
BACKGROUND BOOKS

CENTRAL ASIA

One problem in the study of Central Asia is defining the region's geographical limits. A narrow but precise definition limits the region to the five former Soviet republics that lie to the east of the Ural Mountains and the Caspian Sea and to the west of China. But the definition can be expanded to include some or all of the following: Chinese Turkestan, (Xinjiang Province), Afghanistan, northeastern Iran, Mongolia, Tibet, Azerbaijan, and the entire Eurasian steppe. The Soviets, by contrast, narrowed the five-republic definition by excluding Kazakhstan.

The people of the region are little known in the West, but three reference books provide helpful basic information about the main indigenous groups. (None of the books, however, is devoted solely to Central Asia.) The most concise is **The Peoples of the USSR** (Macmillan, 1984), by Ronald Wixman. A geographer at the University of Oregon, Wixman covers such subjects as ethnic definitions, languages, and status within the former Union. Both **Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union** (2nd ed., KPI, 1986), by Shirin Akiner, of the University of London, and **Muslim Peoples** (2nd ed., two volumes, Greenwood, 1984), edited by University of Houston anthropologist Richard Weekes, have longer descriptive articles on each nationality.

A reliable introduction to Central Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries is **Central Asia: A Century of Russian Rule** (Columbia, 1967), as well as its revised version, **Central Asia: 120 Years of Russian Rule** (Duke Univ., 1989), edited by Columbia University historian Edward Allworth, one of the foremost scholars of Central Asia in the United States. Both offer a clear narrative of the course of political and military events as well as chapters on specific issues, all written by specialists in the field.

Much the same subject matter, but with more background and detail on the Soviet period, is covered in **Modern History of Soviet Central Asia** (Praeger, 1967), by the late Geoffrey Wheeler of London's Central Asia Research Centre. A former officer in the British Army, Colonel Wheeler was not hesitant to pass judgment: "The death of Stalin," he wrote,

"and the subsequent repudiation of some of his methods and policies had less fundamental effect in Central Asia than elsewhere. There may have been some temporary decline in the Great Russian chauvinism fostered from the mid-30s onward, but there was no reduction in the measure of central control exercised through the medium of the Communist Party."

A classic study of the Muslims of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union through the mid-20th century is **Islam in the Soviet Union** (Praeger, 1967), by the late Alexandre Bennigsen, a leading figure since the 1960s in the Western study of Muslims in the Soviet Union, and his frequent co-author, Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejey. One of the book's many strengths is its depiction of the diversity of opinion among the Muslim peoples during a period of great upheaval. The history and politics of one particular Central Asian nationality is the subject of a meticulous study, **The Kazakhs** (Hoover Inst. Press, 1987), by Colgate political scientist Martha Brill Olcott. Discussing the political and social organization of the Khazakhs, Olcott corrects a common error: "Although used by Western and Soviet scholars alike, the term horde is probably a misnomer; the Kazakhs referred to these three groups as the *Ulu Zhuz*, *Orta Zhuz*, and *Kichi Zhuz*, literally the Great Hundred, Middle Hundred, and Small Hundred. This distinction between horde and hundred is important, since the former implies consanguinity and common ancestry, whereas the latter does not. The Kazakh hordes . . . were simply an extension of the temporary military unions formed by both Turkish and Mongol tribes . . . largely for military purposes—to make the Kazakh lands more secure in the absence of any stronger central authority."

Several 19th-century travelers recorded their observations of Central Asia before or soon after Russia enforced its dominance during the 1860s and '70s. Such books contain much useful information and are often evocative of a vanished world, even though they reflect the ethnic prejudices of their authors and the political motives that underlay most of their journeys. "According to Central Asiatic ideas,"

wrote American diplomat Eugene Schuyler in his **Turkistan**, (two vols., Schribner, Armstrong, 1876), "a city, to be really such, must have a *Jumma* [Friday] mosque, that will hold all the inhabitants at Friday prayers, and must possess all of the 32 guilds or trades (*Kasaba*) which are thought to comprise the whole world of commerce." Accounts by other military men and diplomats include Alexander Burnes's **Travels into Bukhara** (J. Murray, 1834), Arthur Conolly's **Journey to the North of India**, (two vols., Richard Bentley, 1830), Joseph Pierre Ferrier's **Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, and Beloochistan** (J. Murray, 1856), Arminius Vambery's **Sketches of Central Asia** (W. H. Allen, 1868) and **Travels in Central Asia** (J. Murray, 1864), and Joseph Wolff's **Narrative of a Mission to Bukhara** (J. W. Parker, 1845).

For earlier periods, the late René Grousset's 1939 classic, **Empire of the Steppes** (Rutgers Univ., 1970), deals with a broad geographic area that partially overlaps Central Asia and concentrates on the Turkic and Mongol peoples from antiquity to early modern times. Grousset wrote a lyrical prose, full of crystallizing observations, as in this description of the rhythms of nomadic conquest: "The periodic descents by the hordes of the steppes, whose khans ascended the thrones of Changan, Loyang, Kaifeng or Peking, Samarkand, Ispahan or Tabriz (Tauris), Konya or Constantinople, became one of the geographic laws of history. But there was another, opposing law, which brought about the slow absorption of the nomad invaders by ancient civilized lands. The Sinitized or Iranized barbarian was the first to stand guard over civilization against fresh onslaughts from barbarian lands." **Bukhara the Medieval Achievement** (Univ. of Okla., 1965), by Richard Frye, a professor of Iranian studies at Harvard University, uses its focus on one of Central Asia's great cities to discuss the cultural life as well as political history of the region in the early centuries of the Islamic era.

The era of the Russian Revolution and the consolidation of Soviet rule in the region is covered from different perspectives in four noteworthy books. **Islam and the Russian Empire: Reform and Revolution in Central Asia** (Univ. of Calif., 1988), by Hélène Carrère

d'Encausse, director of Soviet Studies at the Institut d'études politiques, examines the way Central Asian advocates of modernization grappled with the pressure of Westernizing reform, pride in their heritage, and communism. Large sections of Harvard historian Richard Pipes's **The Formation of the Soviet Union** (rev. ed., Harvard Univ., 1970) look at the military and political battles through which the largely Russian or Russified Communist Party took control of Central Asia. The most unusual approach to this period is Gregory Massell's **The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929** (Princeton Univ., 1974). The Hunter College political scientist argues that in a region without a large, indigenous working class, the new communist regime used a campaign to change the status of a different disadvantaged social group—women—to undermine the authority of the traditional, male elite.

Comparatively few works focus on Central Asia in the period after the consolidation of Soviet power in the 1920s and before the mounting problems of the 1980s. The late Elizabeth Bacon's **Central Asians under Russian Rule** (Cornell Univ., 1966) offers an extremely perceptive anthropologist's insights into the social transformation the communists produced in the region. **Russia and Nationalism in Central Asia** (Johns Hopkins, 1970), by Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone of Carleton University, is a study by a specialist on Soviet politics that uses one particular republic, Tajikistan, as a case study of how people in Moscow and in the region manipulated nationality politics. **Russia in Central Asia** (Collier, 1963), by historian Michael Rywkin of the City University of New York, gives a clear, concise picture of the impact of Soviet rule on Central Asia.

The last dozen years of Soviet rule over Central Asia are covered in a large number of books and articles of widely varying quality. One of the best works to treat a broad range of issues—including language policy, nationality politics, and the status of women—is **Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation** (Westview, 1991), edited by William Fierman, a political scientist at Indiana University.

The role of Islam in Central Asia in the late Soviet period is one of the more contentious topics in the study of this region. Since the late

1970s, a spurt of publications reflected the unfortunate influence of trends in Western political thinking: the tendency to view all Muslims as alike (most often as "fundamentalist" revolutionaries) combined with the hope that the growing population of Muslims in the Soviet Union would unite under the banner of Islam to overthrow the Soviet regime. The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 without an Islamic revolution has demonstrated the degree to which that approach contained an overly generous helping of wishful thinking. Representative of a variety of different but more temperate interpretations of the Islamic question are University of Southern California professor Ayşe Rorlich's chapter in the Fierman volume and two essays by Martha Olcott, "Moscow's Troublesome Muslim Minority," in *Washington Quarterly* (9 [1986]: 73-83) and "Soviet Islam and World Revolution," in *World Politics* (34 [1982]: 487-504). My own opinions on the subject may be found in **The Subtlest Battle: Islam in Soviet Tajikistan** (Foreign Policy Research Inst., 1989).

Another critical issue for contemporary Central Asia is the disastrous consequences of misguided Soviet economic and environmental policies. The most important treatments of the economic aspects are Harvard Russian Research Center scholar Boris Rumer's **Soviet Central Asia: A Tragic Experiment** (Unwyn Hyman, 1989) and Carnegie-Mellon political scientist Nancy Lubin's **Labor and Nationality in Soviet Central Asia** (Princeton Univ., 1984). The catastrophic environmental damage in the former Soviet Union receives authoritative treatment in **Ecocide in the USSR** (Basic, 1992) by Murray Feshbach, a demographer at Georgetown University, and Alfred Friendly, Jr., *Newsweek's* former Moscow bureau chief.

Central Asia has a rich literary tradition, both oral and written. Little of it is available in English. Two medieval epics strongly influenced by elements of Central Asian life but not centered there are the Turkish Dede Korkut stories (the name refers to their presumed 14th-century author) and the Persian **Shah-nameh** (Book of Kings). The Dede Korkut epic has come down to us from Turks who made their

way farther west to Anatolia and much of it is set there; however it preserves information about the culture and way of life of Turks in Central Asia. It is available in two English translations, both entitled **The Book of Dede Korkut** (one version was translated and edited by Faruk Sumer, Ahmet E. Uysal, and Warren S. Walker [Univ. of Texas, 1972]; the other was translated by Geoffrey Lewis [Penguin, 1974]). The greatest version of the **Shah-nameh** was written by Abu 'l-Qasem Ferdousi in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. This mythic history of ancient Iran from its origins to the downfall of the last pre-Islamic dynasty includes as one of its major themes the prolonged conflict between sedentary Persian-speakers and Turkic nomads from the northeast. A translation by Reuben Levy, revised by Amin Banani, is entitled **The Epic of Kings** (revised edition, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973); though parts of the text are omitted and summarized briefly, it is a useful introduction to the work. Babur (1483-1530), one of the last descendants of Tamerlane to rule a part of Central Asia, was driven from there by the Uzbek conquest of much of the region and went on to found the Mughal Empire in India. He wrote his autobiography, the **Babur-nameh**, in Ohaghatai Turkish; there is an English translation, **The Babur-Nāma** (two vols., Luzac, 1922 and AMS Press, 1971) by Annette S. Beverage.

One of the most important literary works from contemporary Central Asia is a novel by the Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov, **A Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years** (Indiana Univ., 1983). It combines several themes, including the impact of modern Soviet technology and the importance of preserving a people's traditional ways and values. It also blends elements of science fiction and evocative descriptions of the natural world of the steppe, once so important to the nomadic way of life. The novel has popularized among educated Central Asians of various nationalities the word *mankurt*, which refers to a person who has been enslaved and denied knowledge of his own heritage.

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