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# *Erica Marat, The Military and the State in Central Asia: From Red Army to Independence*

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## RÉFÉRENCE

Erica Marat, *The Military and the State in Central Asia: From Red Army to Independence*  
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- 1 Erica Marat is a one of the United States' most brilliant Central Asian political scientists. She has offered numerous analyses of political transformations as presented by different think tanks and American foundations. In this book, Marat focuses on the role of the army in building state processes in contemporary Central Asian states. The book offers a wide panorama of Central Asian armies, compiling sources already published (books, reports in Russian and English etc.) and some original data. She has conducted various interviews with policy makers, veterans, politicians, specialists and army officers involved and concerned by the region.
- 2 In many state theories, the army is considered key to sovereignty. The author analyses the effectiveness of national sovereignty in post-Soviet Central Asian republics by looking into the army creation process. To underline the importance of the region's Soviet legacy, she compares two countries: Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Tajikistan, an armed conflict with regional implications broke out, which highlighted difficulties in appropriating available military resources. The 201<sup>st</sup> battalion, set up during the Soviet era and stationed in Tajikistan, remained under Russian control. With no military force of its own to command, the Tajik government was unable to put an end to the conflict. Meanwhile, both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan inherited the Soviet military forces stationed on their

territories, which allowed them to deal with sources of political instability. Kazakhstan even had a nuclear infrastructure, but quickly gave up the idea of becoming a new global nuclear power and handed its arsenal over to Russia.

- 3 The first chapter provides an historical overview of the importance of this historical legacy. First, the author highlights the key role played by the Soviet army in building a Soviet identity. In Soviet society, the Red Army was instrumental in constructing a shared conscience. For the Tsarist Army, Tashkent became a centre capable of fighting British influence and quashing local insurrections. The Army was also the first institution present in the region. This inevitably had an impact on its role in determining whether other institutions were also set up in these societies. The Army facilitated social mobility, enabling local Red Army heroes to appear. In particular, the author mentions how memories of the Second World War and the Afghan invasion affect existing societies.
- 4 Chapter two is probably the most original, and deals with the persistence of ties in the post-Soviet region thanks to a relatively consistent shared memory perpetuated by veterans' associations. The importance of veterans is a reminder of Central Asia's involvement in destroying Nazism. Soldiers who fought in the Afghan War would also like to be considered heroes. Some revise their memories, presenting their involvement in Afghanistan as a continuation of the global war against Islam. However, the Afghan episode remains relatively unpopular because it was one of the first signs the Soviet Union was losing power. From 1985 onwards, the conflict lost support as an increasing number of soldiers were killed. For citizens, the war was considered geographically distant and of limited usefulness. According to official figures, 15 000 died, although real fatalities were probably much higher. Erica Marat has carried out a series of interviews with veterans, and highlights the lasting importance of transnational veterans' associations (AVU). The veterans' visions of the war contrast with what has been written on the subject. Those who took part in the Afghan War remain convinced of the Red Army's superiority. The veterans' association network demonstrates the vitality of a common identity, which extends beyond ideology. Given the indifference of the general population, those involved in the war share a sense of solidarity, regardless of ethnic background.
- 5 The author goes on to provide a detailed overview of current developments in the region's armed forces, country by country. This includes a panorama of existing legislation and institutional reforms in each country. All countries invest considerably in the armed forces. Even the small republic of Kyrgyzstan, facing an armed rebellion by a transnational Islamist movement – the Uzbekistan Islamist movement – invests in security issues.
- 6 National defence is also constructed by way of cooperation agreements. After the collapse of Soviet military structures, Moscow was instrumental in building a new collective vision of security in the post-Soviet region. This is visible in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Intensive cooperation efforts with NATO in the form of a Partnership for Peace were also initiated. In addition, the OSCE provided expertise on questions of disarmament. However, cooperation between Central Asian countries without international mediation seemed to be at an impasse. From the early 2000s onwards, another form of alliance began to take precedence, as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) gained in power. This cemented cooperation efforts between China, Russia and Central Asian countries. The CSTO and SCO demonstrate the importance given

to maintaining relations with Russia. Other agreements, however, show a clear desire for emancipation.

- 7 The multiplication of agreements is evidence of these countries' complex geographical situations. Erica Marat analyses the example of NATO after ten years of cooperation efforts. The Partnership for Peace is seen as a way of reinforcing these countries' sovereignty, which has the effect of weakening Russia. Attempts to create a Central Asian peace corps to minimise dependency on Russia have failed. Marat also mentions the numerous ways in which former Soviet republics have imitated Russian legislative efforts. They repeatedly look to Russia when adopting reforms. The ties linking these countries to the former power are therefore complex, and not just characterised by the end of an enforced submission, as was so often heard after they gained independence.
- 8 Erica Marat also highlights Central Asia's importance after September 11. The spotlight on terrorism and Islam meant the region attracted the attention of the major powers, especially the United States. This strategic interest in Central Asia was not just the result of the Taliban expansion, however, but also the desire to weaken Russia and get closer to China.
- 9 In Central Asia, the global rhetoric against Islam gave some governments and armed forces a legitimate reason to enforce social and political order. This local appropriation would be an interesting topic for further study. It paved the way for military bases in Kyrgyzstan (Manas, Bishkek) and Uzbekistan (Karshi). This military situation was also used to justify strict policies repressing any form of opposition in other countries, especially Uzbekistan.
- 10 In addition, Erica Marat examines relations between armed forces and national elites. Factors such as political nominations and relations between security services are indicative of political power play in these societies (especially with respect to regional factionalism). Military strategies affect relations between neighbouring countries. The army becomes an essential vector for spreading new national ideologies based on a revised vision of the past. Marat highlights the importance of the army legacy as a source of social distinction and social mobility. Armies are nationalised by promoting officers from certain countries, and remain controlled by a political elite. Most continue to maintain conscription forces. However, social differences arise between the young people who pull strings to be exempted from military service, and those who do not. Increasingly this is a factor distinguishing rural or marginal communities from an urban political elite seeking to spare its children the rigours of conscription.
- 11 Indeed, army building is an interesting research topic perhaps because of these non-institutional factors. For example, it would be interesting to examine the reasons for the Russian Army's continued presence on the Tajik-Afghan border. While a border presence is certainly useful to prevent incursions by foreign troops, it also facilitates illegal traffic, in particular in drugs and weapons. The Tajik example may shed light on how networks of former Soviet soldiers were able to take advantage of army reconstruction in an international trafficking context, and not just in terms of the military honours earned.
- 12 Similarly, the Sino-Kyrgyz border, controlled up until the late 1990s by a Russian military authority, is another interesting area of study. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, it contributes to our knowledge of the army's role in *Perestroika* and the early hours of independence, particularly with respect to developing new economies. Secondly, it builds a better understanding of this important legacy, which today has an impact on how the

armed forces perceive their role. Power games are also played out within the armed forces, as seen in social and economic stratagems that have little to do with the army's official role. Soldiers' non-military activities could be a fascinating area of study. One example is some officers' private use of soldiers as security or labour forces. Another is the development of different trafficking activities, in alcohol, drugs and weapons. Despite their apparent rivalry, it is obvious that members of the armed forces stationed near "closed" borders (such as the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border) are instrumental in building economic ties and developing transnational trafficking activities. However, there are many practical barriers to such research.

- 13 This book presents a wide panorama of information and is a perfect handbook of armies in the region. But Erica Marat's work is particularly interesting for two reasons: firstly, it demonstrates the importance of legacies in building new armed forces and, secondly, it shows the embeddedness of many international cooperation efforts. The lasting nature of some practices extends beyond the military field, and cooperation efforts highlight the contradictions that some countries will soon need to deal with. This book therefore provides a general conceptualisation of the post-colonial experience in this region, and encourages comparisons with other post-colonial armed forces.

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## INDEX

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