



Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia

General Editors:

Chris Hann, Thomas Hauschild, Richard Rottenburg, Burkhard Schnepel

Volume 25

Florian Mühlfried and Sergey Sokolovskiy (eds.)

Exploring the Edge of Empire

Soviet Era Anthropology
in the Caucasus and Central Asia

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Exploring the Edge of Empire

Soviet Era Anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia

All too often, Western scholars studying the Caucasus and Central Asia show a striking disinterest in, and occasionally even distaste for, knowledge generated locally. The anthropology of the Soviet era is often dismissed *in toto* as a fabrication of communist ideology and/or a purely descriptive and anti-theoretical endeavour. These assumptions greatly hinder communication between regional experts and between disciplinary specialists.

This book is an attempt to overcome this problem by re-evaluating Soviet anthropological work in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The contributors include scholars from these regions as well as others from Western countries. In addition to authors with first-hand experiences of Soviet era anthropology, the volume presents the voices of several younger scholars, as their reflections on the discipline's past will matter for its future in the regions.

The book is divided into five parts. The first part is devoted to the general framework of socialist anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia and scrutinizes relations between Soviet academic centres and peripheries. The second part deals with studies of collective farms and engagements with modernity in post-Stalinist Soviet anthropology. In the third part, two interviews with key "participant observers" and leading contributors to Soviet and post-Soviet anthropology bring in first-hand experiences and personal reflections. The final two parts of this book present the making of national schools of ethnography and related sciences in the Caucasus, followed by explorations of the contributions of some outstanding individuals and the institutional and/or political constraints within which they worked in Central Asia.

The topics range from discussion of the legacy of Soviet-era anthropology and application of theories of *ethnos* and so-called survivals to the impact of disciplinary traditions stemming from pre-Soviet times. The chapters bring out striking differences between the two large regions considered; they also draw attention to variation within these regions, and between different sub-disciplines of anthropology. The intricate histories of local research traditions subjected to strict controls contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which the social sciences interact with ideology. Chronologically, the book spans the whole epoch of the Soviet-style anthropology from its inception in the 1920s to its aftermath in a new century.

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Cover Photo: Lenin monument at the Kattasay dam in Sogd region (former Leninabad), Tajikistan (2010) (Photo: Sergey Abashin).



Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Werkdruckpapier entsprechend
ANSI Z3948 DIN ISO 9706

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-643-90177-4

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

LIT VERLAG GmbH & Co. KG Wien,
Zweigniederlassung Zürich 2011

Klosbachstr. 107
CH-8032 Zürich
Tel. +41 (0) 44-251 75 05
Fax +41 (0) 44-251 75 06
e-Mail: zuerich@lit-verlag.ch
<http://www.lit-verlag.ch>

LIT VERLAG Dr. W. Hopf

Berlin 2011
Fresenstr. 2
D-48159 Münster
Tel. +49 (0) 2 51-620 320
Fax +49 (0) 2 51-23 19 72
e-Mail: lit@lit-verlag.de
<http://www.lit-verlag.de>

Distribution:

In Germany: **LIT Verlag** Fresenstr. 2, D-48159 Münster
Tel. +49 (0) 2 51-620 32 22, Fax +49 (0) 2 51-922 60 99, e-mail: vertrieb@lit-verlag.de

In Austria: Medienlogistik Pichler-ÖBZ, e-mail: mlo@medien-logistik.at

In Switzerland: B + M Buch- und Medienvertrieb, e-mail: order@buch-medien.ch

In the UK: Global Book Marketing, e-mail: mo@centralbooks.com

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