Journalistic Takes On a Toxic Culture

Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan
By Joanna Lillis
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Reviewed by Tristan Kenderdine

DARK SHADOWS promises to shed light on the under-researched and still largely secretive political world of Kazakhstan. While a great introductory read for the casual observer, the light shed is dim, and rather than being led on an enlightened narrative journey, the reader is left largely scrambling in the same darkness as before.

This is not an academic book, nor really a book about contemporary Kazakh politics, but more an attempt to paint a broad social landscape. For a primer on Kazakh political history and institutions, one would be much better off with Bhavana Dave’s excellent Kazakhstan Ethnicity, Language and Power, even though it is already more than a decade old. In Dark Shadows, we get potted political histories of the Nazarbayev autocracy and the human-interest side of social journalism along with eyewitness political journalism from Lillis’s more than a decade following Kazakhstan, from where she has written for publications including Eurasianet, The Guardian and The Economist.

The book is divided into three thematic parts: Making of a Potentate; Identity Crisis; and Stories from the Steppe. Without an overriding narrative, though, the many chapters are only loosely connected vignettes. Part one is supposed to be about Nazarbayev, and yet it avoids its subject; part two is supposed to be about state formation, and yet remains as disjointed and opaque as the Kazakh political history it grapples with. The third section feels like a collection of human-interest stories collected by a journalist, which is what they are. Awkwardly stuffed into this manuscript, they are the cheap cuts that somewhat spoil the sausage.

While the first section on the rise of Nazarbayev covers a lot of ground, it fails to properly explore his actual rise. The Gorbachev Kunaev Kolbin Nazarbayev nexus is the elephant in the room: the political history that has never been written. Instead, we again get a side-step, a history of the leader’s “inexorable rise” rather than any challenge to the official history. Lillis does, though, introduce many of the minor players in opposition and dissent. For an introductory history, and an introduction to the country, the book is fine.

Reliance on interviews as source material is both the best and worst thing about the book. Few journalists or academics cover Kazakhstan, and Lillis at least has a wealth of on-the-ground interviews to draw from. But constructing political history or political anthropology from a few disparate conversations is not a systematic approach.

The chapter on the Kazakh Khanates is a conversational repeating of oral history, without any exploration of the Golden Horde, the complex history of Khanates in the Turanic geographies, or the impact of external empires on Kazakhstan’s state formation. Historical rigor is eschewed for evocative language, sometimes at the expense of accuracy: Lillis refers to the 18th-century Kazakh ru and zhus swearing allegiance to “The Kremlin” as Russian rule, rather than St. Petersburg rule. Kazakh official history is itself only a loose interpretation that is constantly appropriated for political purposes. But Lillis’ attempt could have been done with a more thorough treatment. Instead, we get another vignette of a populist film based around horse fighting rather than political history.

As the chapter on migration and ethnic control shows, the Slavic majority regions are sometimes hanging on by a thread — millions of Russians, Germans and Jews left the land in the years after the Soviet collapse, and there has been a concerted central government effort to strengthen the ethnic majority Kazakhs. Again, Lillis captures the most peculiar aspect of Kazakhstan as a modern state: it is living in the 20th century and playing tired ethno-nationalist games. Where most 21st-century countries look backwards on nationalism, Kazakhstan never had nationalism to look back on. Mongolian Khanates, tribal fealties to Tsarist Russia, loyal stalwart of the Soviet system, and now emerging into the 21st-century as an independent country for the first time in its entire ethnic history, the appeal of nationalism can be understood. It does not, however, make it any less tiresome for the outside observer or any more dangerous for the individuals and families that must live among it.

For all these faults, though, Lillis does write an engaging series of narratives that sum up the feelings of the interlocutors and systems explored. She gets the friction between political dissatisfaction and economic satisfaction right. The emerging and aspiring middle class in Almaty and Astana are the sources of legitimacy for the political class. The oil price dives of 2014 and the devaluation of the tenge in 2015-2016 have been greater political threats to the establishment than any nascent political opposition. The Kazakh rural-urban divide, petro-wealth and stagnation in traditional professions of teaching and doctoring, a repressed political underclass to accompany an economic underclass, and a bevy of families ravaged by the horrors of the political prisoner system, which is little removed from the Soviet gulag, contrast with Astana’s determination to remain faithful to Russia while plotting an independent foreign policy. Lillis’ description of the Kazakh political system as a “Clan State” is a good one, capturing the tribal nuance more than simple neo-authoritarianism. To the casual observer, Kazakhstan has all the trappings of a state struggling to bridge development and modernity. But scratch the surface and there is rank tribalism, clanism, secrecy and the persistent threat of violence — not just from the ruling clan, but from all levels of Kazakh society. This makes for a disparaging political history: if any opportunity were to succeed the current ruling class, they would themselves likely fall into the same patterns of violent repression.

The Ablyazov chapter is a nice history of the most important opposition leader in contemporary Kazakhstan, and the role he has assumed as political dissident in exile is reasonably juxtaposed with the reality of self-aggrandizement needing political victimhood to avoid extradictions. Abyzov’s alleged financial dealings are at the heart of this, and it must not have been hard to find out the court details of his alleged crimes. Lillis falls back on tropes of “dodgy dealings and off-shore accounts.” Here Lillis could have described the details and let the reader see into the heart of the matter. Instead, we get exactly the problem with all political reporting and protesting in Kazakhstan: “everyone already knows, so there is no need to say it directly.” Lillis has a real chance to get granular and describe the details behind the story, instead we get innuendo, half-truths and speculation. Something a book like this should be putting to rest, not perpetuating. However, given the dearth of coverage, it is still useful that this section on the texture of Kazakh politics reaches a wider audience.
