

BOOK REVIEWS

Akchurina Viktoria. *Incomplete State-building in Central Asia: The State as Social Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 359pp. (ISBN: 978-3-031-14181-2). doi:10.22679/avs.2023.8.2.008

Viktoria Akchurina's book, *Incomplete State-building in Central Asia: The State as Social Practice*, is a remarkable scholarly work that explores the complexities of state-building in Central Asia, with a focus on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Through meticulous research and her expertise in Central Asian politics, Akchurina delves into power dynamics, elite competition, and the societal implications of incomplete state-building. In her comprehensive analysis, Akchurina uncovers the intricate mechanisms that shape state-building in the region, particularly the power struggles and strategies employed by ruling elites. What sets Akchurina's work apart is her comparative approach, closely examining the specific cases of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This comparative framework provides a vivid portrayal of the diverse paths and challenges encountered in state-building, offering a nuanced understanding of the regional dynamics that shape governance in Central Asia. By incorporating historical, external, and local dimensions, Akchurina presents a holistic framework that sheds light on the multifaceted obstacles faced by Central Asian states in their pursuit of effective state-building.

The book provides a well-structured analysis of state-building in Central Asia through seven chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. It begins by addressing a central question: Why did three Central Asian states, with different political and economic contexts, face similar challenges in achieving complete state-building? To better understand this puzzle, the book examines the interplay among three main sets of factors that shape state-building processes: history, external actors, and local elites. These factors are manifested through the legacy of Soviet statehood, the strategies of external actors, and power struggles among ruling and regional elites. The introductory chapter introduces the research question and provides an overview of the book's organization. Chapter 2 of the book discusses the research problem of state failure and resilience in Central Asia. It highlights how the official indicators suggest state failure, but paradoxically, the states in the region remain resilient and adaptive. The chapter challenges the linear logic and assumptions of the transitology paradigm, which limits understanding of state development in Central Asia. It focuses on

ruptures like protests, revolutions, and religious radicalization, suggesting a different story about state-society relations. Chapter 3 introduces the conceptual framework and main arguments of the book. It addresses the dominant debate on the state in Central Asia and demonstrates that various approaches can be grouped under the transitology assumptions. It challenges these assumptions by highlighting the unique characteristics of Central Asian states that defy traditional state theories. The chapter identifies four dichotomies, including strong vs. weak state, rationality vs. irrationality of societal development, historical vs. institutional contextualization of statehoods, and formal vs. informal areas of organizing social order. Chapter 4 explores the Soviet legacy, particularly the social legacy that emerged from Soviet state construction. It focuses on cross-border socio-economic interdependence in the Fergana Valley, examining how specific resource management and state-building practices during the Soviet era fostered this interdependence. Chapter 5 investigates the role of external actors in organizing security, the economy, and society in Central Asia. It explores their strategies in managing borders, trade, resources, and the development of the NGO sector. Chapter 6 delves into the struggles for dominance among local elites in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It analyzes the strategies employed by ruling elites, highlighting their pursuit of economic resources and the utilization of the state to achieve their goals. Despite employing different strategies, all three cases resulted in incomplete state-building. In the concluding chapter, the author synthesizes the key findings of the study, addressing the puzzle of incomplete state-building in Central Asia.

Incomplete State-building in Central Asia: The State as Social Practice is a book that stands out for its interdisciplinary approach, incorporating political science, sociology, anthropology, and history to provide a nuanced understanding of state-building in the region. The author, Akchurina, adeptly navigates the complex historical trajectory of Central Asia, shedding light on the lasting influence of Soviet rule on state structures and social dynamics. One of the notable strengths of the book is its use of the case study method, which allows readers to identify patterns and similarities across the three countries under examination. The author employed the triangulation method during the data collection process, incorporating various sources such as secondary sources, legal documents, interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. This meticulous approach enhances the credibility and depth of the analysis. Akchurina's analysis follows a logical structure, making it easy for readers to follow her line of reasoning. The author's nuanced analysis and insightful observations make valuable contributions to the fields of political science, Central Asian studies, and state-building theory. While *Incomplete State-building in Central Asia: The State as Social Practice* has several strengths, it is important to acknowledge some weaknesses in the book as well. One minor weakness is the time gap between the author's field trip, conducted from 2012 to 2014, and the book's publication date. Given that the book was likely published several years after the fieldwork, the analysis may not fully capture recent developments and changes in the region, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, which is the main focus of the book. The evolving political, social, and economic dynamics in the region may have implications for state-building processes, and a more recent assessment would provide a more accurate understanding of

the current situation. Additionally, the book's reliance on interviews primarily conducted with representatives from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and it would have been beneficial to include interviews with Uzbekistan representatives as well, given their significant role in the region and their unique experiences in state-building. However, it is important to note that these weaknesses are relatively minor and do not affect the high academic quality of the book. The author's meticulous research, extensive use of primary and secondary sources, and rigorous analytical framework are still noteworthy strengths.

In conclusion, Viktoria Akchurina's book offers a timely and insightful exploration of the challenges and complexities of state-building in the region, making it a groundbreaking and essential contribution to the study of state-building in Central Asia. Through meticulous research, interdisciplinary perspectives, and nuanced analysis, the book provides a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies surrounding governance and state-building processes in the region. The author's ability to connect theory with empirical evidence enhances the book's academic rigor, making it an indispensable resource for scholars, policymakers, and researchers interested in Central Asian politics, state-building, and governance.

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William E. Mierse. *Artifacts from the Ancient Silk Road: Daily Life through Artifacts*. Santa Barbara, CA, USA: Greenwood, 2023. Pp. liv, 403. ISBN: 978-1-4408-5828-4 (print); 978-1-4408-5829-1 (ebook). doi:10.22679/avs.2023.8.2.009

The most important items transported across the Silk Road's complex network of caravan routes were ideas and the cultures from which they emerged and not "things," no matter how precious or desired. Yet, ironically, it is things—hand-crafted artifacts—that most vividly reflect and bring alive this millennia-long transit, adoption, and adaptation of cultural norms, beliefs, and modes of expression.

Through fifty artifacts produced between the eighth century BCE and the early twentieth century, but with a majority dating from the first through fifth century CE, William Mierse sheds light on the dynamics of the Silk Road and its peoples from China to Italy, but with an emphasis on the inhabitants and cultures of Central Asia. Accompanying each artifact is a tripartite essay that places the artifact into its cultural-historical context, describes it in detail, and explains its significance. Appended to each essay is a useful bibliography of significant studies in English.

Preceding the chosen fifty are two lead-ins that should be required reading for every member of Mierse's intended readership—students and the general public—inasmuch as they combine to provide a necessary background for the artifacts that follow.

The first prologue, "What Was the World Of the Ancient Silk Road?," sets forth in forty