

Vanguard of ‘socialist colonization’? The Krasnyi Vostok expedition of 1920

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During the Russian Civil War, special vehicles visited the vast country’s diverse regions as emissaries of central authority. The so-called ‘agitational’ vehicles carried out the functions of propaganda and agitation, ‘instruction’ (governance) and surveillance in the pursuit of two overarching, and sometimes contradictory, goals: state building and the radical transformation of society. The *Krasnyi Vostok* (Red East) expedition to Turkestan in 1920 was exceptional in the degree to which the train interfered in local governance regimes. It sought to win over a Muslim majority that had been terrorized by Soviets formed by Russian colonizers, which had not represented the masses but rather perpetuated racist domination. Ironically, having surveyed the vast gulf between the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary gaze and the complex and diverse world in which they found themselves, the *Krasnyi Vostok* activists concluded that ‘socialist colonization’ was the essential task in Turkestan.

Keywords: agitational vehicle; Turkestan; Russian Civil War; spatial colonization

Introduction

During the period of the Russian Civil War and foreign intervention (1918–21), special trains (*agitpoezda*) and steamboats (*agitparokhody*) carried political activists, propaganda, public-health information, films and other forms of popular entertainment to the frontiers of state power. For the new regime, the original purpose of the ‘agitational-instructional vehicle’ was to placate the provinces, especially in the wake of military offensives. However, as some activists soon realized, the innovation’s effects surpassed its initial function. Activists on the train met with local people, solicited their complaints and attempted to reform local governance regimes.

The *Krasnyi Vostok* (Red East, hereafter KV) expedition diligently spread Bolshevik propaganda and ‘agitated’ to encourage changes in line with central policy. The train broadcast a major change in the regime’s policy in Central Asia and took action to put the new line into effect. Like other agitational vehicles, the KV checked on local government and party organizations to see if they were following central policy and conducting business in accordance with proper procedures. But the KV was unique among agitational vehicles in its aggressive approach to the tasks of ‘instruction’. The train’s leadership, which was organized as the Political Department (*politotdel*), was prepared to remove dozens of officials from office in a given locality, even if that meant arresting communists.

The agitational vehicle has not received much attention in studies of the period, nor has the assertion of control over Central Asia by the central Communist regime. I have offered an overview of agitational vehicles in the period (1998) and a study of an expedition down the Volga in 1920 (2010). Peter Kenez (1986) devoted a few pages to agitational vehicles in his history of Soviet propaganda methods. Other scholars have looked at the agitational vehicle’s place in

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the history of film (Taylor 1971, 1979a, 1979b, 1985) and political art (Bibikova 1971). Even Russian or Soviet historians have rarely dealt with the agitational vehicle at length, with two significant exceptions (Maksakova 1956, Tolstoi 2002). As to the KV, the author has managed to find only one mention of the 1920 expedition in works dealing primarily with Central Asia (Sahadeo 2007, p. 222). In general, the period of 1920–24, when central Soviet authority was established in Central Asia, has yet to be explored thoroughly (Khalid 2006b, p. 874).

The current paper looks at the KV's 1920 expedition from a historical-geographical perspective. It also is an attempt to contribute to the 'new spatial history' (Bassin *et al.* 2010). In this regard, it seems appropriate to begin with a discussion of *place* and *space*, and the relationship between them. Clearly the terms are not opposites. On occasion they are used as synonyms, but there are good reasons to attempt to distinguish between them. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan took on this task in his *Space and place* (1977, p. 6):

In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. 'Space' is more abstract than 'place'. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.

Consideration of the effects of familiarity makes a good starting point, but the notion of space as 'undifferentiated' and the implication that 'value' is just a personal matter lead to problems. Two individuals might look at the same house, one considering it a place and the other a space. For the former the house is the home where she dwells. She has become emotionally attached to her home, feeling herself to belong there and making it part of her identity. For the other person the house is a piece of real estate professionally appraised to be worth a specific amount of money. Both perceive value, albeit markedly different in kind: one personal and the other social.

Space in a sense can be pictured from the outside, or *as if* one could be detached from space (Sack 1997, p. 86). It can be viewed abstractly or instrumentally, as an object. This might involve 'seeing like a state', as James C. Scott discusses (1998), or seeing like a planner or developer. Everybody 'sees' this way to some extent when purposely attempting to change places or even when trying to navigate through unfamiliar places. When teaching world regional geography I have no choice but to treat Kenya largely as a space defined by a set of attributes, even though I know millions of people dwell in complex inter-connected places there. Seeing space in this way may be due to lack of personal experience in place. But spaces may be the result of reductive analysis, often functional or ideological in nature.

Robert David Sack challenges us 'to think through how a particular event or process (such as education, work and poverty, or categories such as meaning, nature, social relations and the self) occurs as a series of places' (1997, p. 255). In this regard, it is not difficult to consider the expedition of the *Krasnyi Vostok* in this way – from place through fleeting space to another place, and so on. But for understanding the significance of place, the idea of the self *occurring* 'as a series of places' is perhaps the most illuminating. As J.E. Malpas (1999, p. 35) argues, the self does not underlie or exist apart from experiences of living and acting in place.

[T]he structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place. The connection of subjectivity with place indicates . . . the need to view subjectivity as tied to agency and embodied spatiality, and therefore as constituted in relation to a structure that extends beyond the subject to encompass a world of objects, events and persons.

Place is where we dwell (Casey 1993). Place is where the body is, and it is experienced by means of all the body's senses. Place is the world as we live it: personal and meaningful. We become attached to places and shape places in ways that have as much to do with emotion as reason (not that emotion and reason can be completely separated). At the same time, as Malpas argues, places shape us. What each of us learns from living through one's own series of places, whether from disciplined thought or other ways of knowing, is fundamental for our

understanding of the world and who we understand ourselves to be. The places become part of the narrative that largely defines the self and makes coherent both the self and one's memory of the series of places (Pred 1990, pp. 25–30, Malpas 1999, pp. 72–91)

The KV carried a group of activists who considered themselves to be revolutionaries. Their understanding of the revolution, of society, and the means by which the latter was to be transformed framed their perception of the places they visited. Each had his or her own narrative, but they were unified by what might be called a *revolutionary gaze*.¹ A gaze, considered as a structured perception of space, is distinguished from such terms as perspective, view and vision in that it is understood to be a dynamic social construction. Gazes are justified and supported by institutions. Also, as John Urry notes: 'Gazes are constructed through difference' (Urry 1996, p. 1). Spatial gazes help organize the operations of power through their territoriality; that is, they define what (or who) does or does not belong in a given area (Sack 1986, Sack 1997, pp. 90–91).

The activists' gaze guided their efforts to transform places in Central Asia, a project that may be called *spatial colonization*, in the sense of an effort to make real places resemble planned or imagined space. But the re-structuring of space is more easily imagined than done, because the outcome depends on the agency of people in place. Colonization of space requires that specific practices be embodied, performed and emplaced.

The word 'colonization' comes with baggage. Communists usually reserved the term to refer to the former Russian Empire or to Western imperialism. As will be discussed later, there are good reasons to distinguish between classic imperialist colonization and the Soviet variety (Khalid 2006a). Yet in a broad sense, the word seems applicable to attempts by 'outsiders' to change places in accordance with a spatial gaze. Moreover, at least on one occasion, KV activists urged Moscow to support 'Soviet colonization'.² At any rate, it should not be assumed that all attempts at 'colonization' in this broad sense are bad; literacy campaigns involve revolutions in countless places, but few would argue that they do more harm than good. However, spatial colonization typically encounters difficulties that tend to slow down or divert the process. These difficulties may be due to conscious resistance – perhaps violent, but more often in the form of 'weapons of the weak' that are embedded in place (Scott 1985). Difficulties may also arise as a type of *friction*, not conscious opposition but the dissipation of momentum that results from individuals' trying to reap personal benefits from a changing situation.³ That is, colonization may provide resources for unauthorized and unforeseen agency in place.

Thanks to their shared Marxist-Leninist narrative, Bolsheviks believed that they knew how history would unfold. Modernity in general was characterized by a teleological view of progress, but Bolsheviks were extreme in this regard. History for them led to a new world inhabited by a new type of people. Already they used the term 'former people' (*byvshie liudi*) to designate people of upper- or middle-class background. On principle they were impatient with people and places that were slow to conform to the revolutionary gaze – they saw little value in people or places as they were when they did not seem to be advancing along the correct path.

People dwell in places, although some take little notice of where they are. Bolsheviks, as 'professional' revolutionaries, were extreme in their detachment from place. Before October, their habitat was made up of smoky apartments in foreign countries, basement nooks where printing presses could be set up, workers' hangouts, prisons and the 'bears' corners' of exile. These were places that they felt themselves passing through, without value except for their fleeting usefulness for the revolutionary cause. Bolsheviks were people who were not from anywhere, not of anywhere – literally utopians – people who defined themselves in terms of an imagined final destination.

In reality they ended up in Moscow, the core of the Russian heartland. Moscow was the command centre for the railroad and telegraph networks, which constituted the physical infrastructure of modernity. The unity of the empire had depended on this dual network for military security, political administration and economic development. Without it, Central Asian cotton would not have reached national and international markets and relatively few Russians would have settled in the region. The revolution did not change this fundamental geographical structure, as it continued both to enable and constrain the regime's projects.

As the network radiated outward from Moscow it tended, with the exception of the Donbas-Krivoi Rog industrial region, to grow less dense with distance. Similarly, social and cultural divergence from what was normal in the Moscow region tended to increase with distance from the capital and, more starkly, from the railroad system. In part because accessibility declined and differentiation increased with distance from Moscow, there was 'distance decay' at work in the leadership's understanding of peripheral areas. Of course, the Bolsheviks' self-righteous certainty in their cause and adherence to a rigid class-obsessed ideology led to deplorable acts close to home. Yet, these problems often were compounded by physical and cultural difference as when, for instance, the category 'rural proletariat' was thought to be the basis for understanding Uzbek farmers.

The activists brought their narrative and turned their gaze on each place they visited. Especially important were the public spaces where dialogue ensued between the activists and the local people. At each stop a liminal space/place formed near the train where the activists' performances elicited unpredictable reactions on the part of the audience, which comprised a variety of individuals who were working out their political subjectivities in highly unstable places. They too *performed*, for instance when presenting their complaints to the emissaries from the centre. The activists not only sought to mollify the local residents, but also to induce ('agitate') them to turn their community into a space of revolution. But at some stops in their circuit, unforeseeable aspects of the local situation compelled the activists to innovate. This happened when they lingered long enough to see a locality from the dwellers' perspective. As Tuan put it: 'If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place' (Tuan 1977, p. 6). But this change from movement through space to dwelling in place also can produce a change in perspective and understanding. As Malpas finds: 'The structure of the mind, and of mental content, cannot, it seems, be severed from the structure of the world in which the subject is necessarily located' (1999, p. 100). In 1920, Central Asia was a different world from Moscow: a different world full of diverse places.

An expedition to Turkestan

As noted above, the KV intervened more frequently and radically than other agitational vehicles in local-governance regimes. The relatively extreme approach adopted by the KV was an outgrowth of the Kremlin's goal of quelling discontent in Turkestan. The Soviet government that came to power in Tashkent during the October Revolution operated most of the time in isolation from Moscow, because railroad and telegraph ties had been severed. 'Red Tashkent' had managed to survive and defeat some of its opponents, but its terroristic reign over the indigenous population helped to spark a Muslim resistance movement, the '*Basmachis*' as the Russians called them, which would persist until 1923 (Sahadeo 2007, pp. 212–214). An emissary, P.A. Kobozev, was sent from Moscow in the spring of 1919 in an attempt to appease the native population by recruiting Muslims into the local government, but he was forced to retreat back to Moscow by outraged local authorities (Sahadeo 2007, pp. 210–215). The severity of Russian colonists' repression of the indigenous population is indicated by Marco Buttino's calculation

that there should have been 2.3 million more natives there in 1920 than there actually were (1990, p. 69). At the same time, indigenous ‘communists’ were pushing the regional party’s position toward ethnic nationalism, and away from class-based socialism (Sahadeo 2007, p. 217). Moscow, therefore, was attempting to stop the brutalization of the native masses at the hands of local Russians, while at the same time undermining nationalism and pan-Turkism. In this regard, Soviet policy toward Turkestan was consistent with the regime’s orientation toward ‘the East’ in general (White 1974). A high-level commission, *Turkkomissia*, arrived from Moscow in November to take over as the supreme authority of Turkestan (Sahadeo 2007, pp. 214–220). And to make sure that the new policies actually were enacted, the KV would tour the territory, instituting the policy changes and removing obstacles to their realization.

The importance of the KV’s expedition is indicated by the appointment of Georgii Safarov to head the political committee (*politkom*). Safarov, the son of a Polish mother and an Armenian architect, was born in St Petersburg in 1891. At the tender age of 14 he was involved with socialist groups. He joined the Social Democratic Party when he was 17 and soon fled abroad to avoid arrest. Safarov became a personal associate of Lenin, working for a time as his secretary. He accompanied the Bolshevik leader back to Russia in 1917 aboard the famous ‘sealed train’. The following year found Safarov in the Urals, where he helped organize the execution of the Tsar and his family. Subsequently, Safarov worked as an editor for *Pravda* until a bombing attack on the building by anarchists left him seriously wounded. As this brief resumé indicates, Safarov was a very prominent Bolshevik at the moment of his selection to lead the KV. He had no first-hand experience of Central Asia, but he had devoted his life to the party’s cause (Safarov 2011a, 2011b).⁴

A note on sources

With one exception, the archival documents upon which the following narrative is based are found in *fond* r-1252 in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) in Moscow. R-1252 consists exclusively of documents from the agitational-vehicle organization, which was under the authority of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets (VTsIK) until 1921. In r-1252 one finds many kinds of documents: speeches, minutes from meetings, reports, newspapers, lists of slogans, receipts, authorizations and more. The documents used for this paper come from the KV’s *politkom*: protocols from their meetings, reports on events or activities and correspondence with other governing agencies.

The dominant voice in all of these documents is that of Georgii Safarov. Other voices emerge briefly in reports or in notes from meetings. It is my impression that Safarov was a reasonably collegial leader, not a dictator. The *politkom* met frequently and its collective opinion was worked out at these sessions. Local people communicate through these documents indirectly only, as their voices were interpreted, classified and counted by KV activists. That is the nature of the material. However, it is clear that the KV activists would not have been inclined to sugar coat their findings for the centre: their mission was to bring order to a situation that was known to be chaotic. They also seem unlikely to have exaggerated. Reading their comments about their first stops in Central Asia, one senses that they were genuinely shocked by the rampant corruption, abuses of authority and other types of criminal behaviour on the part of Soviet officials. Moreover, other sources indicate that the situation was in general terms much as the *politkom* reported (Sahadeo 2007, pp. 208–228). Certainly, these activists were not exceptions to Sahadeo’s observation that ‘central Bolsheviks held their own imperial stereotypes and prejudices’ (2007, p. 209), not least in their ideological pre-occupation with ‘backwardness’ (Khalid 2006a). But they did have a clear-eyed view of the oppression of the native Muslim population by Russians, even those who claimed to be socialists.

Preparations

Among the first matters to be settled by the train's political activists was the selection of slogans to be propagated in Turkestan.⁵ It was perhaps typical of Bolsheviks to work out 37 political statements at their second meeting, months before they had obtained a train or any supplies. Some of the problems that they expected to encounter may be inferred from the slogans. The first in the list typifies a number of statements which offered general reassurances to the indigenous population: 'The Russian Soviet Republic is not the conqueror of other lands, but their liberator from the yoke of the predators.' Some of the slogans could have been (and were) used anywhere, for example: 'Soviet authority has decreed: he who does not work shall not eat.'

Several appeals sought support for the Red Army, telling the native population that 'only with arms in hand' would they be able to defend their freedom. Two slogans disingenuously promised religious freedom, contrasting the purported Soviet aim of supporting 'freedom of conscience' with the tsarist authority's 'forcible implantation' of Orthodoxy. Finally, the last slogan reminded the indigenous people that the tsarist regime had designated their rulers 'from above', while Soviet authority allowed the people to select and recall their own leaders.

Apart from slogans and decrees, nearly everything was scarce in the winter of 1919/20. The train's organizers faced difficulties in obtaining rolling stock and people, as well as equipment and supplies. Initial expectations were very ambitious, but in the end they had to set off with much less than they had anticipated. For instance, at one point the activists felt that they needed three carloads of literature in 'Muslim' language. But they were able to obtain only enough to fill half a car, and most of that was in Tatar and referred to dated themes.⁶ Another factor affected the *Krasnyi Vostok* as it had other agitational vehicles: the reluctance of central agencies to part with competent personnel (Karpinskii 1921, p. 28). In this case, both the Public Health Commissariat and the Cheka (political police, predecessor of the KGB) refrained from sending representatives.⁷

The most serious personnel problem was the scarcity of activists who were natives of Turkestan. Unfortunately, the archival documents do not reveal the exact number of Turkestan natives who took part in the expedition, although they do show how persistently the train's leaders tried to obtain them. At first, the leaders thought that 16 'Muslim' activists would be accompanying them. The figure 13 was also mentioned at one point.⁸ Unfortunately, most of the ostensibly available people were Tatars, a nationality which formed a small minority in Turkestan, one moreover that was associated negatively with Russian rule (Baldauf 1991, p. 80, Keller 2001, p. 51, Sahadeo 2007, p. 144). Later 10 or 11 Muslim activists were promised. At least one of these did not make the trip, but five more were supposed to come on board in Tashkent. Finally, at least some of the 'technical workers' on the train were Central Asians, although surely not the 30–35 the leadership anticipated in early December.⁹

Before venturing off on their tour of Turkestan, the train's personnel sought to learn both about how the train was supposed to function as an institution and what they could expect to find once they reached their destination. Comrade Ruzer, chief (*nachpoezd*) of the *V.I. Lenin*, addressed the group concerning the organization of his agitational train and its activities.¹⁰ Shortly after arrival, the political committee would consult with local government agencies and the party organization to gain an understanding of key local problems. The 'instructors' would then be sent off to meet with the local representatives of their parent organizations. Other meetings would be called with groups that the train's activists were especially eager to reach, especially trade unions, youths and women. Also, general public meetings would be announced. Ruzer warned that the public would much rather listen to 'any kind of violinist or singer than a lecture or report'. In this regard, films were crucial in the effort to attract the public.

The train's activists heard a number of reports on the situation in Turkestan. A representative from the military commissariat emphasized the political repercussions of numerous mobilizations of the local people's livestock, especially horses, for which they were not paid. He also indicated that there had been serious shortcomings in supplying food to the Muslim population which would have to be rectified, one of which was the distribution of products proscribed by Muslim custom.¹¹

Another report in mid-December deemed the state of the railroads and industry in Central Asia to be relatively good. On the other hand, there were daunting political obstacles to the advancement of the Soviet cause.

The network of party organizations is fairly substantial, i.e., the number of members is fairly large (after the purge and the exclusion of 2/3 [of the members], 40,000 remain), but they are of very low quality. In all of Turkestan there are no more than 40 real communists. Both the party and Soviet organizations are located along the railroad lines. Ten *versts* [10.6 km] from the railroad there is no Soviet authority. Sixty percent of the proletariat consists of village proletarians who are intensively exploited. Behind the appearance of nationalization in Turkestan terrible scandals have been taking place: they have stolen everything that they could lay hands on. This led to the complete extinction of all trade and the closing of the bazaars, and given the lack of proper supply organizations, this was a huge catastrophe.¹²

A Comrade Shvarts, who had just returned from Turkestan, emphasized the need to appease the Muslim population and to convince the local authorities 'that the policy of oppressing the masses is incorrect'. The point was to 'give the Muslim masses as much freedom as possible, establish far and wide the work of popular enlightenment, and give all kinds of support to them and their welfare'.¹³

Agrarian policy had been especially radical, as even poor farmers had been deprived of their land. All gardens were nationalized as well, including the very smallest. Shvarts said citizens were afraid to pick fruit from their own trees and, since the government was unable to harvest it, it rotted on the ground. He singled out for special criticism the new communal farms. 'The so-called Communards, urbanites, came to the *kishlaki*, drove off the peasants and settled in their places, in which regard they chose a time when the grain was ripening and it was already possible to harvest it.'

In the cities, said Shvarts, 'life is fading away'. The government closed all shops, down to the smallest counter. As a result, most of the population by necessity was engaged in petty trade. Only Russians were supplied by official agencies. Muslims were deprived of the means to provide for themselves but not offered an alternative. In addition, the nationalization of small fish-processing concerns the previous July sparked an uprising in Fergana which was still not under control.

The reports produced by the KV activists support the view of numerous scholars that the policies of 'Red Tashkent' had disastrous consequences. In Marco Buttino's words, 'October' in Central Asia had been a 'colonialists' revolution' (1990, p. 69). The 'proletariat' in Central Asia consisted primarily of railroad workers, who were motivated as much 'to protect, if not build upon existing privileges as to address their complaints as an exploited class' (Sahadeo 2007, pp. 189–190). These 'revolutionaries' formed the Tashkent Soviet, 'whose atrocities were exceeded only by its vanity' (Khalid 2006b, p. 870). By 1920, 'famine and the murderous behavior of Russians (regardless of ideology) toward Turkestanis had engendered so much bitterness that the new government spent much of its first years simply repairing the damage' (Keller 2001, p. 32). Repairing damage was the KV's top priority.

The KV left Savelevskii Station on 22 January.¹⁴ The activists would have welcomed more pertinent, timely literature in local languages. But some of them at least were able to translate handbills and pamphlets into one or another Turkic language, and then they could be printed

on the train's press.¹⁵ And many of the others began taking language lessons.¹⁶ At least some, and possibly all, of the instructors had standardized forms that would not only facilitate the collection of information but also enable them both to compare localities and compile a regional overview of their agencies' activities.¹⁷ In other words, they were ready to apply a fundamental modern method of surveillance in the effort to improve the performance of local agencies and to link them more coherently and responsively to their central headquarters (Holquist 1997, p. 419).

First encounters

The KV made several stops in European Russia (Figure 1) and was also delayed by lack of fuel and snowdrifts on the tracks. It was not until 13 March that the train neared Tashkent.¹⁸ The KV at last began its assigned work on 26 March in Novaia Bukhara, now Kagan, the predominantly Russian railroad settlement near Bukhara, which would remain an autonomous emirate through the summer (Becker 1968, pp. 289–295). Here the train's activists experienced their first taste of the problems that awaited them in Turkestan. The local branch of Government Control was inexperienced and poorly organized. Former prisoners of war were demanding to return to their home countries. The Justice Department was receiving no funding. The hospital was functioning, but the pharmacy suffered from a lack of medicine. Schools were not receiving enough food and the Education Department was in disarray. Food distribution in general was not based on class categories, as it had been in Russia. Here rations were equal for all, which meant to the activists that the labouring population was not properly treated.

Early on, concerns emerged about the 'quality' of local cadres. For example, the chair of the cotton, oil and soap production trade union, which was a crucial economic sector in Turkestan, had been invited to give a report. But he showed up too intoxicated to address the gathering, and then he went on to the general public meeting. The activists considered such behaviour intolerable. Since he had 'publicly discredited an organization of the party and Soviet Power' the union leader was compelled to write a deposition about his insobriety and then he was turned over to the Revolutionary Tribunal (*revtribunal*) of the Turkestan Front of the Red Army (*Turkfront*).¹⁹

However, this incident was soon overshadowed when the activists discovered rampant abuses of authority in Katta-Kurgan, a small town on the line from Bukhara to Samarkand. It was here that the train activists first plumbed the depths of official corruption in Turkestan. And it was here as well that the *politotdel's* activities touched off a backlash of political resistance to the train's authority. Before March ended, the KV's State Control representative had already received reports about criminal officials and counter-revolutionaries who had found positions in the district's government.²⁰ Then the Katta-Kurgan Cheka reported that there were 'bandits' in the local office of *Turkfront's* Special Department, whom the Cheka arrested, only to have the Special Department free them again. At the same time, the Special Department arrested union members and the Cheka in turn was trying to liberate them.²¹

There was also a problem with the border guards who were supposed to be controlling the movement of people and goods in and out of the Katta-Kurgan district. Many of them were disregarding valid identity documents and simply requisitioning money and goods arbitrarily, without giving receipts as they were required to do. Three guards were arrested before the train arrived. Then the KV's Complaints Bureau attracted the local Muslim population, who had a host of grievances against local authorities. Trusting the train as an agent of justice, local Muslims accused the border guards of armed robbery at the public meetings the train organized.²²

The flood of complaints was not directed against the border guards alone. The Special Department was already on the agenda when the train arrived. The complaints from local residents sparked investigations of most of the rest of Katta Kurgan's administrative and social institutions, of which there were 18 in all.²³ In the end, 40 cases were deemed sufficiently

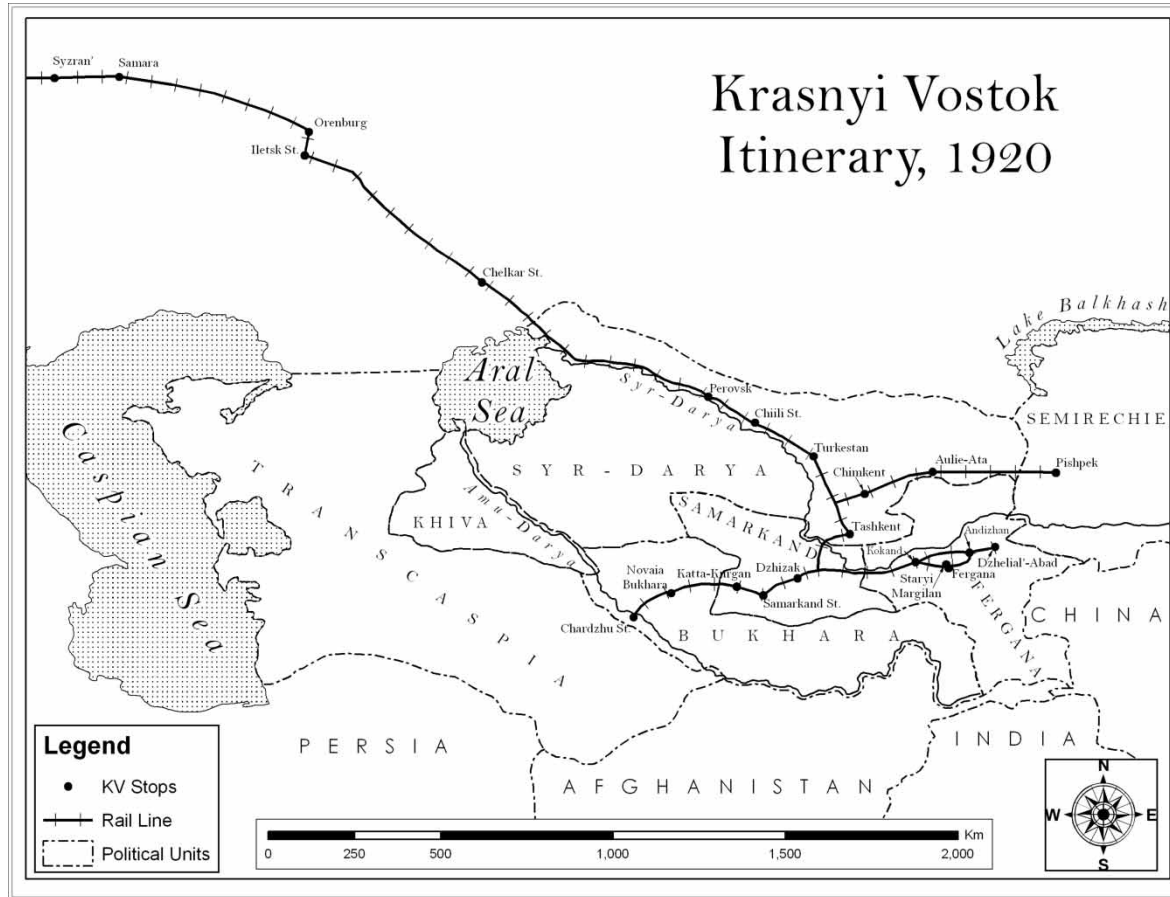


Figure 1. Map of the Krasnyi Vostok itinerary.

serious and well founded to be sent on to the *revtribunal*. Eighteen were from the frontier guards and six concerned the staff of the Special Department. Five held posts with the local Economic Council (SNKh) and six were directors of various departments in Soviet institutions. They also arrested the chief of police, one member of the *ispolkom*, one judge, the former head of the Cheka, and one native citizen.²⁴

Katta Kurgan was a turning point for the expedition, as the activists themselves realized. For the rest of the tour the *politotdel* would be looking for corruption, abuse of authority, and other types of criminality in local Soviet organizations. They took it upon themselves to investigate cases, arrest suspects and hand them over to the tribunals. It was, as Safarov later wrote, a 'purge' (Safarov 1996, p. 183).

Our work in Katta-Kurgan clearly showed how the train's work must be conducted in Turkestan. To be limited only to the instruction [of local authorities] here is not possible, and it would be pointless, because frequently here the first priority ought to be the arrest of the people who are supposed to be instructed, just as this occurred in Katta-Kurgan. Therefore the train must conduct a purge of the top ranks. After the public meeting, Muslims came to the train and said that only now can they speak and work freely, now that we have disposed of that group of former guards. Simple instructing will not accomplish anything, this group of former tsarist *chinovniki* [bureaucrats] listens to everything very respectfully, but in reality does just the same as before. In the future, we need to strive for more, to make deeper changes. Only after a fundamental purge and [after we have gained] a deeper acquaintance with the situation of affairs in the localities, will we be able to draw the Muslims closer to Soviet authority.²⁵

Taking stock

Their early experiences proved that the Complaints Bureau could be much more effective at longer stops. They had to have time to look up the complainant at his or her address, and then investigate. If there was no time for that, the complaint could not be addressed, which would cause discontent. The KV activists stayed in Katta-Kurgan for a week, and received 100 official complaints. In addition they dealt with about the same number of requests for information and explanations of procedures, as well as applications for transfer from staff employees of the railroad and public institutions. By the end of the Katta-Kurgan stop, the activists were deeply impressed with the impact of the Complaints Bureau, which they emphasized in the report:²⁶

The experience of working in Katta-Kurgan showed that it was necessary and useful to receive complaints, not just to help the population in individual cases, but mainly as a way for the activists to acquaint themselves with the process of Soviet construction in the localities and to bolster the prestige of central authority in the consciousness of the local population.

The KV's political leaders could see that the state-building process, 'Soviet construction', had a very long way to go in Turkestan. Moreover, it had not got off to a good start with respect to the indigenous population. Ordinary citizens, especially the Muslims, had an overabundance of reasons to distrust the local authorities. With nowhere to turn, they had little choice but to remain silent until the day came when all the resentments boiled over in another uprising. The train offered an alternative, which many local residents were eager to pursue, according to the activists' report.

While carrying out its work the Bureau takes note at every step of the ruling hopelessness and complete ignorance about the basic outline of the Soviet regime (not to mention its essence) on the part of the Muslim population, and also their profound trust in the authority of the train.²⁷

In Samarkand

Samarkand's governance regime was as unsatisfactory as Katta Kurgan's, but on a larger scale. Numerous depositions and reports indicate that the local population justifiably feared and

despised the authorities.²⁸ The abuses of authority included profiteering on rationed goods, selling requisitioned goods, illegal requisitioning, arbitrary beatings of citizens and illegal arrests.²⁹ Things were so bad that the local Commission on the Struggle with Alcoholism was selling wine at speculative prices.³⁰

The Samarkand police appear to have been not only corrupt, but vicious. In one incident, a group of policemen, including an assistant chief, ‘savagely’ beat a man with rifle butts, evidently for the misdemeanour of playing cards. The chief was entitled to take 10,000 roubles for a fine, but he also kept all the rest of the man’s money. This same group of policemen, along with the local Red Army chief-of-staff and other prominent citizens, were implicated in the theft of 20 Bukhara silver coins, a gun and a horse. Other complaints referred to Samarkand police drinking and robbing the citizens.³¹

Other criminals preyed on the population, without much to fear from the police, evidently. The previous month, 19 armed bandits launched an attack on a Jewish neighbourhood. And then a few days before the train arrived, a group of 16 attacked again. The Jewish residents asked the Complaints Bureau to provide armed guards.³²

There were other violent bands in the area. One group said to include as many as 45 people attacked a bazaar and made off with 100 million roubles and 20 horses. In this case, two Chekists from the regional organization investigated successfully and identified the criminals. The train activists commended them not only for their good detective work, but also because they had to deal with a group of police officials who tried to obstruct the investigation.³³

Not all Chekists remained untainted by corruption. The train’s investigators found that some innocent people had been jailed for long periods, so they lodged a complaint against the Chekist in charge of the cases.³⁴ In response to another case in which a man was falsely charged with bribery, the train’s activists accused the Cheka investigator and the whole collegium of the Samarkand Cheka of abuse of authority.³⁵ The train activists also discovered that the regional Cheka commissioner had threatened to arrest some people unless they gave him wine and 60,000 roubles. The train investigators sent the offending commissioner to the *revtribunal*.³⁶

In the report on their work in Samarkand, the activists were pleased that ‘the appearance of the train terrorized the administrative sector of the population’. They were prepared to arrest anybody among the local authorities, finding justification for their militancy in the discovery of such abuses as the theft of supplies from the social welfare agency, which left young children ‘without a piece of bread’.³⁷ However, their suspicions usually focused on white-collar staff members who had worked in government or business before the revolution. For example, the sixth issue of the train’s newspaper, *Krasnyi Vostok*, carried a front-page article, ‘Labouring people must impose order’, which specifically called for grass-roots surveillance over the white-collar personnel.³⁸

The Kuper affair

Samarkand became a political battleground for the KV when the *politotdel* locked horns with Comrade Kuper, head of the regional party organization. The conflict began when the *politotdel* arrested several of Kuper’s associates in Katta Kurgan. The train’s activists were soon accusing Kuper of corruption and abuse of authority. Whatever the merits of these charges, it is not surprising that a conflict arose between the local leader and those he saw as intruders. Kuper had been a member of the *kraikom*, the supreme party organization in Turkestan. The *kraikom* had dispatched him to Samarkand to lead the local party organization, which supervised all branches of government. Kuper could plausibly claim that he was the legitimate power in Samarkand, not the KV’s meddlesome interlopers.³⁹

In mid-April the *politotdel* tried to have Kuper arrested but he refused to submit. The KV activists appealed to the *kraikom* without success.⁴⁰ They then attempted to have one of Kuper's main associates convicted by a revolutionary tribunal but, given the absence of laws or even a set procedure, the trial became increasingly chaotic until it was transferred to a higher-level tribunal in Tashkent.⁴¹

For a month, the political department bombarded Tashkent with resolutions against Kuper, along with complaints about him from other officials and private citizens. Kuper responded on 15 May through the Samarkand newspaper, *Izvestiia*, which was under his control, with an article entitled 'Cheap self-promoters'.⁴² The article infuriated the train activists who responded with another charge: that Kuper was guilty of 'discrediting Soviet authority as represented by an organ of the Central Executive Committee [that is, the train] by use of a Soviet publication'.⁴³

In June the political department appeared to have won. Safarov cited a ruling of a commission of the Turkfront Special Department with the participation of representatives from the Turkestan *kraikom* that Kuper should appear before the Turkfront revolutionary tribunal. But Kuper was not arrested. Safarov resumed his campaign, appealing to the *kraikom*, the Turkfront's tribunal, the Turkestan Central Executive Committee, the Special Department of the Turkfront, to a member of the Russian Central Executive Committee's commission on Turkestan affairs, and once again to the Turkestan tribunal.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the archival record breaks off at this point, without revealing precisely the conclusion to this struggle. But since Safarov was appointed to the new Turkestan Party Bureau at the end of July, it is highly probable that Kuper subsequently was no longer in a position of authority in Central Asia (*Grazhdanskaia* 1983). Safarov and the KV political department had expended a huge amount of energy to dislodge one 'local Russian "colonizer"',⁴⁵ and in the process, they vividly illustrated that so far the result of 'Soviet construction' in Turkestan was a tangled mess.

Reading between the lines in the records

Kuper seems the villain in the records left behind by the activists. Had Kuper's papers been saved, they may have told a different story. In general, it is to be expected that the documents that remain from the KV's expedition would tend to present the activists in a positive light, but nevertheless some comments give rise to questions.

Sometimes the KV clearly improved local situations. The regimes in a number of areas made life a nightmare for ordinary people. A case encountered in Syr' Darya province in June serves as particularly vivid example of why the KV was needed to root out official malfeasance and protect the Muslim population. The trouble began when the district party committee set up a commission of five members to reorganize the counties' executive committees. Four of the men went on a drinking binge and began robbing the population. As to the reorganization of local governments, the 'reformers' put their relatives on the committees. Anybody who protested was arrested, including the fifth member of the commission. Their abuses included an especially brutal invasion of a Muslim home in search of valuables to steal. In the course of their search, the men barged into the women's quarters and beat two women, one of whom suffered a miscarriage. The KV activists sent them all to the *revtribunal*.⁴⁶

Yet it is disquieting that the activists bragged about 'terrorizing' white-collar staff all along the train's route.⁴⁷ Of course this meant firing people, not shooting them. Indeed, there does appear to have been a lot of bureaucratic overstaffing in Turkestan. In Tashkent alone there were 16,000 white-collar employees in the government. The *politotdel* ordered a 25% cut in personnel from all branches of government, but the decision was not carried out. Similar administrative bloat was found in most places, and the activists understood that 'a heavy apparatus cannot be carried by the half-feudal economy'.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks' approach to

staff employees – calling on the labouring masses to exercise constant vigilance, conducting inquisitions, assuming that problems were caused by corruption or sabotage – was bound to alienate skilled personnel.

The case of the rampaging ‘reformers’ in Syr’ Darya province hints at another problem that must have been difficult for visitors to sort out. The activists tried to struggle against nepotism, but as outsiders they were vulnerable to being used in conflicts between clans. For example, in Dzhezkazgan a feud dated at least from the revolt of 1916, when some families rose to prominence by cooperating with Tsarist authorities. Once order was restored, the collaborators were installed in power and remained there four years later.⁴⁹ The local ‘commissar’ organized mobs to attack his personal enemies.⁵⁰ This case came to light, but there may have been others when the complaints’ bureau and the *politotdel* were exploited by marginalized groups to settle scores with groups who had benefited from the political turmoil, when neither faction had the slightest commitment to the socialist cause.

Outside of the main towns, the KV activists encountered numerous cases that support Shoshana Keller’s depiction of ‘a state of low-level, continuous guerrilla war in the countryside’ dating back to 1906 (2001, p. 24).⁵¹ One of the train’s missions was to appease the Muslim population, in accordance with Lenin’s view of ‘the Muslim poor, not Russian workers, as the new vanguard force in Central Asia’ (Sahadeo 2007, p. 209). But taking possession of the territory meant coming to grips with a colonial geography that structured daily life. For example there were separate schools for Russians and Muslims, with the latter always a smaller proportion of the schools than their share of the population.⁵² In the town of Andijan there were 10 schools to serve a largely Russian population of 10,000. In the surrounding countryside, where 600,000 Muslims lived, there was one school. In neither Andijan nor the rural district were there medical facilities for Muslims.⁵³ The KV activists reported such injustices, but obviously they could not build schools or staff clinics.

End of the expedition

In May the KV headed to Tashkent, the largest city and administrative centre for Turkestan. After a few weeks of uncertainty, probably due to the Kuper case, the *Turkkomissia* commended the train’s company. In a way, the Turkestan leaders appreciated the activists too much, because they wanted to keep them in Tashkent. The train’s leaders insisted, successfully, that the train not be broken up, because the activists would not have the same ‘organizational power’ separately.⁵⁴ In mid-June the KV resumed its tour, focusing especially on areas around Chimkent and Aulie-Ata (later called Dzhabul and now Taraz), which were seriously affected by the ‘*Basmachi*’ uprising. On 3 July they reached Perovsk (now Kyzylorda), the last stop in Turkestan.

On the way back to Moscow, all the train’s departments compiled final reports, including the Complaints Bureau.⁵⁵ In the course of the expedition, 940 formal complaints were received, with Aulie-Ata, Samarkand, Chimkent and Katta Kurgan ranking as the top four areas, accounting for 532 of the total. As regards the types of complaints received, the most numerous concerned confiscations of property, dissatisfaction with the legal process and land issues: the three categories together accounting for 490 of the complaints. Most of the complaints were filed by ‘various people’, whom the Complaints Bureau evidently did not manage to identify more specifically and ‘peasants’, 80% of whom were Muslim.

Socialist colonization?

Near the end of the expedition, the *politkom* compiled its report on Pishpek (now Bishkek). What the activists found there was typical of what they had encountered nearly everywhere in

Turkestan. For example, the *politkom* tried to meet with the local party organization, but none of Pishpek's 'Communists' appeared. It seems they only came to meetings that were followed by dances. Wearily, the activists noted that they would not be able to improve the situation substantially without arresting most of the officials, which was impractical because they lacked replacements.

There is a need to send in proletarians from the centre of Soviet Russia, even if they are from the ranks, so long as they are honest workers with some experience of Soviet construction. There is a need for mass 'socialist colonization,' in order to give Turkestan the builder-cadres of socialist government: both Russians and Muslims, infected neither with tsarist colonialism nor narrow nationalism, and from the genuine labouring elements.⁵⁶

Obviously, the KV activists were not advocating restoration of Russian colonialism of the Tsarist type or consolidation of the 'colonial revolution' that had brought Russian workers to dominance (Safarov 1996). What they experienced in the places they visited in Turkestan most probably did change their outlook in some ways, but not by causing them to reject their belief in the cause of socialist construction. Safarov's faith in the progressive nature of Soviet power remained unshaken, as he wrote in 1921: 'By its most essential nature, [Soviet authority] cannot be a colonial power, the power of a handful of colonizers ruling over the masses of the indigenous population' (Safarov 1996, p. 199). But what of the 'socialist colonization' that his group of activists had advocated for Turkestan?

Shoshona Keller concludes that '[t]he struggle from 1917 to 1922 can be read as a campaign to assert Russian rule, as much or more so than Bolshevik power over Turkestan' (2001, p. 36). In contrast, the present study finds that the KV activists in 1920 were trying to establish central Bolshevik authority and repress the Russians in Central Asia who had exploited the revolution for their own benefit. Consequently, there would appear to be considerable merit in the argument advanced by Adeb Khalid (2006a, p. 232).

[W]hile tsarist Central Asia was indeed directly comparable to other colonies of modern European empires, early Soviet Central Asia cannot be understood as a case of colonialism. In terms of both the scope and the nature of state action, the Soviet remaking of Central Asia makes sense only as the work of a different kind of modern polity, the activist, interventionist, mobilizational state that seeks to sculpt its citizenry in an ideal image.

Khalid's argument hinges on the Bolsheviks' 'universalism' as the opposite of colonialism's reproduction of difference. 'Difference built on essentialized categories of civilization, religion, or race structures the political and social landscape of the colonial order so that the gap between the colonizer and the colonized cannot be bridged' (p. 236). In contrast, 'the Soviet project aimed at the conquest of difference' (p. 247). For the KV activists, the 'conquest of difference' began with treating Central Asian Muslims fairly.

But perhaps 'colonization' might still be applied to the Soviet project, if it is considered colonization of a distinctly new type. For local people dwelling in their diverse places, each ultimately unique to a degree, Bolshevik universalism was colonization by a teleological theory of history. 'The wholesale uprooting of local life in the name of bringing the natives up to a universal standard' (Khalid 2006a, p. 233) must have felt like colonization to those whose worlds were transformed. Even Safarov, who argued for the 'national-cultural self-determination of the labouring masses', ultimately wanted to transform all of the people and places in Central Asia in accordance with the Bolsheviks' revolutionary gaze (1996, p. 200).

Aftermath

The experiences of the expedition appear to have affected Safarov deeply. Shortly after the end of the trip he published *Kolonial'naiia Revoliutsiia (Colonial Revolution)* in order to shed light

on the situation in Central Asia. At the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, Safarov defended his advocacy of 'national-cultural self-determination' in opposition to Stalin, then the Commissar for Nationality Affairs (Khasanaev 1993, p. 8, Tucker 1973, pp. 245–246). In 1921 he returned to Central Asia to organize the forcible removal of the Russian settler population of the Semirech'e region, where between 33% and 60% of the indigenous population had been 'destroyed'. The following year he began working in the Communist International as Secretary of the Executive Committee and Director of the Eastern Department (Safarov Georgii Ivanovich 2011a).

Ambitious plans for increasing the use of agitational vehicles were shelved in 1921, thanks in part to the massive famine but also to a shift in the party leadership's outlook. At the Tenth Party Congress, the agitational-vehicle organization was transferred from the Central Executive Council of the Soviets to the Commissariat of Enlightenment where it was terminated. The party leadership, in the wake of the Kronstadt rebellion and a massive strike wave, had little interest in holding conversations with ordinary people. Propaganda output soared, but it was distributed in hierarchical, top-down fashion. Such was the general picture, but nevertheless the KV toured Central Asia once more in 1921, this time under the leadership of Lazar Kaganovich, a rising star in the party who would become one of Stalin's top lieutenants.⁵⁷

The agitational vehicle was meant to be an advance guard of the dual cause of state building and the transformation of society. It was a means of pacification and more, an opportunity for local people to begin acculturating to a society which actually did not yet exist. In this way, the KV was an agent of colonization by the fledgling Soviet 'civilization' (Kotkin 1995).

The future of the Soviet Union was not locked into an inevitable course by 1920, although clearly the regime already was a dictatorship of the party, not the proletariat, and considerable 'path dependence' was evident in the reliance on force and exaltation of unquestioning discipline. But the agitational vehicle, to a limited extent and not without considerable ambiguity, did suggest a different path. By policing the behaviour of local officials, the institution encouraged people to expect fair treatment before the law, a cornerstone of civil society that was subsequently obliterated. And the train's activists welcomed complaints from ordinary citizens about institutions of government. At the train's public meetings a special political space was created, albeit temporarily, in which anybody could speak out and be heard by emissaries of the central government, without fear of reprisal. Thus, the agitational vehicle embodied the possibility of an alternative course of development for state and society in Russia. Unfortunately, this path was not taken.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Madeleine Reeves and the two anonymous *Central Asian Survey* reviewers for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am grateful to Timothy Edgar for producing the map. Also, belated thanks to those who commented on an earlier version of this paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers and the Southern Conference on Slavic Studies in 1998.

Archives and abbreviations

GARF, State Archive of the Russian Federation.

Notes

1. Feminist scholars have discussed the *male gaze* for many years and Foucault (1976, p. 89) examined the *medical gaze* in *The birth of the clinic*. See also Urry (1996).

2. Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 136, 98 ob.
3. 'Friction' arises from what Michel de Certeau (1988, p. xxiv) celebrated as 'the fleeting and massive reality of a social activity at play with the order that contains it.' See also Seidman (2002).
4. I have been unable to find any biographical information on other members of the KV's company or about those whom they encountered in Central Asia.
5. Minutes from the meetings of the *politotdel* of the agitational train and other materials, Nov. 1919—August 1920, *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 136, ll. 15 ob., 16.
6. *Ibid.*, ll. 34 ob.-36.
7. *Ibid.*, l. 36 and 41.
8. *Ibid.*, ll. 13–14.
9. *Ibid.*, ll. 20, 21, 34.
10. *Ibid.*, ll. 40–41 ob.
11. *Ibid.*, ll. 42–43.
12. *Ibid.*, l. 22 ob.
13. *Ibid.*, ll. 37–39 ob.
14. *Ibid.*, ll. 56, 56 ob.
15. *Ibid.*, ll. 34 ob.-36.
16. Report by the political commissar of the KV, 14 Feb. 1920, *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 142, here l. 1.
17. KV *politotdel* resolutions, reports, workers' complaints, March–April, 1920, *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 140, here ll. 65, 65 ob., 71–80; resolution of investigative commission about corruption in Samarkand, April, 1920, *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 144, here 85–86 ob.; data about people arrested in Samarkand and Katta-Kurgan, April, 1920, *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 145, ll. 17 ob.-26.
18. *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 136, l. 61.
19. Reports and correspondence about situation around Bukhara, March–April, 1920, *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 157, here l. 39.
20. *Ibid.*, ll. 33–34.
21. *Ibid.*, d. 140, ll. 2, 2 ob, 7, 7 ob., 7a.
22. *Ibid.*, d. 136, ll. 66–66 ob.
23. *Ibid.*, d. 140, l. 11.
24. *Ibid.*, d. 145, ll. 138–138 ob.
25. *Ibid.*, d. 136, ll. 66, 66 ob.
26. *Ibid.*, d. 145, ll. 243–244.
27. *Ibid.*, ll. 245–247 ob.
28. Reports from the investigative commission, reports from the complaints bureau, in Samarkand, March–April, 1920, *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 143, here ll. 108–135.
29. *Ibid.*, d. 140, ll. 86–87, 90–91.
30. *Ibid.*, d. 136, ll. 68–70.
31. *Ibid.*, d. 144, ll. 8, 9, 9 ob., 27, 29, 29 ob.
32. *Ibid.*, l. 31.
33. *Ibid.*, d. 143, ll. 105–107.
34. *Ibid.*, ll. 128–129.
35. *Ibid.*, d. 144, l. 1.
36. *Ibid.*, l. 14.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, d. 143, l. 104.
39. *Ibid.*, d. 145, ll. 8, 71–72,
40. *Ibid.*, d. 136, l. 65; d. 145, ll. 8, 9–9ob.
41. *Ibid.*, d. 145, ll. 71–72.
42. Resolution by the KV complaints bureau about the 'slandorous' article and material about Andijan, *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 147, here ll. 81, 87–87 ob.
43. *Ibid.*, d. 145, ll. 81, 81 ob.
44. *Ibid.*, ll. 81–83 ob.; d. 147, ll. 82–84, 90.
45. *Ibid.*, ll. 71–72.
46. *Ibid.*, d. 145, ll. 125–125 ob.
47. *Ibid.*, d. 136, ll. 68–70, 98 ob.-99 ob.; *GARF*, f. r-1252, op. 1, d. 143, l. 104.
48. *Ibid.*, ll. 78–78 ob.
49. *Ibid.*, d. 143, l. 131; also see reports by the Dzhizak revtribunal and other agencies, April–May, 1920, *ibid.*, d. 158, here l. 46.

50. *Ibid.*, d. 144, ll. 46–48. Also see: *ibid.*, ll. 59–61 ob.; *ibid.*, d. 143, ll. 202, 209–211; *ibid.*, d. 145, ll. 1–3 ob.
51. *Ibid.*, d. 136, ll. 86–87, 98 ob.-99 ob.; *politotdel* resolutions concerning a trial in Zhaliial'-Abad, May, 1920, *ibid.*, d. 141, ll. 18–25.
52. *Ibid.*, ll. 71–73, 93–94 ob.
53. *Ibid.*, ll. 82–85.
54. *Ibid.*, ll. 88, 88 ob., 90–92.
55. *Ibid.*, d. 145, ll. 254–255.
56. *Ibid.*, d. 136, here l. 98 ob.
57. RGASPI, f. 122, op. 1, d. 67, l. 114 ob.

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