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J. C. Wright

CENTRAL AND INNER ASIA

PAUL BERGNE:

The Birth of Tajikistan: National Identity and the Origins of the Republic.

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Tajikistan is wedged between Uzbekistan to the west, Kyrgyzstan to the north, China to the east and Afghanistan to the south. It encompasses an area of some 143,100 sq. km, thus roughly comparable in size to Greece. Over 90 per cent of its territory consists of mountains, glaciers and high plateaux. There are relatively few passes across the mountains and many are closed by snow for several months of the year. Even today, with modern transport, travel and communication between different parts of the country is frequently disrupted by adverse weather conditions.

In some ways Tajikistan was an almost accidental creation. It came into being as a result of the territorial division (known as the “national delimitation”) of Central Asia that took place under Soviet rule in the 1920s. There were political reasons why it was opportune to create such an entity, but the ostensible, and largely credible, rationale for its formation was the Soviet government’s decision to create an eponymous homeland in which to develop Tajik language and culture.

The Tajiks, unlike their neighbours, are an Iranian people who have occupied the land between the Pamir mountains and the middle reaches of the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya for more than two thousand years. From the sixth century onwards, successive waves of Turkic invaders occupied the land further to the west, thereby separating the Tajiks from the Iranian heartland. Yet by physiology, language and culture the Tajiks remained very much a part of the Iranian family. The chief difference was that when Iran adopted Shiism as the state religion in the sixteenth century, the Tajiks, like the majority of other Central Asians, remained faithful to Sunni Islam.

Historically, there were two main concentrations of Tajiks. One was on the plains (the Ferghana Valley and the basins of the Zarafshan, Syr Darya and Surkhandarya Rivers), the other in the foothills and mountain valleys (the central and south-west regions). The plain-dwellers were part of an ancient, city-based trading culture. The mountain-dwellers, however, were isolated from outside influences until modern times and consequently developed a distinct culture of their own. In the far south-west, along the tributaries of the Amu Darya/Panj, there were yet other Iranian peoples. Known collectively as “Pamiris”, they represent a different (eastern)

branch of the Iranian family. Their languages are not mutually comprehensible with Tajik, or with each other. Never numerous, today they number approximately 150,000. By religion, most are Ismaili Muslims.

The formation of Tajikistan was a far from simple process. It began in 1924 with the creation of the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TajASSR); it encompassed 135,620 sq. km, and was separate from, but subordinate to, the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. This demarcation divided the Tajiks of the mountains from the Tajiks of the plains. The latter, amounting to some 800,000 people, remained under direct Uzbek jurisdiction. In 1929, Tajikistan was transformed into a full Soviet Socialist Republic (TajSSR). At this time, too, its territory was considerably enlarged to the north by the addition of the Khujand district. However, over half a million Tajiks, and much of the territory that Tajiks regard as theirs by virtue of many centuries of settlement, remained within the boundaries of Uzbekistan. This is still a bitter cause of grievance.

Paul Bergne's study of the birth of Tajikistan chronicles this complex process of state and nation formation, setting it not only in its regional context, but more broadly in the internecine struggles and rifts within the Communist Party apparatus of the day. It draws on valuable archival sources, some of them not previously available in English (or any other Western European language). The first two chapters give a concise overview of pre-Soviet perceptions of identity in Central Asia. The impact of a growing pan-Turkic consciousness, and the Tajik reaction to it, provides a helpful introduction to the nationalist discourse of the following years. The complexities of the national delimitation are discussed in admirable detail. Far from this being an arbitrary exercise, it was a formidable operation that combined scholarly expertise with practical considerations. The negotiations were made all the more difficult by the fierce lobbying carried out by different interest groups. The main disagreements were between the Uzbek and Tajik representatives, but economic, political, cultural, historical and personal factors further complicated the proceedings.

Communist Party politics are often overlooked by post-Soviet writers. Yet given "the leading role" of the Party this is an egregious omission. Moreover, the subject is far from dull. The rivalries and jealousies, successes and tragedies, are the very stuff of human drama. Here, some sense of this turmoil shines through what might at first glance seem to be little more than dry statistical data and chronological developments. I particularly liked the discussion on the reform of the Tajik language, which conveys the bones of the arguments as well as a real sense of the passion aroused by the debate.

The title "Tajikistan's foreign relations" (chapter 10) is unnecessarily confusing. As a constituent part of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan had neither the right nor the opportunity to conduct its own foreign policy; all foreign relations were in the hands of the central government in Moscow. However, the chapter in question deals with a separate issue: relations between the Aga Khan, spiritual head of the worldwide Ismaili community, and the Tajik Ismailis of the Pamir Mountains. It is misleading to describe this as Tajikistan's "foreign relations", since the republican administration had no jurisdiction in the matter. It was an internal Ismaili issue, until the Soviet authorities came to regard it as espionage. The account given here of the Ismaili community during this period is interesting, but is contradicted by other versions (including Ismaili sources). The lack of reliable contemporary documentation means that all such accounts should be treated with caution.

The final chapters deal with the upgrading of Tajikistan from autonomous republic to full union republic. This involved the transfer of territory from Uzbek jurisdiction to Tajik jurisdiction. The issue was hotly contested by both sides. Tajiks and Uzbeks each believed that they had a superior claim to certain disputed territories

and used all the evidence they could muster, however obscure and esoteric, to support their case. In the end, the Tajiks gained some additional land, but this fell short of their hopes and (perhaps unrealistic) expectations.

This book makes an important new contribution to the scholarly literature on the Central Asian region. It does not present Tajik–Uzbek relations in a simplistic black-and-white fashion; neither does it demonize Moscow and the Communist Party. Rather, it illustrates the contradictions and complexities of the period, bringing a rare sense of balance to the narrative. Finely researched and fluently written, it will satisfy the specialist but will not present a daunting challenge for the general reader.

Shirin Akiner

OLIVIER ROY:

The New Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Birth of Nations.

xxiii, 222 pp. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007. £16.99.

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This work was originally published in French in 1997. An English translation appeared in 2000. It has now been reproduced yet again, this time in a “newly updated version”. The promotional statement on the back cover (presumably written by the publisher) states that in this new edition the author “examines the political development of Central Asia, from the Russian conquest to the ‘War on Terror’ and beyond”. I am at a loss to understand the justification for this claim. Apart from a rather inconsequential “Prologue” of just over four pages (which wrongly dates the violence in Andijan and subsequent closure of the US base in Uzbekistan to 2006, instead of 2005), I have been unable to find any indication that this book has been updated. The last events mentioned in the final chapter of the new edition refer to 1996–97. The bibliography does not extend beyond works published in the mid-1990s, with the exception of one published in 1998, for which the bibliographic details are incorrect.

In my review of the 2000 edition of this book, I pointed out that the Soviet-era modernization of Central Asia “radically reshaped the public domain and influenced many areas of private life”. I highlighted the significance of free and universal education, the emancipation of women and “the role of the Communist Party, not only as an ideological force, but as a channel for social mobility”. Developments such as these shaped the “new” Central Asia, yet Roy either ignored them or else deemed them worthy of no more than a cursory mention. Instead, I suggested in my review, he had adopted an “orientalizing” approach that picked out the exotic elements in Central Asian societies without attempting to set them in context. I stand by this today, but I would now go further and say that this attitude, which at the time was shared by many in the West (United States and European Union member states), obscured the realities of the situation. To take but one example, Roy’s confident assumption that there would be a de-linking from Russia, and a concomitant rise in the influence of the United States, is symptomatic of a wider failure to grasp the complexity of regional dynamics. The result of these miscalculations has been that Western policies in Central Asia have been largely ineffective.

The Central Asian states gained independence unexpectedly, without prior preparation. The early 1990s were marked by trauma and upheaval. They could have