Settler Bolsheviks in the Soviet "Eastern"

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Abstract: *The Revolutionary and Civil War period in Central Asia became a popular subject for novels and films in the USSR. Portraying Russians as the main agents of progress in Central Asia against the villainous Basmachi, bandits who resisted the new Soviet order. In the 1960s these stories developed into a hugely popular genre of film, the Soviet "Eastern" that was strongly influenced by American "Westerns," with the Basmachi playing the role of American Indians, and Bolshevik commissars and soldiers the cowboys and cavalry. This paper will explore the extent to which Soviet Easterns reflect settler colonial narratives, and the degree to which the Bolshevik claim to be bringing enlightenment and progress to a backward region has commonalities with settler colonialism elsewhere. It will focus on Semirechie, the main Russian settler colony in southern Central Asia, and in particular the film* Alye Maki Issyk-Kulya *(*The Scarlet Poppies of Issyk-Kul*, Bolotbek Shamshiev, 1972) and the novel on which it was based, Alexander Sytin's* Kontrabandisty Tian'-Shanya *(*The Smugglers of the Tian-Shan*, 1930). It argues that while Sytin's writing certainly does touch on settler colonial themes, these are muted in the film, which is instead suffused with Kyrgyz national narratives and symbolism.*

Russia and the Soviet Union are often excluded from histories of settler colonialism, partly because it is seen as an Anglophone phenomenon, and partly because the colonization of Siberia and parts of Central Asia by Russians and other peoples from European Russia did not involve either movement overseas or the creation of new settler colonial states. Nevertheless, a process which saw the indigenous peoples of Siberia reduced to small minorities, with Europeans also forming a majority of the population of Kazakhstan by 1989, clearly needs to be understood as part of the wider phenomenon of settler colonialism which demographically re-made entire continents between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. Russian settlers, just like their western European counterparts, were not simply migrants in a strange country, but brought a form of sovereignty with them. By the late nineteenth century this meant that the Russian state recognized settlers' pre-eminent claim to the land even in Central Asia, where a large indigenous population was present, and still more in Siberia where settlement was often explicitly compared to that of Europeans in North America.[1]

My thanks to Aminat Chokobaeva and Chris Baker for their comments on this paper, and to Alexander Fedorov for permission to re-use his photograph of Baizak and Kondratii.

[1] Alexander Morrison, "Russian Settler Colonialism," in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini, eds. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 313-326.

As historian Lorenzo Veracini has argued, narratives are important to settler colonialism - whether ideas of "empty lands" and "manifest destiny," tales of frontier pioneering, the confrontation between barbarism and civilization, or the "inevitability" of the disappearance of indigenous peoples – because they serve to soften or blur a brutal reality.[2] In the twentieth century cinema has played an important role in creating and sustaining these narratives, and no form has been more potent than the classic American Western, in which all these themes feature prominently: from early films such as John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (1924), through to later classics such as the same director's "Cavalry Trilogy" (1948-50), Westerns seek to indigenize the settlers in the landscape, establish their claims to it in the face of any indigenous opposition, and show how they are remaking it. If the American Western is the *locus classicus* of settler colonial cinema, a convincing case can be made for parallels in Australian, New Zealand and South African film.[3]

In the Russian-speaking world the closest parallels to the American Western are found in Soviet films about the Revolution and Civil War in Central Asia, set in the years between 1917 and the mid-1920s, a genre often known as the Soviet "Eastern." These films depicted the struggles of the fledgling Soviet regime against an array of villainous and reactionary opponents: former Tsarist officials and officers, the pre-revolutionary Central Asian commercial and religious elite (known generically as "Bais" and "Mullahs") and above all the so-called *Basmachi* - much-mythologized groups of bandits and guerrillas, mounting raids on the outposts of Bolshevik power or otherwise subverting the new Soviet order.[4] In terms of basic plot and aesthetics "Easterns" were strongly influenced by American Westerns, with the *Basmachi* playing the role of American Indians, and Bolshevik commissars, Red Army soldiers and border guards the cowboys and cavalry.[5]

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[2] Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism. A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3, 95-104.
[3] Peter Limbrick, *Making Settler Cinemas. Film and Colonial Encounters in the United States, Australia and New Zealand* (Basingstoke: Palgrace Macmillan, 2010); Janne Lahti "What is Settler Colonialism and What is Has to Do with the American West?," *Journal of the West* 56.4 (2018), 8-12.
[4] Marco Buttino, *La Rivoluzione Capovolta. L'Asia Centrale tra il crolle dell'impero zarista e la formazione dell'URSS* (Naples: l'Ancora del mediterraneo, 2003), 285-326; Beatrice Penati, "The reconquest of East Bukhara: the struggle against the Basmachi as a prelude to Sovietization," *Central Asian Survey* 26.4 (2007), 521-538.
[5] Alexander V. Prusin & Scott C. Zeman, "Taming Russia's Wild East: The Central Asian historical-revolutionary film as Soviet Orientalism," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 23.3 (2003), 259-270.

"Easterns" followed a narrative which, while paying lip-service to Soviet ideals of the friendship and equality of peoples, often presented Russians, or more broadly Europeans, as the main agents of progress in Central Asia. This was certainly true of the most famous of the "Easterns" – Vladimir Motyl's *Beloe Solntse Pustiny* (*The White Sun of the Desert*, 1969) – which has been the focus of much of the existing scholarship on the genre.[6] After a slow start it became one of the most popular of all Soviet films, whose catchphrase – *Vostok – delo tonkoe* (the East is a delicate matter) - has come to symbolize Russia's relations with its "own Orient."[7] Reflecting on his service in the Soviet Afghan War of the 1980s, one of Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich's interviewees recalled: "Back then there was an image of the enemy, one familiar to us from books, from school, from films about the *Basmachi*s after the Russian Revolution. I watched the movie *The White Sun of the Desert* about five times. And there he was, the enemy!"[8]

While *The White Sun of the Desert* continues to play an outsized role in forming Russian attitudes to Central Asia, it was in many ways uncharacteristic of the wider "Eastern" genre, which it sought to satirize. It was produced by the central studio Mosfilm, and had a European director and predominantly non-Central Asian actors. Although popular with Russian audiences, "Easterns" were usually made by Central Asian directors and film studios, whose output in the 1960s and 1970s was heavily focused on them - to the extent that the Tajik SSR's film studio, Tajikfilm was sometimes known as *Basmach-kino*.[9] Some of the best-known "Easterns" include *Reshaiushchii Shag* (*The Decisive Step*, Arty Karliev/Turkmenfilm, 1965), *Krasnye Peski* (*Red Sands*, Ali Khamraev/Uzbekfilm, 1968) and *Konets Atamana* (*The end of the Ataman*, Shaken Aimanov/Kazakhfilm, 1970). All of these had Central Asian directors and an overwhelmingly

[6] Birgit Beumers, "Soviet and Russian Blockbusters: A Question of Genre?' *Slavic Review* 62.3 (2003), 441-454, here 452.
[7] Devid Skhimmel'pennink van der Oie, "Orientalizm – delo tonkoe," *Ab Imperio* (2002) No.1: 249-264; Vincent Bohlinger "'The East is a Delicate Matter' *White Sun of the Desert* and the Soviet Western," in *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier*, in Cynthia J. Miller & Riper A. Bowdoin, eds. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 373-393; Elvira Kulieva, "The East is A Delicate Matter' or Soviet Orientalism in Films about Central Asia 1955- 1970," (MA Thesis, Ibn Khaldun University, 2018), 71-78.
[8] Svetlana Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc* trans. Andrew Bromfield (London: Penguin, 2016), 106; Svetlana Alexievich, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (Moscow: Vremya, 2015), 116.
[9] Kirill Nourzhanov "Bandits, warlords, national heroes: interpretations of the Basmachi movement in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 34.2 (2015), 177-189, here 178-179.

Central Asian cast. *The White Sun of the Desert*, which both in Russia and beyond the former USSR became the most famous of the "Easterns", is thus a misleading archetype.

Soviet "Easterns" uneasily combined proletarian rhetoric with a portrayal of Central Asia as exotic, savage and backward, and as such are usually analyzed through the lens of Orientalist discourse.[10] While the fact that they drew their plots and basic aesthetics from the Western genre is well-established, the extent to which they reflect similar settler colonial themes – the indigenization of settlers in a supposedly pristine or empty landscape, their pre-eminent right to this land, and the inevitable triumph of European civilization over barbarism – is much less clear. On the face of it the Bolshevik claim to be bringing enlightenment and progress to a backward region does have clear commonalities with settler colonialism elsewhere – the theme of the railway opening up and civilizing "empty" landscapes, for instance, is common to both ideologies – but there are other factors that render comparison less straightforward. Most "Easterns" were set in the deserts and oases of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where Russian settlers were very few, and many of them had few or no Russian characters. Hence in this paper I will focus my analysis on the film *Alye Maki Issyk-Kulya* (*The Scarlet Poppies of Issyk-Kul*, Bolotbek Shamshiev, 1972),[11] which was filmed and set in northern Kyrgyzstan in the fertile region of Semirechie. This had been the main Russian settler colony in southern Central Asia before 1917, and would remain a major area of Russian settlement even after the Revolution, where colonial structures of power and land use seem to have been more durable than elsewhere in Soviet Central Asia.[12] The paper will give a brief outline of the origins of cinema in Central Asia, before narrowing the focus specifically to the Kyrgyz SSR. I will explore the literary source material of *Scarlet Poppies*, before comparing this with the plot and characterization of the film, and providing a visual analysis. Overall I would argue that while settler colonial themes and aesthetics borrowed from the "Western" are certainly present in the *Scarlet*

[10] Michael G. Smith, "Cinema for the 'Soviet East': National Fact and Revolutionary Fiction in Early Azerbaijani Film," *Slavic Review* 56.4 (1997), 645-67, here 647-657.
[11] The film is also discussed briefly in Prusin & Zeman "Taming Russia's Wild East," 266-267.
[12] Aminat Chokobaeva, "Frontiers of Violence: State and Conflict in Semirechye, 1850-1938," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Australian National University, 2017); Alexander Morrison, "Peasant Settlers and the Civilising Mission in Russian Turkestan," *Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History* 43.3 (2015), 387-417.

Poppies, these are eclipsed by a much more powerful Kyrgyz national narrative, something which is quite characteristic of the cultural politics of Soviet Central Asia in the 1970s.

The Origins of Central Asian and Kyrgyz Cinema

The use of film as a propaganda tool was one of the hallmarks of the Soviet regime throughout its existence, and this was combined in its early years with some remarkable artistic innovations in the new medium. The first Soviet film shot in Central Asia to gain wide circulation was Viktor Turin's *Turksib* (1929), a highly stylized documentary about the construction of the Turkestan-Siberia railway from Tashkent to Semipalatinsk as part of the first five-year plan. As historian Matthew Payne has shown, the popularity of the film with Russian and international audiences was because it reproduced conventional colonial tropes – of a backward, sleeping Asia awakened by European science and civilization, of the conquering power of technology, and of the primitive naivety of the "natives." As such it failed to reflect the political orthodoxy of the USSR's nationalities policy in the 1920s – *korenizatsiya* ("striking roots" – i.e. indigenization) which saw the local population not as passive recipients of progress but as the bearers of Soviet power and enlightenment themselves.[13]

Most early Soviet fiction films shot in Central Asia conformed to the same Orientalist pattern as *Turksib*. *The Minaret of Death* (Vyacheslav Viskovskii, 1925), filmed in Uzbekistan and set in an imagined 17th-century Bukhara, was "off the scale in its exoticism."[14] Such films were unpopular with Central Asian intellectuals and party cadres who believed that they denigrated and patronized the local population, and they were also criticized as escapism, which lacked necessary revolutionary spirit. The reconciliation of these imperatives – the need to entertain audiences with

[13] Matthew J. Payne, "Viktor Turin's Turksib (1929) and Soviet Orientalism," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 21.1 (2001), 37-62; Gabrielle Chomentowski, "Vostokkino and the Foundation of Central Asian Cinema," in *Cinema in Central Asia. Rewriting Cultural Histories*, Michael Rouland, Gulnara Abikeyeva and Birgit Beumers, eds. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 39-40.
[14] Cloe Drieu, *Cinema, Nation and Empire in Uzbekistan, 1919 – 1937* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 29, 64-65.

tales of adventure in exotic landscapes, while simultaneously presenting a correct revolutionary and national spirit – would be found in the Civil War heroism of the *Basmachi* genre.

The first of the *Basmachi* films was probably Mikhail Romm's *Trinadtsat'* (*The Thirteen*, 1937), which was modelled on John Ford's *Lost Patrol* (1934) and bore strong visual and thematic affinities with contemporary westerns.[15] The elegiac description of it in the otherwise turgid official history of Soviet Cinema gives a vivid impression of the aesthetic that many later examples of the genre sought to reproduce: "uninhabited desert, the rippling dunes, thin streams of crumbling sand, and a lone string of horsemen, shot as if in negative, moving as jerky black silhouettes on the white sand."[16] Although the commander of the eponymous thirteen is Russian, the group includes representatives of Central Asian nationalities, who are shown fighting and dying for Soviet power. This reflects what historian Cloé Drieu calls the "hybridization between Colonial-type discourse and a not yet fully-formulated Soviet (Proletarian Russian) discourse" in which it was essential to show Central Asians as having class-consciousness and agency of their own.[17] By the time the *Basmachi* genre emerged fully in the 1960s and 1970s further ideological changes had taken place, which Drieu argues saw "images symbolically decolonized" and the "oriental" replaced by the "national."[18] Traces of the former certainly remained, as we will see, but national narratives became steadily more important after Stalin's death in 1952, and the Khrushchev "thaw" which followed.

Within Central Asian Cinema, Kyrgyzstan remained a backwater until well after the Second World War. Production centered on Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and early Kyrgyz films were likely to be co-productions with Mosfilm or Lenfilm, and to have Russian directors.[19] The latter was true of the breakthrough film in Kyrgyz cinema, Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovskii's *Pervyi uchitel'* (*The First Teacher*, 1965), based on a story by Chingiz Aitmatov, for which Natalya Arinbasarova won the

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[15] Prusin & Zeman, "Taming Russia's Wild East," 262-263.
[16] Kh. Abulkasymova *et al* eds., *Istoriya Sovetskogo Kino* vol.2 *1931 – 1941* (Moscow: Izd. Iskusstvo, 1973), 200-201.
[17] Drieu, *Cinema, Nation and Empire in Uzbekistan*, 70.
[18] Drieu, *Cinema, Nation and Empire in Uzbekistan*, 82.
[19] Abulkasymova *et al* eds., *Istoriya Sovetskogo Kino* vol.4 *1952 – 1967* (Moscow: Izd. Iskusstvo, 1978), 245-246; Lino Micciche□, "The Cinema of the Transcaucasian and Central Asian Soviet Republics," in *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema*, Anna Lawton ed. (London: Routledge, 1992), 298-9; Michael Rouland, "Historical Introduction," & Joel Chapron, "A Small History of Kyrgyz Cinema," both in *Cinema in Central Asia*, 14, 128.

Volpi cup at the Venice Film Festival.[20] The only major Kyrgyz director to venture into the *Basmachi* genre was Bolotbek Shamshiev (1941 -).[21] His first film, *Vystrel na perevale Karash* (*Gunshot at the Karash pass*, 1968), a co-production with Kazakhfilm, included many of the recurring themes of the *Basmachi* genre. There is the outlaw or brigand who gains class-consciousness - played by the famous Kyrgyz actor Suimenkul Chokmorov (1939-1992) both here and in *Scarlet Poppies* - ravishing landscapes, high adventure and horses. Based on a short story by the great Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov, the film is set in a pre-revolutionary Semirechie where poor Kyrgyz and Russian settlers alike suffer from the oppression of wealthy *bai*s: the chief villain, Zharasbai, also serves the Russian colonial state as a "native" administrator. It includes a deeply implausible scene in which Zharasbai orders the whipping of a Russian peasant settler who had dared to complain about the damage done to his crops by Zharasbai's *Jigit*s (mounted bodyguards), only to be protected by the hero, Baktygul, in an evocation of the Soviet friendship of peoples.

This insistence that the structures of oppression in pre-revolutionary Central Asia were economic rather than ethnic, with "the native bourgeoisie dominating Russian military and colonial society" had already appeared in Soviet film in the 1920s, and are quite unlike anything one finds in the Western genre.[22] This, and the touching scene in which Baktygul says farewell to the children of his peasant settler friend, were also intended to convey the message that the 1916 revolt against Tsarist rule in Central Asia – when in Semirechie many Russian peasant settlers had been killed by Kyrgyz in its early stages - had been fueled by class, not ethnic conflict.[23] The 1916 revolt would also loom large in the background of *Scarlet Poppies*, which is in some ways an oblique cinematic response to a topic that was still considered highly sensitive even in the late Soviet period.[24] However while Shamshiev's film, in common with most *Basmachi* dramas, was as much national as

[20] Abulkasymova, *Istoriya Sovetskogo Kino*, 250-253; Kulieva "The East is a Delicate Matter," 63-71.
[21] Chapron, "A Small History of Kyrgyz Cinema," in *Cinema in Central Asia*, 129.
[22] Drieu, *Cinema, Nation and Empire*, 82.
[23] Aminat Chokobaeva, "When the nomads went to war: the uprising of 1916 in Semirech'e'," in *The Central Asian Revolt of 1916. A Collapsing Empire in an Age of War and Revolution*, Aminat Chokobaeva, Cloé Drieu and Alexander Morrison, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 145-168.
[24] "Editors Introduction," in *The Central Asian Revolt of 1916*, 7-8.

it was Soviet, the text from which it derives was older and much more overtly settler colonial in its themes, language and characterization.

The Literary Sources of *The Scarlet Poppies of Issyk-Kul*

Shamshiev's film is based on *Kontrabandisty Tian'-Shanya* (*The Smugglers of the Tian-Shan*), a novel by Alexander Pavlovich Sytin (1894-1974). This was first published as a short story under the more ominous title *Zheltyi Mrak* (*Yellow Darkness*) in 1927.[25] A much-expanded version sporting the new title appeared first in Kharkov the same year, and then under the prestigious *Molodaya Gvardiya* imprint in 1930.[26] It was republished again in Tbilisi (where Sytin had settled) in 1964, lacking the rather luridly orientalist illustrations of the original.[27] The long gap between these editions of the novel reflected the fortunes of its author. Sytin served in the Tsarist army during the First World War, and was evacuated to Central Asia after being wounded in 1916. In 1918 he joined the Red Army, and participated in the campaign to reconquer the Emirate of Bukhara under Mikhail Frunze's command, before becoming commandant of the fortress at Namangan in the Ferghana valley.[28] In 1925 he returned to Moscow and a full-time writing career. In 1930 he was arrested and sent to a camp near Murmansk. He was released in 1936, but only rehabilitated and re-elected to the Union of Writers in 1962.[29] Apart from *The Smugglers of the Tian-Shan*, Sytin was the author of numerous adventure stories, usually with a Turkestan setting, in popular magazines such as *Ogonëk* or *Vsemirnyi Sledopyt'*.[30] Two of these stories - *Vesy Zhazhdy* (*The Weight of Thirst*, 1927) and *v Peskakh*

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[25] Aleksandr Sytin, 'Zheltyi mrak' *Al'manakh prikliuchenii – Zheltyi mrak* (Moscow: Moskovskoe tov. pisatelei, 1927), 3-28
[26] Aleksandr Sytin, *Kontrabandisty Tian'-Shania* (Kharkov: Tip. "Proletarii", 1927); Aleksandr Sytin *Kontrabandisty Tian'-Shania* (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1930).
[27] Aleksandr Sytin, *Kontrabandisty Tian'-Shania. Povest'* (Tbilisi: Literatura da khelovneba, 1964).
[28] Vladimir Genis, *"S Bukharoi nado konchat'" K istorii butaforskoi revoliutsii* (Moscow: TSPI, 2001); Alex Marshall, "Turkfront: Frunze and the development of Soviet counter-insurgency in Central Asia," in *Central Asia. Aspects of Transition,* Tom Everett-Heath, ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 5-29.
[29] 'Zakleimennye vlast'iu. Ankety, pis'ma, zayavleniya politzakliuchennykh v Moskovskii Krasnyi Krest' http://pkk.memo.ru/letters_pdf/002609.pdf
[30] *Boi Paukov* ['Battle of Spiders'] – *Rasskazy* (Moscow: "Ogonëk", 1928); *Brat Idola* ['The Idol's Brother'] - *Rasskazy* (Moscow-Leningrad: Zemlya i Fabrika, 1928); *v Teni Mechetei* ['In the Shadow of the Mosques'] *Rasskazy* (Moscow-Leningrad: Zemlya i Fabrika, 1930).

Kara-Kuma (*In the Sands of the Qara-Qum*, 1928) deal with the Basmachi revolt among the Turkmen, a popular subject for later films.[31]

Sytin's text can be understood as part of the Civil War genre exemplified by Dmitrii Furmanov's *Chapaev* (1923),[32] but with its villainous Orientals and central captivity narrative it also shows clear influences from the broader genre of European colonial literature – his adventure stories read like something that could have been published in *The Boy's Own Paper* or *Chums* at the same time, with overtones of what Patrick Brantlinger refers to as "Imperial Gothic" - and *Zheltyi Mrak/Kontrabandisty* is no exception.[33] Opening in a Kyrgyz *yurt* deep in the Tian-Shan mountains near the Chinese border, we are introduced to the main protagonists – the border guard Budai (a Ukrainian) and his nemesis, the "Father of Smugglers," Baizak – who has wormed his way into the structures of Soviet power as the chair of the local Consumers' cooperative (*potrebkooperatsii*). Budai is on the brink of securing proof that Baizak is behind the smuggling of opium from China into Soviet Semirechie. However the villainous and cunning Baizak (luridly depicted in the original 1928 publication – Figure 1), has Budai arrested on a trumped-up charge of corruption. The task of clearing Budai's name and securing proof of Baizak's villainy then falls to his friend, the fierce, diminutive cavalry officer Kondratii and his loyal Kyrgyz guide Janmurchi – who had once been a smuggler before Budai rescued him in a mountain pass. Baizak manages to evade the authorities for so long partly

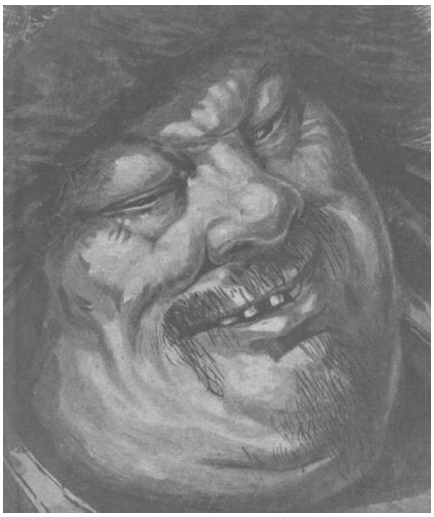

Figure 1 The 'Father of Smugglers', Baizak, illustration from Yellow Darkness*, the 1928 version of Sytin's tale.*

[31] Aleksandr Sytin, 'Vesy Zhazhdy. Rasskaz iz epokhy grazhdanskoi voiny v Turkestane' *Vsemirnyi Sledopyt'* (1927) No.11, 822-843; A. P. Sytin *v peskakh Kara-Kuma. Epizod iz istorii bor'by s basmachestvom* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1928).
[32] On *Chapaev* (which was filmed in 1934) see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel. History as Ritual* 3rd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 84-88; Evgeny Dobrenko 'Creation myth and myth creation in Stalinist cinema' *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 1/3 (2007): 239-264; Julian Graffy, *Chapaev* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 8-11; Angela Brintlinger, *Chapaev and His Comrades: War and the Russian Literary Hero Across the Twentieth Century* (Academic Studies Press, 2012), 42-52.
[33] Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness. British Literature and Imperialism 1830-1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 227-253.

because he has the support of a Kyrgyz elder, Jantai, who had become alienated from the Russians before the revolution when a colonial police chief stole his wife and beat him. Jantai killed the official and retreated to the mountains, where he is still unaware that Tsarist colonial rule is no more, and that Soviet power has introduced equality. Baizak kidnaps Kondratii's wife Marianna, and while in captivity with Jantai's Kyrgyz she is forced to roll felt until her hands bleed. Assisted by a Kyrgyz girl, Kalych, she escapes easily, slipping out of the yurt in the darkness – in the original story they rather fortuitously reach safety when they run into a Red Army patrol: "they smelt the scent of *makhorka* [coarse tobacco] and saw the red glint at the end of a cigar, while a rough voice said 'who goes there?'. After that it was as if she was asleep. Marianna knew only that she had returned to her own, and that a Red Army man, seizing her with tough hands like steel, swept her into the saddle" – a passage worthy of Zane Grey.[34] In the longer novel Marianna's captivity and escape are treated more fully. Both versions meanwhile contain an ethnographic aside, in which Sytin tells a story of the legendary origins of Lake Issyk-Kul – quite clearly derived from the same source as that of King Midas and his donkey's ears, which was also narrated by the Swiss traveler Ella Maillart, who visited Issyk-Kul in 1932.[35]

Sytin's novel certainly has sympathetic and heroic Kyrgyz protagonists – Janmurchi and Jantai, both of whom will serve the Soviets and play a key role in bringing Baizak to justice – but nevertheless it reserves greater agency for its European characters, Budai and Kondratii. It also makes great play of the plight of a European woman kidnapped by nomads, a familiar narrative in the Western and indeed other films featuring "Orientals" (famously *The Sheikh*, 1921). Throughout both versions of the novel the Kyrgyz characters address the Russian Bolsheviks as *Tura*, an honorific for Europeans in Central Asia which was the equivalent of the Anglo-Indian *Sahib.* The settler colonial flavoring of the literary source of *The Scarlet Poppies of Issyk-Kul* is thus clear. What then did a Kyrgyz – but also Soviet – director, Bolotbek Shamshiev, make of this?

[34] Sytin, "Zheltyi mrak," 26.
[35] Ella Maillart, *Turkestan Solo* (London: Unwin, 1934), 48-9.

Nationalizing the Colonial in *The Scarlet Poppies of Issyk-Kul*

Certain elements of the colonial narrative and power relations do survive in Shamshiev's film, particularly in its early scenes. The film opens with a group of young European Red Army horsemen galloping through a field of opium poppies in order to destroy them, when one is felled by a bullet from a hidden assailant, his blood dripping across the scarlet blossoms. As in many westerns, the Soviet cavalrymen appear overwhelmed by the vastness of the landscape, while the smugglers, like Native Americans in the Western, are elusive figures whose control of that space has to be broken in order for civilization (in this case Bolshevism) to triumph.[36] The treacherous Baizak, played by Sovetbek Dzhumadilov, seen in Soviet uniform (Figure 2), appears to be a model Soviet official assisting the commandant, Kondratii, in the operation. We then see the latter awakening before dawn to receive news of the smugglers from his scout, Qarabalta - a hybrid of the figures of Budai and Janmurchi in Sytin's novel - played by Suimenkul Chokmorov. He is described as strange and unwilling to submit to discipline, but loyal. Kondratii's wife, Olga, is enchanted both by the glorious mountain scenery (one of those overwhelming natural landscapes so characteristic of Westerns) and the yurt which has been erected in the fortress courtyard. In a later scene we see her being welcomed and shown inside by a

Figure 2 Baizak (L) and Kondratii (R) inspect a field of Opium Poppies in the opening scene of The Scarlet Poppies of Issyk-Kul. Photograph © Alexander Fedorov, Kyrgyzfilm.

[36] Limbrick, *Making Settler Cinemas*, 74-5, 80.

Kyrgyz woman. With the cavalry riding forth from the stockade and the mountains in the background, we could easily be in the American West. Within the first ten minutes Kondratii refers obliquely to the 1916 revolt, and the flight of the Kyrgyz to China which followed – the *Ürkün* – the yurt in the stockade belongs to a returning refugee. The pre-revolutionary settler colonial past is also referred to when the son of Kalmat (Jantai), a Kyrgyz elder, is brought into the fort. In a defiant speech he says that his father is not a bandit, but an honorable man who killed a colonial official "When the White Tsar took our land," and then led his lineage away from Issyk-Kul into the mountains where they have dwelt ever since. In a conversation with Baizak we learn that Kondratii had served for two years in Bukhara, a clear reference to Mikhail Frunze's campaign of re-conquest of 1920-1921 in which Sytin had also participated. Kondratii is shown at ease with Central Asian customs of hospitality and tea-drinking, and in later scenes we hear him speaking in (dubbed) Kyrgyz: rather like Kirby York and Nathan Brittles in Ford's "Cavalry Trilogy," Kondratii (also a cavalry officer) has close and friendly relations with the indigenous population, which establishes both his indigeneity as a settler and his credentials as a Bolshevik commander.[37] However Baizak exploits these intimate social relations to sow distrust in Kondratii's mind, hinting that Qarabalta is politically suspect: he had been exiled for murder under "Nikolai" (Nicholas II), taken part in the 1916 uprising, and then spent a long period in China.

Although Kondratii and his men (all of whom are Russian) play an important role, and represent the monopoly of legitimate violence claimed by Soviet power, they are not the focus of *Scarlet Poppies*. Instead the hero is unquestionably Qarabalta (an intense, brooding performance from Chokmorov), and its two most dramatic moments have no Russian involvement at all. The first comes after Kondratii has rejected Qarabalta, convinced by circumstances and Baizak's lies that he cannot be trusted. In a local tavern Qarabalta then sings a dramatic lament in Qazaq, accompanying himself on the *dombyra* (two-stringed instrument) – a song which he says he learnt when returning across the Qazaq steppe from Siberian exile. The other moment of emotional

[37] Limbrick, *Making Settler Cinemas*, 72.

climax is the final struggle between Qarabalta and Baizak, in which they wrestle on horseback over a sheer drop, gripping their *kamcha*s (whips) in their teeth.

The film retains the kidnapping of Kondratii's wife during a raid on the Red Army stockade, but we see much less of her captivity than in the novel. Most significantly, the climax of the film is neither the downfall of Baizak nor the triumph of Soviet power, but the moment when Kalman leads his people down out of the mountains to the shores of Issyk-Kul. This is a clear evocation of the return of the Kyrgyz refugees who had fled the repression of the 1916 revolt. A longing for the waters and lands of Issyk-Kul is a powerful theme in much of the poetry and oral epic produced at that time.[38] Thus although the aesthetics and imagery of *Scarlet Poppies* owe a good deal to the western, its setting, Semirechie, was indeed a site of Russian settlement, and the source material on which it was based, Sytin's novel, undoubtedly did have colonial overtones, Shamshiev bends Sytin's narrative in new directions and reimagines the Russian author's characters. He patches these together with references to the 1916 revolt and its suppression in the forging of a Kyrgyz collective identity, and the role of Kyrgyz agency and heroism in defending Soviet power. The result is a film infused with Kyrgyz ethnic sensibilities, which in many ways subverts the colonial text on which it is based.

Conclusion

Despite some aesthetic and thematic similarities to the Western, the Soviet "Eastern" is a very distinctive genre in its own right. Even *The Scarlet Poppies of Issyk-Kul*, which unlike most of these films has many Russian characters and is set in a region of extensive Russian settlement, still affords much greater prominence to Kyrgyz national than to Russian settler colonial narratives. Central Asian *Basmachi* films, though to modern eyes they may seem riddled with Orientalist stereotyping and hackneyed Soviet propaganda, were often perceived at the time as a product of national culture – none more so than Ali Khamraev's masterpiece *Sed'maya Pulya* (*The Seventh Bullet*,

[38] Jipar Duishembieva, "From rebels to refugees: memorialising the revolt of 1916 in oral poetry," in *The Central Asian Revolt of 1916*, 294-301.

1972) also starring Chokmorov, which has no Russian characters at all. Although they certainly celebrated the victory of Soviet power over indigenous forces of resistance, in these films the agents of that power were usually Central Asians themselves: Soviet and national narratives were intertwined. This was at least partly a reflection of historical reality – the coming of Soviet Power to Central Asia during the Civil War was not simply the resurrection of Russian colonialism in another form, and early Soviet nationalities policy had a surprising amount in common with modernizing, nationalizing states such as Kemalist Turkey.[39] "National in form, Socialist in content" was the slogan for Soviet state-building in Central Asia, and as a wealth of recent scholarship has shown, Soviet nationalities policy was not simply window-dressing, neither in its origins in the 1920s, nor even at the height of the Stalin era.[40] By the time the "Eastern" genre came into its own in the 1960s and 1970s there was increasing national autonomy in the cultural sphere in Soviet Central Asia, partly as a safety-valve given the very limited freedom in the political sphere.[41] While cultural Russian*ness* was accorded pre-eminence in the USSR, this was not always true of Russians (or more broadly Europeans) as an ethnicity. The nationalizing component of Soviet rule remained crucially important, and gained in strength in the 1970s, the period of supposed Brezhnevian *zastoi* (stagnation), while the independent states that emerged in the region after 1991 have built their new national identities on Soviet foundations.[42] Settler Colonial themes are certainly present in much Russian literature and film with Central Asian settings, but the late Soviet *Basmachi* films or "Easterns" are better seen as a small but important facet of the Soviet nation-building project.

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[39] Adeeb Khalid, "Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective," *Slavic Review* 65.2 (2006), 231-251.

[40] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 125-181; Jeremy Smith, *Red Nations. The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 76-84; Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan. Nation, Empire and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Eren Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim. The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[41] Shoshana Keller, "Going to School in Uzbekistan," in *Everyday Life in Central Asia. Past and Present*, Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca, eds. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 254-260.

[42] Nick Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia. A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017), 32-40, 77-88.