

Practices of memory in the post-Soviet everyday

Remembering collective agriculture in Northern Kyrgyzstan

Research proposal of doctoral dissertation

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Memory politics in Central Asia

Memory is an often foregrounded, but also highly contested theme in post-Soviet societies. In the context of the post-Soviet nation-states, nation building processes mostly make recourse to historical narratives and include the reinvention of past traditions to specific political purposes. Yet, other forces are also at play, such as the adoption of new forms of Islamic practices or narratives of improvement propagated by mainly European and US American aid agencies.

Scholars have broadly investigated the legacies of Soviet and pre-Soviet past in today's Central Asia, especially the influence of past traditions on contemporary social structures. Several studies have focused on the reconstruction of past practices through oral and written historical sources. Some researchers have addressed the political implications of specific historical accounts and the active political use of historical narratives to legitimise contemporary processes. However, such investigations have mainly examined accounts and performances of the past explicitly recognised as such (e.g. museum exhibitions and official anniversary celebrations). Research has so far neglected the process of the constitution of memory through everyday practices: the investigation of this process is the main aim of my research project.

Collective farming in Kyrgyzstan

I examine everyday memory practices in the context of collective farming. The trajectory of collective farming in Kyrgyzstan spans from the (pre)Soviet to the post-Soviet era, which makes it a particularly suited case for the aim of this study. The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the dismantlement of state farms and collective farms. Today, both the national government and international development agencies promote cooperation in farming activities. However, most of the over 4'000 registered cooperatives exist merely on paper.

The concept of collective (agricultural) work has thus been reinterpreted and today differs radically from the one of the Soviet period. In the framework of the new neo-liberal market system, mainly service and marketing cooperatives are encouraged, whereas production cooperatives are often blamed for their inefficiency. The memory of the working conditions in Soviet collective farms influences – both positively and negatively – the motivation of farmers to join in cooperatives.

Research plan

Research aims, focus and questions. This research aims to shed light on a process that has been so far neglected by academic research, both empirically for Central Asia as well as theoretically in general: the constitution of memory through everyday practices. I look at this process in the specific framework of collective farming practices and agricultural cooperative organisation. The study asks following questions:

- How is the memory of collective farming constituted in the post-Soviet everyday?
 - What everyday practices contribute to the constitution of the memory of collective farming?
 - What narratives of (past and present) collective farming are produced?
 - What role do materiality, knowledge and affectivity play in the constitution of the memory of collective farming?

Conceptual framework. I analyse the constitution of memory drawing on Schatzki's theory of practice. I thus focus on the identification of *sets of actions* that can be recognised as part of *memory practices*. Bundles of such practices and of related *material arrangements* make up the *social phenomenon* of memory. Schatzki's theory of practice also acknowledges the role of materiality, knowledge and affectivity in the constitution of practices.

Methodology. The study innovatively combines two methodologies in social sciences. Ethnographic methods, especially participant observation, serve for the investigation of contemporary practices, both practices of memory and of collective work. Oral history methods are applied in order to make sense of memories, and to understand their contents and constitution through the production of narratives about the past.

Case study and timeline. I adopt a case study approach, investigating a small cooperative in Northern Kyrgyzstan, which carried out few activities of agricultural extension in the past ten years. Data collection will be carried out mainly through participant observation of the agricultural and institutional practices of the cooperative, and through oral histories on the transformation of the cooperative, of collective work and of agricultural practices in general.

Nov 2013 – May 2015	Preparation Literature review, methodology and theoretical framework Exploratory field visit (2 months)
Jun 2015 – Apr 2017	Implementation Data collection, data analysis Fieldwork: Jun-Aug 2015; Mar-Aug 2016
May 2017 – Apr 2018	Finalisation Writing up of dissertation

Contribution

First, the study contributes to Historical Geography and Environmental History by providing insights on the transformation of human-environment relations and of the use of natural resources through its focus on collective farming. Second, the study contributes to Central Asian Studies by investigating processes of reinterpreting the past; understanding such processes allows a better informed critical stance about political decisions that will mark the future development of the Central Asian region. Third, collective work is an approach that Western development organisations promote also in other geographical contexts. A better understanding of this concept in relation to remembered practices offers the potential to improve approaches to collective/cooperative work in development aid. Fourth, this study contributes to improve methodologies in the social sciences through its innovative combination of oral history and ethnography.

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