

## **Remembering Soviet Past: Recording and Compiling Audio-Video Materials on Everyday Life Experiences and Public Memory in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan<sup>1</sup>**

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Throughout the history, Central Asian states have experienced a number of historical changes which challenged the basis of their traditional societies and life-styles. The most significant ones are brought about by the revolution of 1917 in Russia and 1918 in Central Asia, incorporation of this region into the Soviet Union and gaining of independence as a consequence of the collapse of the USSR. However, impartial and informed public evaluation of the past and its understanding has always been a complicated issue in Central Asia over Soviet and post-Soviet periods under various influences.

Two the most important and detrimental factors shaping public perception and opinion regarding their present and their past have been “official” historical discourse and everyday life experiences of populations. “Official” historical discourses can take many forms and every often exemplified by official historiography, which characterizes what was “politically correct” to consider to be “good” and “bad” among the events of the past. There has been a long tradition of history construction in Central Asia when political pressures and official ideology always had a decisive say in how the history is interpreted and eventually constructed. Such approach to constructing history was practiced both in the Soviet period with the aim of beautifying Socialist society (well documented by the Communist-era archives) and in post-Soviet period, criticizing Soviet past and praising post-Soviet society building (demonstrated by current literature on history in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan).

These “official” descriptions of the past sometimes confirmed but more often contradicted interpretations of the past, when made when past is analyzed through the lenses of the everyday experiences of ordinary people.

It is this contradiction in depicting the history which lies at the center of this project. This project attempts to collect, record, preserve and make public the views of public regarding their Soviet-days experiences and memory of the Soviet past using the case-studies of Kyrgyzstan. In particular, this project aims to contribute to understanding of relationship between the governmentally-endorsed history of Central Asian people in the Soviet era and their private lives and believes. In order to do so, this study attempts to contribute to academic knowledge on how people remember their Soviet past and what were their

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<sup>1</sup> While this report has been made available both in Japanese and English languages, it should be mentioned that these were not manual translations of one another but written separately, in both languages to accommodate the specificity of expressions and styles of each language. Therefore, while the content of the reports in Japanese and English is the same, structurally these two reports do not necessarily copy each other. This has been done in order to facilitate easier comprehension of the essence of the project and for the sake of cultural flexibility required in explaining comprehensive notions in various languages.

memories of their experiences of that time. This also leads to a better understanding of how these memories relate to the Soviet and post-Soviet official descriptions of the Soviet life.

This project attempts to achieve its goals through the collecting, recording and analyzing the narratives of ordinary people, their views regarding political practices (repressions, staff indigenization, administration of things, etc), economic policies (collective farm formation, industrialization, economic cadre education, etc), social life (forms and shapes of community and religious life in the Soviet times) and many others.

As a methodological tool, this study is part of the data-collection project of the “Memory of the past” (co-organized by the Universities of Tokyo, Tsukuba, World Economy and Diplomacy in Tashkent and Turkish-Kyrgyz Manas University in Bishkek) over the period of 2005 to 2010 in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Thematically, the project focused on the recollection of memories on the people’s everyday experiences in the times of the Soviet Union. Therefore, the project aims to use the recordings of the memories of everyday life in Soviet Central Asia and relate those to the official recordings of history. The project targeted ordinary people of the 75 years of age and over with questions regarding their everyday life experiences in the various period of their lives. By doing so, the project aimed to collect information about how ordinary people regarded and understood the reality of their time and how this understanding related to official policy of the Soviet government in Central Asian region. The choice of the everyday life experiences of people as the main focus of this study is considered to be one of those instances which presents relatively apolitical picture of the societal life of that time, which was largely ignored in Soviet and post-Soviet studies. In addition, the information provided by the interviewed in the older age group represents a unique data which, if not collected and recorded now, can be lost due to rapid decrease of those who remember the social environment of the Soviet times. The loss of such data will result in false interpretations, assumptions and speculations without an opportunity to check these against the reality of everyday lives of that time.

## **1. Research team**

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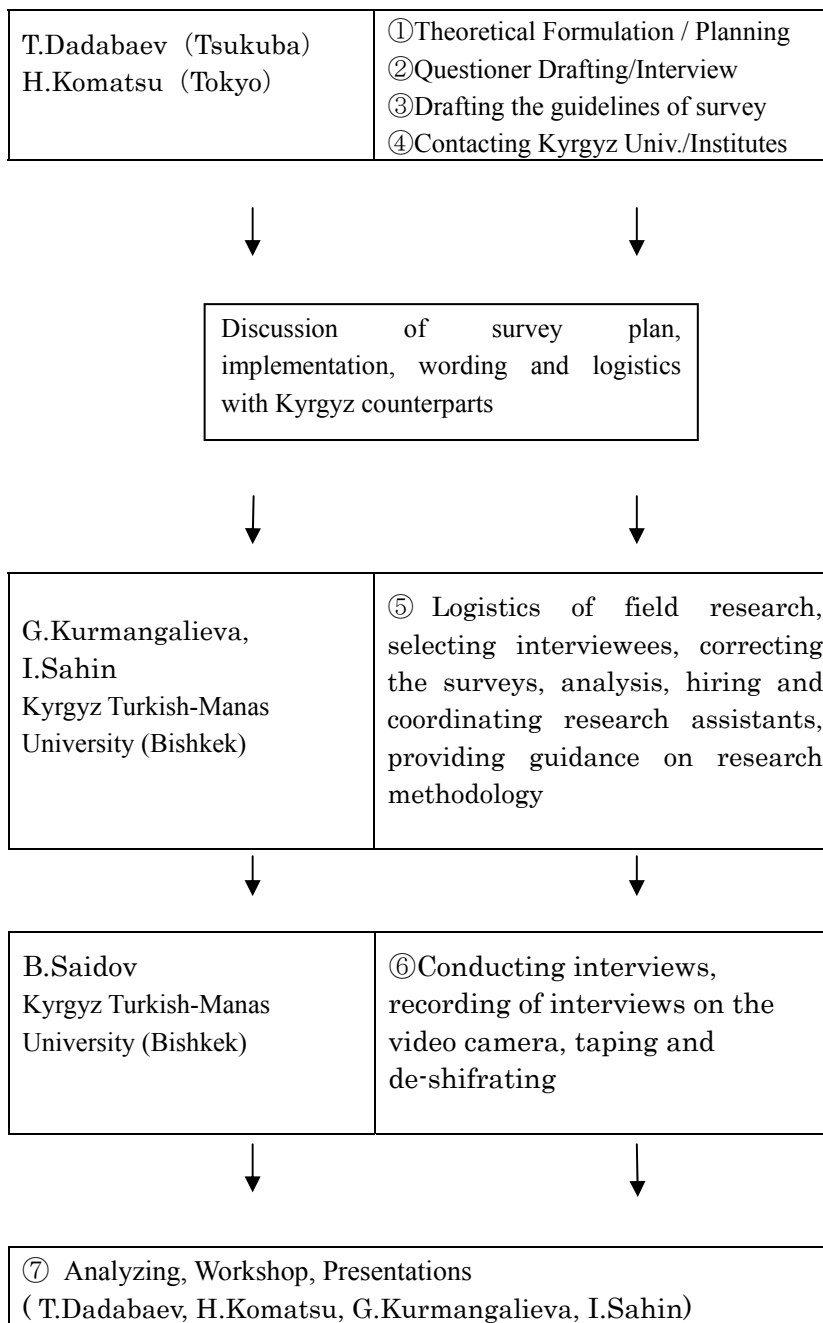
### **Collaborators**

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(From 2009, Associate Professor, Maltepe University, Turkey)



## 2. Sampling method and respondents

The process of sampling for collecting, recording, storing and analyzing the data used in this article has been one of the most difficult tasks as it had the potential for influencing and in certain cases, shaping the answers to the questions asked. In order to cover the conceptual gap in the literature regarding the views of the ordinary citizens regarding their societies in the Soviet time, the interviewees were collected mostly

from the older generations and especially those beyond their retirement age. This is done to cover the memories of the Soviet time by those who spend the most active years of their lives in the Soviet cultural and social environment. These recollections were then either recorded on the audio-tapes (in the case of Uzbekistan), video-records (in the case of Kyrgyzstan), put into the script, translated and are in the process of being archived.

Out of the four possible alternatives for sampling, namely, deviant case sampling, homogenous sampling, maximum variation sampling and network sampling, authors decided to avoid as much as possible the convenience sampling and homogenous sampling in order to avoid the situation when the outcomes of the interviews are similar and predetermined in their content. On the contrary, the project attempted to locate people who led very diverse life-styles, based on diverse regional, ethnic, educational, social, professional and other affiliations.

In terms of regional representation, in the overall sample size of 75 people, the utmost effort has been made to select more interviewees (5-6 people) from capitals, larger, hence more densely populated regions, while ensuring that interviewees from the demographically smaller regions are also represented.

The network sampling has been applied to overcome difficulties associated with political restrictions and self-restrains on the side of interviewees for a fear of repercussions while in Kyrgyzstan, the network sampling has been used to locate people from remote areas which are difficult to gain access to.

### **3. Interviewing**

In order to facilitate open and interviewee-friendly environment, the project used the following four techniques in the process of interviews. Firstly, the cultural flexibility and proper wording of the questions was paid special attention. While given the choice of structured (with strictly defined questions), semi-structured and open-ended options for formulating questions, the study opted to use semi-structured method due to its better applicability to the realities of the region. Using structured interviews in Central Asia often results in short, non-inclusive, incomprehensive answers because of the lack of rapport between interviewee and interviewer. On the one hand, using open-ended interview might have also potential risk of developing into an extensive exchange of opinions and develop into a direction unrelated or distant from the topic of everyday life experiences of Soviet times due to the broad spectrum of issues. Therefore, the semi-structured interview, which includes clearly defined question and some sub-questions to clarify the meaning of the main questions were used with interviewees given the opportunity to develop their story as far as it does not move away from the main topic of the interview.

Secondly, interviewers attempted to establish rapport with the interviewees by discussing some unrelated to the project topics such as the general well-being of those being interviewed, discussion of weather and other topics. In addition to establishing trust between interviewers and interviewee, such long introduction has deep cultural meaning in Central Asia where people are used to use relatively long, introductory

conversations before proceeding to the heart of the issue that they are interested to talk about. This, within the course of this project and in daily life in general in Central Asia, develops a basis for a smoother conversation and offers a chance for interviewees to get to know the other side and shape their own attitude to them.

After such an introductory entry into conversation, the interview proceeded with the questions asked about the topics related to the everyday life experiences of Soviet time. In order to facilitate an open discussion, the project employed an approach when in the course of interview, interviewees' assumptions were on several occasions critically assessed or even challenged in order to provoke them to offer a deeper insight into how they came to the assumptions and conclusions they were operating. Yet, the careful attention has been paid to not radically challenge the flow of the talk and not to discourage the interviewee from laying down his/her assumptions.

And thirdly, project members attempted to make the process of interviewing more "participatory" for both interviewee and interviewer by not simply listening to the memories recalled by interviewees but also, on several occasions, having the family members of interviewees and those close neighbors listen and then sometimes make their own comments which further encouraged the process of remembering and forced interviewees to use more detailed recollections of the past in order to support their own logic. It was especially so with older generation of interviewees who seemed at times to have problems with understanding the essence of the question or having problems remembering the periods in which certain events took place.

#### **4. Challenges, limitations and biases**

There were few conceptual and logistical problems in the course of interviews. Firstly, the mentality of the ordinary people has influenced the outcome of the interviews both in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In both cases, interviewers observed the situation when respondents are often reluctant to speak about negativities of the Soviet times. This can be explained by several reasons. In addition to potential political and related pressures which will be discussed later in the text, many of respondents are bearers of the culture when talking about one's problems and criticism outside of the society is considered to be shameful and needed to be avoided as much as possible. In both societies, people shared the logic of local saying that "Garbage should not be taken out of the house". Therefore, in many cases, interviewees were inclined to speak more about positive sides of the issues than negativities. In addition, the attitude of interviewees towards interviewer differed significantly depending on the developed or underdeveloped rapport between interviewee and interviewer. For many of them, interviewees were "strangers" and it is not an accepted norm to speak about negativities to the "strangers".

In order to encourage the interviewees to be more open about various aspects of their Soviet past, the interviews were often joined by the members of the family or grandchildren in front of whom many elders

could not misrepresent the realities of their past lives. When there were such few attempts, members of the families listening to the interviews often intervened correcting and clarifying certain issues both to the interviewer and interviewee.

Another challenge was encountered with the language in which interview should be conducted. Due to the multiethnic nature of the societies in Central Asia, Kyrgyz was used for those belonging to the titular ethnic group and preferring to answer in their own language. For the Russian and Russian-speaking groups (like Koreans, etc), Russian language questioners have been used. In certain instances, questioners in alternative languages (Turkish-language one for Turks, etc) were drafted and used. But diversity of the languages used for questioners, did not present a technical problem, except for the logistical concerns relating to translation.

Much bigger problem was the obvious correlation between the language of the questioner and the pattern of asking questions and answers to these questions. In Kyrgyz, interviewee had to go through the long procedure of first explaining in length the background of the issue and then asking the question. Otherwise, the answers were either inadequate or too short and mostly shallow. In Russian language, however, such procedure of going into the long discussion of the background of the issue and its details resulted in an irritation of the respondents and desire for clear and short questions without preceding long interpretation and explanation of the problem. In the same manner, the answers in local languages were softer, long and extensively descriptive with few short and clear-cut answers. Those responding in these local languages preferred “middle-ground” answers which can largely be attributed to the mentality of people. Even when respondents answered in a straight and very critical manner, they still preferred to do so after extensive explanation and after “preparing the ground” for it. On the contrary, Russian language responses were more direct, more critical or clear in their message leaving the background information out or offering very little explanation. In addition, in certain interviews, respondents responded to only one part of the interview regarding their lives and experiences in local language and then preferred to switch to Russian when they wanted to be more direct or blunt about their attitude to certain events or happenings.

Secondly, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, majority of those approached have decided to cooperate with the project and to be video-taped. Yet such cooperation with the project also resulted in the situation that sometimes respondents were attempting to provide interviewers with the information that they believed interviewers wanted to hear from them. This, instead, influenced the outcomes of the project because this information did not always reflect real life-time experiences of people but rather their interpretation of the history that they learned from other sources.

## **5. Outcomes and follow up**

As indicated above, the task of recording, preserving and disseminating the qualitative data on what people experienced in their daily lives and on their relations to the ideology and political structure of the

Soviet government Communist party is very urgent and important one. The urgency of this task comes from the fact that many of those who experienced Soviet life and those who have in-depth and detailed knowledge about how people lived at Soviet times are getting older with many of these people passing away. With them, they take away the data which, if properly collected, preserved and distributed, can serve as an essential supplement to the archival and other written sources of history. As indicated above, the selection method, number of interviewed and disparity in their economic, social, ethnic and religious status impacts the outcome of the interviews. Nevertheless, this kind of project provides a new source of information for understanding Socialist life and political structure.

The major outcomes of this project were presented during international workshops in Istanbul (Eurasian Studies conference, March), South Korea (IICAS annual conference), Oral History Workshop in Stockholm, Oral History Workshop in Cambridge University (Department of Social Anthropology) and many others. These workshops, conference and seminars presented the data and served as venues for receiving feedback on how to preserve and disseminate this data. Therefore, the next challenge and task of this project is to design, build and functionalize the data-base on the oral history of everyday life in Central Asia.

The lion part of the academic outcomes of this project is being prepared for publication and cannot yet be made available in this report. They will be published in the next couple of years in the form of few separate volumes and a number of academic papers. Once the essence of interviews is analyzed and made ready for publication, they will also be compiled into a final report of this project and be disclosed in the JFE 21<sup>st</sup> Century foundation's website with due recognition of a significant contribution made by foundation through the JFE 21<sup>st</sup> Century Foundation Grants-in-aid for "Asian History Research for FY2008".