

Official Rhetoric and Individual Perceptions of the Soviet Past: Implications for Nation Building in Kyrgyzstan*

Damira Umetbaeva

Defining the post-Soviet states' relationship to the Soviet past has been essential in forming their new national state identities. This article examines, first, how the post-Soviet Kyrgyz state reconstructs its Soviet past on the level of official discourse, particularly in school history textbooks, and second, how history teachers—as professionals and private citizens—relate to the official discourse when making sense of the Soviet past. This work illuminates that representations of Soviet socialism in Kyrgyz history textbooks are ambivalent, nuanced, and contradictory, oscillating mainly between two colliding discursive strands of the Soviet Union as a colonial and oppressive power versus the Soviet Union as a nation-and-state building and modernizing state. It also demonstrates how arguing for one or another narrative strand has resulted not only in ambivalent but also in unreconciled contradictory discourses about the Soviet past, thus demonstrating unsuccessful attempts by state ideologists to establish a clear-cut hegemonic discourse about Soviet socialism in the post-Soviet Kyrgyzstani history textbooks. By analysing how history teachers interpret and reconfigure official discourses and individual narratives on the Soviet past, this article argues that the teachers relate to the official discourses ambivalently and cynically, which is reflected in their creative interpretation and negotiation of official textbook texts. It concludes that a post-Soviet nation understood as an imagined community is not a durable but a fragile and temporary imagination.

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1. Introduction

This article analyzes representations of Soviet socialism in post-Soviet history textbooks and in the life stories of history teachers in Kyrgyzstan. It examines, first, how the post-Soviet Kyrgyz state reconstructs its Soviet past on the level of official discourse, particularly in school history textbooks, and second, how history teachers—as professionals and private citizens—relate to the official discourse when making sense of the Soviet past in general as well as in their approach to teaching Soviet history. While doing so, this article discusses different traces of discourses and different strategies in dealing with the influence of such discourses utilized by the history teachers. With regards to the Soviet past in Kyrgyzstan, oftentimes connections or disconnections occur between official discourses and individual narratives. This paper examines how and why based on the life stories of history teachers. Answers to these questions contribute to a better understanding of state- and nation-building processes in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan both in terms of how official discourses are formed and how subjects and official discourses interact. This is crucial because defining the independent Kyrgyz state's relationship to the Soviet past has been essential in forming its new national state identity.

Overall 27 life story interviews with history teachers were gathered in the northern parts of Kyrgyzstan, including the capital city, Bishkek.¹ Interviews were conducted with two textbook authors, Osmonov and Imankulov, in Bishkek between August 2009 and January 2010. Most of these interviewees (24) were born between 1948 and 1968. The remaining three were born in 1931, 1972, and 1975, respectively. With the exception of the two youngest teachers they all worked as school teachers during Soviet times. In terms of gender proportions there are three males and twenty-four females. According to ethnic background thirteen are ethnic Kyrgyz, eleven are of Slavic nationality (Russian and Ukraine), one is mixed Russian-Uzbek, one is an Armenian, and one is a Jew. Twelve of the interviewed teachers were born in urban places and fifteen in rural areas of the former Soviet Union, eighteen of the interviews were taken from history teachers who were working in Bishkek, and nine interviewees were working in the northern urban and rural regions of Kyrgyzstan. Only one interview was taken from a male teacher who came from the south of Kyrgyzstan, but he was living and working in a village close to Bishkek at the time of the interview. Additionally, History of Kyrgyzstan classes were observed

¹ Twenty biographical interviews were conducted by my colleague Mehriqul Ablezova from 2009 to 2010 in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan (such as Chui region, including Bishkek, Ysyk-Köl, and Naryn regions). I conducted seven life story interviews with history teachers and interviews with two textbook authors during fieldwork in Bishkek. We found interviewees by visiting schools and contacting history teachers. In all cases interviews were conducted on school grounds, sometimes inside and sometimes outside of the classroom. In this analysis all 27 life stories that were gathered for this work are considered. However, in this article only life story interviews conducted by Ablezova are cited or referenced.

and focus groups were carried out with school children of Bishkek schools on their attitudes about the Soviet past and studying the history of Kyrgyzstan in general. This analysis includes all post-Soviet history textbooks in use at the time of fieldwork that deal with the Soviet past.²

In the first part of this paper, the notion of nation-building is conceptualized. This is followed by a short overview of socio-political developments and ideological discussions in the realm of state-authorized ideological programs (whatever that means) and state-run events, and how these discussions are regarded based on interviews with the political elite. This, in turn, is subsequently followed by an analysis of representations of Soviet socialism in post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks and in the accounts of history teachers in Kyrgyzstan. In the ensuing conclusion a discussion is presented on how and why connections and disconnections occur in the relationship between the textbooks and the teachers' representations of the Soviet past and their implications for nation-building in Kyrgyzstan.

Brubaker's concept of "nationalizing state" is used to analyze state and nation-building projects and processes in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.³ He suggests that the successor states of the Soviet Union could usefully be analyzed as "nationalizing" states instead of simply as "national" as this concept "pointed to the unfinished and ongoing nature of nationalist projects and nationalizing processes... [As] the reorganization of political space had produced (nominally) independent states; it had not produced 'genuine' nation-states."⁴ This term suggests looking both at nationalizing projects and processes. Moreover, this concept invites us to study nationalizing projects and social processes in the post-socialist context, bearing in mind the Soviet legacy of the states and those states' relations with the former core of the Soviet empire and with international neoliberal organizations.⁵ This article responds to Brubaker's call by focusing on the nationalizing projects' — the history textbook discourses on the Soviet past, as well as nationalizing social processes and informal practices —

² The school children in Kyrgyzstan begin studying Soviet history in 5th grade at the age of 11–12. Afterwards they study it in the 9th and 11th grades (14–15 and 17–18 year olds, respectively). The first post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks started to appear only in the second half of the 1990s. My analysis on Soviet socialism in post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks is based on the following three texts: A. S. Myrzakmatova, O. D. Osmonov, and K. S. Moldokasymov, *Kratkaia istoriia Kyrgyzstana—5 klass* (Bishkek: "Tekhnologiiia", 2002); O. D. Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi; s serediny XIX veka do nashikh dnei—11 klass* (Bishkek: "Tekhnologiiia," 2003); and M. K. Imankulov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana s XX–XXI vv.—9 klass* (Bishkek: Kitep Kompani, 2006).

³ Rogers Brubaker, "Nationalizing States Revisited: Projects and Processes of Nationalization in post-Soviet States," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 11 (2011): 1785–814.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1786.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1787.

appropriation of official discourses on the Soviet past by history teachers both as professionals and private citizens as reflected in their life story interviews.

2. Kyrgyzstan, History Textbooks, and History Teachers

The case of Kyrgyzstan offers an illuminating case for studying “nationalizing states” through history education at general secondary schools. School history textbooks and teachers are among the central tools and means by which the state creates its “imagined community” and to justify its national identity.⁶ Compared to other post-Soviet Central Asian republics, the educational reforms in Kyrgyzstan have been particularly radical. Since independence they have been largely influenced by projects and activities of Western NGOs that aimed to reform the general secondary education system according to liberal democracy, a market economy, and human rights principles.⁷ Moreover, these reforms have been happening in a state which is economically poor, dependent on migrants’ remittances and foreign-aid, with a weak-state capacity and fragmented political elite.⁸ All of these factors contributed to the occurrence of two revolutions in 2005 and 2010 in Kyrgyzstan that in turn resulted in more socio-economic and political turmoil in the country.⁹ At the same time, Kyrgyzstan has a largely multi-

⁶ In personal interviews with Osmonov and Imankulov, both of them conveyed that they have to meet the main requirements of the curriculum when writing history textbooks, although they have much more freedom nowadays than during Soviet times. Oskon Osmonov, interview by the author, 19 December 2009, and Muratbek Imankulov, interview by the author, 26 October 2009.

⁷ See, for example, Alan J. Deyoung, “Problems and Trends in Education in Central Asia since 1990: The Case of General Secondary Education in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 4 (2006): 499–514.

⁸ As an independent state, unlike some of its neighbors, Kyrgyzstan could not rely on its natural resources like gas and oil. Therefore, Kyrgyzstan’s first president, Askar Akaev (1991–2005), saw international aid as a primary rescue source. He actively implemented rapid democratic and market economy reforms with the help of the IMF and the World Bank, and in return Kyrgyzstan receive extensive international aid.

In this context, “weak state capacity” refers to the limited ability of the state to govern and provide order.

On the fragmented nature of the political elite in Kyrgyzstan, see, for example, Eric McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).

⁹ On 24 March 2005 Akaev had to resign as a president of Kyrgyzstan and flee the country after the so-called Tulip revolution. In April 2010 the second presidential crisis in Kyrgyzstan occurred, resulting in the ousting of the second president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, who was accused of being a much worse president than Akaev in terms of authoritarianism, corruption, and one-family rule. This political crisis in Bishkek was followed by an interethnic conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Osh in June 2010. On how the revolution in 2005 in Kyrgyzstan occurred as a result of disillusionment with democratization and asymmetric effects of neo-liberal

ethnic population and is a typical example of a state in which more general nation-building processes have been happening, like those in the Central Asian states, in terms of overcoming the Soviet past.¹⁰ It has all the ambivalences related to the discourses of nation and state that were formed in Soviet times and where state independence was received unexpectedly and without liberation movements.¹¹

On Kyrgyzstan's post-Soviet nation-building ideology, Gullette's work demonstrates that in discourse on the Kyrgyz nation there is a contradiction between tribal and nation-state ideology.¹² According to Gullette, from the time of Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akaev, the Kyrgyz state and nation have been defined in terms of a "genealogical relatedness" principle based on the Kyrgyz traditional practice of giving an oral account of one's genealogy, or *sanjyra*. Gullette argues that "nation building campaigns develop the notion of the 'Kyrgyz' person and the construction of relatedness through memories attached to the *sanjyras* is one way in which a 'Kyrgyz' identity is being created."¹³ Thus, we can see that there is tension between nationalism and tribalism in Kyrgyz official discourse with regards to defining the nation of Kyrgyzstan. This tension occurs on two levels. First, since modern national ideology typically stresses that what unites the nation is common blood or a common history shared by all members of the nation (the primordialist view on the nation), the "genealogical relatedness" principle, with its multiple levels of subdivisions, fragments the Kyrgyz into tribal categories. Second, the Kyrgyz state excludes all the other people living in Kyrgyzstan who cannot be defined as members of the Kyrgyz nation according to the "genealogical relatedness"

market economy principles, see Mathijs Pelkmans, "On Transition and Revolution in Kyrgyzstan," *Focaal* 46 (2005): 147–57.

¹⁰ The Kyrgyz Republic is a multiethnic country where, according to census data of 2009, more than 100 different nationalities live. According to census data of 2009, Kyrgyz made up 70.9% of the total population, Uzbeks 14.3%, Russians 7.8%, Dungans 1.1%, Turks, Uigurs, and Tadjiks 0.8–0.9%, Ukrainians, Tatars, and Kazakhs 0.4–0.6 %, and other nationalities 1.7%. At the same time, the number of Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Jews, and representatives of other nationalities has reduced due to emmigration. National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, "Population and Housing Census of the Kyrgyz Republic of 2009" (Bishkek: 2009), 11, 18, 19, available at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/2010_phc/Kyrgyzstan/A5-2PopulationAndHousingCensusOfTheKyrgyzRepublicOf2009.pdf, accessed 25 July 2014.

¹¹ On the continuation of Soviet discourses of nation, state, and high culture in post-Soviet Central Asian states, see, for example, Bhavna Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language, and Power* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Laura Adams, "Culture, Colonialism, and Sovereignty in Central Asia," in *Sovereignty after Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia*, ed. Sally N. Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

¹² David Gullette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State, and 'Tribalism'* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83–89.

criteria. According to Gullete, by excluding all others who do not fit this description of a Kyrgyz person it can serve as a source of societal destabilization, such as happened during Osh interethnic conflict in 2010.

However, some scholars have argued that the post-Soviet Kyrgyz state is quite sensitive, albeit in contradictory ways to its non-Kyrgyz population.¹⁴ These scholars argue that the post-Soviet Kyrgyz ideological discourse is torn between contradictory visions of what the Kyrgyz state and nation are. They are, firstly, Kyrgyz nationalism versus “new internationalism,” and secondly, Tengirchilik versus Islam.¹⁵ State rituals and festivals celebrating the epic hero Manas and the declared 2200 years of Kyrgyz statehood are argued to be directed exclusively at getting the support of ethnic Kyrgyz. In contrast, slogans such as “Kyrgyzstan is our common home” and the establishment of an Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan were meant for the non-Kyrgyz population of Kyrgyzstan. However both of them are considered parts of a single strategy, which is “to obtain the solidarity and loyalty of different groups within the state and when one of [the visions of what the Kyrgyz nation is] does not function, the other is deployed.”¹⁶

To recapitulate, we have seen that socio-economically and politically the post-Soviet Kyrgyz state has become a particularly fragile country in which nation-building discourses reveal significant ambivalence on other official levels.¹⁷ It has also conducted the most radical reforms in the secondary education system among all of the Central Asian countries. However, similar to its neighbors, Kyrgyzstan has also been conducting nation-building projects and has to legitimize its new nation-state status vis-à-vis the Soviet past. History education in secondary schools is crucial for the Kyrgyz state to reach its nation-building goal by educating loyal citizens with the help of history

¹⁴ Asel Murzakulova and John Schoeberlein, “The Invention of Legitimacy: Struggles in Kyrgyzstan to Craft an Effective Nation-State Ideology,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009): 1229–48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1236. Murzakulova and Schoeberlein define “tengirchilik” in the following way: “Tengirchilik, sometimes referred to in English as Tengriism (in Russian, as *tengryanstvo*), is an ideology of post-Soviet origins, also enjoying some interest on the part of the political elite in other Turkic regions of the former Soviet Union, which appeals to ‘Tengri,’ a supposedly monotheistic, pre-Islamic concept of a deity, as well as other customs and beliefs which are supposed to be pre-Islam. Tengirchilik is also related to the concept of ‘Kyrgyzchilik,’ designating the essence of being Kyrgyz.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1239.

¹⁷ For a comparison of Kyrgyzstan’s post-Soviet discursive situation with one of the most contrasting cases in Central Asia, see Victoria Clement, “Articulating National Identity in Turkmenistan: Inventing Tradition through Myth, Cult, and Language,” *Nations and Nationalisms* 20, no. 3 (2014): 546–62, esp. 556, where she argues that “[President Saparmyrat] Nyyazow’s discourse was pervasive and invasive.” On the comparison of Kyrgyzstan as a chaotic state versus Uzbekistan as violent and Kazakhstan as a dynastic state, see McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty*.

textbooks and teachers. But history teachers, aside from their professional role, also have personal lives. So, how does the post-Soviet Kyrgyz state reconstruct its Soviet past in the history textbooks, and how do history teachers in Kyrgyzstan relate to the textbook discourses on Soviet socialism both as professionals and individual citizens under such specific nation-building and socio-political processes? The next section begins with an analysis of the history textbooks.

3. Representations of the Soviet Union in Post-Soviet Kyrgyz History Textbooks

Based on the analysis of representations of Soviet socialism in Kyrgyz history textbooks, the Kyrgyz official discourse regarding its Soviet past is not clear-cut, but ambiguous, nuanced, and contradictory. It oscillates between two main colliding narrative strands—the Soviet Union as state-and-nation building and modernizing state and the colonial ruler. These contradictory narrative strands on the Soviet past coexist throughout all Kyrgyz history textbooks. The discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe argues that the world is always contradictory and ambivalent but there is a need to try to fix its meaning somehow.¹⁸ This can be partially and temporarily achieved by establishing hegemonic discourse through a privileged discursive point that partially fixes meaning within signifying chains, i.e., a *nodal point*. The nodal point creates and sustains the identity of a certain discourse by constructing a knot of definite meanings.¹⁹ Thus, the authors of post-Soviet Kyrgyz textbooks attempt to fix (new) hegemonic meanings of the Soviet past around two main colliding nodal points: first, the Soviet Union as a colonial and oppressive power, and second, the Soviet Union as a nation-building and modernizing state. There are three different ways in which the textbook authors discuss the Soviet past and argue for or against one or the other antagonistic nodal point, or, in other words, three different ways of being ambivalent about Soviet socialism. First, they do it by arguing that the colonial or nation-building and modernizing characteristics of Soviet rule and of Russians were contingent on the specific historical period. Put another way, things were different in different times. The second way of being ambivalent is weighing advantages and disadvantages of the Soviet socialist experience of nation-building and the modernization of Kyrgyzstan. And finally, the textbook authors present outright contradictory arguments about the Soviet Union's role for Kyrgyzstan with conflicting implications without any attempt to reconcile them.

¹⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 112–13, 135, 139; Jacob Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 99.

Variation Based on the Historical Period

Examining three different periods of Soviet rule, one sees varying attitudes of the textbook authors in the portrayal of the Soviet Union vis a vis Kyrgyzstan. First, considering the period of 1916 through the revolution and the Provisional Government, according to the post-Soviet Kyrgyz textbook authors, the Tsarist Russian colonizers of the 19th century oppressed the local people. In 1916, thousands of Kyrgyz had their property seized and were tortured and killed by the Russian government as punishment for their rebellion against the draft of Kyrgyz males to fight in World War I. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from a history textbook:

Thus, the national-liberation struggle of the Kyrgyz [in 1916] failed and was brutally suppressed [in the form of the genocide of the Kyrgyz]. However, despite the failure, the rebellion was of great historical importance [for the Kyrgyz] [...]. The national-liberation struggle [of the whole of Turkestan] was conditioned by the discontent of the national masses (*narodnye massy*) with regard to the colonial-nationalist policy of Tsarism, growing oppression, and various requisitions and taxes beyond one's individual abilities [...]. This struggle of the Kyrgyz people for their own land, justice, and independence became one of the brightest pages in the history of Kyrgyzstan.²⁰

According to the textbooks written by Osmonov and Imankulov, after the February revolution in Russia in 1917 a Provisional Government was established in Kyrgyzstan which continued the Tsarist colonial policy.²¹ The head of the Provisional Government Kerenskii gave an order to treat Turkestan only as a colony.²²

The leadership of the Provisional Government in the country was taken over by the Tsarist officials and bourgeoisie who continued colonial policy toward Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan.²³

During the early years of Soviet rule as well, the Russian Bolsheviki's attitudes toward the local population were colonial and chauvinist: "us" and

²⁰ Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 40–41.

²¹ Imankulov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana s XX–XXI vv.* Kyrgyzstan came to exist first as an autonomous oblast of the USSR as a result of Soviet policies in 1924, later evolved into an autonomous republic, and at last into a Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936. However, all textbook authors use the name Kyrgyzstan interchangeably with Turkestan or Central Asia to describe the political situation in the region from Tsarist period till 1924.

²² Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 67.

²³ *Ibid.*, 43.

“them” attitudes were reinforced by Soviet measures aimed at suppressing the Kyrgyz traditional way of life, traditional values, culture, and language.²⁴

Peoples of Turkestan did not trust the Soviet state bodies in the early period of the establishment of the Soviet rule due to nationalistic positions of some representatives of the local population and the chauvinist attitudes of Russian Bolsheviks. In the Soviet of Peoples' Commissars of Turkestan that consisted of 15 persons, there was not even one representative of the local peoples of Turkestan.²⁵

Nevertheless, having described the tragic events of 1916, the textbook authors then state that the Soviet government under Lenin atoned completely for Tsarist deeds, mounting an enormous campaign to bring back those Kyrgyz who had fled to China in 1916 and providing the returnees with better living conditions than even those of the Europeans in the region.²⁶ Subsequently, according to the authors, Soviet rule made it possible to unite the Kyrgyz as a nation and to reestablish the Kyrgyz state, first in the form of Kara-Kyrgyz autonomous oblast in 1924, then as Kara-Kyrgyz autonomous republic in 1926, and finally as the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic in 1937, which became an “equal member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.”²⁷ Thus, Osmonov, in his textbook for final-year schoolchildren (16–18 year-olds) states that Kyrgyz statehood, “destroyed by the Mongols in 1207,” was re-established in Soviet times after seven centuries, “uniting the territory, economics, and culture of the Kyrgyz and providing the conditions for further national development.” This became “the most important event in the contemporary history of the Kyrgyz people.”²⁸

However, closer to the period of the creation of the newly independent Kyrgyzstan in 1991, Russians and the Soviet Union appear in the textbooks as colonizers who destroyed, undermined, and discriminated against the Kyrgyz culture and language. They appear as exploiting the Kyrgyz economically and not allowing the republic to make independent political decisions either in its domestic or inter-state affairs. When discussing the Brezhnev and perestroika periods, the textbook authors argue that, during Soviet times, the Kyrgyz nation and its historical and cultural heritage was undermined and at times

²⁴ However, the textbooks authors portray the early Soviet Union as a colonial ruler mainly in the southern part of modern Kyrgyzstan, and savior of the refugee Kyrgyz who came mainly from the northern regions of Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, Osmonov connects the work of the Bolsheviks for the refugees to the nation-building role of Soviet power and portrays Soviet rule and the Bolsheviks as saviors of the Kyrgyz nation.

²⁵ Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80, 82, 86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 79–81, 86.

threatened. Unequal center-periphery relations in the Soviet Union, in which Kyrgyzstan had an unfavorable position, had a negative impact on the economy of the country after the system change.

Kyrgyzstan gained independence under difficult economic and political conditions. The common, inter-dependent economy of the Soviet Union collapsed. During the Soviet period Kyrgyzstan exported raw materials and received finished products from other republics. Therefore after independence the republic found itself in a difficult situation.²⁹

One can conclude that this type of discourse is a strategy for the textbook authors to argue that independent Kyrgyzstan can now achieve the full cultural, economic, and political freedom that was not possible during Soviet times.

Weighing Advantages and Disadvantages of the Soviet Union for Kyrgyzstan

The textbook authors of the Kyrgyz history textbooks also attempt to fix the hegemonic discourse about the Soviet past by characterizing the Soviet Union, not as something white or black, but in terms, as they say, of “historical objectivity or truth.” This means describing both the positive and negative aspects of Soviet socialism in Kyrgyzstan. These aspects are evaluated according to how much they contributed to nation building and the modernization of Kyrgyzstan.

Imankulov discusses how the Soviet Union, through the *korenizatsiia* campaign, contributed to the nation-state building of Kyrgyzstan by training its first national cadres for state administrative positions that did not exist before this policy. At the same time he enumerates the policy’s shortcomings that negatively affected the same nation-state building process.³⁰ According to Imankulov, this campaign had its shortcomings, as it was carried out pompously at times, and this negatively affected the quality of the outcomes. For instance, the campaign privileged people from lower, “exploited” working classes, ignoring the level of education and moral and professional qualities of individuals. Moreover—“later these local cadres, which had been nourished with great difficulty, were killed under different falsified reasons during the Stalinist repression.... All these things badly harmed state-building in Kyrgyzstan.”³¹

Moreover, the textbook authors argue that industry in the republic developed rapidly during Soviet times, which led to an increase in the members of the working class in Kyrgyzstan, and particularly to a considerable increase in

²⁹ Myrzakmatova, Osmonov, and Moldokasymov, *Kratkaia istoriia Kyrgyzstana*, 197.

³⁰ Imankulov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana s XX–XXI vv.*, 30.

³¹ Ibid.

the number of Kyrgyz workers. However, Osmonov points out that industry in Kyrgyzstan was made dependent on highly-qualified labor imported from the European parts of the USSR. The guest workers were provided with excellent working and living conditions and would return home at the end of their posting. Local young people, meanwhile, could only aspire to heavy manual labor in the cities, soon returning in many cases exhausted to their homes in completely unmodernized rural areas.³²

The agriculture sector received a significant amount of support for development; village life became more comfortable and civilized. But at the same time many villages, mostly inhabited by the Kyrgyz, did not have libraries, cultural centers, communication services, hospitals, etc., and health conditions of the villagers were poor.³³

Outright Contradictions and Contradictory Implications

Osmonov describes how many gifted intellectuals who took an active role in the development of Kyrgyz statehood, culture, language, and science fell victim to Stalin's terror. From 1924 to 1936 members of the Kyrgyz intelligentsia advocated for the creation of a Soviet Kyrgyz republic, but faced countless obstacles both at the local and central governmental levels. In 1938, in the so-called Chong-Tash tragedy, 140 party and government officials, writers, poets, and scientists were arrested and executed. Some of the officials had been involved in lobbying Moscow for the establishment of Kyrgyz statehood. In an interview, Osmonov told me that "just as the Kazakhs cannot forgive the Soviets for the 1930s famine, so we [Kyrgyz] cannot forgive them for the murder of some of our brightest people."³⁴ In his textbook, however, he writes "all this showed Soviet rule in a negative light. [...] Nevertheless, the essence of Soviet society was not distorted by either mass terror or the [Stalinist] personality cult, and the working masses were able to advance unhindered along the Soviet highway of progressive development."³⁵

The textbook authors' approaches to the destruction of the traditional, nomadic, and tribal way of life is contradictory. They regard the transformation of society as positive and progressive, while at the same time enumerating its negative consequences.

As a rule, new villages were situated far away from cattle pastures, which made it difficult to graze the animals. The traditions and skills

³² Myrzakmatova, Osmonov, and Moldokasymov, *Kratkaia istoriia Kyrgyzstana*, 165; Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 171–74.

³³ Myrzakmatova, Osmonov, and Moldokasymov, *Kratkaia istoriia Kyrgyzstana*, 166–68; Imankulov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana s XX–XXI vv.*, 34.

³⁴ Osmonov, interview.

³⁵ Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 63.

of cattle-breeding were soon forgotten [...]. Resettlement and forced collectivization aroused public anger, but nomads who refused to toe the line were persecuted and murdered. In some areas Kyrgyz were resettled in high-rise apartment blocks, completely at odds with their traditional lifestyle. These measures nevertheless created the preconditions for the growth of social consciousness, and an economy and culture based on, and compatible with, contemporary civilization.³⁶

Following from what has been discussed above, two contradictory narrative strands representing Soviet socialism in post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks are fixed by the history textbook authors in three different ways. The first and second ways of discussing the Soviet Union in the textbooks are attempts by the textbook authors to fix hegemonic discourses about the Soviet past, though in ambivalent and nuanced ways. This is in line with the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe that sees the social phenomena as never finished or total, and always ambivalent. But the third way of discussing Soviet socialism in history textbooks that demonstrates the collision of contradictory discourses without any attempt to reconcile them by the textbook authors goes beyond the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. First of all it makes null and void any previous attempts of the textbook authors to fix any hegemonic meaning about the Soviet past in Kyrgyz history textbooks. As a result it illustrates the failure of the independent Kyrgyz state's ideologists—the textbook authors—to succeed in establishing a hegemonic discourse about the Soviet past in their works and that social phenomena can exist without a clear-cut hegemonic discourse.

How do history teachers make sense of their lives, the Soviet past, and post-Soviet present when there is no clear-cut hegemonic discourse in the society or in the history textbooks, and when the official discourses are ambivalent and contradictory on different levels?

4. Textbook Discourses on Soviet Socialism and History Teachers' Attitudes toward the Soviet Past

Turning now to the accounts of Soviet times from interviews with history teachers in newly independent Kyrgyzstan, one can observe three major types of opposing discourses about Soviet socialism in the life stories of history teachers. The first is socialism as a moral vs. an immoral system; the second, socialism as a colonial system vs. a modernizing state and savior; and the third, socialism as an inefficient system or a great empire.³⁷ In other words, one

³⁶ Osmonov, *Istoriia Kyrgyzstana: Osnovnye vekhi*, 146.

³⁷ Due to limited space, the focus here is mainly on representations of socialism as a colonial and oppressive system vs. a modernizing state and savior, and socialism as an inefficient system or a great empire.

may categorize the discourses as (1) referring to the advantages and disadvantages of socialism, and (2) as reflecting the connection and disconnection with the history textbook discourses. In addition, one finds that textbook discourse is at times accepted but also challenged, negotiated, criticized, or rejected by the teachers, thus showing ambivalences and tensions between state-produced narratives about the Soviet past and individual perceptions of those narratives.

Socialism as a Colonial and Oppressive Order vs. a Modernizing Welfare State and Savior

The discourse of the Soviet Union as colonial and oppressive conveyed by the teachers reflects a connection with one of the other textbook discourses mentioned here about socialism as a colonial rule. Meanwhile, while the discourse of socialism as modernizing and welfare state is also present in the textbooks and thus might influence the teachers, their discourses are also shaped by the experience of loss accompanying the dissolution of the Soviet Union as well as the different positioning politics of those narrating their life stories. By *positioning politics* I refer to textbooks, roles, identities or other sources influencing history teachers' accounts on Soviet Socialism.³⁸ Moreover, on top of ambivalent and contradictory accounts of the Soviet Union as both a good and bad empire, some history teachers negotiate, criticize, or completely reject the idea that it was colonial and oppressive. They may even cynically assess the textbooks discourse about Soviet socialism as an evil and colonial system.

Fairclough and Hall provide the following explanations of how subjects actually relate to discourses.³⁹ According to Fairclough, "subjects are ideologically positioned, but they are also capable of acting creatively to make their own connections between the diverse practices and ideologies to which they are exposed, and to restructure positioning practices and structures."⁴⁰ Similarly, Hall explains:

I use "identity" to refer to the meeting point [...] between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to "interpellate,"

³⁸ My use of the term *positioning politics* is based on the definition of "positioning" which is used to explain the processes of how subjects relate to official discourses. Marianne Jorgensen and Louse Philips define it as follows: "Positioning is viewed as an integral part of the processes by which people construct accounts of themselves in interaction with others. These processes are understood as processes of negotiation as people actively take up positions within different, and sometimes competing, discourses." Marianne Jorgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage, 2002), 110.

³⁹ Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996).

⁴⁰ Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 91.

speak to us, or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses and, on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities which construct us as subjects which can be “spoken.” Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us.⁴¹

Let us consider the words of one interviewee, Janarbek:⁴²

During the Soviet Union to be honest we did not study history of Central Asia but only of the USSR and World History. [...] At that time there was only one communist party. [...] We were also not taught religion. Therefore, great personalities of the Kyrgyz and Tajik nations were not included in history lessons. Currently we study the history of Kyrgyzstan. Pupils are interested in learning about great personalities in the history of Kyrgyzstan such as Kasym Tynystanov, Shabdan Baatyr, Jusup Abdurahmanov, Kurmanjan Datka. They [pupils] ask different questions related to the history of Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz nation is one of the most ancient nations. The Great Russian scientist Bartov [V. V. Bartol'd] said that the Kyrgyz were one of the first Turkic tribes. The Chinese historian Sim Siam [sic.] wrote that the name “Kyrgyz” existed in 201 BC. At that time no other Turkic people like the Kazakhs, Turks, Tajiks, and Uzbeks were mentioned. I am very proud that we [the Kyrgyz] are an ancient people even though we are not so many. I always tell [my pupils] that there are nations that outnumber us but do not have their own state. Thanks to our forefathers and their efforts we did not disappear [as a nation]. And I am proud that we have our own state and that we became independent.⁴³

Janarbek was born in 1961 in a village called Sartmol in southern Kyrgyzstan that, as he said, belonged to Tajikistan until 2002. When he was 11 years old his father died. His mother raised him and his siblings on her own. Janarbek stated that, even though he did not have a father, thanks to the Soviet Union he did not experience anything bad in his childhood. Furthermore, he said that if it had been like nowadays, without the Soviet Union, his mother would not have been able to raise the children and enable them to receive a higher education. At the same time, from his professional positioning as a nationalist history teacher, Janarbek said that he is happy that now, unlike in the Soviet times, he can teach his pupils about the history of Kyrgyzstan. He added that the pupils are also interested in learning about Kyrgyz historical events, religion, culture, and heroes. Moreover, Janarbek argued that it is good that Kyrgyzstan became independent and that it became a member of the international community

⁴¹ Hall, “Introduction: Who needs ‘Identity?’,” 5.

⁴² All names of the interviewees have been changed.

⁴³ Interview with Janarbek (1961), 9 March 2009.

from which it currently receives substantial financial support. However, later Janarbek argued that it was good that in the Soviet Union there were no ethnic differences and the borders were open. He also said that he was patriot of the Soviet Union and he would feel proud when he heard mention of Moscow and the Soviet anthem (most probably on the radio). Janarbek claimed that the Soviet Union collapsed due to the fault of Soviet leaders and he wished that it had not happened, but that someone like Lenin should have saved it. He also said that it would be good too if the USSR had adopted capitalism and stayed together and then it would look like the CIS today. Janarbek complained that he does not enjoy the same kind of respect from his pupils and their parents as he did in the Soviet Union. Moreover, he finds it immensely humiliating when he has to buy bread from one of his pupils as a loan until he can repay it when he gets his salary. Thus Janarbek is very nostalgic about Soviet times because, as he put it, at that time “he was like a minister” and “everyone, including the president, respected teachers.”⁴⁴

Thus the discourse of the Soviet Union as a colonial ruler as argued by Janarbek is challenged by the discourse portraying the Soviet Union as an international and friendly family of nations and a welfare state. The first discourse was influenced under the professional positioning mechanism as he places himself as a loyal agent of the state and a good teacher, while the later discourse is conditioned by his present professional and personal life-trajectories as having lost out in the post-Soviet present. Although Janarbek tried to reconcile this contradiction by being nostalgic about the Soviet Union as a friendly family of different nationalities and saying that he was Soviet patriot, Janarbek clearly expresses unreconciled contradictions.

Negotiation, Criticism, Acceptance, and Rejection of Textbook Discourses

Most of the teachers interviewed in this study have difficulties in dealing with colonial discourse in the post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks. This is true not only in relation to the Soviet Union as a colonial oppressor, but also, importantly, in the assessment of Tsarist Russian rule and Russians as its agents and oppressors of the Kyrgyz before Soviet rule. For example, Russian-speaking and non-Kyrgyz informants negotiate, criticize, or reject the depiction of the events of 1916 as a genocide of the Kyrgyz by Russians, as well as the textbooks' claim that the Kyrgyz did not benefit much from Soviet modernization and industrialization campaigns. These teachers criticize this textbook discourse about the 1916 events, interestingly claiming that the conflict was not about Russians as

⁴⁴ On the accounts of challenges faced by a young male history teacher in post-Soviet rural Kyrgyzstan, see Duishon Shamatov, “Everyday Realities of a Young Teacher in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: A Case of History Teacher from a Rural School,” in *Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: Political and Social Challenges*, ed. Pinar Akcali and Cennet Engin Demir (London: Routledge, 2013).

oppressors, but was based on class—a discourse also present in the textbooks in other contexts. For example, most of the non-Kyrgyz informants argued that it was not a conflict between the two ethnic groups but a class conflict between the rich Tsarist colonial administrators and the poor strata of Kyrgyz society. The textbook discourse is also reinterpreted in terms of state and bigger politics vs. ordinary people. For example, they also argue that Tsarist Russia was a typical colonial ruler, which can explain all the bad things that happened to the Kyrgyz during that time, such as the expropriation of lands from the Kyrgyz by the Tsarist colonizers and peasants, high taxes, and even the 1916 event. Another discourse that rejects the textbook discourse concerns the unpopular regime of the recently ousted Kyrgyz president, Kurmanbek Bakiev.⁴⁵ For example, one teacher claimed that what happened in 1916 with the Kyrgyz was not genocide, but that the real genocide was when demonstrators in front of the Kyrgyz White House were killed by the Bakiev administration in April 2010. Teachers also contrast Tsarist Russian rule in Kyrgyzstan to the rule of the Kokand Khanate, which dominated Kyrgyz territory prior to Russian rule. Russian rule, they argue, was less exploitative of the Kyrgyz. In this case the textbook discourse about Tsarist Russia as a colonial ruler is negotiated in relation to another textbook discourse that depicts the Kokand Khanate as oppressive and unjust, and explains, therefore, why some tribal leaders sought Russia's help to escape it. Finally, they argue that the Soviet Union was post-colonial because it atoned completely for the Tsarist deeds. Thus, in many cases they reject one textbook discourse by appealing to another one.

As for the Kyrgyz teachers, they are also not supportive of the anti-Russian and anti-Soviet statements, or the glorification of the Kyrgyz past that they find in post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks. Just like non-Kyrgyz teachers, none of the Kyrgyz interviewees supported the view of the 1916 events as genocide of the Kyrgyz by Russians. Rather, they mention it simply as a great tragedy in the history of the Kyrgyz and say “we should try to avoid such tragedies from happening again.” For example, one female Kyrgyz teacher from a village in Ysyk-Köl Province even claimed that the Kyrgyz ruling elite of that period was responsible for the 1916 tragedy because they misunderstood the Tsarist administration's policy. Moreover, she said she teaches this topic to her pupils the way she understands it.

Some Kyrgyz teachers also point out the positive role of Russians and the Soviet Union in developing and educating the Kyrgyz. They consider some parts of Kyrgyz history to be exaggerated, in terms of both ancientness and greatness. As one put it, “I don't know where the Kyrgyz historians take this information from.... I think they have a rich imagination.” They also reject the

⁴⁵ Kurmanbek Bakiev was the second president of Kyrgyzstan, from 2005 to April 2010. He had to resign after bloody political protests in Bishkek on 7 April 2010, provoked by discontent with the unpopular activities of the president and members of his family appointed to positions of power. The post-Bakiev political leadership has maintained a discourse presenting the Bakiev regime as corrupt, undemocratic, and cruel.

textbook discourse with such counter claims as: “the Soviet Union civilized us from being ‘primitive’ (*temnyj/karangy*) and gave us education”; “the Soviet Union probably was a colonial power, but in other parts of the Union”; “if not for the Soviet Union we would have been colonized by colonial empires.” They do not even consider that the Soviet Union could have been a colonial empire for Kyrgyzstan. And Gulmira, a Kyrgyz teacher in rural Kyrgyzstan, asserted that no one was concerned that the history of Kyrgyzstan was not taught during Soviet times, and saw no reason why this should have bothered her or anyone else. Instead she insisted that everyone was content with how history was taught in the past as well as with other things, and that the Kyrgyz should actually be thankful to the Russians for bringing education and civilization to Kyrgyzstan. Gulmira stated flatly that Russians did not do anything bad to the Kyrgyz.

Moreover, some teachers that we interviewed believe that they should not criticize the Soviet Union, because, as a Ukrainian teacher in Ysyk-Köl Province said, “We should not diminish the lives of our parents, grandparents, sisters, and ourselves, and therefore why should we teach the bad side of socialism?” In order to prove that the post-socialist present is not better than the socialist past, teachers refer to current problems and shortages: “Although we have a lot of natural resources we are still poor”; “Life has not become better after the breakup of the Soviet Union”; “[Kyrgyzstan] is not as united as it was in the Soviet Union [...]. The clan system and tribalism did not exist in the Soviet Union and we are back to the 16th century”; “There is no discipline or order”; “There is no strong ideology or patriotism.”

Overall, these teachers reject anti-Russian, anti-Tsarist, and anti-Soviet discourses with a cynical opposing discourse about the Soviet Union and Russians as modernizers. Cynical and skeptical discourse is defined as when scientific and other authorities are questioned, and the producer of this discourse assumes the identity of a detached skeptic.⁴⁶

Additionally, almost all teachers expressed their support of the idea that it is right to teach the history of Kyrgyzstan to pupils in general, although, as a female Russian teacher in a school in Bishkek put it, it should be done “more objectively, presenting both advantages and disadvantages, not in the interest of one nation but from the point of view of objective truth.”⁴⁷ The importance of teaching about the past is given significance through discourses about the present. For Alexander, another Russian teacher in Bishkek, Akaev’s time was better than Bakiev’s in terms of state-orchestrated events dedicated to Kyrgyz history. Moreover, for some of the teachers, Akaev was also better than Bakiev because there was more democracy and freedom of speech under the earlier president, and they discuss these issues with their pupils in history lessons. Here they deploy discourses about current Kyrgyz politics and state leadership in terms of liberal democracy and nation-state discourses that are present

⁴⁶ Jorgensen and Philips, *Discourse Analysis*, 166–67.

⁴⁷ Interview with Lena (1961), 25 June 2010.

in the post-Soviet context. And finally, almost all teachers believe that they are responsible for ensuring the proper functioning of the state by providing patriots, citizens, and people with proper education and morals in order to avoid ill behavior, such as the looting that occurred during the so-called revolutions of 2005 and 2010.

Yurchak argues for a complex understanding of the way subjects operate in an environment of official discourse. According to him subjects have the capacity to act as agents through:

... acts that are neither about change nor about continuity, but about introducing minute internal displacements and mutations into the discursive regime in which they are articulated. Such acts may appear inconsequential to most participants and remain invisible to most observers. They do not have to contradict the political and ethical parameters of the system and, importantly, may even allow one to preserve the possibilities, promises, positive ideals, and ethical values of the system while avoiding the negative and oppressive constraints within which these are articulated.⁴⁸

Thus, the last discussion demonstrates ambivalences and tensions between state-produced narratives about the Soviet past and individual perceptions of those narratives. Janarbek's example portrays the particular sources of ambivalences of his explicitly argued professional positioning as a nationalist history teacher in independent Kyrgyzstan when making sense of the Soviet past. It also shows how official state discourse reflected in history textbooks presenting the Soviet past is internally displaced and mutated by history teachers according to the non-ideological discourses which are compelling for them and agree with their positioning politics, but still they do not fully oppose or reject the present political system and ideology. They find ways to creatively pursue what is valuable and meaningful to them amidst the broader ideological context. This is similar to what Yurchak discussed with regards to the late Soviet period, but what is different is that in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan the internal displacement occurs openly, aggressively, and is not hidden by the subjects either in the discourses they convey or in their actions, at least according to how they report them.

Moreover, there is a collision of opposing discourses in teachers' narratives based on the ambivalent and contradictory nature of the textbook discourse, and in general on the state-official discourse as well as the positioning politics of the interlocutors in relation to a given discourse. Some teachers try to find explanations, reconciliations, and justifications when they do not agree with the textbook discourse. They may also give ambivalent and contradictory accounts about socialism and their identities using non-ideological discourses.

⁴⁸ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 28.

At the same time others openly admit to being lost in a myriad of new contradictory and ambiguous meanings of the socialist past and post-Soviet present. However, even those who manage to find some reconciliation and justification for inconsistencies in their memories about the Soviet past also at some point end up giving contradictory discourses without any justification or reconciliation attempts.

5. Relationship between Official Discourse and Subjects

Finally, in this section factors influencing the relationship between subjects, such as history teachers and official discourse, as expressed in textbooks and other contexts are considered. Positioning politics, on the one hand, and nostalgia, on the other hand, influence the way teachers tell their life stories and tell about the Soviet past and post-Soviet present. All of these factors, in turn, influence the connection or disconnection that can be observed between the textbook discourse and the subjects' accounts of the Soviet past.

Connection: Factors of Professional Positioning and Textbooks

The most important factor influencing whether there is connection between teachers' discourses and those of official textbooks occurs when teachers position themselves as good, professional history teachers. Such teachers have two key attributes: they are loyal agents of independent Kyrgyzstan, and they command the critical skills and interactive methods of teaching principles that were introduced to the secondary school practice in the country after the system changed. Both the state and teachers themselves perceive the role of the history teacher as an agent of the state. Thus, teachers are expected to demonstrate loyalty to the state by teaching young citizens to believe in the rightness of the basis, existence, and principles of the state functions of Kyrgyzstan. When history teachers in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan present the Soviet past as immoral, colonial, oppressive, totalitarian, and inefficient, they do so under the influence of the discourses that appear in post-Soviet Kyrgyz history textbooks, and also under the influence of the new standards and methods of teaching, particularly critical skills. Thus, history teachers mainly draw on the textbooks when they want to demonstrate their professional competence and to elaborate abstract concepts about socialism. Some are able to do this successfully while others fail; for example, when interpreting the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet system, they attempt to follow the arguments of the textbook, but then they might admit that they really do not know why the Soviet Union collapsed. Observation and interview data suggests that most history teachers in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan are not that concerned or bothered by what

the textbooks say or with justifying their professional life in Soviet socialism. Instead they are concerned more about justifying the loss of their social capital.

Disconnection: The Factor of Nostalgia

Berdahl and Buzl argued in their research on post-socialist transformations following German reunification that finding oneself inferior to more modern, wealthy, and rational Western Germans made eastern Germans long for the past.⁴⁹ They thus explained nostalgia as the longing for the past in the unfavorable conditions of the present. This is also true of history teachers in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan for whom the Soviet past is the point of reference. They have found themselves inferior both on the international level as well as among their fellow countrymen. When the state system of Kyrgyzstan changed in 1991, the new contact with the Western world became like a mirror in which history teachers in Kyrgyzstan came to see themselves as inferior relative to that world economically, culturally and politically, but also made them feel superior morally and spiritually. Both the feelings of superiority and inferiority of their position in relation to developed capitalist countries shape the teachers' self-justification and professional self-image and serve as the criteria for evaluating positive and negative aspects of the socialist past. The system change had devastating effects on the realm of education as well as many other social and cultural realms in the country. The teachers experience humiliation and little respect from others as they often cannot make ends meet. This also comes out in conflicts with colleagues, pupils, and their parents during the education process, often in a struggle to acquire material benefits. As a result, almost all the interviewed teachers are nostalgic about the strong social welfare system, the better economic situation, being a part of something as great, powerful, and progressive as the Soviet Union, the high social status teachers enjoyed, and in some cases, the status they felt they had as part of the Soviet middle class. They mention the lack of state borders and the ability to travel to other parts of the Union freely, which contrasts with the present situation in relation to bordering countries where Janarbek, for example, who has lived on both sides of the Kyrgyzstani-Tajikistani border, now experiences difficulties crossing it.⁵⁰ The history teachers' longing for greater mobility is related to decreased opportunity to travel to the European parts of the Union such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Ukraine, Crimea, Bulgaria, Latvia, etc. Most non-Kyrgyz teachers (Russian, Ukrainian, and one Armenian) referred to closer social ties,

⁴⁹ Daphne Berdahl and Matti Buzl, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

⁵⁰ On the experiences of people who happened to live within new borders in the Fergana valley after the collapse of the Soviet Union, see, for example, Madeleine Reeves, "Fixing the Border: On the Affective Life of the State in Southern Kyrgyzstan," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 905–23.

mutual assistance, and trust that prevailed during socialism, and represented the Soviet person as a person with moral character and a big heart, in contrast to the egoistic, individualistic, nationalist, and materialistic post-Soviet people and Westerners.⁵¹

Thus, for most of the history teachers, when telling their life stories and, in the acts of remembrance or forgetting, they do not attach so much importance to the shift from socialist hegemonic discourse to post-socialist hegemonic discourse. Instead, what is important is their loss of key attributes: their symbolic capital as the agents of progress and enlightenment; membership in the Soviet elite and middle class. For most teachers the loss of symbolic capital is also a product of their current low material well-being. For others, mostly Russians and those of mixed ethnicity, the status change is connected with their ethnic background. For Russians or Ukrainians, this often has to do with their relations with their Kyrgyz pupils and their parents who sometimes accuse them of chauvinism in relation to the children, and is also connected with the national Kyrgyz language that they feel forced to learn. As a result, such notions as “the equality of all nations and cultures,” “nationality was not important,” and “the friendship of peoples” in relation to the Soviet Union are still asserted by the non-Kyrgyz teachers in the secondary-school context. For them the Soviet school was a better place because a Soviet teacher would not have been accused of bias due to her religious, ethnic, or social preferences as she might be today. For some people the loss of symbolic capital matters in relation to the developed and modern Western world’s scientific potential. For example, in the case of Nurbek, he has found himself in an inferior position as a scholar and historian in relation to his Western counterparts. The new standards and methods of teaching, according to my data, impacted the self-perception of both history teachers and schoolchildren. Therefore, most teachers mentioned—and some complained about—the loss of respect and authority that their pupils used to accord them, but which is undermined due to principles of democracy and human rights that are now in most cases taught to pupils by these same teachers as a separate school subject.

Thus, the loss of status for my interviewees is felt on two levels: (1) on the citizenship level, as they lost their status as a citizen of large and powerful state that included many lands, especially the progressive and modern lands of the European USSR, and (2) the loss of status as (history) teachers that once were associated with Soviet enlightenment, progressiveness, and modernization. Moreover, we can see that, for various teachers depending on their life and

⁵¹ On nostalgic attitudes towards the Soviet Union and life in Moscow in the late Soviet period as expressed in the oral history interviews with three migrants from Central Asia, who eventually returned home, see Jeff Sahadeo, “The Accidental Traders: Marginalization and Opportunity from the Southern Republics to Late Soviet Moscow,” *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 3–4 (2011): 521–40; on the sense of loss of social and economic security of Central Asians in the early years of post-Soviet transformation in contrast to the Soviet past, see Joma Nazpary, *Post-Soviet Chaos, Violence, and Dispossession in Kazakhstan* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

professional trajectories, ethnic, rural or urban, and social background, the loss of symbolic capital is put up as an argument against components of the Kyrgyz post-Soviet official discourse, and as such this discourse fails to become hegemonic. However, since they are history teachers of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and still perceived by the state and believed by the teachers themselves to be state agents—“assistants of the president” as Janarbek put it—they nevertheless try to refer to the ambiguous and contradictory post-socialist Kyrgyz official discourse presented in the textbooks that they use in their work. Inevitably, this creates ambivalences and contradictions in their perceptions and representations of socialism and post-socialism. They find themselves living and working in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan where official discourses do not present many conveniences on several levels. For them the discourses are not so convincing, but they still find creative ways to live and work under such conditions and even to manipulate them for their own interests. Again we see strong echoes of the situation that Yurchak described for late socialism. Due to contact with the developed capitalist world that became possible after the Soviet collapse, as well as to the new economic and political order in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, including such features as the nation-state, the market economy, and liberal democracy, history teachers have found themselves to be inferior and marginal in various aspects—perhaps all aspects—of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstani situation. As a result, disconnection between the subjects and the textbook discourse occurs.

6. Conclusion

The problem of connection or disconnection between the textbook discourse and history teachers’ memories of the Soviet past has profound implications for how relations are constructed between the people of newly independent Kyrgyzstan and their state. Can it be successful in creating a new nation or a nation with a new state identity? If the nation is an imagined community, as Anderson argues,⁵² then we can speak about the durability of this imagination. The research reveals that a collective identity or imagined community is temporarily achieved when history teachers make claims about the Soviet Union, referring to the textbook discourse while they are speaking from their positioning strategy as a state agent and critically thinking history teacher. At the same time, the community is only temporary. “Because subjectivity is fragmented, people do not necessarily experience that they share interests with, or feel affiliated to, the same groups permanently. The identity is always open to change, and, consequently, the community can be dissolved and new ones can be created.”⁵³ Furthermore, nostalgia also fosters disconnection between

⁵² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁵³ Jorgensen and Philips, *Discourse Analysis*, 112.

the textbook discourse and citizens, and that in turn leads to the dissolution of the newly imagined post-Soviet Kyrgyz community. In addition, weak-state capacity, ambivalent, nuanced, and contradictory official discourse on different levels, weak state control of the education process, and liberal methods of teaching according to the principles of critical thinking allow history teachers to teach in a way that introduces internal displacements openly, and at times aggressively, depending on their positioning politics. That is done, however, without open opposition to or rejection of the political system and its official discourse. Instead most teachers are simply trying to find personal meaning under confusing and disorienting conditions.

European University Viadrina
Grosse Scharnstrasse 59
15230 Frankfurt am Oder
Germany
damira.u.m@gmail.com