Recollecting Central Asia's Soviet past

This paper presents in brief a project that aims to collect, record and interpret personal experiences and memories of the Soviet past in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Interviews were held with elderly citizens in order to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between the official historiography of the Soviet era and people's private lives and beliefs. The aim of our study is to contribute to academic knowledge with regards to how people remember their Soviet past. In addition, this study may also shed new light on the transformations of present-day Central Asia, from the perspective of personal memories. The way in which people in Central Asia reconcile with their Soviet past is to a great extent through a three-fold process of recollecting their everyday experiences, reflecting on their past from the perspective of their post-Soviet present, and re-imagining their own history.

Timur Dadabaev

'Retrieving' the memory

The interviewees were chosen from an older generation, beyond retirement age, who had not been covered by any previous studies. Those selected had spent their most active years in a Soviet cultural and social environment. Their recollections were recorded on audiotapes (in the case of Uzbekistan) and video-recordings (in the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan), transcribed and translated, and are currently in the process of being archived.

Methodologically, a critical discourse analysis was used for the processing of the interviews. The video/audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed. These texts /interviews were then treated as elements mediating social events that occurred during the Soviet times. In the process of the interviews, the topics that the respondents touched upon mostly related to the analysis of various actors, such as the Communist Party, the Soviet government, religious institutions, local communities and respondents, and their social roles. This study thus joins other research that analyses Soviet-era social actors, using techniques 'to include or exclude them in presenting events; assign them an active or passive role; personalise or impersonalise them; name or only classify them; refer to them specifically or generically.'

Our study in Central Asian oral history has resulted in a number of conclusions based on people's recollections of Soviet times. The first conclusion is related to the patterns of history construction and the role of the public in this process. The public view of history in post-Soviet Central Asia, and particularly Uzbekistan, often falls between Soviet historiographies, advocating advances in the Soviet past, and post-Soviet historical discourses, rejecting the Soviet past. Public perceptions of history are primarily shaped by and related to the everyday needs, experiences, identification and mentality of people, in contrast to the ideologies and political doctrines of the time. They often reflect not only the perceptions of people regarding their past, but also their perceptions regarding their present and imagined future.

Second, recollections of traumatic experiences associated with the Soviet past are often placed within this dichotomy of depicting Soviet experiences. However, in terms of public experiences, the recollections of the public with respect to traumatic experiences, similar to the ones described in recollections of Stalinist repression, often reflect the positions of the narrators and their (in)ability to adapt to the conditions in which they were placed during those years. Different social, ethnic, educational, religious and/or ideological backgrounds greatly influence the selectivity of these recollections and explain why certain individuals recollect their Soviet experiences with a sense of rejection, while others relate to it with the sense of nostalgia.

Third, in a related manner, although nostalgia in post-Soviet countries is frequently explained solely by the economic hardships and social pressures of the post-Soviet period, such explanations do not accurately cover this phenomenon. Economic and social explanations for the nostalgia of respondents are obvious. However, such explanations are not the only ones, and there are a number of other nostalgia-inducing factors that are rarely discussed in the literature on this subject. From the narratives of senior citizens included in our project, one can conclude that many nostalgic views of the past reflect the respondents' attitudes, both to their adaptability to the Soviet realities and also to various aspects of their present lives.

Fourth, in terms of specific issues such as ethnicity, oral-history research may contribute to the debate about how people in Central Asia recall Soviet ethnic policies and their vision of how these policies have shaped the identities of their peers and contemporaries. Such narratives demonstrate that people do not explain Soviet ethnic policies simply through the 'modernisation' or 'victimisation' dichotomy, but locate their experiences in between these discourses. Their recollections again highlight the pragmatic flexibility of the public's adaptive strategies to Soviet ethnic policies.

Fifth, the hybridity produced as a result of Soviet experiences can be traced not only to ethnic self-identification, but also to the attitude of the public towards Soviet and post-Soviet religiosity. An analysis of the manner in which people have come to terms with their past and their recollections of anti-religious campaigns helps us to understand how life under the Soviet government not only resulted in changes in lifestyles, but also redrew the boundaries of 'proper/modernised' religious life and of what are now considered to be the religious remnants of the past.

Challenges, limitations and biases

There are a few conceptual and logistical issues to be considered in connection with interviews of the type discussed in the preceding sections. First, the mentality of ordinary people has influenced the outcome of the interviews. The interviewers observed that respondents were often reluctant to speak about negative aspects of Soviet times in certain countries, for which there are several explanations. One of the most important explanations is the issue of censorship, which can largely be regarded as a legacy of the Soviet past. In particular, the censorship of questionnaires and answer choices remains one of the greatest obstacles to the wider development of survey research in Central Asia. Even today, the same attitude towards surveys seems to prevail in a majority of cases in post-Soviet Central Asia, which often leads to a situation in which respondents are under either imagined or real pressure to provide socially desirable answers to impress interviewers or please authorities.

In addition to potential political and other related pressures, respondents may be of the opinion that talking about one's problems and expressing criticism outside of their own group is shameful and should be avoided as much as possible. Therefore, in many cases, interviewees may be inclined to speak more about the positive sides of issues than the negatives sides.

Second, determining the language in which an interview should be conducted may be a challenge given the multi-ethnic nature of the environment in which our survey was carried out. Uzbek/Kyrgyz/Kazakh (depending on the country) was used by those belonging to the titular ethnic group, who preferred to answer in their own language. For the Russian and Russian-speaking groups (such as Koreans), Russian language questionnaires were used. In certain instances, questionnaires in alternative languages were drafted. Fortunately, the diversity of languages used for the questionnaires did not present a technical problem, beyond for the logistical concerns related to translation. A much larger problem was the obvious correlation between the language of the questionnaire and the pattern of asking questions and answering those questions. In the Uzbek /Kyrgyz/Kazakh languages, the interviewer was required to go through the long procedure of first explaining at length the background of the issue and then asking the question. If not, the answers given would be inadequate, too short or shallow. In the Russian language, however, preceding the question with a long discussion of the background of the issues and their details irritated the respondents, who desired clear, short questions without a patronisingly long introductory interpretation and explanation of the problem. In the same manner, the answers in local languages were softer, long and extensively descriptive, with few short and clear-cut answers. Those responding in local languages preferred to give 'middle-ground' answers, which can largely be attributed to the mentality of the people. Even when respondents answered in a straight and critical manner, they still preferred to do so after extensive explanation and after 'setting the stage'. In contrast, the Russian language responses were more direct, more critical or clearer in their message, omitting background information and offering very little explanation. In addition, certain respondents spoke about their lives and experiences in their local language, and then switched to Russian when they wanted to be more direct or blunt about certain events or happenings.

Third, in certain cases respondents clearly attempted to provide interviewers with the information that they believed the interviewers wanted to hear, which influenced the outcomes of the project, since the information did not always reflect the real lifetime experiences of people, but rather interpretations of history acquired from other sources.

The fourth problem is related to the issue of sampling. Because the population of the region is very diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and lifestyle, compiling a representative sample of everyday Soviet-era experiences appears to be one of the greatest challenges.

Timur Dadabaev, University of Tsukuba/University of Tokyo, Japan. (dadabaev@chiiki.tsukuba.ac.jp)

Below: Crying Mother Monument, Tashkent. Honouring the 400,000 Uzbek soldiers who died in World War II. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license, courtesy of Allan Grey on Flickr.com.