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‘Death to Sarts’

History, injustice and a complex insult in Central Asia

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Violence in Osh

In June 2010, in the southern Kyrgyzstan city of Osh[1], and in villages up to 25 kilometres from the city, six days of violence left more than 450 people dead. The majority were killed by gunshot according to a newly released and detailed chronology (NHC 2012: 193). Three quarters of those who died were identified as Uzbek and one quarter as Kyrgyz. The violence came two months after the overthrow of President Bakiyev in a self-styled ‘revolution’ in Bishkek. The linkage between the April Bishkek and June Osh events is unclear, but it is likely that following Bakiyev’s departure from the country, a struggle for power and influence quickly took hold in the southern *oblasts* (regions), as politicians and other local strong men, drawing on private armies that thrived in the criminal underworld, vied to gain advantage using violence and intimidation (ICG 2010; KIC 2011; Mateeva et al. 2012).

The instability in Osh took on an overtly ethnic character as protagonists escalated the violence by bringing to the surface social and economic tensions that had for many decades strained relations between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities. Immediate issues included disagreements over land and housing allocation which each ‘community’ deemed discriminatory, the use of the Uzbek language in schools and other public places, and the setting of ethnic quotas in state employment. The ethnic or communal basis of these and other matters relating to resource allocation, representation in politics and policing in Osh, generated political discourses that employed deliberately divisive nationalist language. Uzbek commentators found evidence of rising Kyrgyz nationalism in what were regarded as inflammatory newspaper articles, while Kyrgyz commentators pointed to Uzbek songs with insulting lyrics.

The Kyrgyzstan military and police force was criticized for, at best, failing to be even-handed in its dealings with all the residents of the city, and at worst, standing by as gangs congregated to commit acts of violence directed at Uzbek *mahallas* (neighbourhoods) (KIC 2011). Though the official government report did not find evidence to support claims of official complicity in the violence (NCI 2011), the International Crisis Group (ICG) was sufficiently confident to describe the events as a ‘pogrom’ (ICG 2010). Meanwhile Hanks (2011), disagreeing with the conclusion of the independent international commission of inquiry (KIC 2011), described the killings as ‘genocide’. Local politicians, in particular the Mayor of Osh, Melisbek Myrzakmatov, who is often described as an ‘ultra-nationalist’ and who has been criticized for maintaining authority through corruption and patronage networks (Hanks 2011: 186), was accused of exploiting growing tensions in his city.

The impression that the violence, at its root, was the result of both past and present social and economic disputes in which each population group harboured grievances against the other, was reinforced by the use of certain insults. Urges to violence and writing on the walls included threatening messages in Kyrgyz and Russian such as ‘Uzbeks leave Kyrgyzstan, you have no business here’; ‘Death to Uzbeks’; and ‘Kyrgyz, come out, we are going to kill Sarts’ (NHC 2012: 48; 112-116).

The repeated use of ‘Sart’ as a pejorative term, recalled its adoption by the nineteenth century Tsarist colonizers as their preferred name for the entire settled population of Turkestan; its use, largely in the twentieth century, by Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomads as a slight directed at sedentary people who were deemed to ‘lack tribal attribution’ (Baldauf 1991: 79-80; Hirsch 2000: 221); and its deployment in the violence that occurred in 1990 in the town of Uzgen, also in Osh *oblast*, when ‘Hit, kill Sarts’ was heard being chanted among Kyrgyz gangs (Tishkov n.d.).

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Fig. 1. *‘Sarts’, July 2010.*

A ‘Sart nation’

Nineteenth century Russian Tsarists, through the blanket labelling of all non-nomadic populations as ‘Sart’, elevated a contested (though widely used) descriptor into an official category, which in turn necessitated the compiling of a language, with the same name, to provide a cultural basis around which the envisaged ‘Sart nation’ could be united. Turkic-speakers in Tsarist Turkestan, who today would be described as Uzbek or Tajik, widely denounced as offensive the colonial use of the term and the pseudo-nation it suggested. Some of the common stereotypes of ‘Turkestani Sarts’ were repeated in Rickmer’s account of her 1907 expedition to Central Asia:

> Apathy is the distinguishing characteristic of the Sart or native of Bokhara. Sometimes Tajik or Persian by origin, sometimes Usbeg, more often a mixture of both, his apathy is but little affected by the particular strain in his blood. Centuries of oppression, political and social, have made the Sart what he is, a creature incapable of action save under tremendous outside pressure. Of combined social action for a common end, he has not the most rudimentary idea, save in cases where his very existence obviously depends on it. (Rickmer 1907: 659).

‘Sart’ and delimitation

Following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Soviets in Central Asia joined local intellectuals in first denouncing, and then formally abolishing, the ‘imperialistic’ term. On national delimitation in the early to mid-1920s, with the new borders drawn, residents of Turkestan, Bukhara and Khorezm, liberated from the ‘Sart’ insult, were instead issued documents that assigned them to one or other of the equally created identities of Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, Kyrgyz or Kazakh. And in turn they were declared residents of the newly formed Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (which initially incorporated the Tajik Autonomous Republic), of the Turkmen Republic, and following some initial confusion, as residents of the Kazakh or Kyrgyz Oblast (later Republic).

A significant number of those newly identified as Uzbek or Tajik found themselves living outside the borders of their assigned republic as minorities in one of the other territories. Through delimitation, therefore, the Kyrgyz Republic came to include large minorities of non-Kyrgyz who had been separated from their titular republics as a result of the new and often capriciously drawn borders, including some

1. There were additional deaths in the city of Jalabad.

2. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this form of words. Reported clashes between Kyrgyz villagers and minorities, including Meshketian Turks in Maevka on the outskirts of Bishkek in April 2010 (Eurasianet 2012), and minorities from the Caucasus in December 2011, as well as Tajik villagers in the southwest in January 2012, have been linked to such perceived injustices and historical disparities between ethnic groups (Naumann 2011: 123-125).

3. However, considerable tracts of land were returned to local authorities by families who could not manage the land and across the country, village councils are still dealing with disputes over land yet to be distributed.

4. For a detailed historical account of the processes of Sovietization and collectivization in the Kyrgyz Oblast between 1921 and 1932 see Loring (2008).

5. Government data upon which the WFP (2010) analysis drew, did not directly support the argument that Kyrgyz areas had higher levels of food insecurity or vulnerability, for while the largest number of food insecure people were Kyrgyz (as the majority population), predominantly Uzbek areas in Osh *oblast* tended to be more food insecure than Kyrgyz areas, suggesting that poverty and hardship were experienced equally by Kyrgyz and Uzbek alike.

in enclaves completely surrounded by Kyrgyz territory. It remained the case throughout the Soviet years, however, that the borders were either poorly defined (in particular the Tajik/Kyrgyz border), or were only lightly managed, thus allowing relatively free movement and reducing the sense of 'strandedness' among these minorities. The issue of residence and location grew in political significance following independence in 1991, in part as a result of the tighter enforcing of national borders.

Despite removing the term from the official Soviet lexicon, 'Sart' survived in the Kyrgyz Republic for some years after the creation of the new Central Asian Soviet states. Collective farms that were associated with particular minorities retained the 'Sart' title, for example 'Sart-Kalmyk' in Karakol (Abdykarov et al. 1989: 114), and thus a term which was in common use to signify non-pastoral and settled communities, took on an enhanced political meaning at the confluence of collectivization, minority settlement in the 1930s, and ethnic deportations.

The Kyrgyz population were aware that under Stalin, nations and republics created by the Soviets had no guarantee of permanence, and entire republics could be and indeed were, removed from the Union map and their populations dispersed, imprisoned or killed (Conquest 1960). This existential threat hung over the small and vulnerable Kyrgyz Republic that had felt the wrath of Stalin's purges in 1938, just two years after its elevation to a Soviet Republic, when more than 150 members of the local central committee were violently 'purged'. The presence of deportees in the Republic, many of whom were assigned to collective farms across the country, was a reminder of this threat. The label 'Sart' exposed their status as: *conquered victims*, but as a result of their own untrustworthiness; *rootless*, in the sense that they had been moved around with ease and against their will; and it came to encapsulate also the fate of a people whose status in the new place was fixed, as *impermanent*. 'Sart', ironically, possessed a dual meaning that populations could be both sedentary while also displaced.

Collectivization, decollectivization and privatization

The complexity of the insult as daubed in paint on the houses of Uzbeks and yelled with menace from road junctions in the 2010 riots in Osh, would likely have been lost on most of the rioters whose knowledge of Turkic, Tsarist and Soviet history was likely to be patchy. But the potency of the insult, suggesting foreignness and inferiority, and which underlined the vulnerability of a minority which felt under siege, could not have been mistaken in the Uzbek *mahallas*.

The pejorative use of 'Sart' connected the events in Osh to a certain narrative about collectivization, privatization, and a set of perceived historical grievances which fed into a current and increasingly potent nationalist political agenda. A narrative that, at its extreme portrays the Kyrgyz as predominantly, and at times exclusively, the victims of Soviet aggression, and minorities – whether European or indigenous Central Asian – as at best complacent beneficiaries and at worst active collaborators in the oppression of the Kyrgyz. Flowing on from this narrative is a political argument that advocates relegating Kyrgyzstan's minorities and depriving them of certain rights or property at a time when national cohesion is severely strained[2].

While the grievances underpinning such a political agenda have their roots in a particular reading of the history of Sovietization, they also draw on an interpretation of economic and political developments that have taken place since independence.

Privatization, according to the World Bank, was more extensive in Kyrgyzstan than in any other Central Asian nation, and by the end of the first decade of independence, Kyrgyzstan had dismantled almost all of its collective (*kolkhozes*) and state farms (*sovkhozes*) which previously dominated the agricultural economy, and through land privatization had 'individualized' ownership of 95 per cent of arable land in the country, putting small farmers and households in charge of food production (Lerman 2008: 392-393; Lerman & Sedick 2009). Land privatization was achieved through the allocation of former collective farm land to *in situ* farm members and to others who had an association with a farm (such as teachers). Each family received a share of land, and other farm assets, that reflected the length of their association with the farm, their role on the farm, and family circumstances[3]; and the mechanics of land allocation was devolved to the farms via district level committees.

While decollectivization and privatization *within farms* was thus generally regarded as 'just', the wider policy decision to accept the Soviet demarcated *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* administrative and territorial units as the parameters for privatization and land allocation, was regarded by some as an injustice. Specifically, it was criticized as a policy that legitimized the acts of confiscation, expulsions and land settlement undertaken by the Soviets. The nationalist narrative suggests that while all population groups in the Kyrgyz Republic – indigenous Central Asians as well as Russians and Europeans, deportees from the Caucasus and elsewhere in the Union – were treated harshly under collectivization, most acutely during the period of Stalin's 'total collectivization' in the early 1930s with the hunger and repression it entailed, it was the titular population of ethnic Kyrgyz who were disproportionately disadvantaged.

The historical harms identified included the outlawing of pastoralism in the mid-1930s and its ending as a viable livelihood, achieved through the transfer of Kyrgyz pastoral lands to state ownership, the organized settlement of large areas of lower-lying and productive land by minority populations, the socializing of the country's livestock, and the involuntary relocation of former pastoralists onto the newly created animal breeding and arable *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*[4] (Naumann 2011: 123-125). Land reform, therefore, which as Sabates-Wheeler has stated, rather than appealing to 'historical justice' arguments about restitution (as happened in other former Soviet states) instead 'found its rationale in the notion of distributional egalitarianism' (2007: 1428). As such it was condemned for failing to address perceived historical injustices and came to be seen as the final stage of land confiscation and forced resettlement that first began under Tsarist rule in the nineteenth century, was continued under communism from the 1920s, and which was then given legal status by post-1991 privatization laws that were encouraged by Western accountancy firms, the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund).

Historical harm and contemporary hardship

It was a relatively short step to interweave this reading of Soviet and immediate post-Soviet history into the very real land and livelihood concerns of people across south-eastern Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Political tensions in Osh in that summer had been heightened, as described above, by discontent over urban land allocation, the use of the Uzbek language, policing failure, and the struggle for power and influence which followed the deposing of President Bakiyev. However, underpinning these immediate issues were a set of underlying concerns rooted in broader and nationwide disputes about land ownership, dissatisfaction with the privatization programme and with the course of land redistribution. These tensions in turn were heightened by the effects of a decade-long cycle of declining crop pro-

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(from left to right)
Fig. 2. *Graffiti indicating an Uzbek-owned property on the left, and a Kyrgyz-owned property on the right.*
Fig. 3. *'No Home for Sarts!' written in Kyrgyz on a kerb stone in an Uzbek neighbourhood, June 2010.*
Fig. 4. *Uzbek elders, Osh, July 2010.*
Fig. 5. *Displaced family, Osh, July 2010.*

duction in which food insecurity had come to affect 55% of all households across Osh *oblast* in 2010, creating levels of insecurity and poverty that were considerably higher than elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan and which necessitated the distribution of international food aid (WFP 2010).

Rural food shortages, felt most intensely in households that had too little land and too few animals to satisfy household needs, according to the WFP were related to a decline in small farm wheat production and rising food prices. Against this background, and what Mateeva et al. described as 'a logic (of rural and urban) collective insecurities' (2012: 1), the use of 'Sart' was powerful, recalling historical injustices of land loss and hunger, particularly among those who felt that they had been deceived by privatization and decollectivization[5].

Managing conflict and confronting history

Conley has argued that insults can be at once both 'antisocial' (malign) and 'constitutive of social relations' (benign) (2010: 2-3). It would take an extreme optimist to interpret the use of 'Sart' by the perpetrators of the violence in the 2010 events as anything other than destructive. The insult advanced a radically simplified interpretation of Kyrgyzstan's complex problems, portraying the situation as a straightforward conflict between the victim, 'non-Sarts' (Kyrgyz, the majority *ethnie*, as people with a unique historical claim to the land and a nomadic people who fell victim to Soviet aggression) and the oppressors, 'Sarts' (largely Uzbek, there only by historical accident, complicit in historical injustices, a minority both predatory and untrustworthy). The intent was to inflame a situation where inter-communal conflict was already undermining national reconciliation; a process which was itself in the hands of a government whose authority was challenged by increasing political factionalism and social disunity. The events had the effect, as Troitskiy noted, of turning 'a growing part of the country's political elite (towards) a nationalist rhetoric' thus driving nationalism into the mainstream of Kyrgyzstan's political debate (2012: 25). In the city itself, and in the aftermath of the violence, Tucker (2012) has observed that Uzbeks, aware of the heightened risks of renewed conflict, made a number of concessions aimed at reconciliation; for example, accepting the shift from Uzbek to Kyrgyz language teaching in predominantly Uzbek schools. At the same time, he argues, in their everyday exchanges on the 2010 events, Uzbek residents of the city are actively neutralizing or 'de-ethnicizing' the causes of the violence by reconnecting with a specific 'Osh identity' – one that captures the presence and coexistence in the city of Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and other minorities over many generations – and rejecting the nationalist position that the violence was an outcome of an unbridgeable divide between the city's two main communities. In emphasizing an historic unity of the people of Osh, blame is being directed instead at outsiders; 'people who came down from the mountains', who were not 'of us', but were rather hotheads manipulated by external political actors and criminal interests.

The Kyrgyz government and the numerous international governmental and non-governmental organizations that are supporting efforts at conflict resolution and crisis management are fully aware of the domestic and international risks involved in engaging in debates about Sovietization, colonization, collectivization and its subsequent dismantling. In particular, of confronting those interpretations that place only Kyrgyz harm at the centre. The concentration on grass roots conflict resolution, cross-community communication, and improved mediation and dialogue, may go some way to providing an early warning of conflict such as that witnessed in Osh. However, tensions over land linked to perceptions of historical injustice which in turn are heightened by the experience of poverty, will increase the likelihood of future inter-communal tensions. The challenge for the government is to find a way of discussing the country's Soviet past in a manner that allows for the emergence of alternative political narratives which support rather than undermine reconciliation. ●

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