Chapter-II

Civil Society in Soviet Kyrgyzstan
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Political Culture and Civil Society in Pre-Tsarist Empire

There are a lot of complexities about the separate identity of the Kyrgyz people and their independent nationhood. There is no unanimity among different sources about this. According to the famous Kyrgyz scholar Rakhat Achylova that the “first reference to Kyrgyz and their state can be found in Chinese sources of the third millennium B.C. In that remote period the Kyrgyz were dependent on ancient Chinese state and later, in the first century B.C., on the Huns. It was at the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth centuries A.D. that the Kyrgyz gained independence and built a state of their own. That state, though more a community of all the Turkic tribes created by the Union of Teles, produced the first Kaganate (state) of Enisei Kyrgyz and developed into an enormous empire called the Kyrgyz Great Power. It existed for seventy years and covered a spacious territory in Central Asia from the Irtysh to the Tien Shan to the Ithyl (Volaga) river.”

After that it lost independence and was ruled by the Turks, Mongols and Chinese etc. The second millennium was a period of Kyrgyz dependence on various powers: The Mongols, the Chungizids, the Kokand Khanate, and, at the end of nineteenth century, Russia. The Kyrgyz, however, were never fully dependent on these powers. Thus, until 1910, the independent Alai Khanate was not subordinate to either the Kokand Khanate or Russia. Kyrgyz territory covered large areas of Central Asia, unifying various Turkic and other nomadic tribes (a polyethnic makeup typical of the Kyrgyz) into military-democratic states that had their own capitals, armies, national flags, and so forth. They also had governmental apparatuses—heads of state, ministers, akims (administrative heads of government), and so forth to enable them to handle diplomatic relations with near and distant neighbours. Nevertheless, one constrain of both the ancient and later Kyrgyz states has remained: the struggle of the Kyrgyz for their

independence.” But according to John Anderson till the period of 12th Century A.D. “It is impossible to find more than passing reference to a people known as the Kyrgyz, and their origin remain the subject of controversy.” He again states that after the imperial Mongol power declined during the 15th century, the various Kyrgyz tribes, themselves the product of a mixture of the people of the region and various incoming Mongol and Turkic groups, appear to have created the first independent Khanate with some degree of autonomy from nominal Mongol overlords. According to Soviet historians, it was during this period that the Kyrgyz developed a distinctive language, and acquired a sense of nationhood, though social organization remained centered around tribal and kinship ties. However, they faced an uphill struggle to maintain their freedom against the Mongol Oirats and during 17th century many Kyrgyz groups were forced to move, whether to the Ferghana valley region, or further south to what today is northern Tajikistan, or to eastern Turkestan, now part of China. However, Ahmed Rashid writes that the ancestors of Kyrgyz were probably settled on the upper reaches of the Yenisei River until about the 10th century. From there, they migrated south to the Tien Shan region. Kyrgyzstan had been ruled in the past by the Turks, Mongols, Chinese, Khanate of Kokand, Tsars of Russia. Due to assimilation of various ethnic groups its society has been a multi-ethnic one. Though Kyrgyzs have been under Russian control for more than one hundred years, they are distinct from the Russians in their ethnicity, religion, language, culture and history. The Kyrgyzs are Mongol people who speak a Turkic dialect called kipchak which belongs to Altaic family of languages.

During the later part of 17th century Kyrgyz society had developed a distinctive, flexible, political-administrative structure, based upon independent family and tribal associations, and rooted in the nomadic lifestyles of the people. Communities were organized around kinship groups. As families grew their auls (mobile villages) were split up, as sons left home with flocks and spouse to seek fresh pastures elsewhere. The Kyrgyz were extremely mobile people.

2 Ibid. p. 320.
Each family belonged to a larger clan group and each of these in turn was part of a wider tribal confederation. Though these were mostly nomadic peoples each of these communities had territorial base, and each was dominated by an aristocracy defined largely in terms of the size of cattle holdings which in turn determined levels of access to the most favourable pastures. At the same time tribal life was characterized by a degree of debate and consultation which would have been unthinkable in the settled Oases to the west, with some contemporaries seeing the ‘election’ of Khans and resolution of conflicts through discussion as underlying the more democratic nature of Kyrgyz polities during the 1990’s. There was also considerable degree of flexibility in the selection of leaders, so that when traditionally dominant families failed to produce people of high caliber communities would seek out men of ability from other leading families to exercise authority.\(^6\) Achylova says that the roots of democratic principles can be found in the cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz. Throughout its history, Kyrgyz society has remained democratic. Its main foundations have been a collective, kinship-based consciousness and a communal way of life that ensured solid and stable internal relations and the resolution of all societal issues in concert. The main principles of Kyrgyz democracy can specifically be found in such practices as the nationwide discussion of both minor and major issues; collective decision making on all the most important issues in the life of the community; the voicing of personal opinions, even those in opposition to others; respect for the elderly as well as for the opinions of younger community members, the public election of rulers of all ranks, including the khan; criticism of senior, powerful members; the settlement of political debates through proper use of the folk traditions of hospitality and generous gifts; and a multiethnic ruling system. “These concepts ensured simplicity and sincerity in relations between princes and the common people (nor were the differences between sociopolitical groups great), providing solid foundations for a democratic society, according to Achylova.”\(^7\)

In the first millennium A.D., when the powerful khanates ruled, political life and civil life among the Kyrgyz people were indissolubly linked. Civil society was represented by the family clan, and the neighbor-based community (the aul) was the foundation of the state system.

\(^6\) John Anderson, op.cit, p.2.

\(^7\) Rakhat Achylova, op.cit, p. 322.
In the second millennium, when the state system disintegrated, Kyrgyz society survived mainly through the normal functioning of its most basic civil component—greater communities, based on blood and neighborhood relations. These units were often similar in structure to the European Principalities of the middle Ages and sometimes acted as the state system.\(^8\)

The cultural bases of Kyrgyz people are mentioned in the epic *Manas*, Semetey and Seitek. *Manas*, an enormous epic written by the great nineteenth-century Kazakh educator Chuukan Valikhanov, is encyclopedic collection of all Kyrgyz myths, tales, legends, ways of life, customs, traditions, religious and medical knowledge and international relations. It has been called the *Iliad* of the steppes, and of all the diverse issues reflected in this epic, the most important are democratic principles.

But in spite of many essential attributes of democratic civil life mentioned in the Pre-Tsarist Kyrgyz society certain levels of anti-democratic tendencies were also present. Leadership tended to remain with certain families, and for much of the year the individual *aul* governed its own life and activity. Only occasionally did the communities come together, says John Anderson. However, in comparison to other Central Asian republics, Kyrgyz society was more democratic.

In the middle of the 18th century the Kyrgyz became subject to the Chinese rule. But it could not change the Kyrgyz nomadic lifestyle. In the early period of 19th century, under the regime of Kokand, Islam took a greater hold in Kyrgyz territory. But in spite of this the Kyrgyz people maintained their traditions and customs. According to John Anderson, “rather ironically, it was to be the Russians invaders who helped to strengthen the institutional basis of Islam from the end of he 19th century onwards. Though local leaders preserved most of their privileges under the new rulers, a perceived weakening of Kokand’s power in the 1840s led to a series of rebellions in various parts of the region. Notably in 1845 when the Osh-Kyrgyz took advantage of the absence of the regular garrison to rebel against the harsh tax policies of the khanate.”\(^9\)

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\(^8\) Ibid.

doubt the revolt was put down, but it indicates Kyrgyz people were freedom loving. Hence they could fight against the oppressive rule of the Khanate.

Tsarist Colonisation And It’s Impact On Kyrgyz Social Structure

Kyrgyzs contacts with Russia date back to the beginning of the 17th century when Peter the Great’s ambassador to the Jungar Khanate, artillery captain Ivan Unkovsky, visited the region. Other Russians followed, especially from the late 18th century as adventurers, scholars and travelers began to penetrate Central Asia, some stimulated by intellectual curiosity and others by a desire to spread Russian influence or counter that of English. They collected valuable information of Kyrgyz geography, history and social organisation.

At the beginning of the 19th century the Kyrgyz people wanted to accept Russian suzerainty, to protect themselves against Kokand. Finally Kokand Khanate was destroyed in 1876, with the help of Russia. In the same year Kyrgyz submitted to Russian rule. According to Gregory Gleason, “the first formal administrative structures of the Tsarist government in Central Asia were established shortly after the Tsarist Decree of 1867, which created the guberniia of Turkistan. The decree specified a two-tiered administrative arrangement that was fairly typical for Russian imperial colonies; recognizing a firm border between the cultural lives of the indigenous Muslims and the colonizing Russians. As a rule, the Russian overlords sought not to interfere with local customs. Communication between the natives and the Russians was discouraged; natives were not encouraged to learn Russians unless necessary for the purposes of communications in general, the Russians remained ignorant of and indifferent to the culture of the locals, and vice-versa.”

The new Russian rulers initially proved satisfied with political dominance and interfered only to a limited extent in the day to day affairs of the Kyrgyz people. Administratively Russian rule in Central Asia was marked by constant reorganisation, with the majority of the Kyrgyz territory in the first instance allotted to the Semirechie oblast (administrative region) within the Turkistan governor-generalship. From 1882-97 this region was transferred to the Steppe Administration, after which it returned to Turkistan’s jurisdiction. During the same period the southern regions were located within the Ferghana and Syr-Darya

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regions, each of which was in turn divided into districts (Vezdy). Through most of the pre-revolutionary period each region within Central Asia remained under military governors, but in the districts there emerged parallel Russian and local authority structures, with the new rulers relying on traditional elites to maintain order. This had the advantage of leaving unpopular decisions to be implemented by local leaders who then bore the brunt of popular displeasure.11 As time rolled on the two different cultures clashed with each other’s. In particular the newcomer’s distinctive ideas about agriculture and land use provoked tensions as they sought to impose the principles of private ownership and settled farming on groups who relied heavily on nomadism, and viewed land as the property of all. Successive land statutes in 1867 and 1879 made the practice of nomadism problematic, especially as Russian settlers were given land in locations that often obstructed the age old pattern of cattle herding. Though Russian policies served to undermine traditional ways of life, agriculture, and in particular cattle breeding, remained the predominant occupation for the majority of the indigenous population. John Anderson states that in the late 1890s, 85% of those in the Pishpek district were still nomadic or semi-nomadic. Crops began to spread as Russian settlers introduced cotton, rice, potatoes and tobacco, whilst in the Issyl Kul area Russian farmers successfully developed grain cultivation. Russian pattern of rural development also brought changes to Kyrgyz lifestyles, as the seizure of the best lands or obstruction of nomadic routes led to the impoverishment of many Kyrgyz families and increasing settlement of local nomadic communities.12

Though urbanisation started in Pishpek and in other areas, it excluded the Kyrgyz who remained firmly located in the countryside, while the towns were largely inhabited by Russian Professionals or Tatar traders. In the later part of 1910s one can find some sort of resentment among the Kyrgyz, i.e. refusal to pay taxes, rejection of official candidates in local elections and the occasional murder of hated landlords. Some sorts of songs and slogans were shouted against the Russian conquerors, rich land lords and for social justice. During this period a remarkable achievement was done so far education was concerned. The Jadids (Muslim reformers) tried to establish a network of schools across Central Asia that would combine respect for tradition with openness to modern learning. A few were opened in Kyrgyz towns, including in 1914 one for

11 John Anderson op.cit, p.5.
12 Ibid.
women. But these brave enlightenment efforts, which were treated with suspicion by colonial authorities and conservative mullahs alike, had a very limited impact.13

During the 1905 revolution, there were some public meetings and a few strikes, notably of oil and postal workers, but these were largely confined to Slavic personnel and on the whole Kyrgyz peasants remained unaffected. Following the collapse of the revolution martial law was imposed in the Semirechie and Ferghana regions, and political power was more firmly placed in the hands of the police and the military. Political activities were rounded up and social-democratic circles destroyed. Before the out-break of the First World War, the Indigenous farmers protested land seizures or tax burdens, whilst new settlers were increasingly critical of the administration. In 1916 there was a mass rebellion in Central Asia against Tsarist rule as the local people were drawn into war against their will against Turkey, guardian of the holy places of Islam. According to Anderson "more importantly the revolt reflected deep seated grievances that had been building up over previous years as Kyrgyz farmers and nomads were gradually impoverished by excessive demands and Russian settlement."14

During this period, in short, there was the disruption of social life of the nomad Kyrgyz people by imposing the principle of private ownership and settled farming, the seizure of land by the Russians, excess demand of tax, and finally conscription and levies during the First World War. These destabilized the Kyrgyz society and culture which were marked by acute poverty, Islamization and rebellion etc.

In 1916, a mass revolt started by the Kyrgyz people against the Tsar. But the Russian Army with large-scale massacre suppressed it. Many people fled to China. In addition to the disastrous human consequences, with around 100,000 Kyrgyz deaths, the revolt had major economic consequences as rural labour forces were depleted by population loss and conscription. All these factors only added to the tense relationship between Russians and Kyrgyz, which finally paved way for the revolution of 1917.

13 Ibid., p.6.
14 Ibid., p. 7.
Bolshevik Revolution and Socio-Cultural Changes in Kyrgyzstan

Tsarist regime had become a matter of wide-spread discontent among the Kyrgyz people before the October Revolution. The impact of Tsarist policy of private ownership of land and settled farming on groups, excessive tax on land, encouragement of the Russian settlers and the conditions during the First World War had weakened the legitimacy of the Tsarist rule in Kyrgyzstan, simultaneously creating a fertile ground for the success of Bolshevik Revolution. In this context, Geoffery Wheeler writes, “Prior to the October Revolution the situation in Turkistan and the Steppe region was conducive to the rapid success of the Bolshevik Red Army to overthrow the Tsarist regime. The inconsistent policies towards Central Asia after death of Kaufman in 1882 and the enormous increase in Russian and Ukrainians settlement in Muslims lands since the turn of the century had engendered wide spread resentment against Russian rule, which culminated in 1916 revolt.” 15

According to Dzhunushaliev, the 1916 uprising was “not simply against the Tsarist rule, but to defend honours, dignity, freedom and land.”16 Following the outbreak of revolution in Russia, the first Soviets of Workers’ Deputies appeared in Kyrgyz regions in March 1917, initially in the southern town of Kyzyl-Kiia and a number of mining settlements, and then in Pishpek, Tokmak, Przeval’sk, Naryn and Osk.

Alongside the Soviets there also emerged a number of Muslim organizations which the most influential appears to have been the Kyrgyz revolutionary-democratic union ‘Bukhara’ which was formed in May 1917 and within several months claimed 7,000 members. The aims of this organization, whose agenda became increasingly radical, were to advance the demands of the poorest sections of the population. 17

In this regard, they were supported by the various trade union organizations that sprung up in the mining, oil and handicraft industries whose proclamations usually combined


“political and economic demands including an end to war, the redistribution of land, and
government efforts to combat hunger and poverty.”

Even after the fall of Tsarism in the Kyrgyz territory, there was no separate Bolshevik
organization till December 1917. In the Kyrgyz territories, at the time of October revolution and
in the following months it was difficult to create coherent socialist groups amidst the ebb and
tide of civil war. Only in December Soviet power was established formally, in northern Talas
region, and it was to take a further six months before nominal Bolshevik control was established
in much of the country. And even then it took two years more for the Red army to really control
the whole Kyrgyz territory by defeating the Russian ‘White’ Army and local armed groups
(Basmachi).

Before 1917, Lenin and other architects of the Revolution had vehemently denounced Tsarist
imperialism and the Tsarist treatment of subject peoples. October Revolution was quickly
followed by promises of entirely different treatment based on racial equality, some form of
accommodation with traditional ways of life and national self-determination. The problem
presented to the Soviet leaders by their sudden inheritance of the Tsarist empires, says Wheeler,
“was formidable. Firstly, although the whole concept of empire ran counter to the communist
theory, the inherited empire happened to contain natural resources vital to the continued
existence of the Russian or Soviet state.

Secondly, renunciation of the empire, or at any rate of areas populated by Asian peoples, would,
according to Soviet reckoning, have laid Central Asia and Transcaucasia open to attacks by
Britain and thus have jeopardized Russia’s security. Thirdly, there were in Turkistan and the
Steppe Region alone nearly two million Russian settlers, who, whether they supported the
Russian Revolution or not, considered this area to be an integral part of Russia which should not
be lightly handed over to the backward indigenous population.”

\[\text{18 Ibid.} \]

\[\text{19 G. Wheeler, op.cit., p.99.} \]
While Wheeler criticized the Third Territorial Congress of Soviets, for having ignored the question of autonomy, Devendra Kaushik maintains such a criticism is not valid. Kaushik explains that when the Congress met on November 15-22, 1917, only a very small portion of Turkistan territory was under Soviet control. It was confined, in addition to Tashkent, to only major parts in the Ferghana and Samarkand regions. The Semirechye and most of the Trans-Caspian region were still in the hands of the Provisional government and bourgeois nationalist committees. “Under such circumstances the victory of a socialist revolution and a revolutionary organization of power naturally preceded the question of autonomy on the agenda of the Congress.”

The third Congress welcomed broad masses to participate in the Congress of Soviets with local representatives to deliberate upon the questions of autonomy and state structure. In 1918 the Turkistan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was established within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR or Russian Federation) and included Kyrgyzstan until 1924, when the Kara-Kyrgyzstan Autonomous oblast (region) was created. Further titular changes took place in 1925 and 1927, and then in 1936 the republic acquired the formal title of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, and thereby it became one of the constituent units of the Soviet Union.

**Kyrgyzstan during Lenin Period**

Lenin understood the peculiar conditions and inherited problems of Central Asia. So, his nationality policy was based on the right to national self-determination which was proclaimed by the Soviet Union in one of its first decrees, “the decree on peace”. Lenin argued for the voluntary union of small nationalities in the larger nation. Lenin said “We want a voluntary union of nations, a union which precludes any coercion...so that the distrust of centuries has a chance to wear off”.  

The central problem in Soviet nationality policy had been “to maintain a delicate balance between the two conflicting interests; to enable the continued dominance of the Russian

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majority and at the same time to reduce the alienation of non-Russian nationalities to guarantee
equality between nationalities, in practice, Soviet policy fluctuated between these impulses.”22

Lenin understood that the peculiar conditions of Central Asia needed a different liberal strategy
to handle the multi-ethnic nomadic society. For that he pointed out to the Europeanized and
intellectual Bolsheviks, about the peculiar conditions of Central Asia in 1917 in the following
manner:

“You are confronted with a task which would require applying the general theory to specific
conditions such as does not exist in the European countries. You must be able to apply that
theory and practice to conditions in which the bulk of the population are peasants and in which
the task is to wage a struggle against medieval survivals and not against capitalism.”23

But Lenin’s pleas were ignored by Stalin and many other politicians later on. During
the period between 1918 to 1924, village societies, and people’s courts, composed of people
of local nationalities who knew the native languages, customs and tradition, were set up almost
everywhere. Representatives of the local population constituted the majority in the
administrative bodies. Thus, the Soviet power became genuinely popular under Lenin’s rule.

Administrative change was accompanied by socio and cultural change. During the early 1920s
the authorities were careful in their struggle with remnants of the old way of life. Early
commitments included a promise of equality for men and women, the prohibition of some
traditional marriage customs and education for all. Despite the long-term commitment to
reducing the public role of religion, the early 1920s were marked by a cautious approach to
Islam in Central Asia, with religious schools and courts allowed to function until around 1926-
27 and frequently religious leaders were co-opted into local administration.


Only the most resolutely anti-Soviet mullahs were repressed, but in predominantly rural Kyrgyzstan the drive to win over the population, as well as the practical limitations imposed by the absence of personnel in the villages, took priority over ideological orthodoxy, and not until the late 1920s were serious efforts launched to eradicate the remnants of the old and impose a new Soviet culture, according to Anderson. 24

The New Economic policy (NEP) started by Lenin in 1921 was yet to take hold to reduce the importance of nomadism to the growth of local economy.

Stalinism in Kyrgyzstan

Stalin’s approach on the issues of nationality policy, religion, customs, politics and economy was totally paradoxical to that of Lenin. From the late 1920’s onwards religious and other traditional customs also came under attack. In March 1927 the Khudzhum (advance) was launched in Central Asia. This was a mass propagandistic effort to encourage the liberation of women. Local authorities encouraged the public burning of the veil though in the southern Kyrgyz town of Osh, according to some sources, the veils were thrown off on the day announced by the authorities and then promptly put back on the next day by women under pressure from their families. From around 1929 the campaign against religion inherited in intensity as mosques were closed, religious education prohibited, and religious activities subject to repression. This campaign fell most heavily on the southern regions around the Ferghana Valley where Islam was much stronger and where the old ways of life retained their influence. According to Anderson, “The Stalinist state continued its efforts to reduce the impact of religion on everyday life. With regard to formal allegiance to Islam and dogmatic beliefs, it succeeded to some extent especially in the Slavic dominated north where orthodox religion had never been strong, though many traditional customs such as circumcision and separate burial remained prevalent. But in the south successive attempts to break traditional habits often proved short lived.” 25

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25 Ibid., p.11.
In political sphere, the Stalin years were most notable for the pervasive atmosphere of purge and terror. From the early 1930's as Stalin sought to ensure central control over the republics, considerations of efficiency and loyalty took priority over 'affirmative action'. From the early 1930s, purges began to take on more sinister turn as the secret police discovered 'counter-revolutionary' cells in the Kyrgyz branch of the state planning agency and various intellectuals were accused of 'bourgeois-kulak nationalism. A renewed purge of party ranks was launched in late 1933 which over the course of two years reduced membership of the Kyrgyz party from 19,932 to 6,385. As elsewhere in the U.S.S.R, the murder of the Leningrad party boss Sergei Kirov in December 1934 heralded far-more thorough going purges in Kyrgyzstan, though by this time a number of leading figures had already been removed from their positions accused of nationalist deviations or even counter revolutionary activities.  

Amongst the victims were Abdulkerim Sydykov, a leading economic planner, Yusup Abdakhmanov formerly chairman of the Kyrgyz Council of People’s Commissars, Kasym Tynstanov, a leading reformer and educationalist who had been commissar of education for much of the early Soviet period, and Torekul Aitmatov the father of contemporary novelist Chingiz Aitmatov. The last three of those were rounded up in the affair of the ‘Social-Turan’ (or Turkie party, guilty). According to the security services they were involved in a variety of sins including nationalism, terrorism, anti-Soviet agitation and connections with right wing Trotskyites. Found guilty on all counts, a total of 138 ‘conspirators’ were shot and buried in a local sports center during November 1938. Many others disappeared into the camps and execution cellars, or had their lives ruined as a result of kinship or friendship with ‘enemies of the people’ a category which included 63 people from the 72 member Central Committee.

On the economic front, the vigorous attempt for industrialization and collectivization had both positive and negative impact on Kyrgyz economy, politics, society and culture. Many industrial enterprises sprang up and economic growth was faster. Amongst the new industries created or

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26 Ibid., p.13.
expanded during this period were metal working, textiles, sugar refining and meatpacking and by 1937 over 200 large scale industrial enterprises had been created. Considerable work also went into the creation of a social infrastructure, with the development of new settlements and homes, the building of hundreds of schools and hospitals and huge expenditure on the expansion of irrigation networks. Some efforts was also made to exploit mineral and energy resources and by1940 Kyrgyzstan was producing around 40% of all the coal produced in Central Asia (excluding Kazakhstan). As a result of these efforts, official statistics reported that in the period 1913-40 gross industrial output had risen 9.9 times.28

Kyrgyz society was predominantly an agricultural society. Collectivization paved the path for transition from a nomadic to a settled agricultural life. By the year 1940, as many as 98% of the republic`s farmers found themselves in collective farms. Though economic prosperity occurred but it was done by force. Hence it created a lot of tensions in the countryside, as village communities and even families divided in their response to collectivization. Those who resisted collectivization and industrialization heavy penalties were imposed upon them. The properties of the ‘Kulaks’ or the ‘rich peasants’, were confiscated and they were deprived of their electoral rights, were sometimes imprisoned or assigned to forced labour on new industrial projects or the development of the Chu river for irrigation purposes.

During this period Second World War broke out. Many Kyrgyz troops died in this war, which was known as the Great Patriotic war, in the USSR. As a result, on the domestic front, life in Kyrgyzstan remained difficult; as women, old people and children were drafted into maintain economic life.

So far language issue is concerned, the Soviet rule under Stalin had large-scale impact not only on Kyrgyzstan but on the entire central Asia. According to Gleason, “The idea of a large community within Central Asia may have its source in such common values as those promoted by Islam. But the practicality of the idea has much to do as well with the fact that the native language of 90 percent of central Asians is one or another form of a Turkic language.”29

28 Ibid., p.11.
29 Gregory Gleason, op. cit., p.43.
The three main groups of languages as used in Central Asia are Turkic, Persian, and Slavic. Turkic is the most widely spoken group of languages in Central Asia. The Turkic languages of Central Asia consist of three branches: the Karluk or East Turkic group (e.g. Uzbek); the Kipchak or central group (e.g. Karakalpak, Kazak, Kyrgyz); the Oguz group (e.g. Azerbaijan, Turkmen). Many local variations of the Turkic languages exist. According to Ahmed Rashid the Kyrgyz people speak a Turkic dialect called Kipchak which belongs to Altaic family of languages. When the Arabs conquered Central Asia they applied the Arab script in their day to day administration. The Chagatai language, written in Arabic script was used as the language of the educated people in Central Asia. In 1925 a decree was issued that established a ban on the import of materials printed in the Arabic alphabet. After the consolidation of Soviet power in Central Asia, language policy played a key role in Moscow’s deliberate efforts at social engineering. Between 1927 and 1930, a Latin script was adopted for spoken languages of Central Asia. Between 1934 and 1940, a new version of the Latin script was introduced by the Soviet government. Finally Latin script was replaced with Cyrillic script. The importation of many Russian loan words were made into local languages. Thus, local language was removed from common speech and Russification of cultural life was made.

Kyrgyzstan under Khrushchev to Chernenko

After the death of Stalin in March 1953, the process of de-Stalinisation started by some easing of central pressure and rehabilitating of a few of those purged in the 1930’s. After the Twentieth Party Congress Khrushchev’s nationality policy took a new course. He openly condemned some of Stalin’s wrong deeds and admitted that under Stalin there had been ‘monstrous’ and ‘gross’ violations of the basic Leninist principles of the nationalities policy of the Soviet state. At the Twenty second party Congress in 1961, a declaration was passed declaring that the nationalities problems in Soviet Union had been solved completely between all ethnic groups.

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30 Ibid.

31 Rashid Ahmed, op.cit., p.137.

Within the Kyrgyz communist party the proportion of indigenous members grew slowly, but only about a third of leading positions were occupied by Kyrgyz until 1970’s. Though the Slavic groups dominated in leading economic and security positions, the Kyrgyz very cautiously began to assert themselves, especially in day to day politics. This partial re-assertion took place under the leadership of Turdakun Usubaliev, first secretary of Kyrgyz communist party from 1961 to 1985. Under his leadership a multifaced approach to public life developed. On the one hand he publicly spoke about eternal friendship with the Russian people and language. At the same time he made increasing economic demand on Moscow for greater investment within the republic, and sought gradually to expand the number of positions available to the indigenous elite. Usubaliev balanced his obligations to his native people and to his Moscow overlords rather precariously. To more nationally minded Kyrgyz, his strategy was excessively compromised, entailing in particular subservience towards Russia that was likely to end in the destruction of the Kyrgyz language and the emasculation of national culture. They also pointed out that the Republican Party leadership showed little initiative in dealing with or even understanding, the growing socio-economic crisis because of the rapid rise in rural population. During Brezhnev’s time the trends promoted by Usubaliev were strengthened. So Usubaliev position was something paradoxical. Gregory Gleason opines that “On the one hand, Usubaliev was criticized by his own people for being too-pro-Russian, for promoting Russian culture and language and for having a Russian view of his country’s heritage. On the other hand, he was criticized by Moscow for being too lenient and for permitting localism, and backwardness. Ostensibly this was the reason for his removal in November 1985; he was replaced by Abasmat Masaliev.33

During the period between late 1950s and 1985, the control of Soviet administration over the republics loosened because of the corrupt and inefficient state officials and the rise of localism. Private informal sectors grew. Assertion of local people increased. There was economic slow down in Kyrgyzstan which was also intensified by the faster increase in the number of rural population.

33 Gregory Gleason, op.cit., p. 58.
Growing regional differences to central policies was also evident in other areas. From the late 1970s Moscow, under the influence of developments in Iran and Afghanistan, expressed increasing concern about the possible impact of Islamic revival upon its own Muslim subjects. Anti-Islamic propaganda was stepped up in response to central demands and an increasing number of press articles attacked the tendency of many party leaders at the local level to ignore the religious issue.

Gorbachev’s Glasnost and Perestroika and its Impact on Civil Society and Democratization Process in Kyrgyzstan. It was Moscow, not Kyrgyzstan, which paved the way for the transition from communism in Kyrgyzstan. During the brief tenure of Yury Andropov (1982-84) as a Soviet leader, a campaign had been launched against the corruption that had penetrated in the regional political life in appointment of various posts in the party. Family and kinship ties played major role in such appointments rather than the quality of the leaders. By this time the control over the republics had been loosened. The state-bureaucracy had become inefficient and corrupt. According to Eugene Huskey “at the end of the 1980’s, Kyrgyzstan was ruled by an orthodox and deeply entrenched political elite, which pointed proudly to the continuing quiescence of the population of Kyrgyzstan at a time of open political opposition in European parts of the U.S.S.R.”

The accession of Gorbachev to the leadership of the Soviet Union in 1985 heralded major changes for Central Asia. He saw economic deterioration, a corrupt and command-bureaucratic system, large-scale military-industrial complex etc as obstacles to progress. His first aim was to bring genuine economic liberalization, but it was impossible without bringing any change in political sphere. So, he announced his twin policies of ‘Perestroika’ and ‘Glasnost’ denoting to ‘restructuring’ and ‘openness’ respectively. These policies were adopted by the C.P.S.U. and initiated in the 27th Party Congress in February 1986. The programme of ‘Glasnost’ took precedence over that of ‘Perestroika’. But Glasnost was a means to the end of Perestroika or restructuring of the system, especially modernization and democratization.

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The term 'Glasnost' implies many thing which is related with "freedom of speech and the press, the right to assembly and demonstrations, accessibility of laws and decisions to discussions, transparency of state bodies and openness of their actively, the right to information etc."  

In the political front during his first year in office Gorbachev replaced the party leaders of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In early November 1985 Kyrgyz party first secretary Turdakun Usualiev who had ruled the republic since 1961 was compelled to retire. His successor, Absamat Masaliev, accused Usualiev of corruption and nepotism, and dismissed many of his closest allies from office. Despite all this and the removal or reshuffling of around 75% of leading republican and regional officials, Masaliev's tenure of office witnessed little real change. Though purges brought in many younger officials and reduced the size of the party apparatus by 20%, the old guard of central party bureaucrats and regional bosses continued to dominate, and one poll taken in 1988 showed that many party activists had seen few signs of changes in the style of party work.

At the initial stage of Gorbachev's reform agenda, the Kyrgyz leadership was not interested to implement these policies. So they became vigorous critics of Gorbachev's reform agenda and tacit supporters of his main adversary in the Central Committee, Yegor Ligachev. They also tightened their grip on the republic by mobilizing the local security services against any manifestation of independent political activity. When the republic's first discussion club, Demos, prepared a draft programme for a national front in Kyrgyzstan in the fall of 1989, it prompted a reaction of panic among the authorities and the repression of the club's activities. But the leadership was powerless to block centrally mandated reforms, such as the enhancement of titular languages and the holding of competitive elections for newly designed legislative assemblies.

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36 John Anderson, op. cit., p.18.

37 Eugene Husky. op.cit., p.250.
Masaliev, however, remained suspicious of Gorbachev’s reform programme and began to develop close links with conservatives in Moscow, who feared that Gorbachev’s reform process will undermine rather than strengthen the Soviet System. As a result Masaliev resisted all efforts to create a popular front in Kyrgyzstan. According to John Anderson “Conservatism was also evident in Masaliev’s speech to the newly elected Soviet Congress of Peoples Deputies meeting in June 1989 at which he attacked the breakdown in law and order which had allowed extremist to surface, and where he expressed concern as to whether this new fangled Moscow based talking shop had the ability to resolve the country problems.” As a lethargic leadership failed to tackle mounting social and economic difficulties, the reduction of Central involvement had only exacerbated existing problems with an economic downturn leading to a rising tide of unemployment amongst young in the countryside.

Glasnost spread like a fire in all areas of public life. The country virtually turned into a debating club. A large measure of dissidence was already allowed and also the censorship of press, the obsessive secrecy at party meetings and deliberations were lifted. Less restrictions, on traveling, direct dialing system, video cassette recorder (V.C.R) and audio system etc. greatly helped the hitherto ‘iron curtain’ citizens to have greater contact with the outside world. It opened the eyes of millions people. They realized that the Soviet system of rule was the biggest obstacle to the restoration of the country’s well being.

When Perestroika failed to achieve much Gorbachev realized that economic reform would follow genuine federal reform. Henceforth he changed his priorities by giving precedence to political reform over economic reform. By fearing the opposition from the party he started to bypass the party itself. Instead of restructuring the party first, he chose to concentrate on restructuring the state apparatus. Thus, he was compelled to democratize political institutions that finally opened the way for the growth of social movements in Kyrgyzstan.

Gorbachev’s reforms created a deep crisis throughout the country. Following frequent change in policy and personnel and ill-conceived hastily initiated amendments to the basic laws, production suffered, distribution disrupted. Gorbachev’s reforms had dismantled the traditional command-bureaucratic system without creating new ones to fill the vacuum. Due to economic short-falls, republican, regional and local governments began to look after their own economic interests. In March 1989, the population of Kyrgyzstan participated in elections for an all union parliament, under the scrutiny of central authorities. These elections were different from the previous Soviet electoral practices, in many respects. Firstly in thirty-four of the forty-three districts, candidates ran opposed for the first time in the history of Kyrgyzstan. Only in the Osh region was the level of competitiveness disappointing to the advocates of reform. Furthermore, four of the new deputies defeated candidates advanced by the party apparatus, and even some of the party sanctioned victors, such as Askar Akaev, became open supporters of reforms. A Kyrgyz counter-elite developed in Moscow that would eventually challenge the conservative leadership in Frunze (Kyrgyz capital). Finally, the electoral campaign, taken together with the demonstration effect of political activism in other Soviet republics, mobilized new members into the republic’s fledging informal groups.

Production, distribution and employment opportunities all slumped and affected population of Kyrgyzstan. Glasnost led to the re-assertion of regional grievances and highlighted local issues by newly formed ethno-cultural organizations. There was large-scale resentment among the various ethnic groups towards each other. From May 1989 a growing number of young people started to congregate in the capital Frunze where they staged a series of demonstrations calling for land to be given to them by the city authorities for the construction of their houses. In order to extract concessions from the authorities, such as construction materials and infrastructure improvements, these self-styled ‘builders’ formed the public association Ashar (Mutual Help), at the end of June 1989. Ashar is the first significant independent social organization to be created in the republic. Simultaneously there began to emerge other social and political organisations a number of whom were to coalesce in the Democratic Movement ‘Kyrgyzstan’ (DMK) in May 1990. At their founding congress, 300 delegates approved a programme calling for market reforms and genuine democratization and by the end of the year the movement was

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40 Eugene Huskey, op.cit., p. 250.
claiming a membership of 10000.\textsuperscript{41} There was considerable debate over a new language law and for competitive elections at the republican and local levels. Political participation in Kyrgyzstan grew steadily from the summer of 1989 till the winter of 1990. There were many new informal associations formed in this period such as \textit{Asaba} (Banner), for which the defense of ethnic Kyrgyz interests was the paramount concern, and the \textit{United Council of Labour Collectives}, an organisation of Russian industrial workers designed, like its Baltic counter parts to block or dilute policies that would diminish Russian cultural and political hegemony in the republic. The first explicitly political organization in Kyrgyzstan was the City Voter’s Club (\textit{Gorodskoi Klub izbiratelei}) created in Frunze in August 1989. This proto-party, which attracted from 30-100 persons to its meeting, played an active role in contesting republican and local legislative seats in Frunze during the February 1990 elections. These elections produced a small vocal opposition bloc in the Kyrgyz parliament.\textsuperscript{42} Having learned from their experience in the 1989 elections, the republican Communist Party used the electoral rules and their superior organizational resources to dominate the electoral campaign. As a result the party gained majority in the new Supreme Soviet. All forty raikom first secretaries, both obkom first secretaries, and the four leading republican secretaries secured seats in the parliament. Much as in the Russian federation, the conservative composition of this assembly would later complicate relations with a progressive executive in the post-Soviet era.\textsuperscript{43}

During the year 1989 the socio, economic and political environment in Kyrgyzstan became tense. It was made worse due to the conflict between the republic’s ethnic groups. In September 1989, after considerable debate, the Supreme Soviet had adopted a language law which made Kyrgyz the state language of the republic and described Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication. This language law made it mandatory for the managerial and administrative personnel to be able to communicate with their subordinates in Kyrgyz. It challenged the current dominance of Slavic elites who were in most sectors of the economy and administration. The anti-Russian feeling in Kyrgyzstan created a fear psychosis in the minds of the Russian-

\textsuperscript{41} John Anderson, op.cit, p.19.

\textsuperscript{42} Eugene Huskey, op. cit., p.251.

speaking population. As a result, the level of emigration began to rise in early 1990 and continued to do so until 1993, by which time the Russian population had been reduced by 20%.

Again an inter-communal violence broke out in the Osh region during the summer of 1990. the local Uzbecks and Kyrgyz came into conflict as a result of tensions engendered by the Uzbek's perception that they were unrepresented in local government and the Kyrgyz's view was that the Uzbeks took all the best jobs in the retail and consumer sector. A further grievance was added with the adoption of the state language which failed to take account of an appeal from Uzbeks residents of the southern oblasts of Osh and Jalalabad that some official status to be granted to Uzbek language alongside Russian and Kyrgyz. As a result, violent clashes broke out which resulted in killing of more than 200 persons. Finally it was controlled by the Soviet army and Interior Ministry troops.

The above incidents undermined the image of Kyrgyzstan as a relatively peaceful region of the U.S.S.R by exposing divisions within the state and society. A showdown was developing between the republic's traditional elites, who sought to rule over society and the reformist wing of the political establishment which envisioned a more active role for society in political life.

This intra-elite struggle came to the fore in October 1990, when the Kyrgyz parliament, following the example of the Soviet parliament in Moscow, met to elect the first executive president of the republic. But unlike in the all-Union case, where Mikhail Gorbachev ascended to the Soviet presidency unopposed, Masaliev faced two rivals for the post. By that time Masaliev had been seriously discredited because of his conservative leadership and by the conflict in Osh. Moreover, the opposition, which had united as the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (D.M.K) had became a significant political force. Contrary to the expectations, none of the candidates received a majority of the votes in the first round. This result threw the assembly, and the entire political establishment of Kyrgyzstan into a temporary crisis. The new republican law on the presidency stipulated that, in the event of a hung parliament in the first round of voting, none of the original candidates could proceed to a second round. "In the first round of the voting Masaliev failed to achieve the requisite proportion of votes to be elected and he was refused permission to be nominated. In a further round, Asker Akaev, the president of
the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences was elected to the executive presidency. Akaev quickly allied himself with reformist politicians and economists, including leaders of the D.M.K. The election ushered in an awkward period of dual power, during which both first secretary Masaliev and President Akaev claimed political supremacy. For a time, Masaliev and his successor, Jumgalbek Amanbaev, remained stronger figures, with the institutional support of the vast party-state bureaucracy. The president’s authority rested by contrast on the feeble pillars of parliamentary and public support. However, balance of powers shifted decisively in favour of Akaev in 1991.

During this period, Moscow was losing its credibility and political control. According to Anuradha M. Chenoy “the political situation was in continuous flux. Economic hardships, political confusion, and ethnic disputes led to an apocalyptic vision amongst the people. Results of a poll amongst them showed that a large number envisioned civil war or political chaos”

In these circumstances, Gorbachev advocated a new Union Treaty as a lifebelt for the drowning Soviet Union. The Union Treaty sought to restructure the federation, to give more autonomy to the units. The Baltics, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia favoured independence. Their leaders spoke from a position of strength, since they had popular mandates or referendum backing them. Boris Yeltsin’s success in the June 1991 direct elections for the Russian presidency, established him in a dominant position. The Speaker of the union parliament Lukyanov, was asked to look after the ‘interests’ of the parliament. The talks in Novo-Ogarevo (Soviet Presidential retreat) were not clear on the question of division of power or property between the centre and confederating units. Gorbachev proposed a three-tier system to be organized with the centre, republics and autonomous regions. Russia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine opposed this system, which would equate the autonomous with the Republics. Nonetheless, negotiations concluded in August with the proposal for the formal signing of the treaty on 21st August.

These events sharpened the existing contradictory, and the liberals and conservatives consolidated their positions. The liberals wanted a swifter move towards marketization and a looser confederation with a minimum role for the centre. The conservatives accused Gorbachev of going too far. They felt the Union treaty would break the Soviet Union. The conservatives then decided on a hastily organized coup against Gorbachev. On 18th August, the State Committee for the Emergency, ordered Gorbachev’s arrest, and seized control of centre. Yeltsin, the legitimate and popularly elected president of the Russian Federation led the internationally telecast resistance. Spontaneous public support, refusal by the army and K.G.B to resort to force, Gorbachev’s resistance during confinement and international pressure led to the quick surrender of the Putschists, most of whom had been Gorbachev’s recent allies. The communist party and conservatives had completely lost their control over the Soviet State. The coup hastened the process of collapse which had already set in.

We can see that some important changes had taken place in Kyrgyzstan during December 1990 till the coup in August 1991. In December Masaliev resigned as chairman of the Supreme Soviet, and was replaced by Medetkan Sherimkulov. That month, despite opposition from the K.C.P. and Masaliev in particular, the Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet voted to change the name of the republic from the Kyrgyz S.S.R to the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. In February 1991, moreover, the capital, Frunze (named after the Red Army commander who had conquered much of Central Asia in the civil war), reverted to its pre-1926 name of Bishkek. However, the economic realities appeared to prevail against secession. In the referendum on the preservation of the U.S.S.R. held in nine republics in March 1991; an overwhelming majority i.e. 87.7% of the eligible voters in Kyrgyzstan approved the proposal to retain the U.S.S.R. as a ‘renewed federation’.

In January 1991 Akaev replaced the large Council of Ministers with a smaller Cabinet, especially comprising of reformist politicians. However, his programme of political and economic reform had many opponents within the K.C.P. and security forces. In April, apparently owing to differences with Akaev, Masaliev resigned as First Secretary of the K.C.P; he was replaced by Jumgalbek Amanbaev. Although Amanbaev appeared more sympathetic to

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46 Ibid.
Akaev’s reform programme, there was much opposition within the K.C.P. leadership to the controversial plans for the ‘departyization’ (removal of KCP cells from work places) of government and the security forces.

In August 1991, when the State Committee for the State for Emergency (S.C.S.E), announced that it had assumed power in the Russian and Soviet capital, Moscow, there was an attempt to depose Akaev in Kyrgyzstan. “The K.C.P. declared its support for the coup leaders, and the commander of the Turkestan Military District (which comprised the five Central Asian republics) threatened to dispatch troops and tanks to the republic. To pre-empt military action against him, Akaev dismissed the chairman of the republican K.G.B. (State Security Service), and ordered troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to guard strategic buildings in Bishkek.”

Akaev publicly denounced the coup and issued a decree prohibiting activity by any political party in government or state bodies. After the coup had collapsed in Moscow, Akaev and vice-president German Kuznetsov renounced their membership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (C.P.S.U.) and the entire politburo and secretariat of the K.C.P. resigned on 31st August. The Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet voted to declare independence from the U.S.S.R. Akaev the sole candidate was re-elected president of Kyrgyzstan by direct popular vote on 12 October, receiving 95% of the votes cast. In October 1991 Akaev signed with representatives of seven other republics a treaty to establish a new economic community and when Russia, Belarus and Ukraine proposed the creation of the Common Wealth of Independent States (C.I.S.), Akaev was quick to announce his approval. On 21 December Kyrgyzstan was among the 11 signatories to the Almaty (Alma Ata) Declaration, which formally established the C.I.S.

Under Akaev’s guidance Kyrgyzstan became the most pluralistic of the Central Asian States, with a growing range of independent social organizations, a relatively free media and a lively press. He stressed his commitment to a revival of Kyrgyz identity but at the same time emphasized to protect the interests of all the peoples of the republic in which the titular nationality made up only 53% of the population. It was a challenge for him to give a fair and

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47 The Europa World Year Book, op. cit., p. 2377.

48 Ibid.
equal justice to all the sections of people in Kyrgyzstan irrespective of their ethnicities and regional diversities. It was really a difficult task for him to maintain a balance between the indigenous Kyrgyz people vis-à-vis the other ethnic groups presently living Kyrgyzstan.

A Comparative Study of Pre-Soviet and Post-Soviet Kyrgyz Democracy and Civil Society

Pre-Tsarist Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyz society that Kyrgyzstan has undergone many changes through it’s evolution from Pre-Tsarist to Tsarist and Soviet to Post Soviet periods. Hence it is desirable to compare these periods to know the different kinds and degrees of developments that occurred in Kyrgyzstan at different points of times. Pre-Tsarist periods in Kyrgyzstan were more ambiguous and full of complexities so far Kyrgyz social and cultural life was concerned. Some Kyrgyz scholars like Rakhat Achylova stress the glorious and rich cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz people amidst tribal and nomadic identity. They had a flourishing civil society during the Pre-Tsarist Kyrgyzstan. While other Russian and Western scholars like Geoffery Wheeler, E.H.Carr, John Anderson, Gregory Gleason and Eugene Huskey etc. maintain that the people in Pre-Tsarist Kyrgyzia were nomadic, wondering, fragmented and they lacked any ‘we’ feeling i.e. common nationalist feeling. Hence they did not have any civil society during that period. As civil life requires some sort of settled life, more stable occupation, understanding, common identity, common language, some well organized customs and traditions and some form of political society to maintain law and order within the society when it requires. Despite these two extreme points of opinion, it is apparent that Pre-Tsarist Kyrgyz society was based on tribalism, nomadism but at the same time it had some sort of civil organization like the culture of ‘Khanate’ and ‘Mahalla’, though these were more often dominated by the rich, strong and landed aristocracy. As most of the Kyrgyz people were illiterate, there was every possibility of mixing up of religion and superstitious etc in the social life of the people. The individual identity was submerged into the community identity. The main foundation of Kyrgyz society had been a collective, kinship based consciousness and a communal way of life.
Tsarist Kyrgyzstan

Before the incorporation of Kyrgyzstan into the Tsarist empire it was ruled by the Khanate of Kokond which was too much oppressive. At the out set of the 19th Century the Kyrgyz people wanted to accept Russian suzerainty to protect themselves against Kokond. The Tsar of Russia defeated Kokond Khanate in the year 1876. As a result Kyrgyzstan was annexed into Tsarist empire. At the initial stage the Tsarist policy towards Kyrgyzstan was the policy of non-interference in the socio-cultural life of the people, and the maintenance of segregation between the Russians and the native peoples. The natives were not encouraged to learn Russians unless necessary for the purpose of communication. In general the Russians remained ignorant of and indifferent to the cultural life of the local people and vice-versa.

But as time rolled on the two different cultures clashed with each other. The Russians introduced new pattern of agriculture and land use which created tensions as it imposed the principle of private ownership and settled farming on nomadic groups who viewed land as the property of all. The Russian pattern of rural development also brought changes in Kyrgyz life styles. In the remote rural areas the Kyrgyz people lived in acute poverty while the towns were largely inhabited by Russian professionals or the Tatar traders. There was a wide-spread discontent in the mind of the Kyrgyz people against the Tsarist policy of heavy taxation, seizure of fertile land by the Russians. One of the most important constructive developments made during this period was the spread of modern enlightened education. The Jadids (Mulim reformers) strived to establish a network of schools across Central Asia to combine respect for tradition with openness to modern learning. Some schools were established in Kyrgyzstan. But the Jadids could not spread much impact on Kyrgyz society as they were treated with suspicion by the colonial authorities and conservative mullahas alike. Before the break out of the Bolshevik Revolution, there had been a large scale destabilisation of the Kyrgyz Society and culture marked by acute poverty, Islamization and rebellion etc. Hence all these factors made fertile grounds for the Bolshevik to over throw the Tsarist power from Kyrgyzstan.

Following the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, Kyrgyzia (which had been formally incorporated into Russian Empire in 1876) experienced a period of civil war, with anti-Bolshevik forces, including the Russian ‘White Army’ and local armed groups (Basmachi),
fighting against the Bolshevik Red Army. Soviet power in reality was established in Kyrgyzstan by 1919. During the Soviet period there had been a varied impact on Kyrgyz socio-cultural, economic and political life, both constructive and destructive. It has been noticed that before the Soviet rule there was nearly total non-existence of any real civil society as well as any political organization in Kyrgyzstan.

The nomadic Kyrgyz people were apathetic to any political participation and concrete social mobilization. In its own way, Soviet rule launched the social mobilization of the Kyrgyz population. The Kyrgyz people, who were stranger to modern polities before 1917, became politically active in the soviet era through elections, party membership and continuous agitation. But it was a different type of political participation under the communist rule as it was completely different from the Western model of liberal democracy which was based on the elements of democratic mobilization, such as openness and competitiveness. According to Rakhat Achylova, “there has been extensive national development: a population growth of nearly 250 percent; an increased standard of living for all layers of society; the growth of villages, towns and cities; modern agricultural and industrial development; increased live stock production; total literacy and the establishment of compulsory secondary education (tenth and eleventh grades), as well as free higher and secondary special education; and the flourishing of state sponsored Kyrgyz culture, including the arts and written literature.”

The Soviet era bestowed a separate identity of Kyrgyz people by drawing the boundary of Kyrgyzstan. By doing so it consolidated the Kyrgyz unity, created a ‘we’ feeling among them, provided a settled life to them which finally enhanced the dignity of the Kyrgyz people.

But, inspite of so many positive development under the totalitarian Soviet rule, there were large scale disruption of socio-religious, cultural, political and economic life of the Kyrgyz people. During the period of Stalin, C.P.K. and K.G.B. were dominated by local Russians. In 1925 a group of Kyrgyz communists known as ‘The Thirty’ complained to the party chiefs about the over extensive use of Russian language. They were immediately purged from the C.P.K. and their leader Abdur Karim Sydykov was exiled. Others were imprisoned. Leader form peasants

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49 Rakhat Achylova, op. cit., p. 322.
union were also imprisoned. Education in mother tongue and use of the Arabic scripts were considered anti-revolutionary. Kyrgyz cadres were refused promotion in the party. More purges of Kyrgyz communists took place during the ‘Great Trials’ in 1937-1938 and Kyrgyzstan swiftly became a political backwater with Russians firmly in control of the C.P.K. Ahmed Rasid maintains that “the Kyrgyz remained the least politicized of all Central Asian nationalists. This was reflected in C.P.K., whose membership in the 1980s was still equally divided between 37% Russian members and 37% Kyrgyz members, even though the Kyrgyz were a majority of the population. The Russians were all powerful, and between 1982-87 over 80% of Kyrgyz party leaders in the districts were sacked.”

Rakhat Achylova says that under Soviet rule, however, “Kyrgyz society was transformed. The state system was revived with the creation of Kyrgyzstan as an autonomous region (1924), then an autonomous republic (1926), and finally a union republic (1936) that possessed all the trappings of governmental structures and national characteristics. Yet, it clearly remained a puppet state dependent on and subject to the centralized power of the communist party, its ideology and the totalitarian Soviet political system.” Moreover, politically compliant prevailed to the detriment of civil society by breaking the traditional rhythm of life.

Traditional Kyrgyz society was replaced by a different collective form of existence. The establishment of small communal farms, which in the beginning coincided with the former rural and tribal communities eventually led in the 1960’s to their amalgamation into larger collective farms (Kolkhozes) and state farms (Sovkhozes). Nomadism was forcibly replaced by settlement, though cattle-breeding kept its priority in the national economy. Private property was liquidated; all wealth was concentrated in the highly centralized state. The working class was officially recognized as the leading force in society. These developments brought drastic structural and psychological changes by threatening to undermine the Kyrgyz’s unique cultural and spiritual life.

50 Ahmed Rashid, op. cit., p. 145.
51 Rakhat Achylova, op. cit., p. 322.
Islam as a religion came under the general fire directed against supernatural beliefs. As a way of life, communism regarded Islam as more dangerous than any branch of Christianity. Soviet attack was targeted mainly towards the veiling of women, pilgrimage to holy places and tombs, festivals which interrupted work and practices such as circumcision.

Education in mother tongue and the use of the Arabic script were considered anti-revolutionary. Latin script was imposed in 1922 and in September 1940 a new Kyrgyz alphabet based on Cyrillic was introduced. Large scale changes took place, touching every sphere of life of the Kyrgyz society. These changes included the migration of the rural population in great numbers to towns, creating a new set of problems for local governments. Rakhat Achylova opines that "the imposition of a single Soviet ideological and educational system that excluded the discussion of regional, ethnic and religious differences; excessive industrial and economic development, resulting in ecological imbalances and degradation with harmful and long-term consequences; stunted development of the national language, traditions and other aspects of the national culture; militant atheism, which has weakened the place of religion in Kyrgyz society and erosion or moral and civic values. With the erosion of traditional ties, social and professional demands took priority over personal life and family values." 52 All these negative factors resulted in the development of a split personality in the Kyrgyz psyche. The Kyrgyz people felt torn between the need to follow their customs and beliefs and the need to conform to the external demands of the state. The people of Kyrgyzstan had lost their freedom to criticize the Soviet rulers for their misrule, underlines Brudny. "Terror played a central role; it showed the weak basis of human rights under state monopolistic socialism." 53

However, in spite of so many criticisms a serious researcher can not overlook the unique constructive contribution of the Soviet rule for the development of Kyrgyzstan such as developments in industrialisation and agriculture and spread of education, social mobilization for political participation. Science, literature and culture contributed a lot for the development and upliftment of the life of the people of Kyrgyzstan. The republic began to acquire the shape

52 Ibid., p. 323.
and essence of modern civilization. Some writers like Eugene Huskey are of the view that the role of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union had nurtured a solid ground for a well organized Kyrgyz independent statehood after the disintegration of U.S.S.R. in 1991. According to him, “Indeed, one may argue that Kyrgyzstan as an independent state, and perhaps even the Kyrgyz as a separate nation, would not have existed at the end of the twentieth century without imperial Russian and Soviet rule. The unintended consequences of St Petersburg and Moscow’s control of Kyrgyzstan were the development of necessary precondition for a modern state and nation.”

In the words of Kyrgyzstan’s most famous son, the novelist, Chingiz Aitmatov, “The Soviet past, with all it’s difficulties and suffering, prepared us for the surprising opportunity to suddenly receive as a small nation the status of a state and world recognition.”

Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

The failure of Gorbachev’s reforms of ‘Perestroika’ and ‘Glasnost’ paved the way for the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the year 1991, Kyrgyzstan achieved independence; thereby it emerged as a sovereign entity in the committee of nations. Historically, till the collapse of Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan had to remain as an inactive entity from the view point of democracy and civil society. Hence, if we look at democracy and civil society in the context of Kyrgyzstan the idea is relatively new one. Democracy and civil society started to take its roots only after it became an independent sovereign republic. The process of democratisation which started in Kyrgyzstan after independence in the sphere of society, economy and politics are remarkable. Kyrgyzstan adopted it’s own constitution on 5th May 1993. The constitution provides enough space for the development of democracy and a vibrant civil society. Hence, the development of civil society, free and fair election based on universal adult suffrage, existence of multi-party system, separation of legislative, executive and judicial branches of power, non-interference in private

54 Eugene Huskey. op. cit., p. 246.
life and private property, liberty of the press, freedom of speech and peaceful meeting, guarantees for human rights and secularism are being practiced in Kyrgyzstan.

In this backdrop it is necessary to examine in detail as to what extent democracy and civil society are working in a harmonious way in Kyrgyzstan and to assess their relative strength and weakness. All this will be dealt extensively in the next chapter.