



FEATURED REVIEW

A Tale of Two Orients

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Even before opening this important new work on the history of ties between the Soviet Union and the Arab Levant, readers of Masha Kirasirova's *The Eastern International* will obtain some sense of the open horizon of revolutionary possibilities present in the wake of the October Revolution. The book's cover features a reproduction of a striking "poster-sized watercolor diagram" of the Turkestan Bureau of the Communist Party. At its center lies a red triangle visualizing the Turkestan Bureau itself, connected to a geometrical array of informers in Kabul, Kashgar, Tehran, and Mashhad, to name only a few locales. The Comintern, theoretically the center for the world revolution to be exported from Soviet Russia, occupies only a marginal position as a red square in the top of the diagram. As Kirasirova's book shows, this vision of international revolution in which the formerly colonized territories of the Russian Empire would play a privileged role was not just a fleeting flash on the organizational charts of early Bolsheviks. Rather, the idea that the "domestic East" could serve as a bridge to the "foreign East"—would be a powerful idea in the foreign relations of the Soviet Union for decades.

Kirasirova's book explores the history of relations "between the two Easts" from the early 1920s to the present day. For her, the USSR's "domestic East" figures as "the Muslim Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus"; the "foreign East," meanwhile, includes "South and East Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and sometimes other parts of the colonial world that might eventually decolonize within the framework of a global transition to communism" (p. 9). As she notes in her introduction, telling this story complicates narratives of the Soviet Union as just another colonial empire. Soviet officials, including Soviet Muslims, often proudly pointed to Uzbekistan or Azerbaijan as successful examples of modernization without independence. Soviet officials provided money, arms, and logistical support to Communist Parties in the Arab World that were opposed to British colonialism, French colonialism, or Zionism, while many Arab intellectuals, such as Khaled Bakhdash, saw the Soviet Union as their best hope to secure independence and advance social justice in their homelands. As Kirasirova argues, "the Eastern International" unsettles familiar notions of the Soviet Union, for the "domestic East" of Central Asia allowed Moscow to present itself as an anti-colonial empire, one with a special appreciation of the dilemmas faced by national liberation movements in the Islamic world in particular.

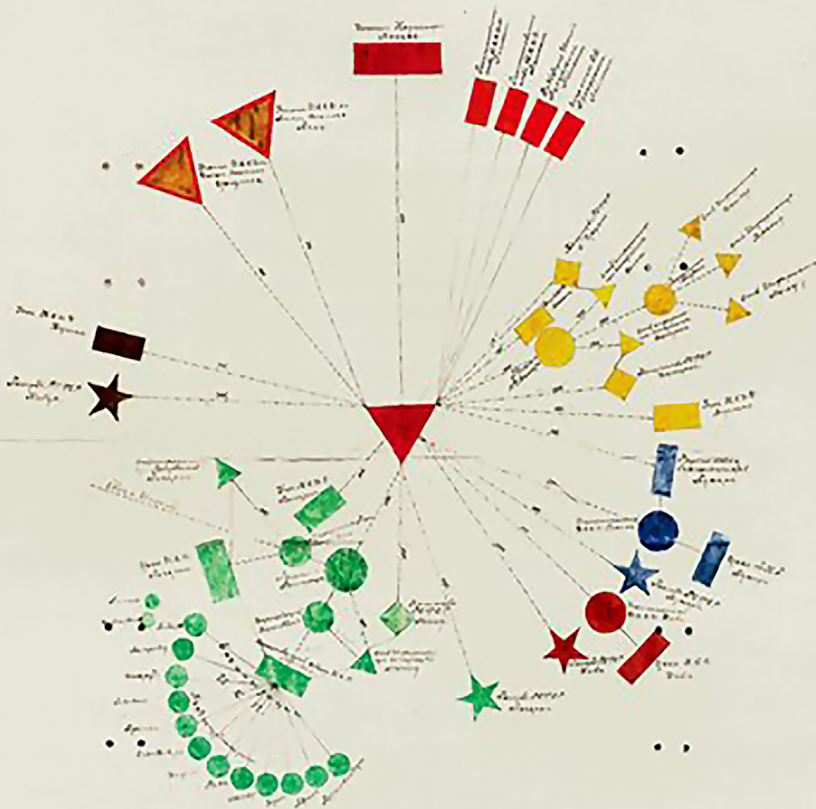
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THE EASTERN INTERNATIONAL

Arabs, Central Asians, and Jews in the Soviet Union's Anticolonial Empire



MASHA KIRASIROVA

Kirasirova tells this story across seven chapters covering the transformation of Turkestan into a platform for international revolution; the heyday of the Communist University for the Toilers of the East; the politics of national identity during the Great Purges; Soviet outreach to Arab Communists during the immediate postwar years; the impact of the Thaw on Central Asians' outreach to the Arab World; the role of film and cultural politics in the "Eastern International" during the Era of Stagnation; and a concluding chapter that discusses the decline of the "Eastern International" throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Kirasirova draws on a wide range of materials, from Soviet archives in Russia and Uzbekistan to Arabic-language memoirs and travel accounts to tell her story. Wisely, in order to marshal such diverse material into a readable narrative, each chapter (roughly) focuses on the life of an "Eastern



internationalist” who contributed to the making of ties between the two Easts. Hence, the rise and fall of Bolshevik Konstantin Troianovskii (1876–1951) frames the first chapter, while later chapters introduce readers to Central Asian actors like the Uzbek Communist Party official Nuritdin Mukhitdinov (1917–2008) or the Tajik-Uzbek director Kamil Yarmatov (1903–78), both of whom connected Central Asia with a Middle East and, indeed, a wider world, in the throes of decolonization.

Several themes run through Kirasirova’s account of ties between the “domestic East” and the “foreign East.” One, as Kirasirova’s subtitle indicates, is the multiethnic and multireligious nature of the men and women behind the Eastern International. During the early years of Bolshevik outreach to the Arab Levant, she convincingly shows in her first three chapters, many key “Eastern internationalists” “hailed from Jewish families in the Pale of Settlement and had participated in European debates about empire and “the Eastern question” (p. 28). Not only the aforementioned Troianovskii but also Soviet Russia’s first Ambassador to Persia, Theodore Rothstein (1871–1953) as well as the Menshevik Cominternian Mikhail Pavlovich (1871–1927) were Jews. Indeed, as she reminds us, “assimilation through Bolshevism” was but one of several ideological options for Jewish intellectuals in the Pale of Settlement, alongside Bundism, Zionism, and Marxist-Zionist fusions like Poale Zion (p. 54).

Yet, as none less than Leon Trotsky, himself Jewish, was aware, the prominence of Jews among the Bolshevik elite encouraged the USSR’s capitalist enemies to use anti-Semitism as a weapon against the world’s first socialist state. Making matters even more complicated was that many fledgling Communist parties in the former Ottoman Levant, such as the Palestine Communist Party (PCP), were themselves headed by Jews like Haim Auerbach, originally from Ukraine. Likewise, among leading Egyptian Communists was Yehiel Kosoi, a former Bundist from Yekaterinoslav (today Dnepropetrovsk), himself married to the daughter of Ukrainian Jews who had settled in Ottoman Palestine in the nineteenth century. So, both the Bolsheviks’ outreach to the Middle East and the sinews of Middle Eastern Communism were heavily entangled with webs of Jewish emigration from the Pale of Settlement. It was for this reason that Bolshevik revolutionary Karl Radek could later describe the Communist University for the Toilers of the East as an “educational institution at which Polish and German Jews lecture in English to Chinese students about how to make Russian-style Revolution.”

By the late 1920s and the early 1930s, however, Jews gave way as key actors in “the Eastern International” to the other two groups mentioned in Kirasirova’s subtitle: Arabs and Central Asians. The reason why is a second major theme of *The Eastern International*, namely the interconnected nature of defining nation and territory in both “Easts.” On the one hand, this had to do with policies of *korenizatsiia* inside of the Soviet Union, whereby the formerly amorphous Turkestan was demarcated and delineated into national republics for Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen. However ill-defined these new national groups were, the mandate to develop a Kazakh or Kyrgyz national cadre meant that there was less and less room for internationalist-minded Russian Jews to speak or act on behalf of the “domestic East.” As for the “foreign East,” the formation of Mandates in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine, as well as Zionist migration to Palestine during the Fifth Aliyah, contributed to the growth of national consciousness in the Levant and the Mashreq.

It was in this context that what Kirasirova dubs “the intersection of nation-making projects in the Mandates and in the Soviet East” assumed added importance” (p.94). Soviet officials increasingly insisted that Communist parties abroad Arabize themselves, so as to provide representation to “the native majority that constituted the proletarian and peasant class” (p. 95). This push, which coincided with the Comintern’s turn away from united fronts and toward a “class against class” approach in the colonized world, had ambiguous consequences. The Comintern’s insistence on Arab ethnic identity nearly split the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party, in which Armenians played an important role (p. 96). It led to the demonization of “anything associated with the Jewish community—including not only the dream of a national Jewish economy but also immigration and agricultural settlement ... as counterrevolutionary” (p. 96). And it created perverse incentives for the figures behind the Eastern International. As Kirasirova ironically observes, perhaps the Soviets’ most important Arab Communist interlocutor was Khalid Bakhdash (1912–95), a Damascene intellectual who was ethnically Kurdish and spoke Kurdish alongside Arabic. In the context of the 1930s, a Damascene Kurd integrated into



an Arabized cultural milieu could seamlessly pass as “Arab”; Jews in the same contexts with a family background in the Pale of Settlement were left to “pass” as Russians or Ukrainians (p. 114).

Ironically, the Great Purges of the late 1930s would decimate both the Central Asian and Arab cadres that had benefited from *korenizatsiia* at home and harden ethnic boundaries in the Levant and the Mashreq. Kirasirova’s portraits of figures like Nuritdin Mukhitdinov (1917–2008) and the Russian Arabist Evgenii Primakov (1929–2015) remind us of how later “Eastern Internationalists” learned much from this moment: Mukhitdinov watched Uzbek national cadres confess to invented crimes and realized that an Uzbek national revival could take place only within strictly imposed limits imposed by Moscow. Primakov, who was Jewish, studiously concealed his Jewish identity while rising to the highest ranks of the Soviet institutions dedicated to interacting with the Arab World, for he knew that being openly Jewish could only damage his career prospects.

By the late 1930s, moreover, the ideological framework surrounding discussions of colonialism in the Soviet Union were shifting. Throughout the 1920s, intellectuals in the Eastern International had denounced Russian colonialism for its plunder of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Lenin and Stalin had denounced “Great Russian Chauvinism” as a menace to the ideals of socialism. But in 1938 “the Friendship of Peoples” became “the new, officially sanctioned metaphor of an imagined multinational community in the Soviet Union” (p. 118). This thesis stressed that Russian imperial expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia had played a progressive role in the regions’ histories and prevented them from falling into the hands of neighboring powers. So, Union Republics could increasingly “nationalize” certain historical figures from the past as their own—the Persian-language poet Nizami in Azerbaijan, or the Chagatai-language poet Alisher Navoi in Uzbekistan. But the Soviet Union placed strict limits on an honest reckoning with the legacies of Russian imperialism, not to mention collectivization or the Great Terror.

As Kirasirova shows in what I found to be some of the most interesting passages in *The Eastern International*, this limiting of the discursive boundaries around colonialism limited the reach of actors from the “domestic East,” even as the institutions and resources at their disposal increased greatly in the decades after World War II. As countries like Vietnam, Algeria, and Egypt confronted European colonialism, the Soviet Union sought to recast itself as a champion for global anticolonialism, its own interventions in Hungary and Poland notwithstanding. Once again, Central Asia took on a leading role in these efforts, as Tashkent hosted the Second Afro-Asian Writers’ Conference in October 1958. A decade later, the Tashkent International Film Festival became a fixture of Soviet cultural outreach to the post-colonial world.

Yet, as Kirasirova explains, even the Thaw under Nikita Khrushchev did not undermine the basic framework of the “friendship of peoples” that narrowed any discussion of Central Asia’s history. “Its rigid frameworks,” she explains, “made it difficult to acknowledge, let alone engage with, new forms of anticolonial humanism articulated by intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, who wrote about race, otherness, and decolonization” (p. 214). Central Asian filmmakers like Yarmatov could enjoy professional success by churning out films in which unspecified religious obscurantists or feudal landlords—not Russian colonialists—stood in as the historical enemies of “progress” in Central Asia. This limited range of reference “stunted the connections and [the] potential meanings” that visitors from the “foreign East” could draw from visits to “the domestic East” (p. 183). By the 1970s, notes Kirasirova, Central Asian authors like Olzhas Suleimanov (1936–) and Chingiz Aitmatov (1928–2008) questioned these stereotypes through works like *Az-i-ia* (1975) and *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (1980). By that point, however, major Arab states like Egypt or Syria had either destroyed their Communist parties or co-opted them into insignificance. As Cairo warmed to the United States and Israel, Syria bucked Moscow during the Lebanese Civil War, and the USSR confronted Shi’a and Sunni Islamist movements along its southern border, the Eastern International was in deep trouble. By the 1980s and 1990s it was in total disarray, and more or less collapsed with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

With *The Eastern International*, Masha Kirasirova has authored an important contribution to a growing historiography of books that connect Soviet history and Central Asian history with the



study of the Middle East. It joins books like Robert Crews's *For Prophet and Tsar* (2006), Michael Reynolds's *Shattering Empires* (2010), Eileen Kane's *Russian Hajj* (2015), my own *Humanitarian Invasion* (2016), Eren Tasar's *Soviet and Muslim* (2017), Artemy Kalinovsky's *Laboratory of Socialist Development* (2018), and Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky's *Empire of Refugees* (2024) that transcend the boundaries imposed by Cold War area studies. Such works on the connections between Russia's "domestic" empire and its foreign policy ought to allow us to center Russia's engagements with Muslim populations more in teaching. At the same time, they provoke the question of how to build this regional perspective into "big" narratives about Russia's empires, or to use these new studies to compare Russian and Soviet empire to other cases. As scholars like David Motadel and Kelly Hammond have shown, both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan sought to stoke the embers of pan-Islamism for their own gain. Meanwhile, scholars like Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank have suggested comparisons between French post-imperial visions of "Eurafrica" to Russian visions of Eurasia.¹ As scholars debate how to teach Russian history in a post-2022 moment, Kirasirova's work will be an important part of these conversations.

I found myself wondering what Kirasirova would make of the increased role that the Russian Orthodox Church—a marginal presence during the period she studies—has played in post-1991 reinventions of the Eastern International. Since the 1990s, after all, not only the Russian state but also the Patriarchy have stressed the convergence between Russian Orthodoxy and Islam (Twelver Shi'ism in particular); Patriarch Kirill has, likewise, described the post-2014 Russian campaign in Syria as a "holy war." I also wonder what Kirasirova makes of Russia's increased cooperation with the Shi'a theocracy in the Islamic Republic of Iran or regimes often read as Shi'a, like Syria. Do these represent a transformation of the Eastern International, or its replacement by a new formation altogether? As Moscow has worked ever more closely with Tehran and Damascus, it has done so rather independently of the Central Asian republics. Tehran's post-1991 relations with these countries has been anticlimactic, and insofar as Syria plays a role in the region, it is as a potential destination for jihadist foreign fighters. Does this new pattern of relations represent a break from the Eastern International, or some kind of transformation?

The Eastern International also comes into a world marked by passionate debates about "decolonizing Soviet history." Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many Western academics have called for a transformation of how Russian and Soviet history is taught, whether by demanding the institutionalization of Ukrainian history as an independent field, engaging with non-Russian language sources, or also looking beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg when we write history. Within the former "domestic East" itself, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have declassified select files of victims of the KGB on their territories until 1953, while Uzbekistan has posthumously acquitted hundreds of members of the basmachi insurgency that fought against the Bolsheviks in the 1920s. In the meantime, Putin's Russia has presented itself as the leader of a "world majority" in which the Middle East plays a special role—a zombie version of the anti-imperialist geopolitics behind the Eastern International. All the while, there are reports of Central Asian citizens fighting as mercenaries for Russia in Ukraine in a desperate effort to either maintain or obtain Russian citizenship.

With talk of decolonization in Central Asia, Moscow proclaiming itself the leader of the global anticolonial majority, and Central Asians themselves dying in a colonial war to obtain the citizenship of their former colonizer, it is hard to doubt the relevance of *The Eastern International*. The moment in which Turkestan could serve as a platform for an open world of anti-imperialist geopolitics is long gone, but Masha Kirasirova's book helps us make sense of these latest anticolonial moments, whether they occur in the name of Central Asian emancipation or of a renewed effort to leverage the "foreign East" toward the ends of Russian state power. For that reason, *The Eastern International* merits reading by scholars and students of Soviet history, Middle Eastern history, and the history of anticolonialism.

¹ David Motadel, *Muslims under German Rule in the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); Kelly Hammond, *China's Muslims and Japan's Empire: Centering Islam in World War II* (Chapel Hill, 2020); Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia* (Princeton, 2023).



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