A Most Beautiful City for the World’s Tallest Dam
Internationalism, social welfare, and urban utopia in Nurek

Une ville magnifique pour le plus grand barrage du monde : internationalisme, protection sociale et utopie urbaine à Nurek

Artemy M. Kalinovsky
In March 1961, Semen Kalizhniuk, the head of construction for the Nurek Dam being built on the Vaksh river, met with the leading writers of Soviet Tajikistan, including the bard of Soviet anti-colonialism Mirzo Turson-Zade.\(^1\) The dam, which promised to expand irrigation and provide electricity for the southern part of the republic, was to be the tallest in the world. However, it was not just a dam that was being built; alongside it, Kalizhniuk promised, would arise a new city:

>We are planning a city that will be the prototype for future cities. All the conditions necessary for people will meet the requirements of the future of our communist society. Everything must be taken into account: height, capacity, the thickness of the walls, the circulation of air, temperature and so forth. It will be the kind of city, I think, that you can write about.\(^2\)

Soviet architects and planners had been envisioning “cities of the future” since the revolution and building them from the start of industrialization during the first five year plan (1928-1932). Such cities were supposed to provide for workers’ every need.

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\(^1\) Mirzo Turson-Zade was a famous Tajik poet and public figure heavily involved in Soviet literary and anti-colonial politics. For many years he led the Society for Solidarity with Asian and African Countries, an important player in Soviet relations with the Third World.

\(^2\) “Meeting of Tajikistani writers with the comrade S.K. Kalizhniuk, head of construction of the Nurek Hydroelectric Dam,” 28 March 1961, CSAT (Central State Archives of Tajikistan), f. 1501, op. 1, d. 179, l. 15.
need but also transform them into conscious, cultured citizens. In reality, urban construction rarely reached these ideals. As Paul Josephson notes, Soviet urbanization was plagued by irrational planning and shortages, and everywhere its supposed benefits—museums, public transport, access to good medical care inexpensive housing—reached the residents least and last.³

While Josephson is correct to note the gap between plans and realities in most of these cities, many did, in fact, develop much of their promise, usually long after the industry for which the town had been built was up and running. This article draws attention to the particular mix of utopian thinking, ideological commitment, and local politics that lay behind the construction of such cities by examining the case of Nurek City and its satellite villages.

Nurek was to be the world’s tallest dam and one of its most powerful. Party leaders in Tajikistan pushed for the dam, hoping it would help expand irrigation and at the same time develop their republic’s industrial capacity and move them beyond agricultural production, especially cotton. The start of construction came at the height of Moscow’s re-engagement with the Third World, when the Central Asian republics were increasingly called upon to play a leading role in demonstrating the superiority of Soviet modernity and its commitment to anti-imperialism. Tajik politicians who were proponents of the project argued that building such an expensive dam in a poor republic that had been on the margins of the Bukharan emirate and the Russian empire demonstrated Soviet technical prowess and its ability to transcend colonial legacies.⁴ By the 1970s, the village of Nurek was on its way to becoming a model city, with a well-paved thoroughfare, green space, modern amenities, as well as cultural and entertainment venues. The dam itself had an international workforce, with a growing share of Tajik workers, a testament to the promises of equally shared Soviet modernity. Engineering students from all over the Third World came to Nurek to gain experience. Domestic and foreign tourists visited Nurek as part of their Central Asian itinerary to see the dam under construction, take in the city’s orderly and modern layout and its well-endowed library, and enjoy lunch by the river before heading back to Dushanbe, the capital of the Tajik SSR.


⁴. I discuss the origins of the Nurek dam in Artemy M. Kalinovsky, “Not some British Colony in Africa: Khrushchev, De-stalinization, and Development in Central Asia,” Ab Imperio, 2 (2013). To point out the connections between Soviet anti-imperialism and the story of the dam is not to deny the other factors that determined whether or not a dam was built. Such decisions generally followed lobbying by coalitions that might include republican leaders, local specialists, and the relevant institutes and ministries in Moscow. See, for example Marc Elie, “Coping with the ‘Black Dragon’: Mudflow Hazards and the Controversy over the Medeo Dam in Kazakhstan, 1958–66,” Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Soviet History, 14, 2 (Spring 2013). The most detailed work on Soviet dam construction is probably Klaus Gestwa, Die Stalinischen Grossbauten Des Kommunismus (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2010) but it is only available in German.
The last decade has seen a series of studies on Soviet company towns. Some have focused on labor camps that became cities, such as Vorkuta or Ozersk, a center of Soviet plutonium production. Other scholars have focused on “new towns” such as Tol’iatti or Naberezhnii Chelny, created to house the workers for a given industry. All of these studies have wrestled with how architecture, city planning, and other kinds of expertise were marshalled to mobilize labor resources while fulfilling some of the more utopian promises of the post-Stalin Soviet Union. Lewis Siegelbaum, in his study of Tol’iatti, a city built for the auto industry, emphasizes the importance of technical elites and the freedom they enjoyed to show the remarkable consistency between their plans and the city that took shape. Esther Maier, in her study of Naberezhnye Chelny, focuses on the “urban expression” of these cities and the “symbolic significance” of its streets. These studies draw our attention to the way Soviet leaders after Stalin tried to fulfill promises of Soviet modernity through urban planning. They also point to the family resemblance not just of Soviet new towns of this period, but of broader trends in urban planning in industrial societies.

This article contributes to this literature by focusing on how Nurek City came into being and the consequences of its construction for the surrounding villages and native population. The city and the surrounding villages were shaped and reshaped by hundreds of compromises and negotiations between planners, builders, party officials, workers, and local residents that took place within particular frameworks as officials tried to attract and keep labor, meet production targets, and live up to the ideals of Soviet labor culture and internationalism. To see the city’s history in this way is not to deny the disciplining nature of Soviet power, but rather to reconsider where that power was located and how it operated. A widely accepted set of


8. Maier, ”On The Streets of a Truck-Building City,” 105-106.

9. I draw on a mix of archival sources, memoirs, and oral histories in this paper. Key archival sources include the files for the Nurek party organization in the ACPT, Archive of the Communist Party of Tajikistan, (f. 56) and the Central Committee (f. 3); files from the CSAT, Central State Archive of Tajikistan, relating to the construction of Nurek, including some of the *Ispolkom* materials in f. 1605; the collection of materials on Komsomol construction projects in the RGASPI, Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, f. M-1, op. 8, and the files of Gosstroj (f. 339) in the RGAE, Russian State Archive of the Economy. Although for reasons of space I do not engage with them extensively in the current version of this paper, my thinking is also informed by extensive oral history interviews conducted in and around Nurek as well as former engineers, officials, and builders in Dushanbe and Moscow. The bi-weekly newspaper *Norak* is also an important source.
ideas about “cultured” urban life determined what the city would become. Nurek was shaped by the way party activists, construction officials, workers, and local leaders responded to problems of disorder, disease, social welfare, and coexistence by falling back on these ideas; the solutions they found emerged from within the logic of post-war Soviet modernity and welfare state, but that welfare state in its localized form was itself shaped by these struggles. In other words, even in the absence of a single utopian plan for the city or its satellites, large and small solutions that were part of a larger utopian project shaped the urban and rural of space.

Nurek was one of dozens of new cities built in the 1960s to house workers for shock construction campaigns, as the Soviet Union sought to develop new territories and industries through mass mobilization rather than terror. Mikhail Rozhansky, who studied the experience of workers in Siberian new cities of the 1960s, has written that

shock construction projects and young cities were not just a part of the social atmosphere of the sixties; in the young cities one could identify the fundamental contradictions of Soviet idealism, and ideals came face to face with ideocracy. In other words, these “new cities” lured young men and women with promises of fulfilling the Soviet dream, but greeted them with bureaucracy that reproduced slogans rather than working to fulfil those ideals. An examination of the Nurek case, however, suggests that this reading may require some correction. I argue that commitments to internationalism and equality, central elements of Soviet ideology, played an important role in Nurek’s history from its pre-history up to the collapse of the USSR. Neither ideal would be truly fulfilled either in Nurek or in the Soviet Union as a whole, but Nurek and its environs would be shaped by the struggle of party officials, city officials, and local activists to meet these expectations. While Nurek has much in common with other Soviet new cities of the 1960s, its importance as a showcase for the Soviets’ commitment to anti-colonialism helped guide its development. This article’s main contribution, however, is to investigate the processes behind the making and reshaping of urban and rural spaces. Therefore,

10. On the importance of examining the struggles that lead to the formation of welfare states rather than assuming an already formed “rationality” that guides these states, see Dennis Sweeney, “‘Modernity’ and the Making of Social Order in Twentieth-Century Europe,” *Contemporary European History*, 23 (May 2014): 209-224.


12. A number of works have addressed the issue of internationalism on large construction sites in the USSR, usually noting the gap between promise of equality and reality of ethnic tension and discrimination. See, for example, Mathew Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001). Even more stark in this regard is the comparison offered in Christopher Ward, *Brezhnev’s Folly: The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).
it will emphasize the ways in which the efforts to reach those goals shaped the welfare state, the city of Nurek, and the surrounding villages.

These observations, in turn, lead me to make a further claim about the nature of ideology and ideological commitment in the Brezhnev era. Historians have long assumed a disjunction between the Khrushchev era, with its enthusiasm and renewed belief in communism, and the period of “stagnation” that followed—a distinction advanced first by Soviet intellectuals and reformers in the Perestroika era. More recently, historians have started to turn their attention to the period of “late Socialism,” filling out our knowledge of the era and in some cases questioning the extent to which the “stagnation” label is appropriate. Research on some of the ambitious projects of the era, like the Baikal-Amur Magistral, tend to reaffirm the stagnation paradigm because they focus on the gap between plans and realities. The Nurek project straddles the two eras and thus offers an opportunity to trace the fate of Khrushchev-era ideological rebirth through the late 1960s and the 1970s. By focusing on the struggle to fulfill those ideals, we can see that Soviet ideological commitments remained appealing well into the late 1970s and helped mobilize people who had been left on the margins of Soviet society in earlier periods.

**Urban Utopias and Social Welfare**

Urban utopias had played an important role since the revolution—how people lived was at the centre of the Bolshevik’s goals of industrialization and social transformation. The right kind of urban planning could help avoid the pitfalls of industrialization in the capitalist world, including overcrowding and urban inequality. In the 1920s, some of the more radical thinkers of the “disurbanist” movement hoped to close the gap between the (cultured but overpopulated and unhealthy) town and country by eliminating the former and spreading industry and labor throughout the countryside. Their opponents, the “urbanists,” dreamt of the elimination of the family unit, which would be replaced with communal living in large blocks of residences with day-care, schools, and kindergartens. Both of these schools were side-lined in the 1930s as Stalin favoured a more conservative, monumental vision for cities inspired by the “City Beautiful” movement.


which had its roots in the U.S.\textsuperscript{16} However, these utopian ideas were nevertheless absorbed in later Soviet city planning, giving rise to, among other things, the ubiquitous but varied Soviet mikroraion, itself a variant of the “Garden City” envisioned by British and American planners at the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{17} They also influenced the planning of industrial cities during the 1930s, like Magnitogorsk.\textsuperscript{18} The main model for Soviet company towns, however, was Nikolai Milyutin’s “linear city,” which he outlined in his 1930 book Sotsgorod. Milyutin’s plans drew on Fordist and Taylorist ideas about industrial production, but also sought to insulate residents from industrial pollution, provide all necessary social services, and extend these to the surrounding countryside.\textsuperscript{19} Such cities were built not just to accommodate workers, but also to make them class-conscious, enlightened (kulturnyi) and politically aware citizens. At the dawn of the Cold War the construction of these “socialist cities” was also encouraged in the new “People’s Democracies” such as Poland, where the Nova Huta city grew up around a new steelworks outside of Krakow.\textsuperscript{20}

The Khrushchev era saw several population trends that had important implications for city planning and housing. First, the opening of the Gulag and the easing of restrictions on former prisoners meant that many of those who had been resettled in the country’s resource—rich but inhospitable areas—were leaving.\textsuperscript{21} At the same time, as farmers left the countryside for the cities, planners and demographers worried that too many people and too much industry was being concentrated in the largest cities of the country, a trend that would become even more accentuated in the 1970s. The Soviet regime thus tried to promote the settlement and exploitation of distant areas by promising housing and amenities that were in short supply in the more overcrowded cities of the European USSR. The mobilization of young people to build new industries and new cities in distant parts of the country was part of the ideological atmosphere of the late 1950s and 1960s, and Khrushchev’s attempt to shed the Stalinist legacy of forced labor and migration while inspiring a younger generation to lay the foundation of the future by conquering nature and mastering technology.

\textsuperscript{17} French, Plans, Pragmatism, and People, 37-38.
\textsuperscript{18} Stephen Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995).
\textsuperscript{21} Some of them, indeed, would come to Nurek to start their lives anew, although that topic is beyond the scope of this paper.
The 1950s also marked the transformation in the regime’s relationship with workers. A mass housing program, discussed under Stalin but only implemented under Khrushchev, gave millions of families their first opportunity at an individual urban apartment. As Mark B. Smith points out, while “[t]he dogma of paradise-using housing to create a way of life appropriate to communist ideals” existed in various forms from 1917 through the Stalin era, it was under Khrushchev that housing became a mechanism for pushing society from socialism to communism. While paradise was always the ultimate goal, it was an explicit and immediate target only in the third stage of this scheme.22

Indeed, at a conference on city planning in 1961, architects and officials discussed ideas from the 1920s, as well as British “new towns,” themselves descended from the “Garden City” idea, at length.23 Following the conference, a joint Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Council of Ministers Resolution called for “complex planned construction with capital investments […] for housing, communal, cultural, and health services” on construction sites of particular importance located far from existing cities.24 As we will see, however, this resolution still left plenty of room for officials to decide just how planned and “complex” a city had to be.

In Central Asia, the situation with housing and city planning was slightly different. Local politicians and planners saw the growth of cities as crucial to raising the standard of living in the republics. Like western modernization theorists and many post-colonial elites, they believed in drawing people out of what they saw as an overcrowded countryside into industry. Local elites were often the most enthusiastic proponents of expanding and modernizing existing cities like Tashkent.25


24. CC CPSU and Council of Ministers Resolution no 920, 7 October 1961, cited in RGASPI, f. M-1, op. 8, d. 1069.

The construction of hydroelectric dams and other industrial enterprises provided the opportunity to create “modern” planned cities for personnel and their families. Yaakov Fligelman, an official in the Ministry of Electrification who worked on various construction projects and would be involved in Nurek as well, boasted about the transformations brought by one of these cities in 1960:

Many of the deputies remember well what the area of the beautiful, green city of builders of the Kairakkum GES [Hydro-electric plant], once looked like. It was a barren, windy valley dried out by the sun. By the will of the party and the people, there emerged, over several years, a modern, comfortable city, supplied with the necessary communications and a full complex of facilities for culture and everyday life.26

Such visions of transforming harsh, inhospitable nature into a modern, perfectly functioning city that fulfilled its residents’ every need would also come to shape Nurek, although the path from construction site to city would not be as straightforward as Fligelman’s speech suggested.

However, there were several problems with that vision. First, there was very little of the migration from the countryside to the cities seen in the European USSR. The large cities, like Dushanbe and Tashkent, were still settled primarily by migrants from outside the region. Since plans for industrialization had assumed a large local work-force, the failure of Central Asians to urbanize and enter the industrial work force became an argument against further investment in industry among sceptics in Gosplan and other central Soviet bodies during the 1970s. Many officials in Moscow were wary of sending labor to the region when it was increasingly seen as scarce in the European parts of the USSR and especially in Siberia. Second, there was a perception, at least in Tajikistan, that the cities were being developed primarily for Russian speakers. Housing was limited, and what was built went to the specialists and workers who were brought to the republic from outside. Tajiks and other Central Asians tended to stay away from the cities, and often disadvantaged in the distribution for apartments when they did move there.27


27. The classic work on the problem of labor (non)migration in Central Asia remains Nancy Lubin, Labour and Nationality in Soviet Central Asia: An Uneasy Compromise (London: Macmillan, 1984). Of course there were both “pull” and “push” factors involved—potential workers might have preferred to stay close to families and social networks, but they also felt exclusion on coming to the city. Note that in the Perestroika era, the failure to make cities attractive for Tajiks was one of the complaints of Tohir Abdujabbor, a founder of Rastokhez who campaigned for Tajikistan’s sovereignty and later its independence. See, for example, Tohir Abdujabbor, “Muhiti zist va zabon [Environment and language],” Sadoi Sharq, no. 8 (1989). Reprinted in Kamiltzoda, Me’mori istikloli Tojikiston [Architect of Tajikistan’s Independence], 189. I discuss the problem of migration and industrialization in “Central Planning, Local Knowledge? Labor, Population and the ‘Tajik School of Economics’,” Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Soviet History 17, 3 (2016) : 586-620.
New, industry-oriented cities like Nurek could prove that the benefits of Soviet urbanity were not just for Europeans. By the early 1970s, Tajik economists were pressing their own republican leaders and planners in Moscow to shift investments from “established” cities like Dushanbe to smaller towns in the republic. They believed that situating industry closer to the rural areas would make it easier to draw local workers into the industrial work-force and raise the standard of living in the countryside. Cities like Nurek promised industrial employment for a population that remained in villages but could easily commute to work, while bringing the benefits of Soviet modernity to where these workers lived.\(^\text{29}\)

Ideas of urban planning were intimately tied to social welfare goals. As some historians have argued, twentieth-century “welfare states,” have a family resemblance. Generally, they involve a commitment by the state to provide for the health and education of its citizens, and to keep them out of poverty by providing housing and other services. The specific contours of different welfare states, however, developed through political struggles particular to that state’s history, and sometimes varied even within states.\(^\text{29}\) The Soviet Union arguably aspired to be a welfare state from the very beginning, but it was only in the post-Stalin era that the resources and organizational capacity to see it through were made available. This is particularly true in the case of Central Asia, where it is only from the 1950s that we see the real penetration of health clinics, schools, and other social services beyond the cities.\(^\text{30}\)

In the Soviet Union, it was often industrial giants that provided many of these social-welfare services, either directly or indirectly.\(^\text{31}\) Not surprisingly, in Nurek it was the dam that became not just economic engine of the region but also the core around which the (local) welfare state was constructed. Directly or indirectly, the dam’s management became responsible for housing, road works, school construction, a health network, and electrification. The commitment to internationalism and the commitment to the welfare-state became mutually reinforcing; while the initial decisions to build health clinics and schools in the early-mid 1960s, for example, were primarily about keeping the (still mostly European) work-force healthy and its children educated, demands for equality from representatives of surrounding villages led officials to expand the provision of these social goods into the satellite villages that surrounded Nurek.


\(^{29}\) On the importance of examining the struggles that lead to the formation of welfare states rather than assuming an already formed “rationality” that guides these states, see Sweeney, “‘Modernity’ and the Making of Social Order in Twentieth-Century Europe.”


Construction site to city

Nurek lies about 70 kilometers south-East of Tajikistan’s capital at a height of 885 meters above the sea level. When construction began, there was a tobacco field and cemetery near the right bank of the Vaksh river. Besides the old town of Nurek, the area designated for the new city contained several villages: Desabur, Langar, and Sary-bolo. All of these would eventually have to make way for the new Nurek, with the residents resettled in one of the surrounding villages or the city itself. Tut-kaul, one of the larger villages in the area, would ultimately be submerged by the dam’s reservoir, its residents resettled onto the left-bank into a village called “New Tut-kaul.”

Constructing a model “city of the future” was neither an obvious nor an uncontested choice. Indeed, there was a broader debate among Soviet city planners regarding priorities in industrial and urban development. One school argued for laying the groundwork of the city first, to attract and keep good workers; another preferred to focus resources on developing industry, even if quality of life had to suffer. This divide was also visible in Nurek: despite Kalizhniuk’s promise to Tajik writers cited at the beginning of this article, it appears that not all managers and leaders actually agreed on the extent to which resources should be devoted to urban construction. According to Marat Hakel, an engineer who worked on Nurek in the 1960s, there was an ongoing debate between the directors of construction on the one hand and local party and executive authorities on the other regarding the priorities of city-building.

The [dam] builders, including head of construction S.K. Kalizhniuk, were in favor of quick (skorospeloe) housing […] local administrative and party organs were interested in building a real [capital] city with modern brick and panel housing and cultural-communal facilities. The building of houses was slow, there was a catastrophic shortage of housing, and people were settled in tents, yurts, and wagons.

It is probable that Kalizhniuk agreed in principle with the construction of an “ideal” city, but subordinated this goal to that of securing resources for the dam. By contrast, the party secretary in the Tajik central committee responsible for industry insisted that “S.B. Ergashev, in charge of industry and construction within the central committee of the Communist Party of Tajikistan, told a plenum that “a town for 35 thousand people will have to be built, with parks, stadiums, pools, and movie theatres.”

34. Speech at the VII plenum of the CC CPT, April 1963, ACPT, f. 3, op. 177, d. 41, l. 134.
Utopian visions for Nurek—as a city that met workers needs while helping raise them to a new cultural level—were thus in consideration from the earliest days of construction. In practice, construction of housing, parks, and other facilities had to compete for resources and labor with the construction of the dam itself, as well as with housing construction elsewhere in the republic. In addition, there were rumors that the project would be abandoned—it was far behind schedule, and many officials in Moscow were skeptical about the value of large dams in general and Nurek in particular. Pavel Gorbachev, the first secretary of the local party organization, recalled that many officials doubted whether building a city was even necessary. Early plans therefore focused on building temporary housing as a stop-gap measure—primarily “yurts” of the kind produced by a factory in Chardzhou and wooden eight-apartment houses that had housed dam builders on the Volga. At the same time, local construction organizations and officials in Moscow agreed that ultimately Nurek would have to include schools, day care centers, cinemas, libraries, and so on.

Ultimately, however, managers found it difficult to manage a construction site where workers found living conditions inadequate. Relatively high salaries meant little when one could not get shelter or decent food, let alone entertainment or consumer goods. Many workers left within weeks or months of arrival. There were very few apartments even in 1964, but even getting a spot in a dormitory could be difficult, meaning that some workers spent months or years in tents. Even those lucky enough to get a spot in one of the dormitories, however, found barely acceptable conditions. An inspection found that

in the larger dormitories the basic conditions are still not being met—there is no boiled or warm water, no closets for work clothes and clean clothes, no storage space and frequent delays and irregularities with changes of bedclothes, even though just this year the ZhKK [housing office] received more than 4 000 sheets and other bedding.

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35. See, for example, “Ob uchastii komsomol’skoi molodezhi… [Regarding the participation of the komsomol youth…]” RGASPI, f. M-1, op. 8, d. 1169.
37. “Protocol of a technical meeting regarding the Nurek GES,” RGAE, f. 339, op. 6 d. 3368, l. 221.
38. By early 1961, planners had agreed on a town that would peak at 20,000 residents during construction and decline to roughly 10,000 afterwards, with a standard of 9 square meters per resident in the initial period ultimately rising to 12 square meters. Most of the houses would be 4 floor apartment blocks, but there would also be some 2 floor apartment buildings with personal garden plots. Conclusions of a sub-committee of the Gosekonomsovet regarding the Nurek GES, 23 January 1961, f. 339, op. 6, d. 3370.
40. “Regarding residential and cultural construction in the city of Nurek,” CSAT, f. 1609, op. 1, d. 79, l. 12.
A Komsomol inspection similarly found that dormitories lacked “chairs, hangers, closets, dressers; the sinks do not work, and two weeks or more pass before bedding is changed.”41 Another report noted that in the men’s dormitories, “dirt and unculturedness rule.”42 Workers were apparently stealing wood from the construction site to burn for warmth.43

As with many construction sites where thousands of young workers gathered, drinking and hooliganism were a big part of daily life in Nurek in the early 1960s. Crucially, however, officials understood the problem to be lack of cultural activities and facilities where workers could spend their free time. A Komsomol article noted that

The lack of basic cultural facilities is leading people to drunkenness and crime. The amount of alcohol per person consumed in Nurek has doubled between 1962 and 1963, and is twice the volume consumed in Dushanbe.44

Over 1 000 people, roughly every fifth resident of Nurek, were arrested over the course of the year for “disturbing the public order.” Drunkenness and hooliganism made it difficult to maintain an orderly construction site and contributed to absenteeism. Although officials rarely stated this in their reports, it also caused strains between the newly arrived workers and the local residents, thus undermining the “internationalism” of the whole project. The republic newspaper, Kommunist Tadzhikistana, chided local officials for failing to provide decent living conditions and especially opportunities for “cultured relaxation.”45 The solution, party and Komsomol officials believed, was to find a way to divert the energy of young people to more “cultured” activities, like movie screenings, dances, concerts, and organized sports. They pressed for the construction of dance floors, libraries, and a stadium.46 Officials were seeking solutions to practical problems, but evoking utopian reasoning to find them. Only when a city contained the elements that were commonly believed to provide for the needs of residents and help transform them into cultured citizens would social problems disappear.

41. “Regarding the role of Komsomol organizations…,” RGASPI, f. M-1, op. 8, d. 1169, l. 12-23.
42. “Regarding the participation of Komsomol members and youth…,” 16 April 1964, RGASPI, f. M-1, op. 9, d. 1169, l. 1-11
43. Some 2 000 cubic meters of wood were apparently stolen in one year. “V storone ot glavnogo [On the margins of what is important],” Norak, 24 August 1962.
44. “Regarding the role of Komsomol organizations…,” RGASPI, f. M-1, op. 8, d. 1169, l. 12-23.
45. “Regarding the article ‘Why it is boring in Nurek,’” 12 February 1963, ACPT, f. 56, op. 5, d. 6, l. 9.
46. “Regarding the role of Komsomol organizations…,” RGASPI, f. M-1, op. 8, d. 1169, l. 12-23; “Regarding the article ‘A s bytom v Tut Kaule plokho’ [In Tut Kaul everyday life is not good],” 12 February 1963, ACPT, f. 56, op. 5, d. 6, l. 11.
There were other practical reasons for construction managers to start taking urban construction more seriously. Poor living conditions, disease, and boredom, all led to a high circulation of cadres. In the first six months of 1961, the first year of construction, 30% (1836) of the workers hired during that same period quit.47 Party activists criticized managers for failing to pay attention to residential construction. “Hundreds of experienced specialists are leaving the construction site,” a communist named Gamianova complained at a party meeting, addressing Kaluzhniuk, “they are leaving because they are not given the minimal conditions for work.”48 As late as 1967 officials were complaining about severe labor shortages, and especially the turnover of qualified labor.49 That year, out of a total work force of 9 514 people engaged in various enterprises related to Nurek, 4 387 had quit or been fired and 4 526 were newly hired.50 Nurek was neither a closed city nor a Stalinist work camp, and workers were free to come and go. Party activists like Gamianova connected labor turnover with problems of housing, provisions, and quality of life. Enthusiasm and the promise of high wages were enough to bring workers to the site, but not to keep them there.

As construction officials like Kalizhniuk, who had the most say in the distribution of funds and materials between urban construction and the main dam site, came around to the point of view of party activists who believed the city and the dam had to be built together, they too began to push for constructing something like the “city of the future” envisioned earlier, even if it meant taking resources away from the main construction site. Whether or not they bought in to the broader ideological goals behind the idea of creating a model city, these officials saw that they would need to provide a city with enough amenities, shelter, and entertainment to keep workers there for the duration of construction. By 1964, construction engineers were begging Moscow and Dushanbe to invest millions more in housing, schools, and medical facilities.51 A Pravda article mocked those who had favored temporary housing:

There was an idea to build the Nurek GES quickly. And if so, then what’s the point of building housing? The builders can live in yurts. Well, life has laughed at those who supported this strange idea.

47. CSAT, f. 1470, op. 2, d. 24, l. 12.
49. “At the moment we are short 300 laborers for tunnelling work, and 400 in various construction organizations and auto depots […] some 1 400 laborers and engineering-technical workers […] have quit,” the head of NurekGesStroi complained in 1967, “[and] as a rule it is the qualified labour that quits.” “Regarding the extremely unsatisfactory provision of Nurek builders….” 7 July 1967, ACPT, f. 3, op. 264, d. 201, 81-82.
But the article also mocked those who wanted to go in the opposite direction. Referring to Manilov, a daydreaming character from Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls* who thought up projects that could never be fulfilled, the paper wrote: “The planners hit the other extreme. They showed incredible *manilovschina*, drawing a picture of Nurek, the ‘city of the future’ on their drafting paper.”

Even when managers committed to building housing or other facilities, shortages of labor, materials, and problems with transport made it hard to bring plans to fruition. The republic’s construction industry could barely keep up with the regular demands of an expanding urban population, let alone the construction of a new city. A new factory to produce housing materials was being built in Ordzhonikidezabad, but it would be a while before it could operate at capacity. In subsequent years, the rush to catch up and build housing led to shoddy construction throughout the city, necessitating fundamental repairs.

Nevertheless, construction officials had come to think of the workers as an urban population, and of the workers’ health, comfort, and family life as falling within their sphere of responsibility. They petitioned republic and Soviet authorities to allocate additional funds for residential construction, medical and service facilities, and entertainment venues. Gradually, conditions began to improve. The tent cities gave way to dormitories, and then the first apartment blocks. Hakel recalled that imperceptibly, Nurek started to acquire traits appropriate for a city. On the main street (as always, named after Lenin), multi-story buildings arose, on one of which a color mosaic panel was raised, showing a worker walking with the dam in the background and the words of V. Maiakovsky “I know-there will be a city!” Nurek also started getting the kind of cultural and educational facilities planners envisioned, including a new ten year school and a summer movie theatre. [Although] in many places people were walking ankle deep in dust, the kishlak was slowly disappearing.

Sedykh, in a 1967 *Pravda* article called the “Diamond of the Vaksh,” boasted “Nurek already exists. In the place of the mud-brick kishlak a modern city with a population of almost 20 thousand people has arisen.”

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53. Seventy-one apartments were supposed to be ready by the end of 1961; in fact, none of them had yet passed inspection and been accepted for residents. Construction on a planned apartment building for the executive committee of the city Soviet had not even broken ground. “Regarding housing and cultural-everyday use construct in the city of Nurek.” CSAT, f. 1605, op. 1, d. 79, l. 1-15.


56. Hakel, *Unesennoe vetrom*, ch. 19

57. E. Sedykh, “Zhemchuzhena Vaksha [Jewel of the Vaksh],” *Pravda*, 12 March 1967. From a census conducted that year, it appears that Sedykh was exaggerating about the size of the population. See footnote 49.
Indeed, it was the failure of early estimates about the project’s duration that made the construction of a planned permanent city possible. Gorbachev, who seems to have been one of the early proponents of building a permanent city, wrote: “No doubt, if construction only lasts 3-5 years, and the district has no chance of further economic development, one can and should focus on temporary housing.” However, he went on to say, if the project lasts longer, for 10-15 years, then one has to think not just about the construction site but about urban formations. People may arrive as single demobilized soldiers or recent graduates of technical institutes, but if they stay long enough they will form families. In an apparent rebuke to those who had argued for holding off on urban construction, Gorbachev asked:

Can you deny builders basic conveniences? Can you deny the children of builders their swing-sets, slides, and swimming pools? In place of the “theory of the temporary” there comes sober and serious calculations: labor turnover is more expensive than swing sets, a fountain, and even a modern House of Culture.\textsuperscript{58}

By 1967, the situation had changed in a number of ways that reflected the changing economic role of Nurek and accelerated its transformation into a permanent city. First, while labor turnover was still a problem, more workers were staying. In fact, they were forming families. A city of 11,967 had 4,356 children – more than a third of the population. Moreover, earlier delays in construction meant that the city had not even reached its peak population. To get the first turbine functioning by 1970, as called for at the XXIII party congress, would require a doubling of the work force. Whereas in the early part of the decade it may have been unclear what kind of settlement would be built for the workers, by 1967 the debate over what kind of city to build had been settled. The new workers would not have to live in tents; instead, officials would do what they could to have dormitories and apartments ready for them.\textsuperscript{59}

Finally, the place of Nurek in the development of Southern Tajikistan had changed over the course of the 1960s. Although the electricity from the Nurek dam had always been intended for several industrial giants to be built in South-West Tajikistan, it was only gradually over the course of the 1960s that the idea of a “Southern Tajikistan Territorial Industrial Complex” took hold among local planners and won approval from Moscow.\textsuperscript{60}

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\textsuperscript{58} Gorbachev, \textit{Plotina}, 137.

\textsuperscript{59} Results of a survey of the population of Nurek, 3 January 1967, RGAE, f. 339, op. 6 d. 3373, l. 50-53.

\textsuperscript{60} Indeed, planners advocated Territorial Production Complexes across the USSR in the 1960s as a solution to problems of inefficiency in transport, energy distribution, and access to resources and labor. See Kalinovsky, “Central Planning, Local Knowledge? Labor, Population, and the Tajik School of Economics,” \textit{Kritika: Exploration in Russian and Eurasian History}, 17, 3 (2016): 585-620.
town” for the staff who would stay to operate the dam after construction was complete. While the precise details of the complex were to be debated and contested until the collapse of the USSR, there seems to have been agreement that Nurek should itself become a minor industrial city within a broader network of small cities built around industries.

Internationalism and Urban Planning

If utopian ideas about urban planning and urban living helped shape Nurek city over the course of the 1960s, internationalism, understood as the obligation of working people to help each other regardless of their national origin, helped push those changes beyond Nurek proper and into the surrounding villages. Arguably, internationalism served both to drive and to justify Moscow’s foreign policy, from its economic aid in the Third World to its military intervention in Afghanistan (1979-1989). The Soviet commitment to internationalism helped it make contacts with the decolonizing world in the 1950s and 1960s, propelling Central Asia to a central place in Soviet foreign policy.61 The rise of China as an additional contender for influence in the Third World made the demonstration of Soviet domestic equality all the more important, as Beijing alleged that the Soviet Union was actually just another racist European empire.62 Anti-colonialism and internationalism as understood by the Soviets were sometimes at odds—for example, when the former was used to mobilize post-colonial states against European countries, forcing Moscow to choose between supporting the European working class or the post-colonial states.63

The ideals of internationalism were also supposed to govern relations between the different national groups within the Soviet Union. The ideology was particularly important for projects like Nurek, where labor and resources from across the union had to be mobilized for an initiative that was supposed to serve as a demonstration of Soviet ideals for domestic and foreign audiences. Internationalism abroad and internationalism at home were deployed in different ways but were often intertwined. In both cases, the rhetoric of “internationalism” was addressed to two audiences: one domestic (the Soviet citizens sending their sons to fight in distant wars, or going there themselves) and one on the receiving end of internationalist aid. In the late 1950s, when officials in Moscow expressed doubts about

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63. See the excellent discussion of these ideals and their contradictions in Friedman, Shadow Cold War, 25-59.
the dam, citing costs and the difficulty of construction in such a small location, Tajik officials eager to get it built cleverly portrayed the dam as a project that could demonstrate the reality of good relations between Soviet peoples and an example to nearby states like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Once the construction process got underway, internationalism was heralded and promoted in the local press and in all publications about Nurek. Internationalism was also a tool to overcome the opposition of bureaucrats reluctant to allocate resources to the project, or to mobilize workers for the project.

Internationalism served a disciplining function that bound the actions of both employees and managers, including party officials. Thus, workers were enjoined to think about “internationalism” in the workplace, which meant, first and foremost, identifying with workers of different nationalities on the basis of class and membership in the Soviet family. “International” brigades were particularly celebrated and managers had to prove their commitment to internationalism by hiring and promoting workers from the local population, setting up “international” brigades like the one led by the often-celebrated Muhabbat Sharipov, and in general making sure that everyone benefited equally from the dam project. Those who failed to do so were chided for “failing to understand the political significance” of their actions.

Not only did they have to demonstrate their commitment to internationalist equality to those higher-up, they could also come under attack from subordinates or residents for favoring “Russians” in employment or in choosing which schools, roads, and settlements would receive investments. The local party organization served as kind of disciplining agent, reminding managers to look beyond their purely technical goals and remember the broader social goals they were supposed to serve.

At the same time, the idea that the city itself should become a showpiece also took hold. Tajikistani proponents of Nurek had connected the building of the dam to the USSR’s broader commitment to internationalism and anti-colonialism, but in the first decade of construction, when the dam’s fate remained uncertain, this idea seemed to have fallen by the wayside. In any case, a dusty field of tents and temporary housing peopled by drunken and diseased workers building a dam no one sure would be completed was hardly good propaganda material. By 1968-69, however, officials again started talking about the project’s importance for demonstrating internationalism, both among the peoples of the Soviet Union and working people the world over. When the dam was to have been built quickly, officials mostly planned to use skilled labor brought in from outside the republic. Yet the problem of labor turnover and the project’s duration forced them to change their strategy.

64. Kalinovsky, “Not some British Colony in Africa.”
65. By the early 1970s, officials claimed that out of 220 brigades, almost each one had representatives of at least five nationalities. A brigade led by Muhabbat Sharipov, a hero worker from Nurek, was among those most often lauded in the local press as “truly international” because it included “Tajiks, Russians, Tatars, and Ukrainians.” Norak, 16 November 1972, 2.
By the mid-1960s, they were working out strategies to bring the local population into the workforce. Nurek became a site where one could find the “results of cooperation between workers, engineers, and technicians of different nationalities.” In addition, from 1968 groups of Middle Eastern, Asian, Latin American, and African students attending the Patrice Lumumba University began coming to Nurek for the practical component of their studies.67

It was also around this time that Nurek started becoming a destination for domestic and foreign tourists, part of an itinerary that might include the ancient cities of Bukhara and Samarkand in neighboring Uzbekistan, a trip by train to Dushanbe, and then by bus to visit the site of the dam. Pamphlets in Russian, English, French, and German touted a city of “bright, comfortable apartment houses” that had replaced an “old kishlak [village] with its rickety huts” where Tajiks and Russians, Uzbeks and Georgians, Evenks and Latvians, as well as representatives of many other nationalities and peoples of the Soviet Union live and work [...] as a large and well-knitted family.

The Soviet tourist agency Intourist invited visitors to take in the city after dark and “admire a sea of lights which opens to view from the mountain ridge surrounding the city.”68 Bringing third-world students and tourists from across the world to observe and experience the reality of Soviet domestic internationalism helped demonstrate the Soviet commitment to anti-colonialism and its suitability as a model development for Third World nations.

As Nurek city became a showcase for Soviet internationalism and modernity, officials were under even more pressure to make it habitable and beautiful. In May 1968, Aleksei Kosygin, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, visited the site and the city, instructing local officials to start taking the city’s appearance seriously and encouraging them to make it as impressive as possible.69 A new plan for improving the town’s appearance, including the facades along the main street, the construction of a main plaza with a fountain, and the greening of the city, was drawn up in 1968.70 “The face of the city of dam builders needs to become exemplary…” B. Shukurov, chairman of the city executive committee, said at a party meeting,

70. “Iunomu gorodu energetikov – krasotu,” [For the young city of energy builders – beauty] Norak, 7 October 1969. According to the article, only half of the trees planted that spring survived until the autumn.
a great task has been set before us – next to the unique dam, rightly called the
diamond of the Vaksh, to build the city of communism’s tomorrow, a source of
pride for all the residents of Nurek and their guests.

The identification of Nurek with internationalism was further strengthened in the
1970s, when the magazine Druzhba narodov [friendship of the people] made the
city a kind of pet project. The magazine’s purpose was to promote internationalism
through literature, and it published writers from across the USSR and hosted
debates about socialist art. The magazine organized several roundtables on Nurek
and published accounts by its managers and workers. Its biggest contribution,
perhaps, was organizing a book drive for Nurek’s library. Famous authors from
across the world were invited to send autographed copies of their works to the
magazine, which would then pass them on to the library.

City and Village

If Nurek was going to become a demonstration of Soviet modernity and internationalism
for foreign visitors, officials would first have to prove that internationalism
within the Soviet Union was a reality. Nurek, as we saw, had made the transition
from construction site to city over the course of a decade, but it was inhabited
mostly by outsiders. By the late 1960s there was a clear dividing line between the
city and its satellite villages, as urban officials strove to eliminate traces of village
life within the city’s boundaries. As urban conditions improved, however, local
workers and party members began to voice discontent regarding the situation in
their own villages, forcing party organizations and construction agencies to expand
the borders of their work.

The struggle over seemingly mundane issues like roads or sanitation was
often framed in terms of nationality politics; equally important, however, was the
push in the late 1960s to raise standards of living and extend the welfare state
to the Soviet countryside. Marx had advocated bridging the gap in living standards
and culture between the countryside and the city, and planners like Miliutin
had tried to address this goal in their work. It was only in the Brezhnev years,
however, that sufficient resources were allocated to make this goal a reality on
a wide scale. New agencies were created at the all-union and republic levels to
bring the benefits of Soviet modernity to rural residents.

This development, in turn, spurred a renewed interest in designing “model kishlaks”
that would facilitate the cultural transformation of Central Asians. Moritz Florin has shown how
planners and architects in Kyrgyzstan envisioned model villages where houses did

72. See, for example, “Nurekseskaia biblioteka popolniaetsia [The Nurek library fills up],”
73. See Kalinovsky “Tractors, Power Lines.”
not have the customary walls separating the yard from the street; removing the walls was supposed to make the village more social and integrate families. Tajik archives similarly contain dozens of plans for “ideal villages” of various kinds, with the usual combination of modernized housing, cultural and medical facilities, and schools.

When we look at Nurek’s satellite villages, however, we do not see new villages arising on the basis of these plans; rather, elements of “modern” living entered villages through the demands of locals or insistence of party activists based in Nurek. As with the demands and expectations of workers from outside the republic, the demands of villagers were channelled through formal institutions like the kishlak soviets (village councils), election meetings, and party organizations, as well as through informal ties between prominent workers from a village and managerial elites. The extension of infrastructure and services, in turn, led the state (from a kind of operational base in Nurek city) to increase its interventions in the lives of people. The city’s party organization and its construction organizations would become responsible for modernizing the villages.

The construction of the Nurek dam made the city, which had previously been of little administrative or economic importance, the nucleus of party activity and the physical center of all construction in the vicinity. According to Pavel Gorbachev, Nurek’s first party secretary, early on in the dam’s construction, the villages that made up the city’s periphery were already delimited as being part of the city’s authority, and were to receive the same attention as the city itself. In 1962, he claims, he arranged for Petr Stepanovich Neporozhniy, the USSR Minister of Energy and Electrification, to visit Kibil at the invitation of one of the elders in the kishlak. During his tour of the village, Gorbachev remembers, the elder asked the minister:

You’ve come to us from the heart of our Motherland—Moscow—a beautiful city with tall buildings. Thank you for finding the time to visit us. People say that Nurek will also become a beautiful city, of a kind not yet seen in the republic. In its new houses there will be electricity, the housewife will no longer have to cook soup on an open fire, because there will be gas stoves, and water will reach each kitchen. This is very good. But what does the great minister think about those kishlaks where there is no electricity, where people have to walk half a

75. See, for example, the various projects for “the layout, construction, and landscaping” of rural settlements submitted to the State Committee for Construction in CSAT, f. 1622, op. 1, d. 390.
76. By 1967, 23% of the city’s residents were “service personnel,” which was the result of the fact that “the city of Nurek, surrounded by more than 10 kishlaks, is currently serving as a district center, and its organizations are serving not only the population of Nurek but also the surrounding kishlaks.” Zubov, Chairman of Gosstroi of the Tajik SSR, to Novikov, RGAE, f. 399, op. 6, d. 3373, l. 57, 3 January 1967.
kilometre to draw water on the banks of the Vaksh? Nor is there a good school or medical clinic, or asphalt roads or sidewalks?\textsuperscript{77}

According to Gorbachev, Neporozhnii turned to him and said:

Take a compass, and make a circle around Nurek with a radius of fifty kilometres, and give electricity to all the kishlaks [that fall within it].\textsuperscript{78}

The story may or may not be true, but it does point to the way the project transformed local geographies, and the role of the city as a civilizing agent and carrier of the Soviet welfare state. At first, the transformation of Nurek from a construction site to a city accelerated the separation of European workers and locals. Concerns about disease pushed officials to speed up the construction of housing, improve infrastructure, and build health facilities. They also sharpened the divide between the city of Nurek and the surrounding countryside. At this point the older residents of Nurek were still living in their family homes, the settlements that would be absorbed into the city interspersed with tents, the quickly assembled wooden apartment blocks, and the more solid brick buildings in early stages of construction. Like most villagers they kept animals that helped supplement the family diet. But sanitation officials believed that these animals caused disease and made it clear that there was no room for farm animals in a city:

The residents of the city of Nurek, and of Saary-bolo and Desabur keep animals (chickens, cows, pigs, geese, ducks and many dogs). Keeping animals in the city and the unsatisfactory sanitation leads to a large number of flies, which are carriers of disease.\textsuperscript{79}

In the following years, these people would be resettled in surrounding villages, along with the barnyard animals. The only “farming” that was allowed within the city was the cultivation of small garden plots attached to some of the two-floor apartment blocks.

The emerging city was primarily settled by European families, while local families continued to live in the villages. This was largely a matter of preference; the villages provided more space and families could expand their dwellings as people were born or married into family.\textsuperscript{80} In the early part of the decade laborers from outside Nurek lived in squalid conditions compared to the local peasantry. A decade

\textsuperscript{77} Gorbachev, \textit{Plotina}, 67-68.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{79} Resolution of the Executive Committee of the City Council of Nurek, 23 September 1963, CSAT, f. 1605, op. 1, d. 407, l. 19.

\textsuperscript{80} Almost none of the people I interviewed spoke of any desire to move to the city when it was being constructed, preferring the spaciousness of the village. Nor have I seen anything in the archival sources that suggests demand for housing from locals as opposed to the labourers coming from elsewhere.
later that was no longer the case. The city not only had living space, it was quickly outpacing the surrounding villages in the growth of services. Now the city had both light and running water, new schools and hospitals. The same could not be said for the villages. Officials noted that

in the majority of the kishlaks, located within the borders of the city, there is no running water, electric lighting, or radio. There are no pharmacies, medical centres (medpunkt) or libraries. There is no regular bus service between the kishlaks.\footnote{81. “Regarding the fundamental improvement of services for culture and everyday life of the workers of the Nurek GES,” 20 October 1966, ACPT, f. 56, op. 7, d. 16, l. 89.}

Resentment began to set in when it became clear that resources were mostly directed towards the city, while the villages were left behind in terms of access to electricity, running water, quality of construction materials for houses, roads, and schools.

On January 13, 1968, E.K. Sedykh, Nurek’s representative in the Tajik SSR Supreme Soviet, was meeting with voters from Kibil, New Tutkaul, and Karatay. Two communists who were present, Ahmedov, a labourer working on the dam and Rahmonov, head teacher at the Kibil school, complained about the state of their village. According to a report on the meeting,

they rudely blamed the executive committee (ispolkom) of the City Soviet of Worker’s Deputies and the deputy of the Supreme Soviet comrade E.K. Sedykh, who supposedly did not care about the conditions and services (blagoustroistva) in Kibil, which still does not have water, there is no bus stop, and the school is in a bad building.

Ahmedov’s real transgression was making it about nationality—apparently he complained that if “Russians” lived in his village, surely it would already have all the things that had been promised before. It seems that a high degree of dissatisfaction led to the emotionally charged meeting:

despite the fact that in the course of this meeting the chair of the city executive committee sharply corrected these orators, nevertheless the communist comrades Ahmedov and Rahmonov continued to be rude and untactful.

Their behaviour was censured.\footnote{82. “Regarding the meeting of comrade Sedykh with workers from Kibil, Novyi Tutkaul, and Karatay,” Nurek Party Committee Buro Meeting, 25 January 1967, ACPT, f. 56, op. 7, d. 30.} By connecting the problem of running water, transportation, and schooling to nationality, they showed they were buying into the promises of internationalism, equality, and social welfare, and willing to call out senior officials when these promises were not met.
And yet Ahmedov and Rahmonov’s protest did get the attention of city authorities. It was one of the first issues Gorbachev brought up at his address to the party conference at the end of the month, placing the extension of services to the surrounding Kishlaks on the top of the agenda for the party organization. He also personally criticized officials who had failed to organize bussing for students from Karatash and the new school building for Tutkaul. Increasingly, as the 1960s became the 1970s, the physical condition of the satellite villages as well as general social welfare there came under the purview of city organizations. Ahmedov and Rahmonov’s complaint—and their claim that internationalist norms were being violated—had evidently been heard.

Although thousands of families would be resettled to work the cotton fields irrigated by Nurek, the dam itself only required the resettlement of one village, Tutkaul, which became submerged as the reservoir rose, as well as some of the households that occupied what ultimately became Nurek. Tutkaul was resettled nearby; just as Nurek was becoming a model city, New Tutkaul was supposed to serve as a model village, with a rational layout and modern conveniences. A publication from the 1970s boasted, that:

The old mud village (kishlak) of Tutkaul was submerged by the man-made sea. All of its residents were transferred to the left bank of the Vaksh. The new everyday life is evident everywhere. In the so-called “kishlak” you have all the urban conveniences: electricity, radio, television, and refrigerators…

In fact, residents would have to wait for years before they got running water and electricity, though it does appear to have become one of the more comfortable villages in the area by the late 1970s.

By the late 1970s, it was taken for granted that the dam, the city, and its satellite villages constituted one whole as far as issues such as construction and the provision of welfare were concerned. The kishlak and city soviets became channels for directing the demands of villagers for roads, electrification, and housing. Officials who worked for the Soviets were responsible for meeting with residents and party members to ascertain the needs of the different villages. They would then
bring their demands to the city party and construction organizations and coordinate the implementation of different projects. As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, both formal and informal approaches were necessary to see a project through, and an effective chairman had to have good relations not just with the city party bureau but the various construction and supply organizations in the city and on the dam.\(^{88}\) Besides the usual demands for paved roads or running water, people also asked for clubhouses, which were constructed in almost all of the satellite villages in the 1970s and 1980s. These clubs often doubled as mosques, with the full knowledge of the party organization.\(^{89}\) City authorities took responsibility for the cultural life of satellite villages, haranguing officials to meet the Soviet standards of cultural life as well as the demands of residents. In 1971, for example, the local paper reminded city authorities that

the work of clubs, libraries, and the house of culture does not meet modern standards. Many residents complain about access to movies […] in the villages they barely show movies in the Tajik language.\(^{90}\)

Officials were chided at party meetings when they failed to follow through on the demands of village residents.\(^{91}\)

Kishlak and city soviets were important for channeling the demands of residents but also organizing them to carry out some of the beautification and infrastructural work on weekends. (Such mobilization, known throughout the Soviet Union as *subotniki*, or Saturdays, were often referred to informally and in official documents as “hashar,” harking back to older Central Asian traditions of communal labor.) Thus, while residents could use the institution of the kishlak and city soviets to demand housing materials, infrastructure, or schools, these

\(^{88}\) The sheer volume of construction material available provided opportunities. Material that was used for a certain phase of production and then discarded, or proved unnecessary for one reason or another was sold off cheaply to workers, who could then use it to expand or rebuild their own houses.

\(^{89}\) Author’s interviews with former party officials. There is indeed ample, if somewhat indirect, proof of these processes. For example, in 1967 a new club was constructed on the outskirts of Nurek. Its initiators were a local representative in the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan and several communists in local party and municipal organs. The materials were provided by the city executive committee, presumably from the resources allocated for housing construction, and the building itself was erected by volunteers. A library was organized, including 4 500 titles, and quickly registered 256 readers. The club included a stage and audience hall, and hosted amateur theatre and musical performances, patriotic gatherings, and lectures on atheism. An article in *Kommunist Tadzhikistana*, entitled “A Club or a Prayer Hall?,” alleged that it was in fact being used for prayer. An inspection followed, and officials reported that there was no evidence that the club was being used for religious purposes. In reality, it almost certainly served a double function, with people of different ages using it in different ways. “Regarding the verification of an article…,” undated, but after April 1972, ACPT, f. 56, op. 11, d. 8, l. 43-48.

\(^{90}\) “Vypolniat’ nakazi izberatelei [Carry out the mandate of electors],” Norak, 19 April 1971.

\(^{91}\) Ia.M. Mirfozilov, chairman of the city soviet, at the IX Nurek City Party, 18 November 1979, ACPT, f. 3, op. 303, d. 104, 1978, l. 50.
same institutions were used to organize them for labor along communal lines, helping overcome the deficiencies in labor of local construction organizations. The chairman of the city council singled out officials who had mobilized people to do this work:

We should particularly note the initiative of those deputies of the city, kishlak and village Soviets who directed the public, and residents for the beautification of the city, villages, and kishlaks.92

City organizations assumed, or tried to assume, increasing control over the territorial space of Nurek and its satellite villages. As the city’s commitment to the welfare of surrounding villages increased, so did the ambition of its reach into people’s lives. New schools were built, but pressure on families to send their children to those schools increased as well. Activists on the village soviet were expected to visit families individually and make sure their children, especially their daughters, were attending school, and to convince them to send their children for further education. In some cases, there was a kind of quid pro quo—officials would win the trust of village elders by helping them expand their house or build a new club/mosque, but they would then expect them to support girls going to school. Officials were even expected to use their position to intervene in cases where families were not providing proper support for their children’s studies.93 Similar strategies were used to convince families to let wives and daughters join the workforce, especially the textile plant.

Medical care and hygiene were at the center of concerns about the rural population. Officials complained about the “lack of access to medical aid […] in the kishlaks medical propaganda is very weak, the work of the sanitary-epidemiological station is not at its best, there is no control over the health conditions of the city and the villages.”94 Nurek’s hospital, finally completed in the early 1970s, became the center of a rural health network, with clinics and outposts in the satellite villages. As the capacity to provide for the rural population’s welfare grew, so did the boundaries of responsibilities in officials’ minds. Issues like domestic hygiene or the practice of delivering children at home and without professional assistance caused concern and were seen as evidence of dangerous traditionalism that city party officials had to combat.95 These concerns were sometimes brought up as part of articles or speeches about “internationalism,” reaffirming the link

92. Ibid. This included planting 3,100 trees, clearing away 860,000 m² of rocks and garbage, laying 2 km worth of water pipes, and the greening of Hafez street in New Tutkaul.

93. Author’s interview with Mirkolon Shodjonov, Dushanbe, July 2013. Shodjonov was the head of the Nurek hospital in the 1970s and 1980s.


95. “Vyshhe znamia internacionalizma [Raise the banner of internationalism higher],” (Notes from the city party committee plenum.) Norak, 24 May 1974.
between welfare, social transformation, and commitment to equality between Soviet nationalities.

Issues of health and the body were just one part of the broader transformation of life and attitudes that Nurek was supposed to oversee in the villages. By the end of the 1970s, officials boasted that with infrastructure and services now extending deeper into the villages, they were producing new Tajik men and women:

The material and cultural level of the population has grown. Electricity and gas have become a part of everyday life, water supply has been improved, all of the kishlaks have midwife-nursing stations, almost every family has a television, radio receiver, and each family gets three copies of newspapers and magazines.

Soviet rituals, such as the day of the agricultural worker, Nowruz, and Komsomol weddings, had “firmly entered people’s consciousness.” However, officials were worried that they were still failing to bring women into “socially useful work,” and found that in one village “120 young women are neither studying nor working.” They found that the battle against the “antipodes of socialist way of life” was weak, and that “backward traditions, habits, views are still common among a certain part of the workers of the sovkhоз [state farm].”

Although Nurek and its satellite villages were supposed to form one whole, the imaginary boundary between them never disappeared. Certain events did bring the two sets of populations together—for example, each village hosting celebrations for one day during the Nowruz holiday, or weekly dances that attracted at least some young men from the villages. (The worksite itself, of course, was where “Europeans” and many “locals” interacted daily.) Nevertheless, the sense that the city was for “Russians” and the villages for Tajiks remained, as did complaints about inequality in the level of services in each. At a party conference in 1988, a teacher and party member complained “The social problem in our city is not being solved at the proper level, especially in the kishlaks…” Criticizing about the state of schools, telephone access, and the failure to protect the villages from mudslides, he noted “these questions have been raised numerous times at plenums of the City party committee and sessions of the city’s executive committee but have found no solution.”

These shortcomings should not obscure the fact that the interactions of “locals,” managers, and party activists shows the way that ideals operated in practice. On the one hand, just as the typical problems of disease, boredom, and labor turnover

96. Nowruz is the Persian new year, marked at the Spring equinox. A pre-Islamic holiday, it is celebrated widely throughout Central Asia. In the 1960s, some Tajik intellectuals campaigned for official recognition of the holiday, arguing that it was a “national” and not a “religious” holiday. Salimi Aiubzod, Tojikon dar Qarni Bistum [Tajiks in the Twentieth Century] (Praga: Post Skriptum Imprimatur, 2002), 212-218.

97. “Regarding the work of the party organization of the Norak sovkhoz…” 26 June 1979, ACPT, f. 3, op. 301, d. 103, l. 67-68.

98. XIII Nurek party conference, 29 October 1988, ACPT, f. 3, op. 360, d. 321, l. 43.
convincing managers of the wisdom of investing in better facilities and housing for workers in Nurek, so did complaints from villagers lead those same officials to invest in infrastructure and facilities for the surrounding countryside. On the other hand, the way that these individuals approached both sets of problems reveals the powerful hold of utopian ideals of equality, internationalism, and urban and rural life. Utopian notions of the transformative power of a modern city and ideals of internationalism and equality pushed officials to promote local workers, and these ideals ultimately also pushed officials to extend the social welfare state to surrounding villages.

Conclusion

Mass housing in the Khrushchev era and beyond created many neighborhoods and towns that looked indistinguishable from one another, as satirized in Eldar Riazanov’s film Ironicia sud’by [The Irony of Fate]. Nurek, too, was a city built from pre-fabricated components—an assembly of available building designs, layouts, and materials. Yet in their assembly the city became something unique, precisely because of the myriad minor adjustments and negotiations between individuals, party officials, and planners. Most of my interviewees—both those who lived in the city and those who were in the villages—insisted on the uniqueness of the project of which they had been a part and recognized its place in a larger Soviet story. While Nurek shares a great deal with other post-war Soviet company towns, its residents are not wrong to think that it was nevertheless unique. Internationalism was a professed goal throughout the Soviet Union, but at sites like Nurek that ideal gained an additional importance as a way to prove Soviet commitment to anti-colonialism. The ideal may not have been reached in reality, but the struggle over the definition and implementation of internationalism and equality nevertheless shaped the city and the satellite villages.

I argued at the outset that understanding the history of the city requires looking beyond the dreams of planners and the goals of party leaders to see how these interacted with the engagement and resistance of workers and locals. It was not just the architectural shape of the city that emerged from these complex interactions, but the entire set of obligations between the state, the workers, and the villages surrounding Nurek—in other words, the local manifestation of the post-war Soviet welfare state. Party institutions played two roles in this process. Party leaders like Pavel Gorbachev were often the most enthusiastic carriers of utopian visions for the new city. But they also played an important role, along with local institutions like the city and village soviets, in engaging with the demands of people. Party activists and institutions served to channel demands and resistance, forcing officials to make endless minor and not so minor adjustments to the templates from which they were working.

The story of Nurek also challenges a familiar dichotomy which sees ideology fading after the Khrushchev era. While it is true that utopian visions or internationalist
ideals were sometimes obscured by the everyday needs of construction, it is equally true that the commitment to these ideals, in terms both of physical resources and individual mobilization, only increased in the 1970s. It was in this period that resources became available to “bridge the gap between the city and the village” throughout the USSR, and the effects of this policy are dramatically visible in the relations between Nurek and its satellites. The ideological commitment of party activists, the mobilization of local residents, and the availability of resources all point to the fact that instead of stagnation, the period saw rapid movement and transformation.

University of Amsterdam

a.m.kalinovsky@uva.nl