

“Identities, Communities, and Nations in Central Asia: A Historical Perspective”

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In the many news reports on Central Asia and Afghanistan that have appeared over the past six weeks, we've heard a great deal about ethnic groups in the region. Journalists now speak knowledgably about the ethnic basis for the various political movements in Afghanistan. We are told, for example, that the Taliban is predominantly made up of Pashtuns, while the opposition Northern Alliance is mostly made up of ethnic minorities such as Tajiks and Uzbeks. Americans who could scarcely identify Central Asia on a map before September 11 now know that Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are directly to the north of Afghanistan, and that there are Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen minority populations across the border in northern Afghanistan.

Given the importance of ethnic identity in our own society, we tend to assume that it is equally important in Central Asia. We imagine that there must be a close relationship, or at least a bond of sympathy, between the Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen of the former Soviet republics and their coethnics in northern Afghanistan. More generally, we tend to assume that ethnicity is an important determining factor in people's behavior, and that knowing who belongs to which ethnic group will help us to understand events in Central Asia.

The goal of my talk today is to examine these assumptions. How much information do we really have when we learn that a group of people is Uzbek or Tajik or Turkmen? Can we predict anything at all based on this knowledge? I'm going to argue that while ethnic identity does matter to a certain extent, it doesn't matter nearly as much as we think it does. Identities and loyalties in Central Asia are far too complex to allow ethnicity to serve as a primary explanatory factor.

The Central Asian nations—and the ethnic groups on which they are based—are of recent vintage. They are creations of the twentieth century. One hundred years ago, there was no Kyrgyzstan or Turkmenistan. One hundred years ago, it would have been difficult to find

individuals in Central Asia who, when asked to identify themselves, would have declared unambiguously: “I am a Tajik” (or a Turkmen or an Uzbek). They would have been more likely to name the state or region in which they lived or the descent group to which they belonged. They might simply have identified themselves as Muslims. Even if you had found people who identified themselves as Uzbeks, Tajiks, or Turkmen, the label wouldn’t necessarily have meant what we imagine it does.

We tend to assume that the world is divided up into nationalities or ethnic groups, each of which has its own territory, language, and history or origins. But this was not true of Central Asia prior to the twentieth century. Due to the region’s position as a frontier between nomadic and sedentary civilizations, Central Asia was long home to a rich and complex mix of peoples, languages, and cultures. The region historically featured an overarching cultural unity along with a bewildering array of population groups, dialects, and ways of life. Diverse communities lived intermingled and interdependent, while sharing a common Turco-Persian Islamic culture.

Within this complex brew, it is difficult to identify distinct ethnic groups prior to the twentieth century. First of all, there was the problem of overlap and intermixing between groups. Populations and dialects blended into each other without any clear boundaries. Our notion that an ethnic group brings together language, territory, and descent in a single package did not apply in Central Asia. People who claimed a common history or descent did not necessarily speak the same language; people who spoke the same language and lived on the same territory did not necessarily consider themselves to belong to the same ethnic group. As an example of the second phenomenon, I can point to certain tribes that lived on the territory of present-day Turkmenistan. They spoke Turkmen dialects, lived interspersed with the Turkmen population, and appeared in every way to be Turkmen. Yet they viewed themselves—and were viewed by their Turkmen neighbors—as Arabs, descendents of one of the early Muslim caliphs. These groups, known as “sacred tribes,” played a special role as religious leaders and mediators in Turkmen communities.

The boundary between Uzbeks and Tajiks was especially hard to draw. Descriptions of Central Asia often advance the proposition that the region can be broadly divided into “Turks” speaking a Turkic language—such as Uzbek—and “Tajiks,” who speak a language related to Farsi. In fact, there was not historically such a clear distinction between Uzbek and Tajik. Many people in the region were bilingual in both Turkic and Farsi, regardless of ancestry. The idea that

language determined identity was unfamiliar. The labels Uzbek and Tajik were not linguistic but had more complicated meanings relating to history, genealogy, and way of life. When queried in population surveys conducted in the late imperial and early Soviet periods, many Central Asians were unable to say whether they were Tajiks or Uzbeks. Sometimes siblings within a single family would claim different ethnic identities. To this day, there are people living in Uzbekistan who declare themselves to be Uzbeks, yet speak Tajik as their first language.

Along with the question of blurred boundaries between ethnic groups, there was the matter of multiple levels of identity. Supraethnic and subethnic loyalties often were more important to people than ethnic categories. Particularly among sedentary Central Asians, it was common to consider oneself simply a “Muslim” or to identify with the state or region in which one lived—the Bukharan emirate, or the city of Samarqand. Among educated elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some identified with a supraethnic Turkestani or Turkic identity.

Among traditionally nomadic and semi-nomadic groups such as the Turkmen and Kazakhs, ethnic labels were somewhat more meaningful. This was because identity was reckoned genealogically among these groups. All those who claimed to be Turkmen, for example, traced their origins back to a single mythical ancestor. Being a Turkmen, therefore, had a clearer meaning than being a Tajik or an Uzbek. Nevertheless, subethnic identities based on kinship were more important than broader ethnic categories among nomadic groups. The Turkmen were divided into a number of tribes and subtribes, each of which was thought to descend from a common ancestor. A similar situation prevailed among the Kazakhs and among the Pashtuns of Afghanistan. This genealogical system was a source of potential unity, since all believed they shared a common descent. But it was also a source of divisiveness. In the nineteenth century, the major Turkmen descent groups were as likely to be in conflict with each other as with outsiders.

Finally, it is important to realize that there was no historical relationship between ethnicity and statehood in Central Asia. Prior to the Russian conquest in the late nineteenth century, the prevailing model of statehood was the Muslim dynastic state ruling over a multiethnic population. State legitimacy depended on dynastic claims and the ruler’s pledge to uphold the Islamic faith. The notion that a state should exist for the benefit of a single ethnic group was unfamiliar.¹

In 1924, the Soviet rulers of Central Asia tried to prune this thicket and clarify the ethnic map of the region. Always good rationalizers and modernizers, the Soviets were determined to make ethnic boundaries correspond to administrative boundaries and to create territorial and linguistic nations on the Western model. Guided by the work of ethnographers and linguists and assisted by indigenous communists, Soviet authorities dissolved the region's three multiethnic political entities and created a handful of "national" republics, each named for a single ethnic group. After a number of boundary shifts and adjustments, the final result was the map of Central Asia we see today, with the five national republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. In addition, there were a number of smaller, "autonomous republics" for minorities who did not quite qualify for their own national republic, in the Soviet view.

Drawing the boundaries was not an easy process, since the population was so territorially mixed. Quite a bit of fudging had to be done in assigning populations to their "correct" republics. Populations located on the border between two prospective republics often could not easily be identified as belonging to one group or another. On the border between the projected Uzbek and Turkmen republics, there were people who spoke dialects with a mix of Turkmen and Uzbek elements and who were unable to say whether they were Uzbeks or Turkmen. Another border group claimed to be Turkmen, only to have this identification declared "erroneous" by Soviet ethnographers. Some of the major cities of Uzbekistan had populations consisting predominantly of Tajik speakers.

It was also not always easy to tell which groups were ethnic groups in their own right and which were simply subgroups of other ethnic groups. The Soviet authorities engaged in ethnic consolidation, assimilating smaller ethnic groups into larger ones by decree. Each of the major nationalities of Central Asia was cobbled together out of smaller groups that may or may not have had a common identity in the past. To cite just one example, there were a number of groups in the mountainous areas of what is today Tajikistan who spoke languages that were quite different from Tajik and were not originally considered Tajiks. These "Pamiri nationalities" were eventually defined as "mountain Tajiks" and incorporated, at least officially, into the Tajik ethnic group.

Despite the problematic origins of these Central Asian nations, they became fairly well entrenched in the Soviet period—so much so that the nation-state appeared to be the only viable

form of political organization after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Predictions that the region would turn to pan-Turkism or pan-Islam after 1991 proved to be false. In fact, during the Soviet period, each ethnic group became more rooted in and committed to its Soviet-demarcated territory. Within each republic, Soviet policy called for preferential treatment for the “titular nationality” and the promotion of the indigenous language and culture. This gave people a vested interest in their own national republics—particularly the elites who got good jobs in Soviet cultural and political institutions. Indigenous Central Asians gradually came to dominate their republics demographically and politically. Through education, urbanization, and the growth of the means of mass communication, the citizens of each republic became more closely linked to their compatriots. National languages became the vehicles of communication in schools and newspapers, seeking to supplant the numerous local dialects. The republics came to resemble nation-states in many respects, although of course they lacked real sovereignty.²

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the republics of Central Asia became sovereign national states. The republics’ communist leaders rapidly refashioned themselves as nationalists, trading the hammer and sickle for symbols of nationhood. Yet despite the seemingly solid entrenchment of Central Asian nations, many of the complexities of identity have remained.

First and most obviously, the titular nationality is not the only ethnic group within each state. Soviet border drawing was not and could not be perfect; inevitably, significant indigenous minorities remained within each republic. Due to large-scale migration during the Soviet period, there are also significant Russian populations in each Central Asian state. Others, such as Germans, Koreans, and Crimean Tatars, arrived in the region as a result of Stalinist deportations. In Kazakhstan, the Kazakh and Russian populations are almost equal in size. Kyrgyzstan is only slightly more than half Kyrgyz. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are a bit more homogeneous, with just over 70 percent of the population belonging to the titular nationality.

Like all multiethnic states, these states have to negotiate a precarious balance between statehood based on ethnic identity and statehood based on civic identity. Are they nation-states, in which one ethnicity is dominant and others must adopt the dominant group’s language and culture? Or are they pluralistic states, acknowledging multiple languages and ethnic groups? Kazakhstan, with its large Russian population, is trying to be both an ethnic homeland for Kazakhs and a pluralistic state for its entire population; it remains to be seen whether this will

succeed in the long run. Those states that are more ethnically homogeneous, such as Turkmenistan, have pursued a more overtly ethno-nationalist policy.

At the same time, it is important to remember that even among people officially categorized as belonging to the “correct” nationality for their republic, alternative identities remain potentially important. Smaller groups that were consolidated into larger ones, such as the Turkmen “sacred tribes,” have not necessarily forgotten their origins. Subethnic and supraethnic levels of identity remain extremely important. Regional and kinship-based identities have salience throughout Central Asia. An overarching sense of Muslim identity still exists. Even for completely secular Central Asians, Islam is an important source of cultural identity that sets them apart from non-Muslims in the region. Yet this Muslim identity coexists with what might be called a “post-Soviet” identity, especially among elites. Many urban, Russian-speaking Central Asians still feel they have more in common with educated Russians and Russian-speakers in other former Soviet republics than they do with the Muslim elites of Iran, Pakistan, or Turkey.

Let me come back, in conclusion, to the question I posed at the beginning of my talk—how much does ethnicity matter in Central Asia? It should be clear from what I have said that ethnic categories such as Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen do have meaning, and that their significance increased greatly in the Soviet period due to the institutionalization of ethnicity in the Soviet republics. Certainly, we can identify instances when ethnic affinity seems to be a factor in the policies of Central Asian governments. Yet it would be a mistake to exaggerate its importance. Take Turkmenistan, for example, the Central Asian state that has been most determined to promote ethnonationalism. The Turkmen government has invited ethnic Turkmen from neighboring countries to conferences of the “world Turkmen community,” and Turkmen President Saparmurad Niyazov has declared that Turkmenistan is the “ancestral homeland” of all Turkmen. Yet Turkmenistan has been reluctant to accept ethnic Turkmen refugees, in part because of fears that this would change the tribal balance within the country. Moreover, Turkmenistan has maintained good relations with the Taliban, despite the Turkmen state’s secular stance and the Taliban’s poor treatment of ethnic minorities. Here there are compelling pragmatic interests at stake, most notably the Turkmen regime’s desire to build a gas pipeline through Afghanistan. This example, like many others I could cite, underscores the need to keep in mind the myriad interests and identities of Central Asians when seeking to interpret events in the region.

¹ For more detail on the complexities of identity discussed here, see Beatrice Manz, “Historical Background,” in Beatrice Manz, ed., *Central Asia in Historical Perspective* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000); John Samuel Schoeberlein-Engel, “Identity in Central Asia: Construction and Contention in the conceptions of ‘Ozbek,’ ‘Tajik,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘Samarqandi,’ and other groups,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1994).

² On Soviet nationality policy, see Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).