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Book Review

Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City (1930–1966)
by Paul Stronski
(Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010)
Pp. 350, $27.95 (Paperback)

This is a well written and well researched book on the transformations of the physical and social landscapes of Soviet Central Asia in the mid-twentieth century, viewed through one particular city: Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Paul Stronski describes how the Soviet Union transformed this city into a showcase of socialism and into the largest urban area in the region. The objective of the book is to describe the Soviet breakdown of traditional social relations through the transformation of urban infrastructure, which was aimed both at modernizing the city and at developing ideologically and physically healthy citizens. The book traces the history of Tashkent in the context of the national and global events from 1930 to 1966: Stalinism, World War II, and de-Stalinization. The main part of the book (Chapters Two to Nine) describes the efforts of planners to "build socialism" on the backdrop of a pre-existing urban structure that had crystallized the colonial relations between Russians, living in a European style "New City," and Uzbeks, living in the old, Central Asian city. This part concludes with the earthquake of 1966, which destroyed the city and provided urban planners with the "blank slate" they needed to "turn the city into a display of postcolonial socialism" (15); while the concluding chapter briefly discusses contemporary Tashkent. Stronski carefully outlines the relationship between urban planning, actual implementations—two sometimes painfully different domains— media representations of the "model city," politics, and the transformation of social spaces. Therefore, this work should appeal to scholars and graduate students in history, human and urban geography, sociology, and urban planning.

The methodology is a major strength in Stronski's work. Based on archival research, the book draws on material collected in Uzbekistan, Russia, and the United States. The author consulted archives in Uzbekistan to include sources from various institutions involved in planning at republic and city levels, organizations involved in managing the evacuation of industries during World War II, public health, and the Communist Party. In Moscow, the author accessed the academic archives in architecture, economics, history and literature, and the Russian State Archive (GARF) for information on the secret police, the Supreme Soviet, and the Procurator General of the Soviet Union. In the United States, he consulted the collections of the Hoover Institution, the New York Public Library, and the Library of Congress. The documents he collected were written for the most part in Russian, with some docu-

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ments in Uzbek from the Tashkent City Archive, newspapers, travel guides, and monographs from both contemporary and mid-twentieth century authors.

The book is organized in ten chapters, arranged in chronological order. Reproductions of archival photos of Tashkent in the mid-twentieth century pleasantly break the continuity of the historical account (105-118), complementing the author's analysis of architectural themes and infrastructural development. In the first chapter, "Introduction," the author delineates the central premise: while most of contemporary historiography on Central Asia focuses on episodes of resistance against Soviet rule, this book provides a broader analysis of the social and spatial transformations brought about by the Soviet Union. Discussing "city planning, migration, industry, education, healthcare, and cultural affairs" (5), Stronski provides insights on how the USSR transformed local identities, to the point that Central Asian republics became the strongest supporters of the Soviet system. Particularly, in Chapter 2 "A City to Be Transformed," he highlights the continuity but also the differences in how Tashkent and Central Asia were governed before and after the Revolution. Imperial Russia regarded Central Asia as a distant colony, indigenous people as "primitive and unchanging" (21), "despotic, unhygienic, immoral" (26), and disdained local knowledge. As with other European powers, Russians built a European city next to the old one, in order to showcase modernity and bring civilization (24). After the Revolution, these orientalist attitudes persisted. However, Soviet rule was both more intrusive as well as inclusive, attempting to bring Socialist ideals to Central Asia and focusing on the "liberation" of women. Starting in the 1930s, the European and the Old City were administratively unified, and projects of urban redevelopment of the Old City were started. By breaking down symbolic barriers, setting up green areas, and introducing new forms of housing, Soviet officials attempted to change society within the city, combining the European and the local population and freeing women from their segregation in traditional housing. In doing so, the mostly male Russian officials started programs to turn Uzbek women into productive and skilled citizens (33-35).

In Chapter 3, "Imagining a 'Cultured' Tashkent," Stronski discusses the details of Soviet planning in the 1930s. He points out that urban planning throughout the USSR played a political role complementary to Stalin's purges: "...while the secret police physically removed undesirable people citizens from Soviet society, construction workers tore up narrow city streets to install wide avenues" (47). Stronski exposes the contradictions of Soviet planning: Russian architects attempted to erase the Old City, synthesizing European architecture with what they perceived as 'Uzbek' tradition—while Uzbekistan itself was a very recent construct, a creation of the Soviet Union. In the end, the plan was not fulfilled. Housing shortages, lack of implementation programs and of qualified architects, ethnic tensions between Russians, Uzbeks and other groups contributed to the preservation of the divisions and old infrastructures.

It was not planning, but World War II that finally transformed Tashkent (Chapter 4 "War and Evacuation," Chapter 5 "Central Asian Lives at War"). Factories and skilled workers, evacuated from the European front, moved to Tashkent, which thus gained the skilled workers and the high-tech industries that peacetime planning could not provide. Stronski exposes the messiness and transformative power of the war experience. Massive immigration and factory relocations happened without sufficient information and preparation, and maintaining industrial zoning proved impossible; factories were relocated in museums and parks, and in populated areas, causing public health hazards (98). In the midst of harsh sacrifices, ethnic

tensions, tremendous population increase, declining food supply and increasing diseases, Tashkenters began to develop a Soviet identity through participation in the war effort, war propaganda, and mobilization of local history against Nazism (79).

The following chapters are dedicated to the postwar and de-Stalinization periods, and tell the story of the consolidation of Tashkent's Soviet identity (Chapter 6, "The Postwar Soviet City;" 7, "Central Asian Tashkent and the Postwar Soviet State;" 8,"Redesigning Tashkent after Stalin;" and 9, "The Tashkent Model"). War and evacuation had turned Tashkent into an industrial powerhouse, at the price of infrastructural and housing disasters (Chapter 6). The post-war re-establishment of Soviet planning led once again to a Eurocentric view of urban development (156). Planners resumed the debates of the 1930s: Soviet Tashkent had to both "look modern" and "present proper national characteristics", upon which nobody agreed (163). In the meanwhile, citizens expressed anger and discontent regarding their living conditions regardless of their ethnic group (180). However, by the 1960s the Soviet propaganda presented Tashkent as a proof of equality of national minorities, and a "model Asian city" (234) showcasing socialism to the developing world. Thus, Tashkenters experienced both the celebrations of Soviet Tashkent, and the obvious failures of the system. In the meantime, society deeply changed, and by the mid 1960s, Uzbeks started to gain political influence alongside Russians. It was another disaster, the earthquake of 1966, that completed the inclusion of Uzbeks and Tashkent in the broader Soviet society: the reconstruction after the quake became a symbol of Soviet unity, showing that "Tashkent was not only the capital of a far-off…colony, but an essential part of a much larger Soviet state" (255).

Overall, Stronski succeeds in explaining the relative success of Soviet Tashkent. Through collectivization, industrialization, and urbanization, the USSR created the new "Soviet citizen" (Chapter 10, "Epilogue"). In doing so, it included postcolonial Central Asia in the effort of building socialism, but at the price of harsh social displacement. However, in my opinion Stronski is not equally successful in engaging theoretical debates beyond the history of Central Asia. Even though he quotes Benedict Anderson's argument about nation and nationality and Said's work on orientalism, and others, he does not push these theoretical debates much further. It is a missed opportunity, because the rich empirical material in this book could easily engage critiques of development such as Escobar's (1995), or post-coloniality (Spivak, 1996), or the tension between orientalism and Balkanism (Todorova, 1997) and other scholars who base so much of their writings on the relationships between former Western European metropoles and their subjects and peripheries. While Stronski shows that the Soviet approach to development and colonialism had several unique traits, he unfortunately does not tell us how this uniqueness challenges the established views on these issues.

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