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Book Review

**THE EASTERN INTERNATIONAL: ARABS, CENTRAL ASIANS,
AND JEWS IN THE SOVIET UNION'S ANTICOLONIAL EMPIRE**

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Masha Kirasirova. *The Eastern International. Arabs, Central Asians, and Jews in the Soviet Union's Anticolonial Empire.* Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 416.

The Soviet Union strategically exploited its 'own East' depending on the political and diplomatic needs of the country. As the first communist state, it mobilized to a varied extent Central Asians, Arabs, and Jews to mediate the state's ideological and geopolitical ambitions. The book, through the cases of these mediators, unpacks how the Soviet government employed the concept of 'Easternness' to propagate critiques of capitalism, fascism, and colonialism through propaganda, education, cultural relations, and, subsequently, political and economic assistance in the foreign East. It also illustrates how global geopolitics, intellectual history, and individual experiences shaped the concept of the East as a quasi-imperial creation in the Soviet Union.

Dr. Kirasirova's central argument is that the Soviet Union's involvement with Easterners was not solely a geopolitical strategy but an endeavour to foster global anticolonial solidarity grounded in socialist ideals. It demonstrates how individuals and ideas traversed the socialist and decolonising realms, thereby enhancing our understanding of the USSR not only as an empire-builder but also as a multifaceted actor in the anticolonial movement. It also provides a context and understanding of the practice, manipulation, and performance of the "Eastern international" policy through the examples of the intermediaries involved.

The first chapter of the book commences with the early efforts of the Bolsheviks for a global revolution in the colonised East. It traces the formation of the "Eastern International" as a paradigm for anticolonial and anti-imperialist revolution in the East envisioned in 1918 by Konstantin Troianovskii, an assimilated Jewish Bolshevik and the first head of the Comintern's Near East Section. Similar to other early Cominternians, Troianovskii's career illustrates the life of the 'old Bolsheviks' who participated in the construction of the Soviet foreign propa-

ganda institutions, and their relationship with the ‘new’ Marxist orientalists. His career allows us to understand how the Comintern’s ties to the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire along the northern Mediterranean coast and to Southeast and Southwest India through a European hub were expanded and the role of the centres of Tashkent, Bukhara, Odessa, and Batumi in these processes.

The second chapter delves into the decade of the 1920s when the efforts of Soviet and Comintern officials were institutionalised under the “laboratory” for training Eastern revolutionaries—the Communist University for the Toilers of the East (KUTV). It explores how Soviet officials established institutions to cultivate local and foreign cadres, fostering connections between the communist intelligentsia and revolutionary movements across the East. The author looks at the activities of KUTV students like Egyptian Hamdi Seliam and Palestinian Najati Sidqi to show how the Soviet Union shaped foreign students’ understanding, ultimately acting as intermediaries to the East.

The third chapter investigates the changing context of the 1930s. There, the author looks into how, by the 1930s, hardened boundaries and intensified securitisation transformed the USSR into a more insular and ethnonationalist state. As anticolonial nationalist movements intensified under British and French mandates, the rift between Jewish and Arab communities in Palestine widened following the violent confrontations of 1929. Notwithstanding these changes, the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) persisted as a channel for both international and indigenous concepts of the East. At the same time, these dynamics resulted in the expulsion of numerous senior Jewish officials from both KUTV and the Comintern, especially those associated with Palestine, Egypt, or Syria-Lebanon. This, in turn, facilitated the emergence of new intermediaries to further party-state objectives in the region.

Further, the author examines how World War II shifted Stalin’s focus away from the Eastern Mediterranean, relegating the region to a peripheral theatre compared to Europe, America, and Asia. The chapter concentrates on the intellectuals from Syria and Lebanon who were invited by the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad, also known by its Russian acronym VOKS. These delegations, as the chapter unpacks, contributed to minimizing the repressive nature of Russocentric antic cosmopolitanism. The chapter also highlights how their Eurocentric perspective preserved the Soviet Union’s image as a model of alternative modernity despite its internal contradictions.

In chapter five, the author elaborates on Nikita Khrushchev’s reassessment of the Eastern Mediterranean, who maintained Stalin-era frameworks of connecting and distinguishing the domestic and foreign Easts. Khrushchev and the emerging political elite established the trajectory of Soviet internal and international cultural policy, initiating the most significant extension of the ‘Eastern International’, characterized by an increase in connections, linkages, and exchanges with the decolonizing Afro-Asian world. The career of Uzbek politician Nuriddin Mukhitdinov exemplifies how Soviet officials used Central Asians to promote Khrushchev’s “East politics” at home and abroad. It also illustrates how Soviet Central Asian officials attempted to leverage Moscow’s geopolitical priorities to promote their region as both a model and a bridge to the broader Eastern world.

In the 1960s, the Soviet Union's emphasis on presenting itself as an anticolonial entity enabled prominent Central Asian artists to redefine themselves as revolutionary anticolonial icons. Soviet cultural bureaucrats recognised that films could potentially reach a wider audience in the non-Western world than literature, which led to the investment and promotion of Central Asian artists within the Afro-Asian cinematic networks. The chapter on the career of Central Asian Tajik filmmaker Kamil Yarmatov, illustrates how policy on the representation of Soviet culture was reconsidered and how Yarmatov positioned the Soviet Union's anticolonial credentials catering to both internal and international audiences.

Chapter seven reveals the late Soviet period, marking a gradual shift in the narratives of "the Eastern International" that once linked the two Easts. The growth of global capitalism and scepticism towards the Soviet model of development, particularly in relation to the industrialisation of poorer republics and the provision of foreign aid, coincided with the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, Soviet mediators persisted in bridging the two Easts, yet prioritising economic development and military aid with Middle Eastern states alongside cultural diplomacy. Soviet internationalism of that period was constructed upon Soviet resources, political authority, and intermediaries, significantly supplemented by the contributions of Arab thinkers and states. The 1973 oil revolution, along with the war in Afghanistan transformed the established connections between the domestic and foreign Easts. The chapter also discusses how late Soviet and post-Soviet developments encouraged Soviet Central Asian writers to openly challenge Soviet historical politics in both domestic and foreign Eastern contexts.

The author concludes with an emphasis on the limited attention paid to Soviet 'Eastern' politics and the role of Eastern intermediaries in Soviet diplomacy. The author advocates for reconsidering the Soviet setting to foster postcolonial studies of Soviet and post-Soviet entities. Dr. Kirasirova believes that a comprehensive examination of Soviet interactions with the East enhances the understanding of how circulations of people and ideas across the Soviet Union's various Easts influenced postcolonial studies. The historical narratives of Central Asia and the Arab Left within the Soviet framework, along with the personal and shared experiences of the key figures in the Eastern International, continue to be overlooked.

Dr. Kirasirova's research brings new perspectives on how the Soviet government employed its Muslim-majority Central Asian republics as intermediaries to the Arab world. It also highlights the significant involvement of Soviet Jews, particularly in cultural and educational initiatives. The book facilitates comprehension of how the Soviet government acted and positioned itself as a model for decolonisation and modernisation. It provides a significant contribution to the discourse on post-colonial studies by elucidating the origins of Soviet frameworks, thereby enhancing the comprehension of post-Soviet post-colonial studies.