

Negotiating the Soviet Past: How Young People Navigate State and Family Narratives in Uzbekistan

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PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOVIET PAST IN CENTRAL ASIA

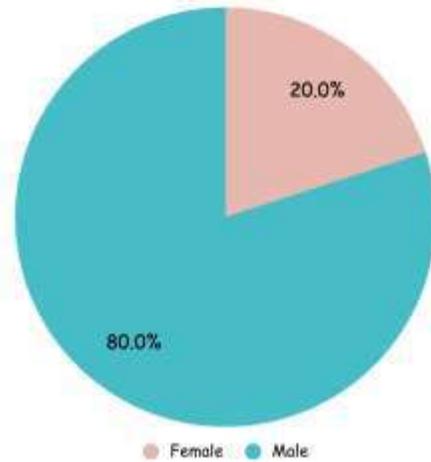
- Central Asia's youth, born after independence, encounter two perspectives on the Soviet past.
- **State Narrative:** Emphasizes authoritarian regimes, forced collectivization, ethnic repression, and economic exploitation, while occasionally recognizing modernization and industrialization. Disseminated through education, media, and commemorations.
- **Oral Stories from Seniors:** Highlight nostalgia for cheap prices, job security, and mobility within Soviet states. Nostalgia is defined as a “rejection of the present and an emotional attachment to the past” (Dadabaev, 2021).

Research Question:

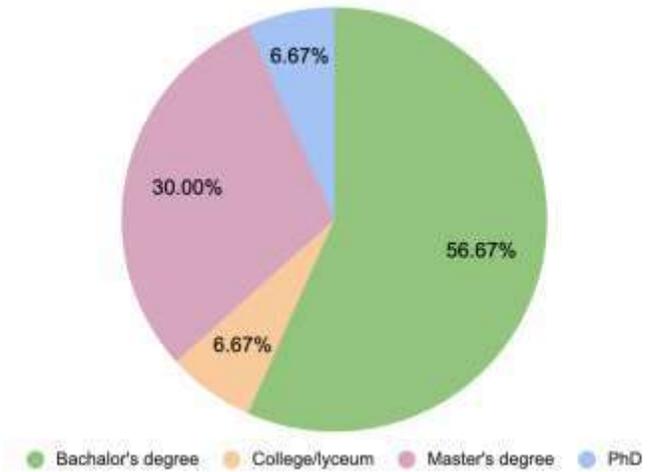
How do young people in Central Asia understand the Soviet past, and how does it shape their view of present social reality?

INTERLOCUTERS

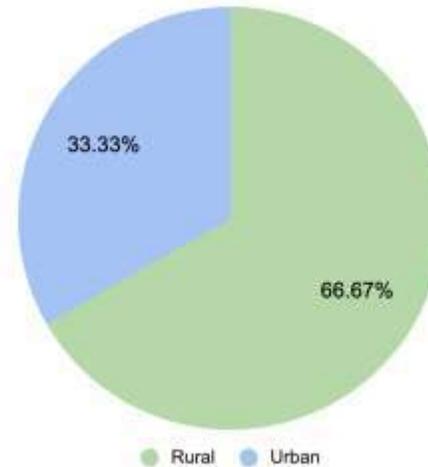
Andijan	4
Bukhara	5
Fergana	3
Jizzakh	2
Kashkadarya	2
Khorezm	1
Namangan	2
Navoi	1
Samarkand	5
Surkhandarya	2
Tashkent	3



Education



Born in Urban vs/Rural Areas



ORAL STORIES



Education was free. ... The Soviet Union was a very large country, and **there weren't strict borders for movement.** People could easily leave for different places and come back. ... **Prices were the same everywhere. Everyone had the same conditions;** there weren't big class differences.
(Anonymous, female, 26, Tashkent)



My grandmother says that in almost every family at that time, **there were, beatings, domestic abuse, because of alcohol. Men used to drink a lot, because of the access.** And my grandfather also says alcohol was, like, really accessible
(Anonymous, male, 27, Ferghana)



They say, "***I could go to Moscow whenever I wanted, I could visit St. Petersburg anytime, I could travel to Yalta whenever I wanted.***" They also say, "***All I had to do was bribe the collective farm chairman, and that was it.***"
... I think people tend to exaggerate. I believe even those who speak negatively about that time are also exaggerating.
(Jakhongir, male 25, Khoresm)



What people often recall is that the things they bought in the '90s are still working in their homes. TVs, electric stoves—they still work. They say that everything made after that turned out to be defective. **There's this belief that products from that era were of higher quality.**
(Mukhlisa, female, 22, Navai)

SCHOOL TEACHINGS



I have learned about the 20th century more through literature than through history. For example, when I read what the Jadids wrote, I already started developing negative feelings toward the Soviet era... And later, this led to the formation of my antipathy toward the Soviet period.

(Madina, female, 23, Bukhara)



I don't remember teachers saying anything good about the USSR or the Soviets. I don't think they praised it like that, if I'm not mistaken.

(Tolib, male, 29, Surkhandarya)



The criticism of the Soviet era in (textbook) writings was part of the policy of our first president — I support this. What was written is closer to the events that actually happened.

(Isomiddin, male, 26, Surkhandarya)



I didn't get much information about the 1970s and 1980s from books or textbooks. I know about the Jadids, but the history after them is not well covered in our history books.

(Sardorbek, male, 30, Tahskent)



There hasn't been much discussion on this topic. Even when it was mentioned, **that era was portrayed in a negative light.**

(Muhammad, male, 23, Bukhara)



for me the most embarrassing thing is that the guy who's even not even got married at that time being sent to the front lines and **they didn't even know if Hitler was good for them or this (soviet) regime...** ... for me how war happened is that this big guy Russia came and **made a live wall out of these colonized countries and even in exchange of winning the war, there was, I think, not enough credit for Uzbekistan,** even for neighboring countries. ... what kind of reward we get as a country, as people, as a nation for beating that machine (Hitler's army)
(Anonymous, male, 27, Ferghana)



Hitler is a bad person for us, right? He killed so many of our ancestors. But Hitler had his own principles. His soldiers were close to him, his own people. He provided his soldiers with enough food, enough weapons, everything they needed. That made them quality soldiers, right?
And what was Stalin doing? There were many people from Central Asia, right? **He sent them to war like ants... Human life had no value at all.**
(Sardorbek, male, 30, Tashkent)

WORLD WAR II – "NOT OUR WAR"



I condemn it [the war]. **It wasn't our war.**
(Anonymous, 33, male, Andijan)



To the front, to the battle, to the front line with a toy gun...
It was good for people to go, because **there was no guarantee that Germany wouldn't come to Uzbekistan.**
(Jamshid Karimov, 29, male, Bukhara)



people talk about how **Central Asian men were disproportionately on the front lines and the casualties were disproportionate** in terms of Central Asian men. And that, I think that's bad.

... I haven't dived deep into this topic, and I don't know much about it.

But then the general idea of Central Asian men trying **to fight this fascist regime [that] was trying to take over Eurasia -- I think it was a good cause**

(Otabek, male, 27, Andijan)



I condemn war, but I think it would be wrong if none of us took part in it. **If we hadn't joined, things could've turned out worse**—because I know what kind of danger was coming.

(Muhammad Usmanov, male, 23, Bukhara)

WORLD WAR II – “NOT OUR WAR”



During World War I, **they sent our people to serve as workers digging trenches for Russian soldiers.**

They didn't see us as human beings, that's clear.

The term "churka" didn't just come from nowhere...

As for World War II, they manipulated people's minds with slogans like “for the motherland, for the homeland,” **and they sent our ancestors to fight in a war that wasn't even ours.**

Even in the big history books, it's mentioned that **two Uzbeks were given one rifle between them.** What does that mean? It means they were sent like prepared meat. In other words, they were sent as living shields.

(Isomiddin, male, 26, Surkhandarya)

KHUJUM



It was against religious belief of the people.

(Mukhlisa, female, 22, Navai)



Of course, this was all done for their own benefit, **because there were no men left to work.** They were sent to war, and someone had to work on the collective farms. It's like when **they claimed to have freed women by removing their hijabs and veils, but in reality, they exploited them under that pretext.**

(Madina, female, 23, Bukhara)



It wasn't a natural process; it was a political act.

(Abduraxmon Razzaqov, male, 26, Tashkent)



(I see it) positively. It makes me happy to see women demanding their rights.

(Muhammad, male, 23m Bukhara)



I don't have a lot of information. **I mean, this is just a choice.** If someone wants to wear a veil, they can, and if they don't, they don't have to.

(Fayzullo, male, 22, Ferghana)



Women's freedom is not only a legal issue, but also a strategic one. We can see the current state of societies where women are not free.

(Muhammad, male, 23m Bukhara)

INDUSTRIALIZATION, URBANIZATION AND EDUCATION



In our region, one of the best things that came from the Soviets is the factories left behind, like the tank factory and the aircraft factory. These were built during that time. Even in education, our best scientists came from the Soviet era. **If science hadn't developed during the Soviet period, I think our current situation would be even worse.**

(Tolib, male, 29, Surkhandarya)



None of these were built for us, for Uzbekistan, whether it's the Tashkent Tractor Factory (TTZ) or anything else.

(Sardorbek, male, 30, Tashkent)



The Soviets didn't want to bring urbanization. Without World War II, nothing would have come to Central Asia. During WWII, all the industrial factories of the USSR, which were part of the military sector, were moved here. Once they were moved, they equipped and set them up in Central Asia.

(Isomiddin, male, 26, Surkhandarya)



It was because of their arrival **that things like the railway, the education system, and other such developments came to us. ...** What I'm trying to say is that life **during the time of the khanates was extremely backward.** I'm not saying everything about the Soviet era was great, of course. **I'm against occupation,** naturally. But on the other hand, I can't wrap my head around how else we could have changed, how else we could have developed.

(Muxammad Usmanov, 23, male, Bukhara)

ALTERNATIVE PATHS



Even if we hadn't been a colony, and even if the Russians hadn't been here, I think development would have still happened in our region. Because once industrialization started around the world, it wouldn't have bypassed us either. But there's one thing: **if a European country or America had been the colonizer instead of Russia**, perhaps our development would have been even better.

(Madina, female, 23, Bukhara)



If it hadn't been the Russians, maybe the Turks would have invaded. Maybe there would have been pressure from Europe. Maybe we would have ended up like Afghanistan.

(Nurmuhammad Ortiqbaev, male, 31, Jizzakh)



PERCEPTION OF CONTESTED NARRATIVES



I see both sides as equal... **We just take both as information. Both have evidence.** Life was easier, that's true. And it was also difficult. It's just that it was hard for the intellectuals, while it was easier for ordinary people—that's it.

(Fayzullo, male, 22, Ferghana)



On the other hand, since there were different periods, I think that's why there are differences. **The periods most emphasized negatively in the media and textbooks are the 1920s to the 1960s** and then from the 1980s onward. But the period that people around me (fondly) remember is the one in between—the 1960s and 1970s, the time of their childhood.

(Sarvar, male, 32, Bukhara)



I think both sides exaggerate.

(Jahongir, male, 25, Khoresm)



There are points where their truth and the truth in books intersect. But they don't acknowledge the truth in our books. ...

I'm not calling my parents liars, and I don't want to speak badly about them. But I'm not blind, and I'm not deaf.

(Isomiddin, male, 26, Surkhandarya)



I don't know which one is true anymore. **I say we should trust books, but not textbooks.** ...I think relying on textbooks is wrong. ... **I don't trust (oral) stories either.**

(Sardorbek, male, 30, Tashkent)



I am against introducing Russian from the primary grades. Up to the 4th grade, Uzbek and English are sufficient. We should consider offering Russian as an optional language later on—perhaps alongside French or another language
(Saidislomkhon Uzbekkhonov, male, 25, Samarqand)



“I studied Russian in school, but it hardly plays any role in my life. **I’ve even boycotted the Cyrillic alphabet;** I stopped reading books in Cyrillic and only read those in Latin script. The same goes for the Russian language.”
(Fayzullo To'g'onboyev, male, 22, Ferghana)



“**A lot of things need to be removed—just completely erased.** For example, all the Russian-language signs. I see it even in my own city, Andijan. **There are still so many Russian signs on the streets.** Even in places where only Uzbeks live and no Russians at all, you still find signs in Russian.”
(Azizullo Yaqubjonov, male, 23, Andijan)

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE



... now, if you want to get a job in Tashkent or in major cities of other regions, Russian is often a required skill. ... That’s the part I criticize. **I’m not against the language being taught. I’m against it being placed above Uzbek or treated as equal to Uzbek** in terms of official status or job requirements.” (Mukhlisa, 21, female, Navai)



“**I think teaching [Russian at schools] has been a good thing up to this point.** ... Back then, we were forced to obtain important literature and knowledge in Russian, as there were no other options. There was almost no information available in Uzbek.”
(Nurmuhhammad Ortiqbaev, male 31, Jizzakh)

IMPACT OF THE SOVIET LEGACY

Generational Difference: Those born before the 2000s link contemporary struggles (corruption, political passiveness) to Soviet-era policies; those born after see the past as distant.

View of Soviet Rule: Most young people criticize the Soviet legacy, often using terms like "bosqinchi" (colonizer) to describe Soviet presence in Central Asia.

Language Shift: The decline of Russian language fluency, with a preference for English among young people for career and educational purposes.

Thank you!



☰ ALL SECTIONS 🔍 SEARCH

THE | DIPLOMAT
READ THE DIPLOMAT. KNOW THE ASIA-PACIFIC

MAGAZINE

Russian Without Russians: The Politics of Language in Uzbekistan

A new generation is questioning the privileged place of the Russian language in public education and everyday life – while still grappling with its utility, legacy, and political weight.

 By [Niginakhon Saida](#)
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