

The redrawing of the map of the Soviet Union has focused attention on the five former Soviet republics that make up Central Asia. A region once considered the esoteric domain of Soviet ethnic specialists, it has become one of the most closely watched areas in the world because of its Muslim population and its strategic proximity to the Middle East and South Asia.

## Central Asia's Emergence

BY GEORGE I. MIRSKY

Central Asia, one of the world's oldest inhabited areas and home to an ancient and highly developed civilization, was until last year viewed by most as a faraway, godforsaken place of no serious interest to anyone.<sup>1</sup> The end of the Soviet Union last year has changed that. The region has been neither the quietest nor the most restive of the former Soviet territories. What about tomorrow?

### A NEGLECTED AREA

Some years ago this writer had the opportunity to visit Central Asia as a member of a team headed by Yegor Gaidar, currently Russia's economic czar. The picture we were presented with was truly appalling. The region's chief gynecologist, for instance, told us that the vast majority of pregnant women had already borne one or more children and were aware that there were health risks if they had another child. However, they had become pregnant because contraception was either unavailable or was rejected as contrary to custom and religion. (Most women in the region had never even visited a gynecologist.)

In the tobacco-growing valleys of Tajikistan, nicotine could be found in infants' blood. In the area near the Aral Sea, doctors counseled would-be mothers not to nurse their infants, since their breast milk could be contaminated. The Aral Sea itself is a scene of immense ecological damage. The two main rivers that feed this

inland sea are primary irrigation sources for the large cotton plantations that dominate Central Asia's economy. Because of the intensive irrigation required to cultivate cotton in the region, the Aral has lost 65 percent of its volume in the last 30 years. Irrigation has led to the salinization of huge tracts of arable land, and the area has been severely polluted by the huge quantities of chemical and mineral fertilizers used to grow cotton.

On cotton plantations, mainly women and children could be seen working, this kind of labor being deemed unfit for men. At the same time, in the *mahallas*—communal neighborhoods—large crowds of young men and teen-age boys idly stood around. (We were told that urban unemployment was assuming extremely dangerous proportions.)

Comparisons to the developing world are unavoidable. And this is just what Central Asia has been—the Soviet third world, backward and exploited, lagging behind the industrial center in economic and social development. Traditional patterns of belief, life-styles, behavior, and attitudes toward work successfully resisted Soviet-style modernization. In fact, it is totally incorrect to consider Central Asian societies as Sovietized by Communist rule and the Central Asian peoples no more than "Soviet" people speaking Oriental languages. Another kind of society managed to preserve its identity, although not quite intact.

Resistance was only one side of this unique relationship, the other side being coexistence. Communist rule was superimposed on traditional social structures that were sometimes called feudal (though there never has been true feudalism in Central Asia). Communism and traditional society proved to be quite compatible, since both have an authoritarian base. Central Asian scholar Boris Rumer maintains that clan and tribal consciousness "not only survived but [became] even stronger in the Soviet era. . . . A majority of the national cadres remain[ed] loyal to their clan and tribe."<sup>2</sup>

Central Asia's client-patron relationships main-

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GEORGE I. MIRSKY is a scholar at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow. He is the recent recipient of a MacArthur Foundation grant to study ethnic issues in the former Central Asian republics.

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<sup>1</sup>The five sovereign states that have emerged in Central Asia are: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Kazakhstan, strictly speaking, does not belong to Central Asia; it claims to be a Euroasian state that is a bridge between East and West.

<sup>2</sup>Boris Z. Rumer, *Soviet Central Asia: A Tragic Experiment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 148.

tained from generation to generation and its clan and communal group mentality fit easily into a Soviet system built on the absolute rule of omnipotent party first secretaries. In every locality there was only one official worth talking to, one man who decided everything—the party first secretary. In Central Asia the first secretary also symbolized and took the place of the traditional clan and ethnic leader; he was the local chieftain and all-powerful patron, a Godfather figure lording it over an entrenched network that often resembled the corporate structures of the Mafia. Loyalty to him was paramount, and hardly related to Communist ideology.

The native nomenklatura played a dual role: first, party and state officials were Communist apparatchiks just like their colleagues in Moscow, Leningrad, or Kiev; and second, they were traditional local bosses and patrons. Thus their system of rule was vertical, and they always had the valuable feedback from the grass roots, allowing them to gauge the mood of the populace. This is why they, unlike their counterparts in Russia, have retained their positions after the collapse of the Soviet system.

These elites held sway over a society that was (except in Kazakhstan) predominantly Muslim. Of course, within atheistic Soviet ideology, Islam was, if not banned, at least not encouraged. But people knew they were Muslims, and observed religious practices such as those concerning circumcision, marriage, and funeral rituals. They had a rudimentary knowledge of the basic tenets of Islam, and had heard about the Prophet Mohammed, Mecca, and pilgrimage; some performed their prayers and respected the region's few mosques and mullahs.

With independence came an inevitable religious revival. Overnight, Islam became a common denominator, a powerful vehicle (alongside ethnicity) for asserting identity. People instinctively felt it was Islam—which is not just a set of religious beliefs but a way of life and a civilization—that made them different from the Russians, whose rule they had never accepted as legitimate. Now openly proclaiming themselves Muslims (whether from the predominant Sunni sect or from smaller ones, like the Ismailite sect in Tajikistan) and asserting their Islamic identity, they have found at last what makes them a community distinct from all the others. For the Central Asians, Islam now embodies the ideas of nationalism and sovereignty; it is a banner of liberation.

The revival of Islam in Central Asia is probably unprecedented. Five years ago there were only about 260 mosques across the region; now there are more

than 5,000. Ten new mosques open each day. But the Islamic revival has, if not to compete with, then to coexist and somehow come to terms with another powerful trend accompanying the process of liberation and the assertion of identity: the rise of ethnicism.

## ETHNOS AND NATION

Before the October Revolution, ethnicity was not a reference point for Central Asian communities, which historically were divided not along ethnolinguistic lines but by whether they were sedentary or pastoralist. Bukhara in Uzbekistan and Khojent in Tajikistan, two of the most populous and wealthy cities in Central Asian history, both have mixed ethnic populations. Those living in present-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (especially urban dwellers), were largely bilingual, speaking local variants of Persian (Farsi) along with native Turkic dialects. All considered themselves "local Muslims." And from the point of view of the government, "religion formed the basis for distinguishing natives from infidels. . . . [T]he term 'nationality' in its modern meaning did not exist in this period."<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet regime, having discarded religion as an identity factor, made the national-linguistic the cornerstone of its neo-imperial policy. New political units were created based on nationality, which was rigidly linked to the issue of territory. The republics created in this manner were formed around a "core" nationality, which was the largest or the dominant ethnic group in an area. In some republics, nationhood was more artificial than others, but the process acquired a momentum of its own. For example, there had never been an Uzbek nation as such. An ethnic community largely descended from tribes related to the Mongols had come during the Middle Ages to what is now Uzbekistan and mixed with the sedentary population of the valleys. Under the Soviet regime, one of the most widespread local idioms was chosen as the official language, and the concept of a Uzbek nation was asserted. What followed was national self-assertion and self-identification in terms of the Uzbek nation. And Uzbek nationalism came into being alongside Turkmen and Tajik nationalism.

Since the borders of the republics were based on the predominance of a particular ethnic group within them, ethnic minorities were bound to exist in each. In specific localities, an ethnic minority could be in the overwhelming majority, and vice versa. Thus two famous ancient cities—Bukhara and Samarkand—with largely Tajik populations became part of Uzbekistan.

Generally speaking, in what used to be the Soviet Union, self-identification is now made on the basis of one's ethnonational community. Under the old regime, a broad multinational entity like the United States did not exist; there never was a Soviet nation. At

<sup>3</sup>Michael Mandelbaum, ed., *The Rise of Nations in the Soviet Union: American Foreign Policy and the Disintegration of the USSR* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991), p. 19.

present a former Soviet citizen cannot identify with anything except an ethnic or religious community. State, party, class, profession—all have deteriorated to such an extent, everything appears so ugly and worthless that the only firm ground, the only basis for self-assertion and even pride, is found in membership in a stable, long-established community. Ethnos and religion, rather than the fragile and rapidly deteriorating political and economic dimensions of life, provide stability and command respect.

Interethnic relations in Central Asia are far from harmonious. Traditionally, there has been an ethnic hierarchy of sorts in the region. Tajiks consider themselves—and are—albeit grudgingly, considered by the others, except possibly the Uzbeks, to be the people with the oldest and richest culture. The Farsi-speaking Tajiks, who claim to be the inheritors of Persian civilization, are the largest non-Turkic Muslim community in Central Asia. Turkmens are considered by both Tajiks and Uzbeks to be seminomadic, and much less cultured. The Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are looked on by other Central Asians as gruff nomads only recently converted to Islam. Particularly bad are relations between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz; one need only recall the bloody massacres in the largely Uzbek city of Osh in Kyrgyzstan in 1990 in which people of both nations killed those from the other with incredible brutality. But the most dangerous conflict of the region may flare up between Uzbeks and Tajiks if the latter decide to raise the issue of Bukhara and Samarkand.

Islam Karimov, the president of Uzbekistan, maintains that the one thing that could possibly tear Central Asia apart is “the issue of frontiers—those artificial frontiers that were arbitrarily traced as early as 1924. . . . [I]f you want to pit one republic against another you have to start talking about frontiers.” It is true that the Bolsheviks imposed artificial—and in some cases blatantly unjust—frontiers, but it is certain that trying to revise these now would be opening up a Pandora’s box. Here a parallel with Africa would not be out of place: after independence African governments proved to be wise enough to reject any border claims and counterclaims, thus closing off a path to endless and bloody conflict between states.

But even if the present boundaries of the Central Asian countries remain unchanged, interethnic conflicts cannot be ruled out. And Uzbekistan is likely to be at the center of these conflicts, since the Uzbeks are the most powerful and dynamic people in the area. Uzbek assertiveness is a source of anxiety for neighboring states.

<sup>4</sup>Turan is the historic name of a Turkic empire that supposedly incorporated all Turkic-speaking peoples. The “Turan myth” has served to justify pan-Turkic schemes.

<sup>5</sup>Martha Brill Olcott, “Central Asia’s Post-Empire Politics,” *Orbis*, Spring 1992, p. 255.

Pan-Turkestan nationalists hope to bypass and override ethnic differences by advocating the creation of a larger entity in the form of a federation or confederation. There have been rumors of plans to build a united Turkestan or a Turan state.<sup>4</sup> The idea appears unrealistic, if only because Tajikistan, with its Farsi-speaking majority, will almost certainly refuse to join a Turkic-dominated superstate. Most likely the present states will remain separate. However, even if the integrative movement achieves temporary success, it will probably disintegrate quickly, just as all attempts at Arab unification have failed.

### THE STATE: ISLAMIC, SECULAR, DEMOCRATIC?

Many an observer believes that because ethnicity is a divisive rather than a unifying force, only religion can bring the Central Asian nations together. The newly formed Islamic political parties in the region tend to play down identification with ethnic groups and nationality, stressing the irrelevance of these. And the idea of creating an Islamic commonwealth is gaining ground in certain Muslim quarters that are anxious to put an end to ethnicity-based nationhood.

However, it may be too late. Ethnicity was given a tremendous boost by the Soviet regime: ethnic identity was enshrined as nationality and areas that had been bilingual and nonethnic were split up into separate nation-states. As a result, the situation in Central Asia is unique, since people look for and assert their identity in terms of both ethnicity and religion. Much will depend not only on the strength of Islamic feeling but also on the outcome of the struggle for power now taking place in the new states. What forces will replace the old Soviet-created regimes now functioning under new colors?

In the words of Martha Brill Olcott, an American expert on Central Asia, “three main groups are. . . competing for political control everywhere in the region. Representatives of the old Central Asian ‘partocracy’—in most places split into competing groups—are struggling to remain in control. They are challenged by the new, so-called democratic groups dominated by intellectuals who generally played only a peripheral role under the old political order. The partocracy is also opposed by revivalist Islamic groups composed of fundamentalist-style clerics who were trained outside of the official establishment.”<sup>5</sup>

This analysis applies chiefly to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It is in these two countries that Islamic and, to a lesser extent, democratic forces are the strongest opposition groups. In Uzbekistan’s Fergana Valley, Islamists have actually succeeded in establishing Islamic rule on a minor scale, introducing a ban on alcohol and requiring Islamic dress for women.

It is in the Fergana Valley too, as well as in Tajikistan, that the influence of the Islamic Renaissance party is strongest. This nonethnic movement

claims to represent all the Muslims of the former Soviet Union. (It was founded not by Central Asians but by the better-organized Russian-based Tatars and Daghistanis in 1990.) It is the closest thing yet to a genuine fundamentalist Islamic organization in the post-Soviet world.

Moderate Muslim-cum-nationalist parties trying to play two cards—Islam and ethnicity—simultaneously are *Birlik* (Unity) in Uzbekistan and *Rastakhez* (Renaissance) in Tajikistan. A democratic opposition made up largely of secular-oriented intellectuals is represented by *Erk* (Independence) in Uzbekistan and Democratic Movement in Tajikistan. The influence of these groups is limited, and they are unlikely to capture the masses since first, they are considered too “urban,” and second, their Islamic credentials are not very convincing. Here, *Birlik* and *Rastakhez* have an edge on the democrats. But it is precisely these nationalist-religious movements that represent the greatest threat to the ruling apparatchiks who may have changed their hats after the collapse of the union but desperately cling to power and oppose Islamization.

In the first presidential elections held after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Islam Karimov gained 86 percent of the popular vote in Uzbekistan while Rakhman Nabiyeu in Tajikistan received 58 percent. The victory of these former first secretaries of the Communist party was unsurprising, since a large portion of the population regards them not so much as ex-Communist leaders as local bosses or clan chiefs. But while Karimov appears to be firmly in control in Tashkent, the same cannot be said of Nabiyeu, who was almost overthrown during an insurrection in Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe, earlier this year. However, this was not so much a confrontation between religious and secular forces as a traditional clan struggle. Nabiyeu comes from the northern Khojent (formerly Leninabad) clan that has always wielded power in Tajikistan. The northerners were challenged by the southern clan, which in its turn is divided into two subclans: the Kulab region group (traditionally predominant in the southern alliance) and the Pamir group representing people of the Mountain-Badakhshan autonomous oblast, or province. The latter gained the upper hand as a result of the insurrection in Dushanbe, and both northern Khojents and southern Kulabis felt betrayed.

Rumors of the north's secession and its incorporation into neighboring Uzbekistan began to circulate, and there was unrest in Kulab as well. A last-minute compromise was achieved that left Nabiyeu president but with restricted powers. One important consequence was a clear gain in strength for the opposition *Rastakhez* movement; its leader, Davlat Usmon, was made deputy prime minister. Also worth noting is a significant upsurge in the influence of the Tajik spiritual leader (Qadikolon) Akbar Toradzhon Zoda, who

opposes an Islamic state on the grounds that the people are not yet ready for it. At present Tajikistan appears to be virtually ungovernable as a single state. Some areas—notably the south—are in open revolt and do not recognize central authority. Bloody clashes have already occurred.

Most observers believe that Nabiyeu's days are numbered and the old Communist nomenklatura will have to exit. At the same time, there are many who hold that it is precisely the former Soviet apparatchiks with their experience and long-standing control over clan structures who can prevent chaos and anarchy or the seizure of power by Islamic fundamentalists. This is an agonizing dilemma for democrats, who just might prefer the devil they know to the one they do not, and opt for the old guard.

## OUTSIDE FORCES

Any discussion of the future of Central Asia must include an assessment of the influence wielded by nearby Muslim states. It is possible to envisage at least a three-cornered struggle for influence in the area, with Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan the principal players; eventually Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan are sure to join in.

Of the three, Turkey has the advantage of being the “motherland” of Turkism. It is also a relatively developed modern state that is secular and thus a counterweight to Iranian-style Islamic fundamentalism. But it is precisely here that Turkey loses points against Iran when judged by the Muslim mainstream, to say nothing of the Islamic radicals. The secularism of Kemal Atatürk may appeal to a progressive-minded urban intelligentsia, but not to a destitute rural population and unemployed youth (almost 70 percent of the population in Central Asia is under age 25).

Iran has as yet little to offer except ideology and moral values that are by no means universally accepted in the area and are actively rejected by sophisticated urbanites. But Iran has a strong spiritual appeal traceable back to its late ruler, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Moreover, Iran has for centuries been honored in Central Asia as a cultural model even though most Central Asians, Tajiks included, are Sunni Muslims and not Shiites like the majority of Iranians.

On a trip to Teheran earlier this year, I asked an Iranian deputy foreign minister about possible rivalry between Turkey and Iran in Central Asia. The answer was, “What rivalry? Turks have nothing in the area but local idioms close to Turkish. History, civilization, culture, literature, science—everything is Iranian.” A high official at the same ministry gave his own definition of ethnicity: “a common destiny.” Iranians look on Central Asia as a natural sphere of cultural influence, playing down the ethnic issue and claiming to harbor no political ambitions. However, Iran can play an economic trump as well, with a vague promise to give the landlocked Central Asian states an outlet to

the Indian Ocean. This Turkey, which does not even share common borders with the states, cannot provide.

Karimov said that Uzbekistan had already opted for the Turkish model as "secular and civilized," rejecting the Iranian alternative. The United States is no doubt pleased with this and is doing its best to block Iran's penetration into Central Asia, using Turkey for the purpose. (Iran is quite sure this is the case.) The question of who will rule in Central Asia depends to a large degree on outside forces. But the reverse is also true: the rivalry between Iran and Turkey—which at present seems to be of a defensive character, each side trying mainly to block the other's advance—can be decisively influenced by the type of regime that replaces the present ruling elites in Central Asia.

### **WHAT LIES IN STORE FOR THE RUSSIANS?**

The assertion of ethnic identity calls for a drive against "the others," the enemies. In Central Asia, Russians are likely to symbolize the forces of evil that have brought about all misfortunes. Russians have been leaving Uzbekistan and Tajikistan because of a perceived threat of a nationalist-religious flare-up leading to discrimination against "foreigners" and possibly even to pogroms. They are less nervous in Turkmenistan with its tough, autocratic, Communist-style regime. The picture is mixed in Kyrgyzstan, where a relatively liberal and progressive-minded statesman, President Askar Akaev, a man of the new post-Communist generation, is firmly in charge (but who knows for how long?). As to Kazakhstan, where Slavs actually outnumber the "core" population, Russians

are now more or less satisfied with the situation but uneasy about the future. President Nursultan Nazarbayev, a wise and astute politician, is constantly talking about "the people of Kazakhstan" rather than the "Kazakh people," stressing that in his republic individual rights have priority over those of ethnic communities. But "Islamic danger" here, too, is just around the corner.

Russians and Ukrainians make up the bulk of the modern labor force and the senior technicians and managers of Central Asia. Their exodus would jeopardize all economic reform, so the governments of the region need to calm the fears of the Russians who dominate urban areas and often hold key jobs. No less vital, however, is the maintenance of local nationalist morale, lest the present leadership lose out to Islamic-nationalist forces. The Islamic brand of nationalism may grow increasingly anti-Russian as the economic situation deteriorates and people become more and more frustrated. At that point a scapegoat is usually needed, and here is one right at hand.

The leaders of Central Asia seem to be aware of the political and economic disasters that could follow a break with Moscow and an anti-Russian campaign. Judging by their latest steps—a series of bilateral treaties with Russia—they have opted for alliance and cooperation with the single most powerful nation remaining after the breakup of the empire. This is a wise course. Nevertheless, it is hard to envisage for the region a smooth transition to genuinely independent and healthy states. ■