

Marco BUTTINO, *Samarkand: Living the city in the Soviet era and beyond.* Rome: Viellia, 2020, 353 p.

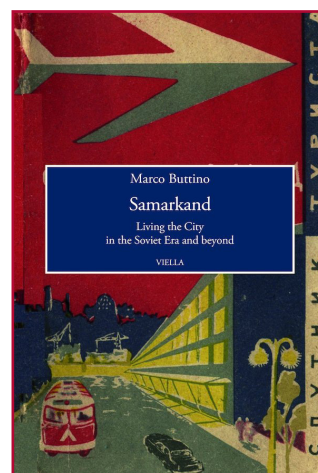
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Samarkand offers many different faces to residents and visitors alike. Once a Tajik city, Russians, and later Uzbeks, grew to attain pre-eminence. Minority groups, from Bukharan Jews to Koreans, have ebbed and flowed, playing important roles in city life. Buttino presents Samarkand as a “city of minorities” through a series of case studies, focused mostly on older, pre-imperial neighborhoods (mahallas). Archives and secondary research are mixed with interviews and ethnographic walks through Samarkand as the author examines Soviet and post-Soviet change, which has been turbulent outside of a surface sense of calm in the 1970s-early 1980s. The book focuses on how the state filtered to the everyday life, and how Samarkand’s residents sought to bend rules and make their own lives as they faced Moscow or Tashkent and manoeuvred within or between Samarkand’s communities as well as dealt with local leaders.



Compromise is the key term that the author continually comes back to when discussing the Soviet Union, particularly in the postwar years. The Soviet regime set the playing field for citizens to live, work, study and interact. In Samarkand, residents nonetheless made their lives in their own fashions. “Broad and active cooperation” (p. 112) marked the Soviet, and, to a lesser extent, the Uzbek approach to governance over local society. The multitude of players between Moscow and everyday citizens assured continual negotiations. A patrimonial state –which came increasingly under Uzbek control, even before 1991– mixed with a strong grey economy and offered space for agency, if not activism. The mahallas, as intensely social spaces, determined so much of Samarkand’s citizens lives.

Samarkand emerges as a fascinating palette of Soviet life, even as it was shaped by deportations, repressions and unequal access to power and privilege. In 1924, the Bolsheviks decided to award the largely Tajik city to the nascent Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, even making it the capital. Tajiks faced a choice to “Uzbekize” through passport identity to gain the best access to government posts and other privileges. By the 1930s, Soviet modernization prompted a significant in-migration of Russians, making them the largest ethnic group in the city. Russian remained the language of

communication and a vehicle for social mobility in Samarkand throughout the Soviet period, even as the state continued to offer schooling in Tajik and other minority languages.

Sketches of ethnic neighborhoods, which compose the middle chapters, are the book's greatest contribution. Buttino focuses first on Bukharan Jews, named from the Emirate of Bukhara which held Samarkand until 1868. A feature of Samarkand's urban life for centuries, they faced turbulent decades under Soviet rule, where they never had the government's trust. At the same time, in their mahalla, Bukharan Jews could make prosperous lives for themselves. They could study in their native Tajik language and choose to pursue a wide range of careers, even if state employment was rarely an option. Lives as wealthy merchants, artisans and retailers before 1917 shifted somewhat to careers in academics, as teachers, musicians and artists. Buttino interviews Bukharan Jews who worked as engineers and in factories. Personal synagogues and kosher butchers displayed a degree of cultural and religious life allowed, if not approved by, the Soviet regime. By the mid 1990s, however, as Bukharan Jews realized the extent of Samarkand's Uzbekization, emigration became a widespread option and decimated the community.

The Mugats, or Samarkand's Romany population, follow, were later additions to the urban scene, the product of Soviet efforts to sedentarize the mobile population from the 1930s-1960s. They eventually received their own mahalla in Samarkand's old town. Mugats faced widespread prejudice, before and after 1991. Poverty did not diminish an active social and cultural life, however, based on ties between extended families. Exogamy and polygamy were two features that distinguished this minority in Soviet Samarkand. After 1991, Mugats' economic situation deteriorated as they were reduced to begging and waste collection, and they could no longer study in their native Tajik language.

Koreans arrived as deportees from the Far East in the late 1930s. They maneuvered within Soviet bounds to gain their own collective farms outside Samarkand, where they could grow rice instead of cotton. These farms were merged to Uzbek ones after World War II and many Koreans moved to the city proper, though they maintained village connections and became a prosperous community. Unlike more established minorities, Koreans integrated into Russian life, recognizing the privileged urban position of the language and Russified Soviet culture. They climbed social ladders as doctors, teachers and cultural figures; like Bukharan Jews, however, they chose emigration before the Uzbekization of Samarkand and subsequent economic challenges. Given the difficulties of emigrating to Korea, most chose Russia.

Buttino offers other sketches of urban life through tours of schools and factories. The Hujum silk factory, a major source of employment for residents of old-town Samarkand, turns out to be antiquated –until its post-Soviet end using machines from 1927 or 1952. The more advanced Kimap factory, which produced weapons and high-quality industrial goods, remained a Russian world –though with the presence of a high number of deported Crimean Tatars. Buttino notes that even in the USSR's last 20 years, “the Uzbek world came to dominate school, administration and politics.” (p. 276) The compromises other groups reached with the Soviet system to ensure cultural and economic prosperity faded, and then were decimated in the late 1990s.

Uzbek control receives the harshest scrutiny in this book; the sense of negotiation and compromise that the author portrays in the Soviet era disappears under Uzbek control. From a minority viewpoint, certainly the emigration statistics are clear; however, Buttino's source base –Russian-language archival and published materials and interviews mainly in Russian– render Uzbek words and voices largely silent. We lack therefore a full picture of the city's complexity. The book largely fails to engage existing historical or anthropological scholarship, so its analytical contributions are not made clear to the reader. It hovers somewhere between a work for an educated public and a strictly academic audience. But certainly, the material presents fascinating insights into Samarkand's past and present, and Buttino's interviews and his sketch of urban life through old city design and architecture are lasting contributions that students and scholars alike can use in their own works. Giving voice to the city's minorities allows us to see Samarkand with new eyes.

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