From the establishment of tight Soviet control over Central Asia in the 1940s, and toward the beginnings of the nuclear and space ages, orientalist paradigms have been redeployed within art and propaganda production in the USSR. Soviet orientalism remains the untold story manifested by discrepancies between the expanding bibliography on the art of the Soviet Union and its lack of integration within the established field of postcolonial studies and its methodologies. The urgency of such integration is fueled by increasing tensions within the former Soviet Bloc today.

Masquerading as a form of multinationalism, the imperial project of the Soviet state—with its political and social constructs surrounding both Soviet art and Soviet Central Asian policies—governed Soviet visual production. Soviet totalitarianism was not only a social framework, but also a visual experiment; art institutions and models of visual production during the period constituted separate realms of power. Stalin’s terror provided a context for the development of the “total visual space” of socialist realism, which extended toward Central Asian artists and art institutions. The orientalist question is further complicated by the creation of new art forms within the territory of
Soviet Central Asia. Inevitably, the introduction of new art institutions and practices had its underlying political and social contexts. Works by Russian artists living in Central Asia highlight the question of artistic lineage in relation to nineteenth-century Russian orientalist art. The cases of native artists are demonstrative of the main issues Central Asian art faced during the period, including the battles for identity and survival (artistic or otherwise) that were fought within the Central Asian Soviet republics, which were themselves new political creations.

Firm connections exist between socialist realist visual art, Soviet identity-creation processes, and later nationalist sentiments, which led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Examinations of Soviet art strategies shed light on the historical sociopolitical constructs and point to the continuing existence of power-driven representational processes.

Two decades have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall—two decades that brought destruction and change but, most importantly, opened new pathways and destroyed old borders. The time is ripe for a new look at the art of the Soviet Union, a country that no longer exists, yet whose history shapes today’s world. One of the least raised research questions in the field of post-Soviet art studies remains that of Soviet colonies and their relationship with the Soviet center.

Central Asia today comprises five republics in which the identity of the adult population has been shaped by Soviet education and culture, as well as by the experience of a turbulent breakup phase and a period of new state-building. Coming from Kazakhstan, the only Central Asian republic which borders Russia, I have an interest not only in its history—a century of which took place within the borders of the Soviet Union—but also in ways of incorporating an analysis of the art of the Soviet period into the broader study of power relationships within the Soviet Union and its official nationality policies for Soviet Central Asia. The vast majority of texts on the USSR’s cultural history remain very Moscow-centric in perspective. Indeed, in a way they avoid one of the Soviet era’s most potent contradictions between Moscow and the periphery or, more precisely, between Russia and its Central Asia.

The binary nature of the Soviet art apparatus, and with it that of post-Soviet art criticism, highlights one contradiction: equality for all as opposed to
authority above all.¹ It is a truly Orwellian opposition, which might possibly be relayed into a national question. Where the national system was supposedly horizontal, hence the marching nations within paintings being all on the same physical level, it also possessed horizontal expression, thus containing a supposedly more civilized character at its center with other ethnically diverse members of the nation surrounding it or following suit.

The East/West of Buck-Morss’s *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000) is the East/West of the Cold War.² As is often observed, this dichotomy only presupposes two overarching players, and discussions of Soviet art often support this, even if they do so in a deconstructive mode. The Soviet’s own East/West involves, however, a different political structure, that of Russia/Central Asia. For the West of the Cold War this Soviet East is a doubly removed notion. If the East/West discourse of the Cold War was structured, and arguably continues to be structured, along the lines of progress and development versus backwardness and evil, what does it leave for a further removed East-of-East? The orientalism of the Soviet Union is the visual realization of this political and geographical otherness. In this doubly removed context, both of power relations and of theory dominance, the question of the Soviet inner Other finds its own place.

Discussing and contextualizing oil painting within a Russian tradition leads to conclusions of anachronism, lack of quality, eruption of quantity, and restriction of expression. The analysis of oil painting within other Soviet territories, especially in Central Asia, leads to further unsettling questions. One such question stems from the introduction of the medium (and the means of its exhibition, namely museums and galleries) into cultures not previously accustomed to visual imagery, fine art, or realistic depiction. Art institutions such as galleries and training facilities, as well as artist unions, were all modeled on a general and overwhelming Soviet version. However, if this Soviet version was related to a preceding Russian one then for Central Asian republics this experience was new. Ceramic making, rug making, and the applied arts of preceding generations were carried out in similar socialist realist

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modes, but it was oil painting that defined the processes of art production, whether for official or underground Central Asian artists throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

The proper analysis of Russian orientalism is not useful to either side of the Soviet East/West equation. And the fact that such orientalism was played out on the outmoded and anachronistic canvas of oil painting has simply fueled skepticism as to the relevance of any discussions for today’s political or artistic milieus. It is even questionable whether, for example, Semion Chuikov’s *A Daughter of Soviet Kyrgyzia* (1948) can be construed as an orientalist work of art (Plate 35.1). Indeed, can it even be regarded as a successful painting? Would there be any use in examining the reality of the depicted situation?

*A Daughter of Soviet Kyrgyzia* was, and still remains, one of the main images that springs to mind for post-Soviet people at the mention of Central Asian art of the Stalin period. The artist Semion Chuikov was born in Kyrgyzia, but was of ethnic Russian origin and educated in Russia. The painting was exhibited in Moscow and in 1949 was given the highest award for a work of art, the Stalin Prize. Such recognition of the work immediately gave it an almost iconic status and led to the widespread dissemination of copies. There are at least three painted versions in existence. But more importantly, there are countless photographic reproductions. In terms of public memory, the illustrations produced in schoolbooks and distributed right across the USSR were especially effective. To this day “Kyrgyzia” is to Russians a girl lost amid the steppes.

The image is of a solitary female child walking across an empty field toward an invisible goal. She holds her head high and her hand tightly clutches some unidentified books. Each detail is given the utmost importance in the piece. Made up of primary colors, the composition culminates in the bright red scarf on the girl’s head; her mind is clearly possessed by Soviet or communist doctrine. The shape of the costume is modest, undeniably feminine and devoid of any national connotations, yet her face is definitely Asian and slightly rounded; she is no doubt a well-fed Kyrgyz child. Her stance and gait show her to be in good health and possessing physical strength. The background shows an idyllic and peaceful landscape under a clear blue sky.

The girl is at once an emancipated, Central Asian heroine, the new future of the Soviet woman, and the forever young and forever feminine im-
age of the Soviet East. Yet she is also the object of the Russian gaze, which can be identified as male, adult, and progressive. The relationship signified is that of parent and child, of educator and student, of powerful male and subjugated female.

When the image of a whole nation, even one so small a nation as Soviet Kyrgyzia, rests heavily on one oil painting of a girl walking through an empty steppe clutching a book in her hand, there must be very powerful forces of representation at play. The daughter of Soviet Kyrgyzia is walking away from the imperialist past and toward an imaginary future. The painting now rests at the State Tretyakov Gallery in the Russian, and previously Soviet, capital city of Moscow. However, at the time of writing this thesis it is not on display.

This painting had a lot of power in an almost political sense; it had the power to grip people’s minds, to alter, or create perceptions, to be seen, to be remembered, and to be loved. This power rested upon the significance of several diverse factors, such as the appropriateness of the painting’s subject, the painterly style, the celebrity of the artist, and the means for dissemination available when all the aforementioned factors had successfully been put together.

This Soviet Kyrgyz girl is not shown as a barbaric creature of the East, nor is she dressed up in special costume. In fact, she is not even an example of exotic femininity. She is a new woman and her Asian features, together with her modern costume, exemplify her belonging to part of a larger whole. Being a Soviet girl she wears a red scarf.

Chuikov was not an ordinary Soviet artist. He is heralded as the founder of the painterly tradition in Kyrgyzstan and he was the head of the artists’ union there, as well as a Soviet academician. However, he did learn his trade at VKhuTeMas-VKhuteIn, an institution at which he was taught by, among others, Robert Falk and various prominent avant-garde artists or “formalist” artists of the early twentieth century.

The girl, of an undefined age and with a plump face, tight grip, and upright posture, is neither conventionally attractive nor barbarically repulsive. This apparent ambivalence or nonspecificity is further echoed in the landscape. Do we see a steppe or a field, or a steppe that is to become a field? The girl’s attitude is double-edged and she is both a proud woman and a stubborn child. She represents the new Soviet Kyrgyzia to the public of the time and is
Part IV · Defining Europe

essentially a metaphorical blank canvas on which all sorts of new information can be inscribed. For us, she is also an image of the young Soviet Kyrgyzia as her past is being continuously erased and her future is uncertain.

Did this image deliver a certain message? Was it a message of progress, emancipation, and reassurance? Was this a message deemed necessary for all schoolchildren to receive at the time and also much later on? *A Daughter of Soviet Kyrgyzia* was not alone in its protagonist’s desire to gaze. Yet there is a problem. Chuikov renders the girl’s gaze impotent and allows the viewer the pleasure of a much more powerful and overwhelming gaze. With the angle of the composition her figure pushes up into the sky and she becomes a monument to illusive freedom and a reminder of an obliterated past. Her safety in the middle of the field is somewhat uncertain as she is too alone, too tidy, and too proud.

The girl in Chuikov’s painting is forever young. The model for his painting has, however, aged. It seems that her schooling, if it at all took place, brought the communist utopia into the village, rather than the young girl into the future. This girl from Soviet Kyrgyzia was allowed to look ahead, but never managed to walk out of the village she was born in. According to Matthew Cullerne Bown’s recollections of his travels in Kyrgyzia, the woman who posed for the image was still residing in the same place Chuikov allegedly found her forty years earlier. Nevertheless, the artist became a celebrity and there is now a museum dedicated to his life and art in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan.

First and foremost, *A Daughter of Soviet Kyrgyzia* is an oil painting that received high acclaim at the time of its production. It represents its time both in form and in function, the latter of which was to illustrate the progress of previously repressed Central Asian lands and women. In itself, the work is not at all insulting for the Kyrgyz audience, nor is it insulting to women, or to either religious or atheist views. It lacks the grandeur of more recognizable examples of socialist realism and yet it does not deviate from socialist realist norms. It is in fact so noninsulting and unprovocative as a work of art, both in socialist realist terms and for today’s audience, that I am constantly surprised as to how it manages to escape finding a place in the pantheon of newly ac-

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3 From a conversation with Matthew Cullerne Bown during my time as an assistant at his Izo Gallery, London, in 2004.
cepted socialist realist works of art of the Groys/Degot curatorial school that controls the exhibition circuit today. This is certainly one thing that keeps my interest in socialist realist orientalism strong: the continuous absence of the subject not only from the political arena, but also from the realm of both long-standing and highly acclaimed art theory and criticism.

I would like to highlight the split between active and expanding hegemonic post-Soviet and postcommunist scholarship on Soviet and communist subjects and the less apparent, and yet probably more legitimate, authority of the postcolonial voice in relation to the same issues. This voice is representative of the perpetual weakness of the colonial subject, in my case the Soviet Central Asian subject, and its perpetual representation, as opposed to self-reflection; crucially, the two instances are closely interlinked. This third constant forms a bridge to another area of art historical and cultural scholarship, namely that of broader postcolonial studies as identified with its most prominent speakers, namely the late Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. Postcolonialism has become a recognized academic discourse and a body of canonical texts emerged in this field during the second half of the twentieth century. However, a contemporary disproportion between power over representation and possession of knowledge, or in this case influential knowledge and the means of its dissemination, shows that in the twenty-first century we are witnessing a reintroduction of imperialist structures (both by Russia in particular and the West in general) in a mutated form, but possibly with a wider and more substantial grasp.

An examination of cultural or, particularly in this case, visual output is an attempt to empower the voice of the represented group, namely formerly Soviet Central Asians. Critical discussions of such a voice reside between several main categories or definitions. These involve issues of time and generations that are closely interlinked with the idea of a political and social context. These are all present during both the creation of depictions and self-

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4 The most notable exception was the exhibition in Oxford, organized on the basis of the private collection of Matthew Cullerne Bown who, in spite of publishing several works on socialist realism, remains largely excluded from the academic community, probably due to his status as an art dealer. As the title of the exhibition makes explicit, the content reached beyond the usually Russian-centric domain. David Elliot and Matthew Cullerne Bown, eds., Soviet Socialist Realist Painting, 1930s–1960s: Paintings from Russia, the Ukraine, Belorussia, Uzbekistan, Kirgizia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1992).
depictions and the process of critical writing. Furthermore, there exists the
notion of position, which can be interpreted in two ways. There is the ap-
preciation of the within/without confrontation or simply the view from inside
or outside of the discussed geographical and intellectual sphere. This is fur-
ther complicated as “post-Soviet” and “postcolonial” are terms that may or
may not coincide in temporal terms with the territories of, for example, the
UK, Russia, and Kazakhstan.

The analysis of socialist realist depictions of the Soviet Other is compiled
from a series of palpable tensions. The main tensions are geopolitical and his-
toric, both of which are problematic due to a significant distancing between
the writer and the subject of research. Not only is there a generational issue
in the fact that the new generation of art historians is only superficially aware
of the former Soviet situation; there is also the fact that the reactions of post-
Soviet scholars, even within one generation, vary from that of post-Western
(or neo-Western) scholars. On the other hand, as suggested in the previous
sentence, there is a continuous reevaluation of the notion of the Other. In this
case, this might encompass Russian, Soviet, Central Asian, Muslim, Secular,
Eastern European, and more. The terms may sometimes overlap but they by
no means coincide with one another. Within the framework of a postcom-
munist, postcolonial, socio-cultural study of art history, autoethnography is
an area that requires persistent and conscious evaluation.

As a result of the overtly colonial attitudes Moscow exercised toward the
Asian republics of the Soviet Union, the people residing in these territories
became the victims of progress, that is to say they became victims of a dra-
matic change in economic and social conditions which involved the denial
of some or all of their fundamental rights. Slavoj Žižek argues that a funda-
mental right of human beings is not necessarily the right to truth but the
right to narrate or “the right to tell your story.” In a way this particular

5 There is a certain void within the international field of cultural (and other) research, which manifests itself in
the absence of bipolar divisions prevalent during the Cold War era. While terms such as post-Communist or
former-Soviet and former-East come into use, no applicable equivalents for the West have come into force. The
issue is beginning to be raised, especially as part of dedications to the twentieth anniversary since the fall of
the Berlin Wall. Most notable is probably “Former West.” According to organizers, “the project aims at artic-
ulating the processes of the West ‘becoming former’ that, however unacknowledged by the West itself, began
with the demise of the Cold War construct of a bipolar world in 1989” (formerwest.org).

6 Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, Conversations with Žižek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 141.
right was not entirely taken away, but the means by which Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks were required and allowed to tell their story became so dramatically different from what they were accustomed to that it is possible to suggest that for some time these nations were left without the ability to fully express themselves.

Nationality and nationalism are still largely disputed subjects in Central Asia. However, steps toward the construction of an identity cannot be viewed as having roots in the independence of 1991 only, or even in the 1986 December revolt. Art structures of the Soviet era, as well as depictions of Central Asians in Soviet paintings, are valid examples of stereotype and identity construction. In the art world of the Soviet Union, the period between the 1940s and 1980s was characterized by socialist realism and various direct reactions to it (such as underground art and later SocArt). This period affected the Central Asian consciousness giving it, for now, a schizophrenic edge. Central Asia became both Soviet and Asian, traditional and contemporary, Western and Eastern, and at the same time none of these.

Central Asia is predominantly visible to the Western gaze through the screen of Russian history. Central Asians are keen to explore both their ancient history and its contemporary modifications within society, while Western critics insist on seeing, for example, Kazakhstan as just a center for Stalin’s gulag and Soviet nuclear testing. The Central Asian stereotype consequently varies significantly inside and outside of the region, as facets of it are Central Asian, Russian and Western. While the first two stereotypes are based significantly, if not consciously, on Soviet socialist realist imagery, the latter relies on a mix of real and portrayed Stalinist horrors as well as Borat-style self-serving Western misrepresentation.

In Kazakhstan the question of national identity remained a characteristic feature of art throughout its development. Tensions between the real and the abstract, the Self and the Other, and the acceptable and the unusual were all nurtured in the Kazakh art of the 1960s and 1970s, a time when freedom,
however elusive, first became imaginable. This generation of artists proved to be asking similar questions in their works—questions related to national identity—even though these questions were still enclosed in oil paintings.

By the end of the 1980s, and certainly by the beginning of the 1990s, the entire world was being transformed. The Soviet Union went through perestroika under Gorbachev and then collapsed and disintegrated in 1991. The Central Asian republics each gained independence. The late 1980s and early 1990s produced chaos and uncertainty to the political, economic, and social life of the region. Economic crisis only stimulated the revolution in art.

The year 1989 was significant in Kazakh and Central Asian art history as the year the first uncensored exhibition was held. The Crossroads gathered a variety of artists belonging to a number of independent (not-state-sponsored) groups such as the Green Triangle and the Night Tram. The exhibition highlighted the wealth of alternative art practice in existence alongside official oil painting and sculpture. A large proportion of it was ephemeral, including extremely new and, for the period, controversial installations, happenings, and performances. Being at the forefront of the new avant-garde in Kazakhstan, the artists gained little recognition outside peculiarly segregated art circles. By the 1990s art no longer seemed to attract governmental interest, nor was it perceived to be contentious, thus allowing almost total creative freedom.

The varied nature of the works of art created at this time was symptomatic of the split in personalities and an artistic tension that has its origins in the socialist realist period of Kazakh art. A strong sense of the need for social involvement counters an exploration of a fragile identity, both personal and national, which utilizes both factual and invented histories. Nomadism, tradition, and modernity find their way into Western-inspired forms of art production.

The period between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras allowed art to flourish—however, as Irina Yuferova notes, it was short-lived. Without boundaries and criticism, art in Central Asia ended up without identity. The 1990s were characterized by increasing commercialization and the creation of an art market. However, it was the artists who established themselves as cultural

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experiments in the 1980s by continuing to stretch the boundaries in the 1990s, provoking the press and public with their gestures and performances, but gaining at least some attention. To this day, artists in Kazakhstan battle with the limited notion of art practice, an inheritance of the Soviet era.

Saule Suleimenova’s *Self Portrait* (1989) is an expression of the layers of tension that characterized Central Asian identity at that moment. Neither abstract nor realist, the painting is nevertheless an exploration of silence, fear, and newly discovered courage—to express oneself, to demand attention, to think in one’s own language. In her most recent series, *Kazakh Chronicle* (2008), Suleimenova addresses the layering of identity processes—utilizing photographs of writings on walls and gates, she paints over them images drawn from nineteenth-century ethnographic photographs, chance encounters with strangers, villagers, and town dwellers—all gathered to compose a fragmented view of Kazakh-ness.

Discourses surrounding both Russian orientalism and Central Asian art and culture have intensified over the last five years, while at the same time there is a lack of integration between the two fields. Cultural production largely remains outside discussions on Central Asian and wider post-Soviet identities. Although, as this article has attempted to highlight, cultural and visual creation is not peripheral to the construction of national and personal identities in this region.

Orientalist paradigms have been redeployed within art and propaganda production in the USSR. While political structures governed both art production and nationality policy during Stalin’s rule, today regional and international politics govern visual imagery and cultural processes in Central Asia and across the globe. Stalinist terror, World War II, and the Soviet nuclear program were all contexts for socialist realism. The war in Chechnya, war between Russia and Georgia, conflicts between Central Asian states, and war in Afghanistan and Iraq are not just contexts for contemporary visual imagery and art, but they are also contexts for contemporary analyses of the Soviet past. Posing research questions in relation to the preceding epochs reveals conflicting meanings. Depicting Central Asia is no longer the domain of socialist realist artists, but orientalism haunts both the process itself and its discourse.