

evolution under various influences and was everything but an art “contrary of free artistic creation” (46). Denying this (on the basis of Hans Belting’s theories) means to deform Russian art history and to adjust the Russian past to the Russian present; that is, the absence in contemporary Russia of creative freedom. To emphasize the originality of Russian art from this perspective does not mean to be objective, but to take a very questionable position based on atemporality (or, worse, deliberate archaization). After two centuries (eighteenth and nineteenth) of westernized Russian art and one century (twentieth) of massive destruction (often by the “people”) of churches and icons—not to mention sales to the west or the museumification, both done by the non-Orthodox elites, of a very small number of so called “masterpieces of the iconic art”—a serious researcher cannot affirm that the violence against any contemporary art making reference to icons is “spontaneously” provoked by a specific atavistic feeling. At best, such a position for a researcher can be judged as naïve. Because of this initial error, the whole narration is weakened by the constant medley between aesthetic, political, and legal aspects and, within the latter, confusion between the law itself and repression.

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Rentier Capitalism and its Discontents: Power, Morality and Resistance in Central Asia. By Balihar Sanghera and Elmira Satybaldieva. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. xxvi, 321 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Tables. \$149.99, hard bound. doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.275

This important book by Balihar Sanghera and Elmira Satybaldieva provides a sweeping account of how the emergence of rentier capitalism in Central Asia over the last three decades has generated and perpetuated decades of income inequality, poverty and social struggle. The authors outline eight types of rent-seeking activities, introduced by neo-liberal economic reforms that have come to dominate the portfolios of the wealthiest Central Asian elites. Abetted by local and national level political allies, these elites have made the acquisition, control, and monopolization of rents their main strategic focus, creating networks of favoritism and patronage and repurposing the state’s regulatory apparatus. As a result, economies have become skewed to those with this access, denying opportunity and basic social needs to most citizens despite their novel, courageous and persistent bouts of protest.

The book showcases a wealth of groundbreaking empirical research and nuanced theoretical observations on topics too often neglected by the western academy and international economic observers. The rentier economy includes some familiar sectors—like extractive resources and financial services—along with urban development policy and real estate, whose commercialization and expansion in the 2000s generated lucrative new opportunities for the connected. In turn, rentier capitalism has been justified by the introduction of new moral codes into social life that shift the responsibility of socioeconomic survival onto the individual citizen, borrower, oil worker, or economic migrant, rather than the enormous systemic disruptions that remade Central Asian societies over the last three decades. The book effectively explores these themes across contemporaneous cases, sectors, and social movements in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

The pick of the chapters recounts (Chapter 5) how post-Soviet property development created networks of collusion among plutocrat investors, local politicians, and administrators who controlled permits and enabled new forms of US-style securitization in the mortgage markets that disrupted existing residential practices and

marketplaces. Also superb is the analysis in Chapter 7 of how neoliberal urban development policies appropriated land in public parks and small plots away from local residents, especially vulnerable rural migrants, in order to serve as sites for lucrative new private and commercial developments. Their breathtaking scale was revealed in a never-ending string of scandals involving mayors in Bishkek and Almaty and in settlement-related activism and protest. Chapter 9 provides one of the best available accounts of the origins and evolution of protests by oil workers in Kazakhstan and miners in Kyrgyzstan. Throughout, the authors display their keen eye for various forms of resistance, backlash, and local activism (such as the women's-led anti-debt movement) normally overlooked in more perfunctory western accounts that discount the role of Central Asian civil society and the southern-based voices who understand and narrate them.

In some chapters the analysis may cede too much analytical ground to the all-encompassing and marauding influence of "neo-liberalism." For example, the chapter on how the adoption of international investment treaties has empowered foreign capital and corporations overlooks the agency of Central Asian elites that is otherwise afforded to Central Asian social resistance movements. Certainly, the oil giant Chevron and the gold mining company Cameco pushed hard for favorable terms in their initial production-sharing agreements, but there is hardly a mention of the national-level and high-profile corruption scandals—mostly transferred to secretive overseas bank accounts—that embroiled politicians who demanded kickbacks from these companies to access and exploit their country's wealth. Corporations engage in merciless extraction, but they are usually aided and abetted by local gatekeepers. Although the authors admirably lay out and explain the various types of rent extraction that have characterized the post-Soviet political economy, we are also left wondering how, exactly, these networks of repurposed regulatory power emerged from the institutional chaos of the 1990s. Certainly, the advice and political influence of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank played some role, but both countries were infiltrated by legions of western lawyers, consultants, and advisors who teamed up with local middlemen to cut deals with regulators and bureaucrats that privatized or otherwise restructured lucrative sectors. They provided the pathways that normalized this predatory behavior. The institutional uncertainty of the "transition," the readily available offshore routes for capital flight, and the general lack of any faith in state regulation afforded a *carte blanche* to those insiders who understood they could privately benefit from shaping nascent economic regulations.

Ultimately, Sanghera and Satybaldieva have rewarded Central Asia scholars with a critically important intervention, one that spans multiple disciplines in mapping the contours of the extensive local networks of collusion and graft, misplaced moral justification, and the varieties of backlash, resistance, and activism that they have engendered in the contemporary region.

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Putin's Labor Dilemma: Russian Politics between Stability and Stagnation.

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Putin's Labor Dilemma presents an authoritative study—indeed definitive as far as that is possible—of labor politics in post-Soviet Russia. A veteran scholar of the