

## Book Review

Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. xx + 556. Suggestions for Further Reading and Index. \$35.00 (cloth).

If this reviewer's preconceived expectations are indicative, readers approaching Adeeb Khalid's revealing *Central Asia* might not necessarily encounter what they anticipate. Those seeking another among numerous "Silk Road"-themed books, or novel analysis of the putative nineteenth-century "Great Game" pitting Romanov Russia against the British Empire, will find disregard for such "hackneyed notions" (1). "Silk Road" is swatted aside as the 1877 invention of "German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richtofen" (19). Richtofen's specific wish "to describe the routes along which Chinese silk was exported from the Han empire (206 BCE-220 CE) to Central Asia" has unhelpfully metamorphosed into "cliché[d]", exoticizing representations of "Central Asia...[as] simply a pathway, rather than a place of interest in its own right" (19).

Khalid has less patience, still, for the "Great Game," perceiving a fundamental misunderstanding of British imperial interests that were far more "concern[ed]...[with] the defense of India...[than] territorial conquest in Central Asia" (73). As for those who would resurrect "Great Game" as a geopolitical paradigm superimposed atop competing Russian, Chinese, and United States ambitions within a post-Soviet world, "multilateral" complexities are far too numerous for this interpretation to be valid (419). Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and India are also part of the picture; moreover, in light of Khalid's emphasis on Central Asians' own agency, "none of [these global and regional actors] had the ability to determine the shape of things on the ground in post-Soviet Central Asia" (420).

One does discover important clues to the historical underpinnings of current affairs—but not when it comes to tumultuous Afghanistan, a country assiduously excluded by Khalid from the definition of Central Asia: "the five post-Soviet states [Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan] and the Xinjiang region of the [People's Republic of China, hereafter PRC]" (4). In Khalid's portrayal, Central Asia is neither "exotic or isolated" (497). Rather, the region is "depressingly

normal” in the ways it has been buffeted by “all the currents of the modern age: colonialism, anticolonialism, development, social revolution, nationalism, state-led modernization, and social engineering” (497).

The central narrative begins with the latter 1700s, when the Qing dynasty conquered Muslim-populated eastern Turkestan and folded it into imperial China. This foreshadows both the axial, 1800s fault line emerging when the Romanovs conquered western Turkestan, and Xi Jinping’s relentless, present-day oppression of Xinjiang’s Muslim Uyghurs. The latter scenario is provocatively and ironically contrasted to post-Soviet states’ independence as “a twenty-first century Gulag” (475-496). Xi desires nationalist subjugation of all China, now that Beijing possesses geopolitical reach beyond the dreams of Qing emperors or Maoist revolutionaries. Then too, post-Soviet sovereignties notwithstanding, an early 2022 event like Russia’s intervention in Kazakhstan signifies Vladimir Putin’s enduring interest in that country. Close to one quarter of Kazakhstan’s population remains Russian, and strong economic and strategic ties link Moscow with Nur-Sultan (the capital recently renamed for Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose political dominance spanned from late Soviet-era Kazakh Communist Party leadership, to his 2019 retirement as a strongman surrounded by “a cult of personality”) (472).

By Khalid’s admission, a “breakneck-speed overview of Central Asia’s history” (34) traversing some four millennia suffices within the space of fewer than twenty pages, before the main event unfolds in successive sections “Empire,” “Revolution,” “Communism,” and “Postcommunism.” To be sure, every author is free to design their own thematic emphases. However, aforementioned preconceptions having been confessed, it is a bit disorienting to compress the following into one paragraph: foundational agricultural settlements of 2200-1700 BCE; the Achaemenids (after all, Persian history remains salient, up through contemporary Iranian-Tajik relations being based on shared Persian language); Alexander the Great; Zoroastrianism (which, beyond entwinement with ongoing Persian influences like Central Asian societies’ commemoration of the new year, Nowruz, features a messianic theology genealogically linked with Islam and its fellow Abrahamic faiths, to say less of worldly utopianisms like communism); and the arrival of Buddhism.

Next zipping by, albeit evocatively, is the religious diversity of Central Asia’s sedentary and nomadic communities, thereafter transformed by a centuries-wide universe of profound Islamic intellectual and cultural developments revolving around centers like Bukhara and Samarkand. Then follows the “Mongols[’]...apotheosis of nomadic empire building” (23), soon supplanted by Muslim Turkic dynasties like the Timurids and their successors, ranging from resurgent Mongol khanates to emergent Muscovy expansionism. Throughout, Khalid effectively asks us to trace back through such religious and cultural DNA, so as to make sense of nineteenth- and twentieth-

century phenomena like contestations over Turkic identity, and the pivotal Central Asian Muslim reformist school of Jadidism.<sup>1</sup>

The main event, as it were, sees Khalid foreground the 1881 Russian-Chinese Treaty of St. Petersburg as a watershed division of “Central Asia between...zones” presaging “even today[’s]” (39) boundary between Moscow-wedded Kazakhstan and Beijing-gripped Xinjiang. Khalid then steps back to illustrate singular Qing dominance during the 1750s, when this hybridized empire, its leadership comprising “a coalition of Manchu and Mongol warriors,” conquered Muslim lands northwest of Tibet to extend a “synthesis of Inner Asian political ideology and Chinese methods of organization” (44). Thus fostered were persisting ethnic tensions whereby Manchu and Mongol rulers, once coming into control of Turkic Muslims, resettled throughout the Qing domain a Han Chinese peasantry over whom the Qing were sovereign. Nonetheless, as the 1800s unfolded, trouble came for the Qing, in the form of uprisings emanating from within the vicinity of present-day Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (preceding the cataclysmic, 1850-1864 Taiping Rebellion), together with Russian and British encroachment.

Above all, the nineteenth century brought the Romanovs’ vast eastward sweep into Transoxiana. By the 1880s, Russia refashioned the region into the protectorates of Khiva and Bukhara, along with districts built around Turkestan and a broad Steppe to the north. Russian imperial dominion imported European modernity in myriad embodiments spanning from communication and transportation lines, to agricultural and mining development, and the urban construction of a city like Tashkent (which would grow, by a century later, into the fourth-largest city within the latter-era Soviet Union). In a similar vein, Tsarist officials viewed Islam as “fanaticism” in need of harnessing through legal regimes (106-107).

Then came revolution, felling the Qing and Romanovs alike. In the latter case, the stirrings of 1905 were enthusiastically received by the modernist-minded Jadids, who utilized proliferating print media to exchange ideas with Muslim reformers in the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and India. From a distinctly nationalist perspective, this enthusiasm was shared by a burgeoning Kazakh intelligentsia. Less enthralled were Turkestan’s conservative Muslims, who supported the Tsarist regime as an anchor of “order and stability” (124). Proceeding chronologically, the 1911-1912 Qing collapse saw Mongolia assert Russian-influenced autonomy, and British-backed Tibet do likewise, against “[t]he new republican leaders in Beijing” (137). Yet, revolutionary fervor was limited in Xinjiang, whose “Central Asian population remained largely aloof from... upheaval among the Chinese” (137). As World War I grew into a global conflagration, the crumbling Romanovs faced a widespread uprising within Central Asia. This rendered the region ripe for the revolutions of 1917, which were “accompanied by a frenzy of [activist] organization” (152) throughout Turkestan, alongside intensifying Kazakh nationalism.

With the Bolsheviks' rise, the equation again radically changed. Emerging from the brutal, 1918-1921 Russian civil war was the utopian, Leninist vision for sifting together communism with anticolonial Central Asian nationalisms—within pre-industrialized Muslim communities, no less. The outcome was a newly-formed Soviet Union's 1924 “transform[ation] [of] the political map of Central Asia” (199). Transitional socialist republics in “Turkestan, Bukhara, and Khiva disappeared and were replaced by a number of republics—each bearing the name of a national group” (199). Meanwhile, even as large numbers of refugees had fled the turmoil for Xinjiang, the Soviets refrained from interfering there, “unlike in Mongolia” (181).

Once more, Stalinism rearranged the equation. Central Asian languages were Latinized during the latter 1920s (before being reconverted to Cyrillic during the Russia-centric 1930s), religion repressed through emblematic means like forced unveiling in the name of women's liberation, collectivization imposed, and republics yoked hard into “Socialism in One Country” (236). Even so, symbiosis occurred between Central Asian national identities, and Soviet patriotism forged amidst “the crucible of [World War II]” (265-280) whose desperate circumstances drew even on reanimated *jihadi* discourses. Additionally, the Stalinist era helped cultivate an Eastern Turkestan Republic in Xinjiang, whose shifting blend of socialism and Muslim-inflected nationalism held until the area's forcible reincorporation into the post-1949 PRC.

From Kazakhstan's crystallizing as ground zero for Soviet nuclear weapons testing and space exploration, to rapid infrastructural development throughout Central Asia following the Stalinist era, the republics stood on “the front lines of the Cold War” (377-392). Along the way, the Sino-Soviet split made the Kazakh-Xinjiang boundary especially tense. The Soviets' demise vaulted the republics into independence along distinct trajectories, although late Soviet-era Communist Party elites' peculiar metamorphosis into post-Soviet Central Asian nationalist leaders—often very corrupt ones—has been consistent. Today, the PRC's targeting of Uyghurs within Xinjiang has tapped into global demonizing of putative “Islamic terrorism,” further evoked in alliances of convenience like that between the US and Uzbekistan.

With geopolitical and ideological cynicism knowing no bounds, one can see why Khalid finds the Central Asian situation “depressingly normal” (497). Formidably detailed, *Central Asia* is ideal for upper-level students wondering how a chronically misunderstood region has been shaped by broad currents and dominant powers of modern world history, in concert with local actors. The pitfalls of exoticism being noted, it remains valuable, though, to draw students' attention toward underlying strata of civilizational brilliance—even while the Silk Road metaphor is repurposed as advertisement for Xi's Belt and Road Initiative.

---

**Andrew M. Wender** is an Associate Teaching Professor in the Departments of Political Science and History, and Director of the Religion, Culture and Society Program, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada. He may be reached at [amwender@uvic.ca](mailto:amwender@uvic.ca).

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> One might delve further into pre-eighteenth-century settings with the aid of S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age From the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2013); and a new gold standard, Marie Favereau, *The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021).