

GLOBAL ASIA:

TURNING POINTS IN MODERN ASIAN HISTORY

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Turning Points in Central Asia, 1900–2016

Of all the former Soviet Socialist Republics, the five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are perhaps the least well understood, despite their forming an important strategic region with a rich history. In centuries past, Central Asia was the heart of the Silk Road, along which traders moved goods between China and Europe. In more recent times, geopolitical events and the discovery of large energy resources in Central Asia have once again brought the region to the world's attention.

Russia's conquest of Central Asia by the end of the 1800s transformed the region's future. At that time, Central Asia's kinship networks were the most important group determiner, and no sense of modern national identity existed. The future five Central Asian states likewise did not yet exist. A major turning point

occurred at the end of the 19th century, however, when the Russian Empire conquered the region and brought with it new influences and ideas.

The 1917 Russian Revolution had enormous implications for Central Asia. It is difficult to divorce any discussion of present-day Eurasia from the legacy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its Marxist founding party, the Bolsheviks. In October 1917, under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin, the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia and soon renamed themselves the Communist Party. This new party was truly revolutionary in every sense — and the new Soviet government aimed to completely overhaul all Russian institutions through massive projects.

The Soviet nation-building project of the 1920s and 1930s was an important turning point for Central Asia that ultimately had unexpected consequences. In the Soviet Union, citizens were expected to have a dual identity. First and foremost, they were socialists and citizens of the Soviet Union, which meant in practice that Russian was taught in schools, the Cyrillic alphabet was used in Turkic languages such as Kazakh and Uzbek and religious practice was pushed underground. Second, citizens were expected to retain ties to their national identity. This posed a puzzle for Soviet ethnographers, who were tasked with drawing new borders around multiple diverse groups that thought in terms of clans and families, not nations. Not one of these borders has changed since 1924, but within them, new nations have developed based on the work of the early Soviet ethnographers.

The Soviet project of collectivization launched in late 1929 was a brutal campaign with devastating consequences for Central Asia. Individual farms were outlawed, and farmers were forced to pool their labor, land and livestock to collectively produce food for the country. An extensive famine resulted, and an estimated 6 million to 8 million rural citizens died. Peasants who resisted collectivization were punished: Their homes could be destroyed, entire families could be killed or they could be sent to labor camps in remote areas of the USSR. Forced migration to labor camps and special settlements in far-flung areas of the Soviet Union created new minorities in Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan. It wasn't until the next major turning point, independence in 1991, that some groups were able to leave the settlements that they had lived in for generations and return to their ethnic homelands.

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a huge upheaval for all of the USSR's constituent republics, including those in Central Asia, which abruptly became independent countries. Political protests in Eastern Europe during the period of glasnost ("openness") introduced by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms after 1986 had encouraged similar protests in the USSR's Baltic republics and eventual declarations of their independence. No such protests took place in Central Asia, however. Whereas the Baltic nations had experienced the Soviet Union as foreign occupation, Central Asia had largely benefited from Soviet institutions, education and the flow of money into the region. Central Asia's distance from Moscow had allowed many local practices and traditions to endure, and its leaders largely desired to remain part of the USSR. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union collapsed and its Central Asian republics became independent. But the links that were built in the Soviet Union have not disappeared, and modern Russia continues to influence Central Asia. The ease of travel and the ability of most Central Asians to speak Russian makes Russia a top destination for the region's migrant laborers.



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