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Between Empire and Revolution: New Work on Soviet Central Asia

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Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*. xvi + 296 pp. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. ISBN 0691117756. \$37.50.

Vladimir Genis, *Vitse-konsul Vvedenskii: Sluzhba v Persii i Bukharskom khanstve (1906-1920 gg.). Rossiiskaia diplomatiia v sud' bakh* [Vice-Consul Vvedenskii: His Service in Persia and the Bukharan Khanate, 1906–1920. Russian Diplomacy in Life Histories]. 416 pp. Moscow: Sotsial'no-politicheskaia mysl', 2003. ISBN 590216818X.

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Central Asia was the most colonial possession of the tsarist empire. The protectorates of Bukhara and Khiva were under the rule of indigenous autocrats in an arrangement modeled on British practices in India, while in Turkestan, a Russian settler society existed in an unequal relation with indigenous society. The distinction between "Europeans" and "natives" (*tuzemtsy*, the term used locally to denote the indigenous population) produced its own peculiar dynamics when imperial rule collapsed in February 1917. How did class and nationality interact during the tumultuous years between 1917 and 1920? What did "Soviet construction" mean for the region in the decades that followed? Did Soviet rule mean the continuation of Russian colonialism under a new name, or was it something different? How much did Soviet rule change Central Asia? What role did Central Asians have in the processes that affected Central Asia in this period? These are the large questions that govern the study of Central Asia in the early Soviet period and that are addressed by the books reviewed here. ¹

The events of the revolution and the early Soviet period did not fit the standard categories of Soviet historiography. In the very early years, a few Soviet authors tried to comprehend the way in which broader revolutionary currents intermingled with local peculiarities. For Georgii Safarov, a revolutionary and functionary who played a significant role in the consolidation of Soviet power in Turkestan, the situation was clear-cut. In Turkestan, "belonging to the industrial proletariat ... was the *national* privilege of the Russians," and the proletarian revolution as it had transpired locally was a clear example of a "colonial revolution."² Safarov was a critic, however, only of local "revolutionaries," not of Soviet power. During his brief stint in the region, he worked to rid the proletarian revolution of its national chauvinism and to establish Soviet rule on a sounder footing.³

But Safarov's book was soon consigned by Soviet historiography to the list of "mistaken analyses" by early authors. By the tenth anniversary of the revolution, the peculiarities of the revolution in Turkestan had been subordinated to an official narrative of the "triumphal march of Soviet power" in **[End Page 866]** which class antagonisms had been the only driving force.⁴ To the extent that this narrative had little to do with events as they had actually transpired, the Soviet literature on the revolution and the early Soviet period was always fraught with evasion, excision, self-censorship, and outright falsehoods. Worse yet, there was little else to compete with the Soviet literature. Scholars outside the Soviet Union were hamstrung by...

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