

Pamirian Crossroads: Kirghiz and Wakhi of High Asia

Author: Reeves, Madeleine

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Pamirian Crossroads: Kirghiz and Wakhi of High Asia

By Hermann Kreutzmann.
Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz
Verlag, 2015. 559 pp. € 98.00.
ISBN: 978-3-447-10449-4.

Hermann Kreutzmann's *Pamirian Crossroads* is a remarkable work of scholarship and a major contribution to our understanding of livelihood, adaptation, and agency in harsh mountainous environments.

Kreutzmann's geographical focus is the region of High Asia that transects the borders of present-day Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and the People's Republic of China—a region inhabited by Turkic-speaking Sunni Kyrgyz pastoralists and Shia Ismaili Wakhi, who speak an Eastern Iranian language. The legacies of 20th-century area studies mean that the Pamirs and the Wakhan, which constitute a distinctive ecological zone of high plateaus and steep valleys, are more often studied as marginal outposts of world regions centered elsewhere rather than as life-sustaining places integrated into the economies of the lowlands beyond.

Kreutzmann seeks to redress this picture through a focus on Pamirian crossroads. One of his important conclusions is that the high mountains and plateaus that, to outsiders, can easily seem an index of a region's "remoteness" or distance from urban centers can, in fact, be central to establishing modes of connectivity and exchange. Moreover, such environmental conditions are not stable: a river may serve as a boundary in the summer but act as a line of transport in the winter; a mountain pass that is impassable in winter may be a critical route of exchange in the summer; and a lake may appear where there was none previously, because of landslides and glacial melt. The focus on

"crossroads" in the book's title alludes to this concern to foreground the distinct forms of dwelling, livelihood, and exchange that for generations have connected this region with the world outside. It also enables the author to direct theoretical and empirical attention to the *longue durée* of political and economic change: from the legacies of the "Great Game" to the impact of closed Soviet borders, and to ongoing projects of infrastructural incorporation through road construction, resettlement, and education.

While the early chapters devote detailed attention to the historical currents that have shaped the region, the core of the narrative focuses on the Kyrgyz and Wakhi populations who derive a living from this harsh environment. These groups have developed overlapping but distinct environmental and political strategies for survival. The yurt-dwelling pastoral Kyrgyz nomads typically live at higher elevations and move great distances between summer and winter pastures. The village-dwelling Wakhi farmers, by contrast, combine seasonal cultivation with short-distance seasonal migration to high pastures. The Kyrgyz/Wakhi dichotomy provides an organizing framework for the analysis, which examines the past and present of these populations as they have adapted to diverse ecological, institutional, and political environments on various sides of imperial, Soviet, and contemporary international borders. Over the course of 8 substantive chapters, coupled with an avant-propos and an epilogue, Kreutzmann masterfully combines a critical analysis of outsiders' perspectives on the region (from spies and military expeditions to ethnographers and development agencies) with attentiveness to the agency of the Kyrgyz and Wakhi in navigating changing political vicissitudes over the last 2 centuries.

Kreutzmann's analysis is grounded in 3 "pillars" of research. The first is

the author's own extensive ethnographic fieldwork, including 6 years of participant observation conducted over the course of 35 years. The depth and range of this fieldwork is quite unusual, allowing the macronarrative to be substantiated through detailed descriptions of particular family genealogies, domestic economies, patterns of livestock ownership, and geographies of seasonal movement. These microlevel characterizations are rendered through careful description of individual biographies and households, extensive use of photographs, and meticulous diagrams, which reveal changes and continuities in modes of Wakhi house construction, use of agricultural tools, and herding techniques. The generational stretch of Kreutzmann's research allows him to trace important historical shifts, including the "precautionary exodus" (*ürküin*) of the Kyrgyz from the Little Pamir in 1978, first to Pakistan and later to Turkey, which reduced the population of the Afghan Pamirs by three quarters (p 419). It also affords scholars of the Tajik Pamirs an important insight into the impacts of the Tajik civil war (1992–1997), the critical role of humanitarian aid in sustaining the region's population, and the ongoing "renaissance of Ismailism" (p 446) in Gorno-Badakhshan.

The second pillar consists of documents from archives and libraries in London, Delhi, Islamabad, Saint Petersburg, and Berlin. Drawing on contemporary critical cartography studies, Kreutzmann examines these maps and reports, reflecting on the complex negotiations and competing knowledge practices that went into their production. The sheer volume and range of maps (and the technical quality of their reproduction) will make the early chapters of invaluable interest to historical geographers, particularly for the period of the "Great Game." Among the many late-19th-century maps that are reproduced is a German depiction of

competing interests in the region of the source of the Amu-Darya. As Kreutzmann notes in his explanatory note to the map, the Pamirs that were “before often represented as a white spot”—both unmapped and of little geopolitical significance—emerge at this time as a site of competing territorial claims and of multiple scientific and military expeditions (p 37). There are also many contemporary maps designed by Kreutzmann himself. One of the most illuminating depicts the various “escape routes” connecting Sary-Tash and Murghab in the north, through the Small and Large Pamirs, to Gilgit and Chitral to the south during the most intense period of imperial boundary-making (1883–1901). This historical geography is complemented by extensive use of historical photographs and drawings, reproduced from a variety of archives and personal collections. These provide historical insight into particular events, such as the 1978 Kyrgyz exodus to the Ishkoman valley (p 361), as well as changing patterns

of shrine worship, domestic construction, dress, and material culture over the course of the 20th century.

Scholars of mountain societies from anthropology, geography, history, and cultural studies will find much that is to be treasured in this work, from the insightful analysis of borders and their impacts to the lavish maps and illuminating diagrams of seasonal pastoral movements. Perhaps inevitably in a work on such a scale and scope—a text of 559 pages that draws on more than 3 decades’ research and with a glossary that references over 20 languages—the reader can sometimes feel overwhelmed by the range and detail of microlevel data. Anthropologists and those interested in the contemporary experience of Kyrgyz and Wakhi communities may sometimes wish for more detail on the ethnographic present that is touched upon most extensively in the final chapter: a lot of the fieldwork that is presented dates from the 1990s and early 2000s, and it would be

fascinating to know how the Kyrgyz and Wakhi lives that are depicted have been affected by the most recent turbulent transformations across these new international borders. Overall, however, this is a *magnum opus*: the work of a life of scholarship that demonstrates both meticulous field research and an impressive familiarity with a variety of secondary literatures in multiple languages. It is also an exceptionally well-produced book, lavishly illustrated with literally hundreds of color plates, allowing it to straddle both scholarly and popular audiences.

AUTHOR

Madeleine Reeves

Madeleine.Reeves@manchester.ac.uk
School of Social Science, University of
Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, United
Kingdom

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