

Igmen, Ali F. *Speaking Soviet with an Accent: Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012. xi + 236 pages. Paper, \$27.95.

The book under review is undoubtedly a great contribution to the growing literature on the Central Asian region. In an elaborate analysis of cultural and educational clubs in Kyrgyzstan beginning in the 1920s, historian Ali Igmen argues that Kyrgyz tradition meshed with Soviet art in the clubs to create representations of “Kyrgyzness.” The book sheds light on the ways in which Kyrgyz selectively maintained certain pre-Soviet traditions while casting off others and adopting a new culture that resulted in an entirely new society. Igmen analyzes the process leading to what has come to be known as “Kyrgyzness” by focusing on three factors: the club, the development of Kyrgyz identity, and the official policymakers of the Soviet state. These policymakers, Igmen argues, acted as agents of opposition and authority who challenged the Kyrgyz elite to revive and further develop their own cultural identity.

The work consists of six chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter deals with the question of status and various methods of categorizing the Russian Empire’s “Asiatic” subjects, as well as the response of Muslim Central Asian thinkers and intellectuals to imperial Russian and Soviet rule. Subsequent chapters analyze the ways in which cultural clubs, festivals and other activities in the 1920s and 1930s contributed to the formation of an aesthetically Kyrgyz community with an underlying Soviet influence. Igmen demonstrates how “Kyrgyzness” evolved under the influence of Soviet cultural programs in the clubs in the 1920s, and that the Kyrgyzs became interested not only in their epic heroes and cultural traditions, but also in Bolshevik protagonists, which clearly shows the fusion of heroes from Soviet and Kyrgyz sides. The reading and performance of the new Kyrgyz cultural narrative in clubs, theaters, and cultural Olympiads became a constant and treasured practice throughout the Soviet era and made Soviet legends of Kyrgyz heroes. At the same time, Kyrgyz celebrations sponsored by the state contributed to a regional tendency toward indigenous art, which proved mutually beneficial to artists and the state.

The fifth chapter looks into how Kyrgyz professionals influenced contemporary Soviet theater by adding indigenous elements to Soviet and traditional styles of drama. Soviet theater, meanwhile, was repurposed for the Kyrgyz population. The final chapter looks at how Kyrgyz cultural wisdom was formed in large part by the women who took in stride the cultural and social changes brought upon them by the Soviet system.

The presence of Kyrgyz clubs to foster a fusion of “Kyrgyzness” and “Sovietness” was one important reason, Igmen argues in his conclusion, why Soviet and traditional Kyrgyz cultures avoided a clash when they merged to form an entirely new cultural form. He adds that both Kyrgyzs and neighboring Kazakhs may have also been more accepting of outside influences than, for example Uzbeks or Tajiks, because of their nomadic roots and unorthodox take on Islam.

Igmen conducted extensive archival research in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, and made impressive use of the club documents, which included reports, correspondence of the administrators, declarations, and manuals. Igmen also analyzed fictional characters from the works of the author Chingiz Aitmatov and conducted oral interviews with real men and women of Kyrgyzstan, including artists and intelligentsia from the Soviet period who are, to this day, grateful that “Soviet culture helped Kyrgyz shape their own culture in the modern world” (p. 96). Taking into consideration that Igmen worked with several Central Asian archives, it would be desirable to see a more in-depth comparative analysis with clubs of other Central Asian regions.

Igmen nevertheless does a great job making his point as to why club activities in Kyrgyzstan differed in terms of success from other Central Asian clubs.

This well-researched and well-written study will be useful in any student of Central Asian, Soviet Russian, or world history. It is easy to understand and interesting to read. As a native of the region, this reviewer felt compelled after reading Igmen to speak with her own relatives and their friends of an older generation to see how they perceived clubs during the Soviet period, and what role those clubs played in their lives growing up in Uzbekistan.

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