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The Eastern International: Arabs, Central Asians, and Jews in the Soviet Union's Anticolonial Empire

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Over the past decade, scholarship on the Soviet Union has increasingly moved beyond the traditional focus on Cold War bipolarity, foregrounding instead the complex web of political, economic, and cultural exchanges that linked Moscow to actors across Asia, Africa and Latin America. In her path-breaking addition to this emerging literature, Masha Kirasirova sheds new light on Soviet Union's engagement with the Global South by examining it through the lens of the 'Eastern International' –, a Soviet project premised on the idea that its own 'domestic East' (that is, Central Asia and the Caucasus) could act as a springboard for spreading the revolution further East and forging an anticolonial front against 'western imperialism'. Drawing on an extensive body of Russian- and Arabic-language archival sources, Kirasirova traces how the intermediaries of the Eastern International deployed anticolonial narratives centred around the Soviet East to project influence, forge political alliances, and disseminate Soviet ideological and cultural models across the decolonizing world. She focuses in particular on the networks that connected the Eastern Mediterranean (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq) with the Soviet Central Asia.

Kirasirova's study follows a chronological structure, beginning with the early postrevolutionary period. Chapter 1 illuminates the Eastern International's origins by reconstructing the intellectual and political contributions of Konstantin Troianovskii, a Bolshevik activist and one of the project's leading visionaries. Chapters 2 and 3 examine how these early Soviet efforts to cultivate anticolonial revolution across the East institutionalised through the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), a Moscow-based institution which trained thousands of domestic and foreign students from across the East to become Eastern International's 'agitators' (p.66). The second half of the book focuses on the postwar period, tracing

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the project's evolution amid the changing global and domestic landscape. It moves from the decimation of the Eastern International cadres, particularly its Jewish representatives, amid late Stalinist purges (Chapter 4), to the project's grand revival during the decolonization wave which swept across Asia and Africa in the 1950s (Chapter 5), and finally its struggle to maintain legitimacy and allure in the context of the rise of competing anticolonial movements in the 1960s (Chapter 6). Kirasirova argues that, despite the intermediaries' efforts to find new means of connecting the two Easts through means such as film diplomacy, the project's rigid Eurocentric Marxist framework, along with ideological restrictions on representations of the Soviet East's past, constrained its intermediaries' ability to craft 'fresh and compelling narratives' (p.186). Consequently, this constrained their ability to engage with 'more diverse and radical voices on issues of imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism' (p.189). Combined with the Soviet Union's often inconsistent and ideologically incoherent behaviour on the global stage – most notably the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan – these factors led to a decline in the project's influence, which Kirasirova traces in Chapter 7.

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its ability to combine a detailed account of the Eastern International's institutional evolution with a close examination of the lives, ambitions, and agency of the intermediaries who sustained it. The result is an impressively comprehensive study that illuminates not only how the project was designed, but also how it was enacted and strategically navigated in practice. The latter is vividly illustrated by Kirasirova's careful investigation into the lives of Uzbek politician Nuriddin Muhiddinov and the Tajik film director Komil Yarmatov, both of whom became the project's spokespeople. By tracing their 'skilful navigation of the Soviet Eastern International as a nexus of domestic affirmative action' (p.155), Kirasirova exposes the ways in which 'Easterners' utilised the project to accumulate influence, widen their professional and creative opportunities, and even channel resources to achieve meaningful political and social change in their republics. These insights help explain why so many of them willingly chose to uphold the state-sanctioned narrative of successful internal decolonization and international anticolonial engagement, even if this came at a cost of suppressing inconvenient histories, silencing of dissenting voices, masking of egregious domestic inequalities, and aiding the factual decolonisation of Central Asia.

The Eastern International is a compelling and meticulously researched study and a worthwhile read for scholars of Soviet and Middle Eastern history, as well as those seeking to understand the Soviet Union's engagement with the Global South and the enduring legacies of its anticolonial project.