



**THE ROOTS OF UZBEKISTAN:  
NATION MAKING IN THE EARLY SOVIET UNION**

**CAP PAPERS 161  
(CERIA SERIES)**

*Adeeb Khalid*<sup>1</sup>

The political map of Central Asia with which we are all familiar—the “five Stans” north of Afghanistan and Iran—took shape between 1924 and 1936. The five states of today are each identified with an ethnic nation. A hundred years ago, it looked very different. The southern extremities of the Russian empire consisted of two provinces—Turkestan and the Steppe region—and two protectorates—Bukhara and Khiva—in which local potentates enjoyed considerable internal autonomy as long as they affirmed their vassalage to the Russian Empire. No ethnic or national names were attached to territories. Indeed, the ethnic nomenclature in the region was different and quite unstable. Outsider accounts of the period spoke of the population being composed of Sarts, Uzbeks, Kipchaks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turcomans and other “tribes,” with different authors using different categorizations. Even the Russian imperial census of 1897 did not use a consistent set of labels across Central Asia. In Central Asian usage, on the other hand, the most common term for describing the indigenous community was “Muslims of Turkestan.” Where did the nationalized territorial entities come from and, more basically, from where did the national categories emerge?

During the Cold War, we were comfortable with the explanation that the division of Central Asia into national republics as a classic form of divide and rule in which the Soviets destroyed the primordial unity of the region for their own ends. All too often, writers lay the blame at the feet of Stalin himself. One of the gentler formulations of this view belongs to the pen of Sir Olaf Caroe, British imperial functionary and historian, who wrote in 1954, that the “Russian policy

---

<sup>1</sup> Adeeb Khalid is Jane and Raphael Bernstein Professor of Asian Studies and History professor of history at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. He works on the Muslim societies of Central Asia in the period after the Russian conquest of the 19th century. His latest book, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*, has just been published by Cornell University Press.

[of national delimitation] is in fact describable as cantonization, conceived with the object of working against any conception of the unity of the Eastern Turks and bringing the *disjecta membra* under the influence of overwhelming forces of assimilation from without.”<sup>1</sup> That judgment is much too beguiling to be let go and is repeated ad nauseum in all registers of writing. Olivier Roy writes of the “artificial creation of new national entities” along completely arbitrary criteria, in a process in which the Soviets “amused themselves by making the problem even more complicated.”<sup>2</sup> For Malise Ruthven, “The potential for political solidarity among Soviet Muslims was attacked by a deliberate policy of divide and rule. Central Asian states of today owe their territorial existence to Stalin. He responded to the threat of pan-Turkish and pan-Islamic nationalism by parceling out the territories of Russian Turkestan into the five republics. ... Stalin’s policies demanded that subtle differences in language, history, and culture between these mainly Turkic peoples be emphasized in order to satisfy the Leninist criteria on nationality... .”<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of the horrible ethnic violence in Osh and Jalalabat in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, *The Economist* trotted out the same argument: “After the October revolution of 1917, new autonomous republics were created. In 1924 Stalin divided the region into different Soviet republics. The borders were drawn up rather arbitrarily without following strict ethnic lines or even the guidelines of geography. The main aim was to counter the growing popularity of pan-Turkism in the region, and to avoid potential friction. Hence, the fertile Fergana Valley ... was divided between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.”<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Rashid opines that Stalin drew “arbitrary boundary divisions” and “created republics that had little geographic or ethnic rationale.”<sup>5</sup> The journalist Philip Shishkin one-ups Rashid when he writes, “Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin ... drew borders that sliced up ethnic groups and made it harder for them to mount any coherent challenge to Soviet rule. If you look at a map of the Ferghana Valley, ... the feverish lines dividing states zigzag wildly, resembling a cardiogram of a rapidly racing heart!”<sup>6</sup> One can round up dozens of such statements that continue to be popular even in academic writing.

This is in striking contrast to current historiography in Central Asia itself, which takes the existence of nations as axiomatic and sees in early Soviet policies a historically “normal” process of nationalization. Central Asian scholars who criticize the process do so for the “mistakes,” deliberate or otherwise, that gave lands belonging to one nation to another, but do not see it as a fraudulent enterprise. To be sure, there are differences between the historiographies of the different countries today. Kyrgyz historians see the delimitation as the moment of the birth of the statehood of their nation. There is likewise no animus against the process among historians in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Indeed, archivally grounded research has clearly shown that the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia was part of a pan-Soviet process of creating ethnically homogenous territorial entities and that it formed a crucial part of the Bolsheviks’ nationalities policies. Our understanding of Soviet nationalities policy—the assumptions behind it and the forms of its implementation—has been transformed over the last two decades. We now know that the Soviets took nations to be ontological givens and considered it a political imperative to accord administrative and national boundaries. More sophisticated accounts of Central Asia’s delimitation have emphasized the importance of classificatory projects of ethnographers and of the Soviet state.<sup>7</sup> The creation of ethnically homogenous territorial entities took place all over the Soviet Union and indeed Central Asia was the last part of the union where this principle was implemented. In 1924, for the Bolsheviks, the main problem in Central Asia was the region’s political fragmentation, rather than some overwhelming unity that needed to be broken up. In fact, the region’s borders (which disregarded nationality) had come to be seen as yet another aspect of its general backwardness. The implementation of the national-territorial delimitation was a stage in the Sovietization of the region.

However, there has been a tendency in this new literature to see the creation of the new republics as simply a Soviet project and hence, ultimately, a Soviet imposition, a conclusion that doesn't take us very far from the divide-and-conquer argument. We might have local cadres arguing passionately over territorial boundaries, as Adrienne Edgar has so clearly demonstrated in her fine book, but we still give credit for the idea of dividing up Central Asia to the Soviets.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, we ignore longer term trends in the historical and national imagination of Central Asia's modernist intellectuals and the purchase that the ideas of nation and progress had on their minds. Central Asians did not come to the revolution of 1917 with a blank slate. Rather, their societies were in the midst of intense debates about the future. The revolution radicalized preexisting projects of cultural reform that interacted in multiple ways with the Bolshevik project. One of the results of this interaction was the creation of Uzbekistan.

This is the point I make in my new book, *Making Uzbekistan*.<sup>9</sup> Uzbekistan emerged during the process of the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia in 1924, yet it was not simply a product of the Communist Party or the Soviet state. Rather, its creation was the victory, in Soviet conditions, of a national project of the Muslim intelligentsia of Central Asia. Muslim intellectuals, not Soviet ethnographers or party functionaries were the true authors of Uzbekistan and the Uzbek nation. The idea of the nation had arrived in Central Asia well before the revolution, but it was the revolution, with its boundless promise of opportunity, that planted the nation firmly at the center of the intelligentsia's passions. The revolution also reshaped the way the nation was imagined. As I have shown elsewhere in detail, before 1917 the new intellectuals, the Jadids, generally saw the nation as encompassing "the Muslims of Turkestan," a territorially limited confessional nation.<sup>10</sup> The revolution saw a rapid ethnicization of the Jadids' political imagination, as they came to be fascinated by the idea of Turkism. A Turkestan-centered Turkism (quite distinct from "pan-Turkism" that was a constant bugbear of Soviet and western historiography) imagined the entire sedentary population of Central Asia as Uzbek, and claimed the entire tradition of Islamicate statehood and high culture in Central Asia on its behalf. The rule of the Timurids was the golden age of this nation, when a high culture flourished in the eastern Turkic Chaghatay language. I use the term "Chaghatayism" to describe this vision of the Uzbek nation. Thus the "Muslims of Turkestan" became Uzbek, and the Chaghatay language, modernized and purified of foreign words, the Uzbek language. The Uzbek nation thus imagined has rather little to do with the Uzbek nomads under Shaybani Khan who ousted the Timurids from Transoxiana, but claims the mantle of the Timurids themselves.

The era of the revolution provided a number of opportunities—all eventually aborted—for realizing a Central Asian national project, from the autonomous government of Turkestan proclaimed at Kokand in November 1917, through the renaming of Turkestan as the Turkic Soviet Republic in January 1920, to the attempt at creating a national republic in Bukhara after the emir was overthrown by the Red Army in August 1920. The Chaghatayist idea lurked behind all those projects, but it was the Soviet-decreed national-territorial delimitation of 1924 that provided the clearest opportunity of uniting the sedentary Muslim population of Turkestan into a single political entity.

The success of the Chaghatayist project also defined the way in which the Tajiks were imagined. Most Persian-speaking intellectuals in Central Asia were heavily invested in the Chaghatayist project, even as the denial of the Persianate heritage of Central Asia was foundational to it. In the absence of any mobilization on behalf of a Tajik nation, the Chaghatayist project prevailed during the national delimitation. "Tajik" came to be defined as a residual category comprising the most rural, isolated, and unassimilable population of eastern Bukhara. It was only after the creation of Tajikistan that some Tajik-speaking intellectuals began to defect from the Chaghatayist project and a new Tajik intelligentsia began pressing for Tajik language rights and

a larger national republic. The delimitation froze the identity politics of the early 1920s in time. The current shape of Tajikistan can only be understood in the context of the triumph of the Chaghatayist project in 1924.

The key figure in the Chaghatayist project was the Bukharan intellectual Abdurauf Fitrat (1886-1938). The son of a prosperous merchant, Fitrat spent the four tumultuous years from 1909 to 1913 in Istanbul as a student. These were the years in which the hopes unleashed by the Constitutional Revolution were soured by the wars in Libya and the Balkans and debates over the future of the empire—on “how to save the state”—raged in the press. We know little about Fitrat’s activities in Istanbul, but he first appeared in print in the pages of the journal *Hikmet* and was close to other émigrés from the Russian empire. It was in Istanbul that Fitrat was introduced to the idea of Turkism (*Türkçülük*) and to the need for self-defense and self-strengthening in the face of colonialism. The experience was transformative for him and it marked his thinking for the rest of his life.

The Russian revolution of February 1917 provided both the opportunity and the urgency for articulating a new vision of solidarity. For Fitrat, it involved a passionate plea for the renewal of “Great Turan” and the Turkic-Muslim nation that inhabited it. The “Muslims of Turkestan” had become Turks and their homeland the cradle of a great race of heroes. The Russian revolution provided the opportunity for the Turks to take their place again in the world as Turks. The key historical figure of the past was Temur (Tamerlane), the world conqueror who had established an empire centered on Central Asia. He was a node where the Turco-Mongol heritage of the steppe, of Attila and Chinggis, came together with the Islamicate heritage of Central Asia.

It became quickly obvious in 1917 that Kazakh, Kyrgyz, or Turkmen intellectuals had no interest in the Chaghatayist project. Rather, the inheritors of Temur were the sedentary Muslim population of Central Asia, a nation, which came to be called Uzbek. The name “Uzbek” for the community was in use in Turkic sources before 1917 and became standard after that. “Amir” Temur emerged as the founding figure of the Uzbek nation in 1917. His reappearance in 1991 should not have surprised anyone.

Asserting the Turkicness of this nation was a key feature of the Chaghatayist project. This Turkism should not be confused with pan-Turkism, for it was centered on Turkestan and significant not for seeking the unity of the world’s Turks, but for asserting the Turkicness of Turkestan. In a different sense, the emirate of Bukhara came to be seen as the direct descendent of the statehood tradition of Temur, as a Turkic state. The Turkification of Bukhara was a major part of the policies of the Young Bukharans in their short years at the helm in the People’s Republic of Bukhara.

In 1924, when the Soviets opened up the possibility of delimitation, it was Bukhara that pounced on it. The basic document laying out the rationale for a new entity to be called “Uzbekistan” was laid out by the Bukharan delegation. “Bukhara will be the basis for the construction of the Uzbek republic,” it stated. “Uzbekistan will unite ... Bukhara, except for the left bank of Amu Darya; Ferghana; Syr Darya oblast, excluding its Kazakh parts; Samarqand oblast; [and] Khorezm, except for regions inhabited by Turkmens and Kazakhs,”<sup>11</sup> that is all territory inhabited by the sedentary population of Transoxiana. This territory would also incorporate all the historic cities of the region in one republic. This was the Chaghatayist vision of Uzbekness laid out in territorial terms.

Eventually, this project succeeded with very few alterations. The Uzbekistan that emerged in 1924 included all the regions of sedentary population and almost all the ancient cities of

Transoxiana. Some cities (Jalolobod/Jalalabat, Osh, and Toshhovuz/Daşoguz) were ceded to other republics on the principle, central to Soviet nationalities policy, that cities' role as economic centers for their hinterland overrode the concerns of nationality. At the same time, Tajikistan, encompassing the mountainous, rural parts of what had been eastern Bukhara, became an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan in 1924. It was separated from Uzbekistan and raised to full union republic status in 1929 after a determined campaign by its leadership.

Understanding the origins of Uzbekistan has considerable contemporary relevance. I want to conclude with three main points. First, the incessant talk of the artificiality of the new states of Central Asia and of the weakness of their identities is misplaced. All of them, but perhaps particularly Uzbekistan, have a highly developed sense of a national identity that calls upon a nationalized past, complete with a pantheon of heroes and well cultivated sense of a national cultural heritage. To a great extent, these identities crystallized during the Soviet period. Soviet institutions of history, ethnography, and folklore were crucial in creating the research that nationalized the past, while Soviet-era practices of everyday life made nationality an indispensable and politically relevant part of people's identities. This was what Michael Billig has called "banal nationalism."<sup>12</sup> The Soviet period might have crystallized and operationalized Uzbek national identity, but it did not create it. As should be clear from the foregoing, the roots of Uzbekistan's national identity predate the revolution and are not Soviet. It is for this reason that the post-Soviet Uzbek state has banked so heavily on it and succeeded rather well.

Second, Uzbekistan is not entirely analogous to the other states of Central Asia. Contrary to what is often repeated, modern Uzbekness has little to do with the Uzbek nomads of Shaybani Khan who ousted the Timurids from Transoxiana. Rather, it claims the entire Islamicate heritage of Central Asia as embodied in Temur and the high culture created under his dynasty. As such, it claims to be the central phenomenon of Central Asia, while the other national identities of Central Asia were often defined *against* Uzbekness.

Finally, given that the national identities and national programs based on them are well developed and often mutually antagonistic, the scope for cooperation in anything beyond the most practical concerns is limited. We should recognize that the persistent hopes for common action of the Turkic world or of Central Asia are utopian.

---

<sup>1</sup> Olaf Caroe, *Soviet Empire: The Turks of Central Asia and Stalinism* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1954), 149.

<sup>2</sup> Olivier Roy, *La nouvelle Asie centrale, ou la fabrication des nations* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 101, 117.

<sup>3</sup> Malise Ruthven, *Historical Atlas of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 103.

<sup>4</sup> "Stalin's Harvest," *The Economist*, 14 June 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 88.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Shishkin, *Restless Valley: Revolution, Murder, and Intrigue in the Heart of Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 238.

<sup>7</sup> On nation-making in the USSR, see Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53 (1994): 414–52; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). On Central Asia specifically, see Arne Haugen, *Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2003).

---

<sup>8</sup> Adrienne L. Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 51-59. Haugen, *The Formation*, makes the same point throughout his book.

<sup>9</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), chap. 6.

<sup>11</sup> "Osnovnye polozheniia po voprosu sozdaniia Uzbekistana," O'zbekiston Respublikasi Markaziy Davlat Arxivi [State Central State Archives of the Republic of Uzbekistan], f. 48, op. 1, d. 272, ll. 16-17ob.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).