

# To the studies of Soviet *vostokovedenie*: the precarious Marxist debates

In the fields of humanities and social sciences (particularly in Asian studies), individuals and collectives of Soviet scholars developed their research topics within the lines of international scholarship. However, their works were rarely known or recognised internationally. In the aftermath of the Cold War, in the 1990s, the dissolution of the former social institutions went hand in hand with the decline of many previously renowned academic traditions in the former Soviet Republics and especially Russia.

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THE RUSSIAN ASIAN STUDIES or, to emphasise the imperial origins of their formation, *Oriental studies*, had borrowed significantly from and developed in close linkage with the German tradition of *Orientalwissenschaft*. Diverse colonial encounters of Europeans in Asia produced various systems of knowledge about the Orient. The debate on the differences of socio-cultural constructivism behind *Orientalwissenschaft* and Orientalisms established in other European maritime empires, particularly Great Britain, is relevant for the Russian Oriental studies as well. The Russian term, *vostokovedenie*, means 'knowledge about the East [Vostok]' with an accent on possessing knowledge.

In the 1920s and during the first part of the 1930s, no radical rupture of tradition had occurred in Soviet Russia yet, and many imperial Russian Orientalists were still leading the research departments. However, the formation of a new society also called for completely new and modern debates. This article dwells upon the merger of imperial Russian *vostokovedenie* with Marxism, which produced a very specific knowledge system, with its politicised concepts and research apparatus. Another aim of the article is to endeavour to explain why scientific Marxism, as a method to study history and society, appeared to be practically completely abandoned by the former Soviet Union and socialist states of Eastern Europe; and to find not solely political, but social grounds for this transformation.<sup>1</sup>

## The concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production in Soviet *vostokovedenie*

Marx's analysis of Asian societies became the foundation of the development of theory in Soviet *vostokovedenie* – an approach poorly researched by contemporary Western scholars<sup>2</sup> and almost forgotten by the majority of the former Soviet Orientalists, the *vostokovedy*. One of the central questions of Marx's analysis was the concept of the 'Asiatic Mode of Production' (AMP) – a special mode of production that distinguished Asia from the West. The Western world, according to Marx, undergoes a number of successive formations (primitive society – slavery – feudalism – capitalism – socialism), while in Asia property is not differentiated from power, which impedes the development of certain formations.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Marx never thoroughly developed the AMP concept himself, but in the 1920s, *imperial Russia* and *new Soviet* *vostokovedy* fostered the development of the AMP debate. The reason for the debates' popularity was the Russian Bolsheviks' plans for the spread of communist revolutions in the Vostok (by means of the Third Communist International).

The debate first broke out between the followers of the AMP concept and those scholars who wanted to find a place for Vostok within the formations scheme. The debate roared in the 1920s and the early 1930s; it then died down, only to be partly revived in the 1950-60s, when it had to reflect the discussions on socialist development in the decolonised Vostok. In the mid-1970s, the Soviet *vostokovedy* endeavoured to reconceptualise the communist grand narrative and change their visions of the Vostok's history and development. The AMP debate was once again brought to light in a peculiar modified form during the later stages of the Cold War.

The key discourses held about Vostok, its history and culture, differed noticeably between the Soviet *vostokovedy*, working on the 'foreign East' (*zarubezhnyi Vostok*), and those conducting research on the Soviet 'domestic East' (*otechestvennyi Vostok*). The hierarchy found in the Soviet *vostokovedenie* research institutes had long been formed on the basis of the obviously political distinction that framed, above all, the social hierarchies in the USSR: the studies of the 'foreign East' were considered more prestigious (and thus situated in the capital), while the 'domestic East' scholars in Central Asia were linked to the studies of their localities [*kraevedenie*]<sup>4</sup> and the histories of their national republics. Institutions on the theory and methodology of social sciences were situated in the cities of the European part of the country. Nevertheless, the Soviet *vostokovedy* of the 'domestic East' started to acquire a wider social and political role inside the USSR in the mid-1970s; after the Soviet Union's disintegration they moved to the forefront of nation-building processes in the newly independent Central Asian states.<sup>5</sup>

The followers of the formations approach were mostly representatives of conservative intelligentsia and *nomenklatura*, and those who wanted to believe that any society, at any stage of development, could be guided towards socialism. Those who tried to work on the AMP were suspected of revolting against the Soviet mainstream. The AMP debate, however, acquired a new social meaning at the time of *perestroika*. Scholars who wished to legitimise *perestroika* and market economy reform, supported the AMP concept. And again *vostokovedy* played the key role, as many (particularly in ethnography) tried to prove the impossibility of transition towards socialism by many Vostok societies (and what was not openly pronounced at the end of the 1980s, but implied – in the Soviet Union itself).

In the same way as endorsements by certain influential Russian *vostokovedy* in the early 1930s (e.g., renowned Egyptologist and Assyriologist V.V. Struve) had helped the formations approach to prevail, in the 1980s a respected sinologist, L.S. Vasiliev, among others, brought the AMP to the frontline again. His interpretation of the AMP was a bizarre mixture of Marxist dialectics, Orientalism and Cold War ideological biases on socialism, which he learned in the process of non-critical reading of the Western literature available in the Soviet Union. The Western 'rightfulness' over the Soviet 'lies' was reaffirmed in Vasiliev's eyes as he witnessed the devastating economic and social crisis in the USSR at the end of the 1980s. Vasiliev, as Marx did,<sup>6</sup> interpreted the integrity of power and property in the AMP as the 'Eastern despotic mode of production' – 'the civilisation-cultural fundament' of Vostok. From this, already in opposition against Marx and to a greater degree against the Soviet mainstreams, Vasiliev made another step: he connected the 'Eastern despotism' with the repressive state structures, 'typical' for the Soviet society. So far 'communist and other left experiments of the twentieth century' with the USSR at the vanguard, were seen as a manifestation of AMP. Communism, as Vasiliev wrote, was 'genetically' tied to 'Eastern despotism' and had to give way to the liberal values of the market economy.<sup>7</sup> In the early 1990s, his two-volume textbook, *The History of Vostok*, was key reading at the main faculties for Oriental studies at the universities in Moscow. In the second volume, devoted to contemporary Vostok, Vasiliev changed all the previous dogmas and reverted to new ones, condemning the socialist way of development as morally backward and ultimately wrong, and praising any course towards liberalisation, free market reforms and democratisation of the countries of Vostok. Those interpretations became the legitimising ideology for the group of young liberal economists who launched reforms in Russia in the 1990s.

## Socialist revolutions in the underdeveloped Vostok of the 1970-80s, and the traumatic aftermath of socialism

The disclosure of Soviet historiographical biases became such a dramatic process for many *vostokovedy* at the beginning of the 1990s, that some of them, especially those who used to write on socio-economic developments in the Middle East, rejected their own literary legacy to the point that they abandoned their studies and switched to studying former Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus – the 'new' *zarubezhnyi Vostok* – which as they sensed, would become vitally important for the new Russia's government.<sup>8</sup> This narrowing of geographical scope of research by Russian *vostokovedy* echoed Russia's political and economic withdrawal from the foreign East. To understand the level of shock involved for these *vostokovedy*, who were suddenly excluded from the social fields inside the country, one has to remember their 'golden decade' (specialists of the Middle East in particular) when in the mid-1970s the 'threat of Wahhabism' was constructed.

In the mid-1970s, and into the Gorbachev era, new socialist revolutions had been taking place in Vostok, also among communities at the 'tribal stage' of development (according to the formational dialectics of the Soviet policy-makers). However, even at this low stage of development (*underdeveloped*), the societies had to be mobilised for the national-liberation struggle and revolution, for which the concept of 'non-capitalist development' (once applied in Mongolia in

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the 1920-30s) was revived. Afghanistan came into focus; the study of the history and culture of the Afghan tribes, and primarily their languages, became important specialisations at the departments for *vostokovedenie* at the leading universities and research institutes in the Soviet Union in the 1980s; and the Department of Fraternal Nations at the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan, supported by Moscow, ran the projects on national minorities' languages.

Another key discussion of Soviet *vostokovedenie*, dismissed in the 1990s, was on the state institutions among the peoples of Vostok (particularly the *underdeveloped* nomads), according to which the state [*gosudarstvo*] was seen as another inevitable stage of societal development and a precondition for social evolution. The politicised vision of a nation-state as a necessary step in the evolution towards a communist state had been an ideological ground for mapping the Soviet Central Asian Republics in 1924. More than this, since the 1940s, the ethnocentric idea of the nation-state impregnated the national academia and formed the mainstreams in the Republics. Although the *independent* historiographies of modern Central Asian states tend to throw a veil over many social developments at the time of socialism, the nation-building policies of the states largely derive from the Soviet concept of 'statehood' and search for the 'state features' in ancient and medieval polities of Central and Inner Asia.

The legacies of socialism are strong in Central Asia and many concepts and symbols persistently resurface in the ongoing rivalry for the Soviet legacy (that has become more visible against the background of the recent war in Ukraine). The young generation adheres to the affirmative nationalist symbols (remaining unaware of their actual evolution) and reproduces new localised identities (particularly 'us' versus 'them') that potentially divide rather than consolidate the population.

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- For some exceptions, see: Kemper, M. 2009. "The Soviet discourse on the origin and class character of Islam, 1923-1933", *Die Welt des Islams* 49(1):1-48.
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- Vasiliev, L.S. 1994. *Istoriya Vostoka* [The History of the Orient], Moscow: "Vysshaya shkola", Vol. I, II. Importantly, the publication of such textbooks was a matter of approval by the Moscow 'Orientalists gang' – the directors of the leading universities and the branches of the Academy of Science and recommendation by the State Committee on High Education of the Russian Federation.
- Other 'Middle Eastern experts' changing their research profile for Central Asia included L.A. Friedman. In 1963 he published the most famous work, *Kapitalisticheskoe razvitiye Egipta. 1882-1939. [Capitalist development of Egypt]* (Moscow: MGU). In the 1990s he became more known for his works on Central Asia: for instance, *Ocherki ekonomicheskogo i sotsial'nogo razvitiya stran Tsentral'noi Azii posle raspada SSSR* [Remarks on economic and social development of Central Asia after the USSR's disintegration] (Moskva: "Gumanitarii", 2001).