

# **Histories of Central Asia:**

An SSRC Web Resource  
for Teaching

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In April 2009 the Eurasia Program of the Social Science Research Council will launch a website to help instructors who would like to include material about Central Asia in their classes. “On-line Histories of Central Asia” [<http://onlinehistories.ssrc.org/centralasia>] contains three sections: “The Built Environment” by Robert McChesney (New York University, emeritus), “Changes in Identity” by Shoshana Keller (Hamilton College), and “Islamic Cultural Movements” by Adeeb Khalid (Carleton College). Each section has embedded within it links to outside sites, images, and maps, and includes bibliographic resources. Teachers and students of Asian societies, and teachers of world history, Asian history, and Islamic history, are invited to use this site as a basis for lectures, discussions, classroom exercises, and research assistance.

## **Site content**

McChesney discusses buildings, building materials, and the ways that Central Asians have arranged them to create a living environment. The section considers the design of villages, towns, and nomadic camps as well as the architecture of gardens, shrines, mosques, and homes. McChesney examines Central Asians’ economic abilities to create and sustain their environment through the Mongol, Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods, and pays particular attention to the forcible creation of modern urban designs in Soviet Central Asia and Afghanistan in the twentieth century.

Keller provides six sets of lecture materials that explore the concepts of mobility, identity, and mobile identity in Central Asian communities since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These sets provide

extensive information on both the “Russian” and “Chinese” sides of Central Asia, and the ways in which Turkic, Persian, Russian, Mongol, and Chinese cultures have interacted to shape peoples in the region.

Khalid writes on Islam and the enormous pressures that religious practice and knowledge have been subjected to in modern (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century) Central Asia history. Based on his recent book *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), the section concerns Islamic practice and study prior to 1917, the Jadidist reform movement, and the impact of Communist rule on Central Asian Islam to the present day. Khalid includes extensive sections on the “official” and “unofficial” forms of Islam that existed throughout the Soviet period, with links to primary documents from the Soviet government and government-supervised Islamic institutions. He also provides brief biographies of key figures in recent Islamic thought, and bibliographies of Chinese and Japanese literature concerning Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia.

### **Mobile identities**

The dominant themes of Keller’s and Khalid’s sections are mobility and change, with an emphasis on the fact that these phenomena long pre-dated imperial domination by Russia and China. Personal and communal identities in pre-colonial Central Asia were derived from different bases than those familiar to Chinese and Japanese history.

The most basic level of mobility is the physical movement of peoples across the vast space of Central Eurasia. Nomadic tribes and their herds followed green grass through the seasons within fairly well-defined territories, but war or changing environmental conditions could push them to new locations. The intrusion of a nomadic group into strange territory dislocated relations among other nomadic and settled peoples in the region. Large-scale invasions set off a kind of domino effect, in which the newcomers triggered a cascade of secondary invasions that significantly changed where and how people lived and how they interacted with each other. Invader cascades were one

of the most important causes of changes in communal identity across Central Eurasia until modern empires established controlled borders. The Mongol invasion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century set the stage for the modern history of Central Asia.

The next level of mobility is that of the markers that Central Asian peoples used to identify themselves, primarily genealogy, language, and religion. As peoples moved physically into different territories, they could either emphasize their distinct identities by contrasting their genealogy and language with those of earlier inhabitants, or they could merge identities by “discovering” common ancestors and adopting vocabulary and modes of expression from other languages. The relationship between territoriality and identity in Central Eurasia had more in common with Middle Eastern than with European or East Asian practices. Rulers in Muslim lands did not derive their political identity and legitimation from territory. Instead, notables in the Middle East gained legitimate power from a patent to rule from the caliph, even if the notable in question was a Seljuk Turk who could forcibly demand a patent at sword-point. Under the Baghdad Caliphate (750–1258 CE), regional rulers were legitimate because they had permission to rule from the caliph. The caliph was legitimate because he was a successor to the Prophet Muhammad, not because he controlled Baghdad. As Beatrice Forbes Manz writes, “We find therefore that in Islamic imperial traditions, the most strongly expressed identities brought with them no specific territorial claims,” (Manz, 81).

In this context, people derived identities from the roles that they, both as individuals and as members of ethno-linguistic groups, played in society. For example, Iranians were cultured and sophisticated, but steppe nomads (Turks and/or Mongols) made the best fighters. Hindus from India and Jews were merchants, with the characteristics of worldliness and cunning associated with long-distance trade. Religion also provided social roles that defined communities, although when observed in common it could facilitate interactions between nomadic and settled peoples who spoke different languages. Common religion could not completely prevent raids and warfare, however.

Religious differences, such as between Islam and Buddhism in Kashgaria/Altishahar (now Xinjiang), prevented a merging of identities.

Socially-derived identities were also quite fluid. Arminius Vambery, a Hungarian who traveled in the early 1860s throughout Central Asia in the guise of a Sufi mendicant, reported that Kyrgyz or Qipchaq nomads who moved permanently into towns routinely started calling themselves “Uzbeks” or “Sarts” (a broad term for town-dwellers). This change in name implied more of a political than an ethnic transition, as townsmen were under much closer administrative control than were the nomads (Vambery, 431–432; Geiss, 157).

### **Identities in the Khanates**

On the eve of the Russian conquest in 1865, western Central Asia was divided into three khanates: Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand. Bukhara was ruled by a dynasty of Uzbek emirs of the Manghit tribe (1756–1920). They tried to establish a basis for legitimacy in Islam: several emirs were active in the Naqshbandi Sufi order and gave prominent ceremonial and real power to clergy. Islam was only partially effective in solidifying the political order, however. The Manghit emirs struggled to establish centralized control, but the stronger Turkic or Iranian tribes could arrange to be governed by one of their own members. Villages were governed by elected *oqsoqollar* (literally, “white beards”), who represented local interests against those of centrally-appointed officials. The Manghit emirs faced frequent disobedience or rebellion by local communities. The emirate was a political entity bound by forced obedience, not by any sense of common community based on ethnic or even religious ties. In border regions where Uzbek clans still practiced a semi-nomadic way of life, tribal law was accorded as much respect as was Islamic law. Identity remained based on local family and customs. There was no “Bukharan,” much less “Uzbek” national identity.

Khiva was less successful than Bukhara in imposing centralized administrative control, even though the khanate occupied a smaller geographic area. The ruling Qongrat Dynasty

(late eighteenth century–1920) was Uzbek, but did not automatically command the support of other Uzbek tribes in the area. Most people outside the cities were Turkmen of the Yomut or Teke tribal confederacies, Kara-kalpaks, or Kazaks. The khans of Khiva could not appoint their own officials to govern the tribes, but had to accept locally-elected leaders. Tribal warriors could be helpful allies, but they were not reliably obedient to the khans. While all the nomadic tribes considered themselves Muslim, and the khans appointed Islamic judges to preside over disputes, neither the khans nor the clergy had the power to force nomads to submit to anything other than tribal customary law. This severely limited rulers' abilities to shape communal or personal identities.

Mongol lineage traditions still played a role in distinguishing communal identities within the Kokand khanate. The ruling Ming tribe (1710–1876, not to be confused with the Han Chinese Ming Dynasty) was Uzbek on the basis of their descent from the fifteenth century horde whose leader claimed descent from Shiban, son of Jochi son of Chingis Khan. This genealogical tradition distinguished Ming Uzbeks from the older population of Turkic-speakers (usually called “Türks”) in the Ferghana Valley, whose ancestors had lived there since at least the time of the Chaghatid khans in the thirteenth century. The Ming also had to contend with another Uzbek confederation called the Qipchaqs, who identified themselves on the basis of a different ancestral lineage, and who did not voluntarily recognize the Ming Uzbeks as their superiors.

### **Eastern Turkestan**

The region that today we call Xinjiang has rarely been a united polity, and so has been called a bewildering variety of names. The area south and east of the Tien Shan mountains was called Kashgaria (for a major trading town, Kashghar), and/or Altishahar (“six cities”). Most of the people there were settled farmers and townsmen who lived around oases. The northern section was Mogholistan under the rule of the Chaghatids, and then was referred to as Zungharia, for the

Zunghar Mongols (also called Oirats or Kalmyks) who were the dominant population. The Oirats, as well as Turkic Kazak and Kyrgyz tribes in the region, were nomadic pastoralists.

Kashgaria was ruled by *khojas*, dynasties of Naqshbandi Sufi sheikhs that originated in western Turkestan. The *khojas*' power was broken in the 1670s by a bloody dynastic rivalry that outside powers exploited. Tibet's Dalai Lama arranged for his ally the Oirat khan to invade Kashgaria, pacify it, and place the lama's chosen *khoja* on the throne. This takeover of Muslim areas by Buddhist powers appears to have been motivated by politics, not religion. Nonetheless, being dominated by Buddhists would most likely have had the effect of strengthening an Islamic identity among the Turkic peoples of Kashgaria. The Turkic oasis-dwellers paid tribute to their Mongol overlords until 1759, when the region was incorporated into Qing China.

For most of the Qing period the Chinese state had no policy to sinify the peoples of Xinjiang. Qing emperors controlled the region through military governors, keeping it administratively distinct from the rest of China. The garrison personnel were themselves widely diverse, including Oirats, Manchu bannermen, and Chinese Muslims (called Hui or Dungans) as well as Han Chinese. The state was more interested in extracting as much grain, silver, and cotton cloth as possible than in changing Turkic cultures. Economic and military control did entail the settlement of increasing numbers of Han Chinese in Xinjiang, but this was a slow process.

### **The Communists create nations**

In 1917 the Bolshevik leaders were unshakeably convinced that their revolution was the start of the world-wide proletarian revolution that would destroy capitalism and usher in an era of justice and equality for all. Lenin believed that Marx's laws of the historical development of society were proven, ironclad science. Therefore, including the "backward" non-Russian peoples in the revolution was simply to pull them into the larger and unstoppable flow of History.

Once his government had more-or-less achieved control over Central Asia, in 1920, Lenin began the long process of turning the peoples there into European-style nations. He ordered that an ethnographic map be drawn up, with suggested subsections marked “Uzbekiia, Kirgiziia, and Turkmeniia,” which tells us that Bolshevik leaders intended to fit Central Asians into European ethnographic categories. In 1924 the old geopolitical lines of Central Asia were swept away, and the region was re-organized on a new basis: the nation as defined by Stalin. The Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were proclaimed in October 1924. Tajikistan was split off from Uzbekistan to become its own SSR in 1929, and Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan became SSRs in 1936.

The creation of new states, each with its own government structure, Communist Party, and patrolled borders, was just the beginning of a profound recreation of Central Asian identities. Even the basic step of calling a language “Uzbek” or “Kyrgyz” meant defining the boundaries of languages that shaded off into many local dialects, a process that most Central Asians found incomprehensible. Equally incomprehensible, especially to nomads, was the idea that territory was a definitive component of identity. Borders may have stopped people from traveling freely, but borders alone could not create new individual or communal identities.

The Soviets built schools and trained teachers, wrote textbooks, defined separate languages, alphabets, and histories for each nation, created distinct “folk” music and dance traditions, and promoted national literatures and opera in the Western mold. Many of the people who did the real groundwork on these projects were Central Asians who welcomed the chance to develop and modernize their societies, even if they did not always accept communist ideology. The creation of Central Asian cultural institutions, however artificial, was not a matter of Russians imposing their will on resentful and helpless natives.

Meanwhile, the natural and man-made disasters that befell Xinjiang in the 1920s and 1930s were almost unfathomably complex. Local governments were dominated by Han Chinese

warlords. Some of these Han warlords imposed heavy taxes on Hui, Turkic, and Mongol communities, took land from them, and instituted an ethnically-based oppression that the Qing had been wise enough to avoid. This led to armed resistance and the rise of Turkic and Hui warlords who seized their own fiefdoms.

In 1933–34 and again in 1944–49, Turkic nationalists set up independent republics, based respectively in Kashghar and in Ghulja in the Yili River valley. Although short-lived, these governments were crucial for the development of Uyghur nationalism. The symbolic language of the first republic especially suggests that its leaders were concerned with creating a European-style national identity: they designed a flag, a constitution, and a national anthem about “the homeland of our Turk people.” Politicians paid their respects to Allah, but did not say anything about restoring the traditional rule of the *khojas*. Japanese historian Shinmen Yasushi points out that many of the leaders of the first republic were from merchant and clerical families who had been active in bringing Jadid education to Xinjiang. Since Jadidism was a modernizing school of thought, it is not so surprising that the republic was based more on Western national models than on pre-Qing political traditions (Millward, pp. 201–206; Rudelson, p. 6).

Ironically, a critical building block for founding the modern Uyghur national identity was provided, not by the Turkic republics, but by one of the loathed Han Chinese warlords. The ethnonym “Uyghur” had not been in use for 500 years. In the 1910s and 1920s a few intellectuals in the region started calling themselves “Uyghur,” but the ethnonym only came into widespread use during the rule of Sheng Shicai (1930–1944), one of many Chinese military officers who found themselves in charge of bits of a broken China in the 1930s. Sheng was unusually sympathetic to the grievances of Turks against Han abuses. He made a point of employing non-Han in his government and promoted the study of Turkic and Mongol languages. Sheng also borrowed from Soviet nationality policies to recognize fourteen ethnic groups in Xinjiang, including the

Uyghur, Taranchi (Turkic settled people in northern parts of the province), Kazak, Kyrgyz, and Hui/Dungan. By creating a bureaucratic category that came with real political and economic benefits, Sheng did as much as any intellectual group to solidify a Uyghur identity.

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, it rejected the Soviet federal system of dealing with nationalities in favor of a unitary structure. The Chinese also divided political power among all the nationalities of a given region rather than allow a majority nationality control over local power structures. Xinjiang was re-named the "Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region" in 1955 in recognition of the Uyghur majority (which was increased by re-categorizing the Taranchi as Uyghurs), but power was shared among the fourteen nationalities that had been categorized by Sheng Shicai in the 1930s, including Han Chinese. Neither did the PRC engage in a systematic program of nation-building, as the Soviets had.

Soviet rule destroyed and re-built the political order of Central Asia, and much of the social order as well. The common experience of Marxism-Leninism gave a new basis of unity to Central Asians: Russian is still the *lingua franca* of the university-educated, and people from Astana to Termez shared cultural phenomena from TV shows and after-school clubs to memories of intense suffering under Stalin. These experiences have also left today's Central Asian republics "a world apart" from other Muslim states in terms of religious culture (Khalid, 190). In today's PRC, it appears that Deng Xiaoping's easing of Maoist abuses and opening the region to the outside world exacerbated, rather than alleviated, the resentments that originated in earlier decades. Capitalist expansion has made everyone wealthier, but it has been accompanied by large increases in the Han population. As of 2000 the Han reached population parity with the Uyghurs, depending on how one reads the data. Increased wealth and restoration of stability allowed for a new generation of Uyghurs to grow up who are fully

modernized, comfortable in Chinese, and acutely aware of the dangers of assimilation into the dominant culture.

The creation of modern national identities is a dialectical process. It requires not only internal changes within a discreet group of people, but external and opposing forces for those people to define themselves against. The peoples of Central Eurasia were pushed through unusual variants of the modernizing process that left them in a distinctive position *vis-à-vis* other Asian cultures. Incorporating their experiences into larger studies of Asian civilizations, as the “On-line Histories of Central Asia” aims to help with, will broaden our and our students’ understanding of their richness.

### Source list

- Geiss, Paul Georg. *Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia: Communal Commitment and political order in change* (London: Routledge, 2003).
- Khalid, Adeeb. *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
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- Rudelson, Justin. *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China’s Silk Road*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Vambery, Arminius. *Travels in Central Asia*. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers), 1865.

### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup>“A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.” J. V. Stalin. “Marxism and the National Question, “ in *Works*, vol. 2. Moscow, Foreign Language Publishing House, 1953, p. 307.