

CEDEJ Tuesday Seminar
April 7, 2026, at 2pm

**From Marxist Political Economy to Scientific Geo-Engineering: Comparing
Colonialism in Egypt and Soviet Uzbekistan**

By Masha Kirasirova

This paper explores the intertwined histories of Soviet hydrology and cotton agriculture in Uzbekistan and Egypt, demonstrating how imperial-era comparative frameworks were revived during the Cold War. It argues that Egypt served as a persistent foil for Soviet development in Central Asia; that scientific experts, especially hydrologists and agronomists, replaced political economists as key comparative agents; and that these exchanges facilitated Soviet development aid while reinforcing internal Soviet hierarchies. Drawing on archives from the International Agrarian Institute and the Central Asian Bureau of the CPSU, the paper analyzes comparisons and connections between these regions from the 1930s to the 1970s. Why were they so often compared, and in what ways were they comparable? How did these comparisons evolve with the Soviet development missions in Egypt from the 1950s to 1970s, when Egyptian and Uzbek scientists participated in interconnected development projects? By examining shared infrastructures—water, soil, and cotton—the paper challenges Cold War binaries between Soviet and Western developmentalism, reframing empire as a technoscientific project rooted in the material transformations of land and labor.

Masha Kirasirova is an Associate Professor of History at New York University Abu Dhabi. Her work examines exchanges between the modern Middle East and Soviet Eurasia, focusing on state-led efforts to transform natural and built environments, political culture, theories of empire, histories of the future, and aesthetics. She is the author of *The Eastern International: Arabs, Central Asians, and Jews in the Soviet Union's Anticolonial Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2024), as well as a co-editor of *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History* (Oxford University Press, 2023) and *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties* (Routledge, 2018). She is currently working on an edited volume about the visual cultures of the Aswan High Dam, a special issue on futurisms in the Gulf and the wider Arab region, and a project about visions of the future in Egypt and how they changed from the early 20th century through the Nasser period and the liberalizations of the *infitāḥ*. This last project situates Egypt within a longer history of empire in the 20th-century, Cold War geopolitics, and regional circuits of capital, expertise, and culture.