“Roadlessness” and the State in Soviet Tajikistan, 1925-1935

Patryk Reid’s engaging April 22, 2014, Noontime Scholars Lecture explored the development of transportation infrastructure in Soviet Tajikistan during the 1920s and 1930s. Combining archival sources from both Moscow and Dushanbe as part of his larger dissertation project entitled “Managing Nature, Constructing the State: The Material Foundation of Soviet Empire in Tajikistan, 1917-1937,” Reid showed how the material realities of the Tajik landscape constantly challenged the Soviet transportation projects in Tajikistan.

As Reid aptly showed, several mountain ridges separated these fertile valleys, creating engineering challenges not faced even in other, equally mountainous regions of the USSR. The existing roads were often little more than paths used for animal transport and could not accommodate the heavier mechanized forms of transportation that the state demanded. A combination of other natural factors like water run-off and flooding, which ultimately disrupted road construction and often damaged newly constructed roads, complicated these problems. Meanwhile, the unpredictable loessial soils left many roads simply impassable for part of the year.

As Reid observed, these very material challenges in the way of mountains, water flows, and soils meant that road construction was slow, and transportation remained unpredictable and expensive. Soviet planners consistently struggled with inadequate knowledge of the material landscape, which left them hesitant and uncertain on how to complete key road projects.

Reid’s research serves as an important challenge to the existing historiography of Soviet state building in Central Asia. As he noted in his presentation, there is a strong historiographical focus on cultural change and nationalities policies that has led scholars to place an emphasis on state strength in Central Asia. Instead, Reid contended that a focus on material reality illustrates a much different view, and that there was considerable contingency and weakness to Soviet state building efforts. The inability to successfully complete road projects meant that mobility remained problematic, and that the Soviet state had difficulty in allocating both resources and labor in important construction
Yet, this weakness was not simply a result of ineptness on the part of the Soviet government, but rather due to real physical challenges the state and its planners faced. Reid’s presentation and larger dissertation seeks to reorient scholars to the ways that material geography is not only important in itself, but also helps to inform conceptual geography.

Ben Bamberger is a Ph.D. candidate in History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a Summer 2013 FLAS fellow. His research interests include Georgian mountaineering, Soviet nation-building, and Soviet tourism to the Caucasus. Ben received his B.A. in history and economics at American University (Washington, D.C.). After graduation, he was a Peace Corps volunteer in Georgia. As Ben furthers his studies, he hopes to conduct research in both Moscow and Tbilisi, ultimately incorporating Russian and Georgian sources into a dissertation about Soviet nation-building projects in Georgia, and the ways the local Georgians negotiated and understood these policies.