

The Russian Revolution and Central Asia



- News of the Russian Revolution of 1917 filtered down to Central Asia via telegraph. There was hope that the revolution would usher in an era of peaceful coexistence – it was misplaced.
- According to Oxford historian Alexander Morrison: “The Soviet system, while brutal and callously profligate with human life, was not simply a continuation of Russian colonialism in another form. In Central Asia, it was a radically modernizing regime that transformed what had been a culturally and politically unassimilated colony of the Tsarist Empire into the nation states we know today. All five Central Asian states still bear a heavy Soviet imprint in their governance, institutions and identity.”¹

Morrison’s article continues:

- “The Bolsheviks met widespread resistance across the Russian empire; they were rejected as illegitimate even by other socialist and revolutionary parties. In this colonial periphery the October Revolution was even less representative of the popular will than in European Russia. In Tashkent, the capital of the governor-generalship of Turkestan (comprising most of modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the southern half of Kazakhstan), the Tashkent Soviet reacted to the news by proclaiming its own seizure of power.”
- The first decree of the Tashkent Soviet, comprised almost exclusively of European railway workers and soldiers, asserted that representatives of the local Muslim population would not be admitted to membership. The logic of this was that the revolution had ushered in the dictatorship of the proletariat, and Muslims were too backward to have a proletariat of their own. In other words, it was an attempt by poorer Europeans to seize the colonial privileges and power of the former rulers – Tsarist officials and army officers – for themselves.
- Unsurprisingly, the Muslim population did not remain passive. Earlier in 1917, they had gained control of Tashkent City in what were the only more or less free elections ever held in Central Asia, and now they responded to the Soviet’s seizure of power by proclaiming an autonomous government of the Muslims of Turkestan, with a capital in the cotton-rich city of Kokand. In February 1918, the Tashkent Soviet launched an attack on Kokand. This attack left about 14,000 people dead and much of Kokand in ashes.

¹ Morrison, A. (2018). The Revolution in Central Asia. [online] The Red Legacy. Available at: <https://theredlegacy.org/en/stories/the-revolution-in-central-asia> [Accessed 29 Nov. 2018].

- The Soviet reconquest of Central Asia, under General Mikhail Frunze, a settler of Bessarabian heritage born in the town of Pishpek (modern-day Bishkek) in Semirechie, came only in 1919-1920. As even official party histories would later acknowledge, the campaign aimed not just to suppress overt anti-Bolshevik resistance, but to bring the local Soviets under central control, and end what was seen as ideological differences. Frunze captured Khiva and Bukhara in 1920, but in Ferghana, the eastern part of the Bukharan emirate and parts of Turkmen territory, an anti-Soviet rural revolt, known as the Basmachi movement, gained strength. The Red Army would not finally defeat the Basmachis until 1926.
- The Red Army might have won a military victory, but Soviet rule in Central Asia was politically very weak, with almost no base among the indigenous population. As Lenin and Stalin (then commissar for nationalities) both realized, they needed local allies, and these could not be drawn solely from the ranks of the European settlers, who had shown themselves more interested in perpetuating colonial privilege than in propagating revolutionary ideals among the Central Asian masses.
- Starting in 1921, the Soviet regime began to espouse a policy of korenizatsiya (striking roots) in Central Asia and other non-Russian regions, which has prompted historian Terry Martin to describe the USSR in this period as an 'Affirmative Action Empire.'
- This policy reserved quotas of industrial, administrative and political positions for Central Asians, launched campaigns for mass literacy and indoctrination with Soviet ideology, and called for the emancipation of women. The spirit of early Soviet rule was often radically anti-colonial, denouncing not just the western colonial empires, but also the legacies of the Tsarist regime and Russian colonialism in Central Asia.
- In 1924, a series of new Central Asian Republics were created, each with a new set of boundaries and state structures – contrary to what is often thought, these were not simply imposed from Moscow, but built upon local national projects, some of which pre-dated the revolution. New national histories, languages and ideologies were built atop older foundations. Over time, each republic would acquire its own set of national cultural institutions: universities, academies of science, libraries and opera and ballet theaters. Central Asians were no longer 'aliens' as they had been before 1917, but Soviet citizens on a relatively equal footing with those in Russia, even if the rights which Soviet citizenship granted were illusory.



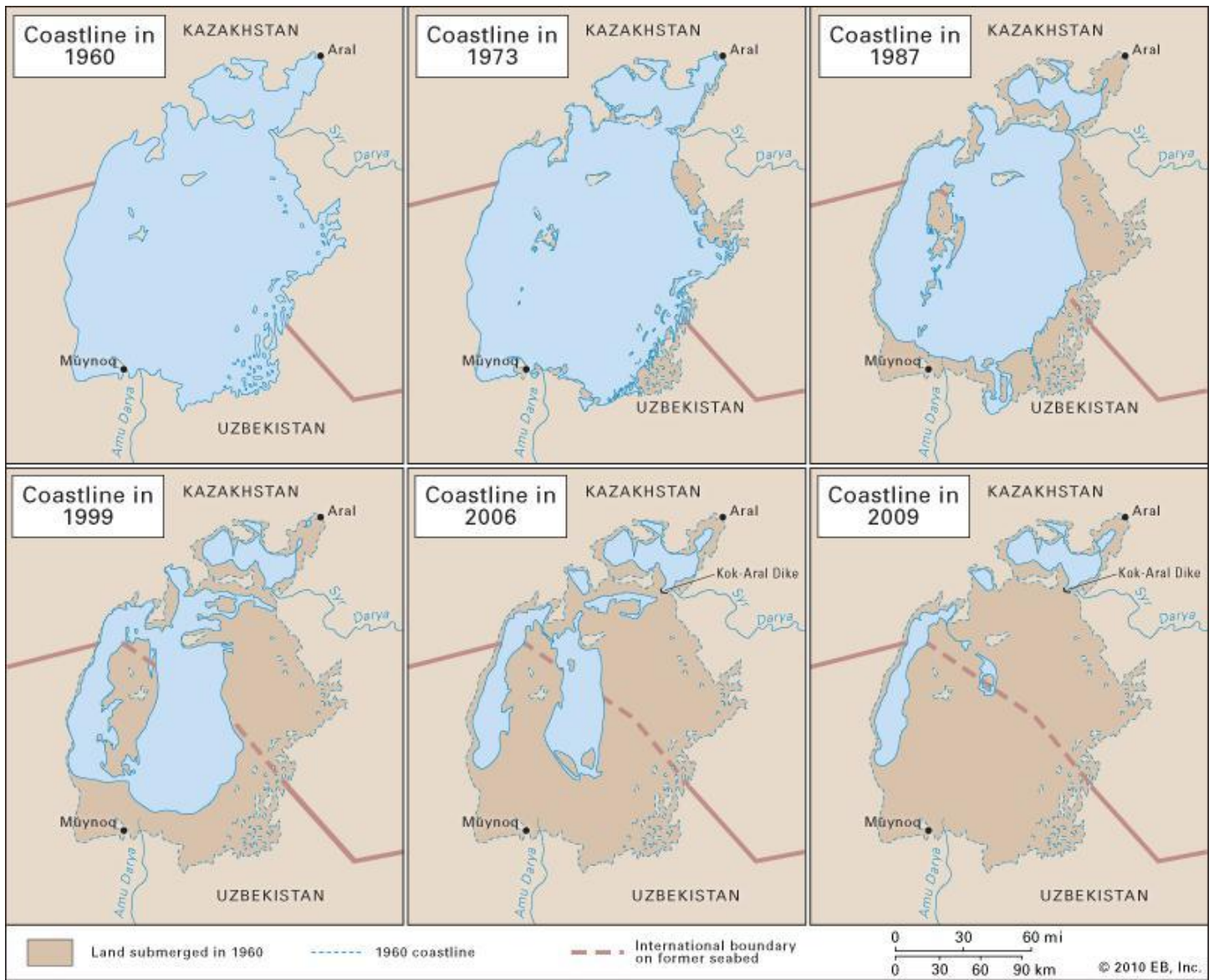
- As it did everywhere in the Soviet Union, Stalin's collectivization policies took a heavy toll on the people of Central Asia. It was particularly horrific in Kazakhstan, where it was accompanied by the forced sedentarization of Kazakh nomads, and the mass death of livestock. At least 35 percent of the ethnic Kazakh population – 1.5 million people – died of starvation and disease.
- By the time of the outbreak of war in 1941, Central Asia had been fully incorporated into the Soviet Union and the apparatus of Stalinist terror. Many outside observers believed that the anti-colonialism, affirmative action policies and nation-building of the early Soviet years had been wholly reversed. The national republics still existed, but their autonomy appeared fictional – window-dressing to disguise renewed Russian colonialism.



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- The flow of Slavs from European Russia into the region grew through the 1950s and 1960s, so that they made up a majority of the population in large cities, such as Almaty and Tashkent. Spoken Russian became ubiquitous, sometimes at the expense of indigenous languages. The transformation of much of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan into a vast cotton plantation producing the raw material for Russian industry, and for export, seemed to reproduce a classic colonial economic relationship, particularly when the irrigation it required led to the drying up of the Aral Sea. Historian Robert Conquest dubbed Stalin 'The Breaker of Nations.'

- Universal literacy, a moderately effective system of healthcare, a comprehensive railway network and a greater degree of gender equality, and a highly educated and skilled urban population were all notable Soviet achievements.
- On the negative side of the balance, the Soviet ecological legacy is almost uniformly disastrous, including the destruction of the Aral Sea, radiation caused by nuclear testing, growing soil salinization and other forms of chronic environmental pollution. With the partial exception of Kyrgyzstan, the authoritarian traditions of Soviet rule have so far prevented any of the Central Asian republics from making a transition toward more representative forms of government.



Aral Sea

- And finally, for good or ill, cultural and linguistic Russification is another important long-lasting legacy.²

² Ibid.