants of the opposition, may it be IRP, the Democratic Party or the *Pomiri La’l-e Badakhshon*, similar thugs and violent criminals as among the ‘Popular Front,’ which again emphasises contingency in the conflict or, as Driscoll aptly puts it, the accidental escalation spiral, all driven by the actions of a few ruthless people. Furthermore, Driscoll rightly criticises the limitations of the sources consulted, particularly the absence of archival sources, importantly, material composed by the Russian military and GRU (which is not open to the public at present). His suggestion to conduct interviews with the then Moscow-based academic and political specialists on Central Asia offers interesting perspectives for future research. Finally, Driscoll mentions ‘disputable,
sometimes sweeping psychological and sociological claims’ in Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan, but unfortunately does not specify them in detail. I would certainly love to engage with Driscoll on these claims in the future.

In the end, Foroughi reminds us of the geopolitical context of Tajikistan’s civil war, in particular the proximity to Afghanistan and the importance of the fall of Kabul to the Mujahideen in April 1992 for Tajikistan’s opposition and the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Foroughi refers particularly to Akbarzadeh’s finding about the slogans of the Iranian Revolution 1979, which might not only highlight the particular regional and Islamic tropes of the moment (as Akbarzadeh understands it), but rather the universality of the Iranian revolutionaries’ political agitation which accounts for the success in bringing down an authoritarian regime in 1978–79. I could not agree more with Foroughi on the importance of geopolitics, but among my key objectives in writing Origins was the particular focus on the conflict as a civil war, which was triggered predominately by internal actors within a contingent context and therefore I decided to focus less on the important geopolitical trajectories in order to address these neglected internal dynamics.

Reference