

Introduction

At the very beginning of Perestroika an old dusty Tajik in Dushanbe said: 'If a single man dies of Perestroika, then what is this Perestroika for?' But thousands have died, and millions will die if this bloody dark mute Cart of Death roaming across the smashed Russian Empire is not stopped. O Allah! Where is that old Tajik? Perhaps, killed in the civil war, or died of starvation? Who listened to this old man and other old men of our land? What is happening in our destroyed bleeding country? This is a revolt of children against fathers and grandfathers ... And this is the most horrid revolt! The most bloody and horrific primordial troglodyte sin in the land of men!

— Timur Zulfikarov

Pain and bitterness permeate these words of one of the foremost contemporary Tajik writers.¹ And bewilderment as well—bewilderment at the outburst of violence and destruction that in the early 1990s swept through Tajikistan, hitherto quiescent for so many years. Why did the bloodshed occur in Tajikistan and not in the neighbouring republics of the former Soviet Union? What were the origins of the conflict? Who was on the winning and losing sides? What factors shaped the composition of the opposing parties to the conflict? These are but a few questions, the answers for which can only be provided by a systematic exploration of the Tajiks' history, politics and society.

Until the break-up of the Soviet Union, Western scholars neglected Tajikistan for a number of reasons. Its remote geographic location made physical access to the republic almost impossible for foreigners. The fact that Tajikistan bordered Afghanistan and China and had a large network of strategic installations on its territory, including uranium mines and missile bases, had made Soviet security services extremely vigilant and alert in the republic, so the trickle of information emanating to the outside world from Tajikistan, and about Tajikistan, was heavily censored and scant. Finally, Tajikistan was always viewed, and not without grounds, as a bastion of Soviet power, invariably loyal to the Kremlin, and was always treated as a dull political backwater of the USSR even in comparison with other Central Asian republics. Not surprisingly, in seven decades of Soviet rule, only one monograph devoted to the history and politics of Tajikistan was published in the West, and that was in 1970.² Many important trends, events

1 Quoted from Timur Zulfikarov, 'Khodzha Nasreddin i perestroika', *Literaturnaia gazeta* (13 March 1996), p. 7.

2 Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, *Russia and Nationalism in Central Asia: The Case of Tadzhikistan* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970). A truly unique study, in terms of scope and insightful generalisations, it has retained relevance until today, although the methodology employed in Rakowska-Harmstone's book, based chiefly on the notion of 'Russification' of Tajikistan, is discarded in the thesis.

and patterns of continuity and change in Tajikistan, especially in the crucial period between 1965 and 1992, have so far remained ignored, overlooked or misinterpreted by the scholarly community. In recent years there has been some excellent work done on the very late 1980s and early 1990s, but in only a narrow or fragmented manner. In the meantime, this country represents an important aspect of Central Asian politics, with all its inherent modalities and controversies unprecedentedly amplified and exposed in the post-communist era. Thus, analysing issues of political development in Tajikistan may facilitate a better and more nuanced understanding of the entire region.

The Tajiks and the Tajik State

Descended primarily from the original sedentary population of Central Asia, Tajiks followed a peculiar cycle of civilisational adaptation in the wake of numerous dislocations brought about by outside forces, usually in the form of military conquest: political subjugation, adjustment, cultural synthesis, the rise of a new social order and its decay, once again, due to external influences. The invasions of Alexander the Great, the Turks, the Arabs, the Mongols and the Uzbeks were the major landmarks in these processes. The latest cultural dislocation in Tajikistan was associated with the establishment of communist rule after 1917. It initiated a new adaptation cycle, which formed the broader historical context for political occurrences in modern Tajikistan. The state remains the major focus of analysis in this monograph, but only as one of a multitude of social institutions in Tajikistan that compete for the ability to prescribe rules of behaviour for the populace.³ Even if the state in Tajikistan cannot challenge the lasting influence of people's loyalties to kinship, religious and ethnic groups, it is certainly capable of acting as a mediator and incorporator in relation to these communities. Henceforth, the political system in Tajikistan is analysed from positions of instrumentalism—that is, its efficiency in regulating the competition for resources amongst elites representing various communities.

From the 1930s until the mid 1980s the regime in Tajikistan did not face any legitimisation crises, having attained a high degree of stability based on broad elite consensus, with formal and informal rules of political behaviour accepted, if not grudgingly, by all players involved. As part of the process of state consolidation in Tajikistan during the Soviet era, state structures did indeed penetrate local society; however, the process was only partially successful. The government had no choice at times but to accommodate local strongmen and traditional patterns

3 This approach, detailed by Joel S. Migdal, provides for a better understanding of autonomous political actors and their vibrancy and adaptability to crisis conditions. See Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State–Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

of social organisation, religious belief, identities and loyalties.⁴ The result at the level of centre–periphery relations was the central (Soviet Union) and republic-level (Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic) governments’ use of local cleavages as a power-balancing and patronage tool—thereby sustaining the cleavages, even if in a transformed state. The alliance of local networks and actors with the central government gave regional actors a stake in the success or failure of the political arrangements in the national government—thereby tying highly localised issues to national political issues. In Tajikistan, such cleavages were present in the increasingly contentious politics of the late Soviet era and, strongly linked to Gorbachev’s reforms, reached a critical situation in the second half of the 1980s.

The Civil War in Tajikistan

Generally referred to as the ‘Tajik Civil War’, the violent conflict in southern Tajikistan lasted from late spring 1992 until its official end in June 1997 with the signing of a peace agreement and power-sharing arrangement. In regards to the analysis of the war, the main focus in this work will be on the first phase of conflict that finished at the end of 1992. During this early period the majority of fatalities occurred—including both civilians and armed combatants. Early guesstimates (which went almost entirely unchallenged)⁵ for the conflict as a whole cited the number of deaths as high as 100 000; however, a later study put the number at 23 500, with 20 000 of these deaths occurring in 1992.⁶ This should in no way lessen the emphasis on the level of suffering during the war. Aside from the deaths of combatants and numerous unarmed civilians, the conflict generated a massive number of refugees and internally displaced persons, led to large-scale destruction and looting of property, resulted in the rape and torture of many, and further harmed the already fragile economy while devastating the livelihoods of many in Tajikistan.

At the end of 1992 the armed opposition suffered a heavy defeat and fled to mountainous areas of eastern Tajikistan and, importantly, to a safe haven in

4 Again, this phenomenon is referred to in Migdal’s analysis of Third-World states. See, for example, Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, pp. 263–4.

5 This general assessment of problematic estimates for war fatalities matches Tajikistan quite well: ‘For many conflicts, commonly cited estimates employed in media and NGO reports are repeated so frequently as to become unquestioningly accepted as truth ... In many cases, the origin of these estimates is unknown or ... even where this information is available, the methodology and definitional guidelines used in generating the estimates are rarely transparent.’ See: Kristine Eck and Lisa Hultman, ‘One-Sided Violence against Civilians in War: Insights from New Fatality Data’, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2007), p. 237.

6 Vladimir Mukomel’, ‘Demograficheskie Posledstviia etnicheskikh i regional’nykh konfliktov v SNG’, *Naselenie & Obshchestvo*, No. 27 (April 1997), Table 1, <<http://demoscope.ru/acrobat/ps27.pdf>>; ‘Demographic Consequences of Ethnic and Regional Conflicts in the CIS’, *Russian Social Science Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2001), pp. 23–4, Table 1. Mukomel has a longer format study that includes full references: ‘Vooruzhennye mezhnatsional’nye i regional’nye konflikti: lyudskie poteri, ekonomicheskii ushcherb i sotsial’nye posledstviia’, in *Identichnost’ i konfliki v postsovetskikh gosudarstvakh* (Moscow: Karnegi, 1997).

Afghanistan, where the 'Islamic' opposition attempted to regroup. The character of the war from this point was more that of a counterinsurgency with sporadic guerrilla warfare, as well as smaller operations against opposition strongholds in the mountains of the peripheral areas of the east, rather than what was seen during the first year: a complete collapse of the state and a fight that was roughly equal until October 1992. The first phase of the civil war went beyond ethnic Tajiks fighting each other, and included ethnic Uzbeks and Pamiris on opposite sides allied to their Kulobi and Gharmi Tajik allies, respectively. And even this is too simple a description, as it is not possible to neatly classify the main combatants into monolithic blocs based on ethnicity and, for Tajiks, region of origin. Nevertheless, factors such as ideology and religion will be de-emphasised, in line with much of the later scholarship on the civil war.

The relevance of social and political divisions necessitates an in-depth historical and social analysis of ethnicity, religion, social organisation, migration, state-building, politics and economics in Tajikistan (especially during the Soviet era). All of these factors played a role in shaping the loyalties and actions of individuals and groups during the prewar era through to the outbreak of conflict. When the power struggles in Dushanbe led to civil unrest and violent conflict, national-level elites and local powerbrokers mobilised support from the local level, drawing on and appealing to ties of identity, shared economic concerns and common security dilemmas. Language, ethnicity, sub-ethnic identity, religious sect, region of origin, collective farm affiliation, family ties, professional relationships, political party membership, employer–employee ties and government patron–client networks have all been cited as factors in determining individual and group participation or non-participation in the conflict. Each one of these categories played a role in determining behaviour during the civil war—of course some of them to a far lesser degree than others.

Analysis in this work will go beyond the national level in the capital and focus also on the main zone of violent conflict: the economically significant Vakhsh Valley of southern Tajikistan, a few hours' drive south of the capital, Dushanbe.

At the beginning of the Soviet era, the Vakhsh Valley was a sparsely populated river valley inhabited mostly by semi-nomadic Uzbeks.⁷ It would soon become a grand project of Soviet agricultural and social engineering. After suppressing the *Basmachi* rebellion and securing the Afghan border during the 1930s, the Soviet authorities began their transformation of the Vakhsh Valley. The meandering Vakhsh River was soon controlled and diverted into a system of irrigation canals as part of a plan to boost agriculture in the Tajik Republic. Food production had limited economic significance for Soviet industrialisation plans, so agricultural production was focused mainly on cotton—a crop that required significant amounts of irrigation in the arid region.

7 This includes Uzbek speakers who claim a tribal affiliation as their primary identity (for example, Loqay).



Map 2 Satellite View of Tajikistan with the Vakhsh Valley Circled

Source: NASA public domain licence image. Upload credit: <<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Poulpy>> Modification by authors: circle added.

One of the main requirements for the labour-intensive projects of building irrigation canals and farming cotton was a large pool of workers. This necessitated the massive in-migration of people from throughout Tajikistan and beyond. Since the economic potential of the mountains and foothills of Tajikistan was quite limited, people from these areas were selected as the primary core of migrants. The main groups of settlers were drawn, often forcefully, from the mountain valleys of Qarotegin (now known as ‘Rasht’) and Darvoz, as well as from the foothills of the Kulob region. Here in the valley they, and other outsiders (for example, Pamiris, Russians and others), were settled into the Soviet collective farms that were a common feature throughout the rural areas of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic (hereinafter Tajik SSR) and the rest of the USSR. At independence, more than half a century later, the Vakhsh Valley was part of Qurghonteppa Province—an administrative region with a high degree of social and political-bureaucratic fragmentation where competition for resources occurred increasingly along lines of ethnicity and, most significantly, mainly along lines of region of origin: the Gharmi Tajiks from the mountainous area of Gharm (Qarotegin and Darvoz) and the Kulobi Tajiks from the foothills of the neighbouring Kulob Province. Again, as mentioned above, the blocs in the

conflict were not monolithic and should be seen as the end result of not just long-term historical and cultural factors, but also more recent political and economic competition, as well as a result of the initial tactics and strategies of mobilising for political struggles and war.

The Soviet authorities attempted to shape ethnic identities throughout the USSR, and in Central Asia there were particular difficulties as most people here did not see their primary identities at the ethnic or national level. As part of the Soviet process, languages were standardised, traditions codified, pre-existing sub-ethnic identities (for example, tribe or city) were suppressed (for instance, by being removed as an option in the official census), privileges were granted or denied based on ethnic identity, and many people found that they were outside the borders of their titular republic (for example, ethnic Uzbeks inside Tajikistan). Despite the continuing rhetoric that the divisions between nationalities (that is, ethnic groups) would eventually disappear and give way to a unified people, ethnic identities continued to be strongly promoted in the Soviet republics, and Tajikistan was no exception. There were, however, also divisions within the ethnic groups. For Tajiks, there was the reality that ethnic Tajiks from different regions had obvious differences in dialect and in many other aspects of their culture.

Regional differences are a common feature of many countries, but they held—and still hold—a particular social, economic and political significance in Tajikistan. During the post-World War II period, Tajiks from the northern province of Leninobod (now Sughd)—particularly from the city of Khujand—dominated the upper echelons of the Tajik SSR's government and they cultivated patronage networks that were dominated by co-regionals. Besides competition within northern Tajikistan, these northern Tajiks then had to contend with their less privileged southern counterparts, whose elites also organised intricate patronage networks that came to be identified with regions such as Kulob and Gharm. Of course, the people in these networks were not completely averse to cooperating with outsiders in mutually beneficial arrangements, especially at the higher levels. And the networks did not benefit all people in a particular region, so it should be considered that they were dominated by people from a single region and mostly based there (and in the capital) rather than entire regions and their populations competing against each other.

Nevertheless, the end result was the 'politicisation' of regional identities—elites and those within their regional networks would benefit or suffer based on government appointments and bureaucratic decisions. For example, when a Kulobi held the post of minister of the interior, Kulobi Tajiks dominated the ranks of that ministry. The police force continued to be dominated by Kulobis throughout most of the 1980s. But when a Pamiri was appointed to that post during the late 1980s, ethnic Pamiris moved into the ministry in large numbers

and displaced Kulobis from their positions—creating a pool of unemployed (and presumably angry) Kulobi former police officers.⁸ Concerning Tajiks from Gharm, they had a more modest level of access to national-level positions in the late Soviet era, and many turned instead to entrepreneurship and ‘grey market’ activities such as selling agricultural products to markets not just in Tajikistan, but in other republics as well. This activity was especially significant in the Vakhsh Valley, which was now home to many Gharmi and Kulobi Tajiks. At a more official level, the competition for government posts at the district and provincial levels, as well as for the top positions in the collective and state farms of Qurghonteppa Province (at times subsumed within Khatlon Province), was particularly fierce. An official position gave a person access to resources and jobs that they could then distribute. Losing one’s position meant far more than one disappointed Communist Party cadre; an entire network would then be at risk of losing benefits such as jobs, university acceptance, equipment, fertilisers, and other political and economic goods.

The authorities in Dushanbe and Moscow were generally able to control this process within the authoritarian system of the Soviet Union; however, this ‘control’ was only in the sense that cadres did not challenge the arrangements at the highest levels. In Tajikistan, corruption was pervasive and local apparatchiks competed to replace each other—but within the system. Eventually, in the mid 1980s, this system began to break down in the Tajik SSR. Anticorruption campaigns and *perestroika* reforms resulted in the removal and replacement of many apparatchiks in the republic. By the end of this process, Gharmis and Pamiris were able to obtain positions that were previously out of reach. In the Vakhsh Valley the turnover of leadership at the district and provincial levels, as well as in the collective and state farms, was unprecedented. Kulobis and Gharmis, often living in mixed settlements, competed against each other for these positions as they were all-important in securing economic and social benefits locally. The local positions were tied into the political wrangling at the republic level, giving locals a strong stake in national politics.

Around the same time (the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s), the political and social atmosphere became less restrictive. Civil society groups and political parties began to form and agitate for further changes. After some time the political foes settled into two opposing coalitions: the incumbent leadership dominated by elites from Leninobod along with their primary junior partners from Kulob and Hisor, and the opposition coalition that included new political parties such as the mostly urban Democratic Party of Tajikistan, the Gharmi Tajik-dominated Islamic Revival Party, and the Pamiri party La’li Badakhshon. The first post-independence presidential election of November 1991, after some difficulty and the replacement of the top government candidate, was won by the

⁸ This anecdote is fully analysed later in this book.

incumbent forces' candidate, Rahmon Nabiev, at the expense of the opposition coalition and their cinematographer-turned-politician candidate, Davlat Khudonazarov—a man supported by anti-conservative politicians, journalists and cultural elites at the Union/Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) level. This was followed by a period of government crackdowns and harassment of the opposition, resulting in large anti-government street demonstrations in the capital starting in early spring 1992. The largest contribution to the opposition's demonstrations was by the Islamic Revival Party (IRP). Meanwhile, the incumbents, geographically isolated in the capital from their home base in northern Tajikistan and unable to easily summon their supporters to the streets, relied instead on their junior Kulobi partners whose province was adjacent to the capital. The IRP's mobilisation effort also had a regional aspect. The leadership of the IRP, despite their pretensions to being a party for all (Sunni) Muslims, was heavily staffed by Tajiks with roots in one particular region. The IRP was more accurately a party for Muslims that was overwhelmingly dominated by Gharmi Tajiks.

As the demonstrations intensified and eventually turned to violence, political and social authorities who could not quickly mobilise manpower for violent conflict became powerless. The skilled technocrats increasingly lost power to savvy rural strongmen and religious leaders (for example, mullahs) who could call on the support of men willing to fight. The urban intellectuals and reformists of groups such as the Democratic Party were helpless in the face of military mobilisation. Soon it was clear that the real players in the conflict were the Kulobi Tajik militias allied to local Uzbeks and militias from Hisor on one side against the IRP's mullahs and their Gharmi Tajik followers allied to Gharmi-dominated Dushanbe street gangs and Pamiri police officers and militias on the other.

* * *

The violent civil conflict that erupted in 1992 was a striking watershed in Tajikistan's history. People in that country are now accustomed to view politics, social events, and often their daily lives—what they did, where they went, how they grieved and celebrated, even what they ate and drank—in terms of 'before' and 'after' this catastrophe. We, too, follow such bifurcation in narrating the past of Tajikistan by focusing on key trends and events that culminated in large-scale fratricide and national tragedy. Quite another story needs to be told about the subsequent process of healing and reconciliation, as well as that of state-building and the consolidation of power.

While there is no single authoritative scholarly examination of the civil war in Tajikistan,⁹ there are many sources that provide a strong analysis of certain aspects of the conflict. The only problem here is that the analysis in this literature is focused mainly in two areas: variables that caused the conflict¹⁰ and post-conflict state-building.¹¹ This is understandable as people, institutions and governments want to know what triggers conflicts, and, once they have commenced, how they may be resolved; however, a more comprehensive historical and social analysis is required in order to fully explain the processes that led to the Tajik civil war. And this necessitates a full historical background to the modern state of Tajikistan, to the social structure of the country, and to the shaping and formation of identities and loyalties in Tajikistan. Additionally, a special focus on the period immediately preceding the civil war will be provided. This requires a full narrative and analysis of the transition from political competition to violent conflict (late 1980s to May 1992) and a similar, but shorter, treatment for the mobilisation of forces and the first phase of the war (May 1992 to the end of that year). Other accounts give far too little information about these two periods as a whole, or provide great analysis of only a narrow aspect of the political competition and conflict. This book will demonstrate the logic behind the outbreak and continuation of conflict, and will show that the cultural and political factors shaping the opposing sides into regional and ethnic blocs are steeped in history.

9 The best, though still incomplete, candidate for this would be a Russian book: V. I. Bushkov and D. V. Mikulskii, *Anatomiia grazhdanskoi voiny v Tadjikistane (etno-sotsial'nye protsessy i politicheskaia bor'ba, 1992–1995)* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia Akademiia Nauk, 1996).

10 Idil Tuncer Kilavuz, *Understanding Violent Conflict: A Comparative Study of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2007; Lawrence Markowitz, *Collapsed and Prebendal States in Post-Soviet Eurasia: Cross-Regional Determinants of State Formation in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 2005; Jonathan K. Zartman, *Political Transition in Central Asian Republics: Authoritarianism Versus Power-Sharing*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Denver, 2004.

11 See, for example: M. Olimov, ed. *Mezhtadzhikskiy konflikt: put' k miru* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia Akademiia Nauk, 1998); John Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order* (London: Routledge, 2009); Luigi De Martino, ed. *Tajikistan at a Crossroads: The Politics of Decentralization* (Geneva: Cimer, 2004).