Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present

By Adeeb Khalid. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021. 556 pp. ISBN: 9780691161396 (cloth).

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Despite a blossoming of English-language scholarship on Central Asia in the last decade or so, the field has been waiting for an accessible general history. With the publication of Adeeb Khalid's *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*, alongside another recent book, Shoshana Keller's *Russia and Central Asia*,[1] we now have such a volume. Broad in scope and lucid in its prose style, Khalid's book focuses explicitly on the autonomy—cultural, if not always political—of Central Asia, markedly including the culture and territories of the Uyghurs with the five former Soviet Central Asian nations. This book takes a major step toward undoing some of the disciplinary boundaries that focused on empire and enforced an outmoded separation between studies of Eastern and Western Turkestan. This work provides a subtle treatment of the region, challenging but not dwelling overmuch on such familiar stereotypes as the Silk Road and the Great Game. Particularly welcome is the slight complication of the notion that Central Asian culture can be broadly defined by conflict between nomadic and sedentary populations—Khalid instead tells the more interesting story of the political process, first gradual and then sudden, which enclosed the vast Central Asian steppe between stable inter-imperial borders.

As a narrative history, Khalid's *Central Asia* is particularly well suited for use in the undergraduate classroom. Taken in its entirety, it presents a cohesive historical arc of the region for a nonspecialist audience. Accessible, focused chapters make an instructor's job of excerpting easy—this in itself is a huge boon to the field, as Central Asia can furnish many illuminating case studies for thematically focused humanities and social sciences courses (courses on global Islam and the legacies of the socialist world, to name a couple of possibilities). Until the arrival of this volume, there had been a dearth of historical material with which to introduce and ground Central Asian texts.

Specialists, too, will find much to admire in Khalid's latest work, which builds on an already prolific career in the study of twentieth-century Central Asia. Here, Khalid argues that the story of Central Asia in the last two and half centuries is inextricable from the conceptual development of nationality and nationalism in the region. Early chapters on the Jadids distill Khalid's extensive work on the topic, showing clearly how these Muslim modernizers laid the foundations for Central Asia's imagined national communities in both the former Soviet countries and Xinjiang. Without these developments, Khalid suggests, neither Soviet nationalities policy nor the Soviet anticolonial critique would have had much social currency in the region. Instead, in the 1920s, Soviet Central Asia became the center of "the idea of revolutionizing the colonial world," an idea that "came from the peoples of the East themselves" (p. 173). This moment alone helps Khalid to "center" Central Asia, presenting the region as not only an active participant in the political and intellectual currents of a globalizing world, but also an ideological and imaginative engine of the socialist "Second" world in the twentieth century.

Closing chapters on Central Asia in our present moment anticipate a counterargument to the unfortunately widespread notion—one that continues to plague the study of the region—that the region is a global backwater where nationalism appears merely as a dangerous artifact of Soviet social engineering. Quite the contrary, as Khalid shows over the course of this extensive and carefully constructed book, when the five post-Soviet Central Asian nations became independent in the 1990s, they did so with "a vast storehouse of national legitimacy" (p. 433).

[1]Shoshana Keller, *Russia and Central Asia: Coexistence, Conquest, Convergence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

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Against the backdrop of Khalid's masterful analysis of national identity in the five post-Soviet republics, other territories with a claim to inclusion in Central Asia and Central Asian studies seem, still, in need of further explanation. For instance, what Khalid calls Eastern Turkestan—the territories of the Uyghurs and other Muslim and Turkic groups in what is now the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—has a more obscure relationship to questions of the nation. Nonetheless, its inclusion in this book is persuasive, serving as an example of what can happen when a centralized state views minority nationalities as an inherent threat rather than as an organizing principle, as the Soviet Union often did.

The penultimate chapter, "A Twenty-First-Century Gulag," is powerful testimony of the violence currently visited on Xinjiang's Uyghur population by the Chinese government. This story is undeniably part of Central Asia, and of its modern legacy. I am less convinced by the exclusion of Afghanistan. True, Afghanistan's historical trajectory does not fit the imperialism-socialism-capitalism arc as precisely as the other territories discussed in Khalid's *Central Asia*. But Afghanistan today bears the marks of the complex interactions of communism, Islam, and capitalism as much as any other Central Asian state.

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Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang, Revised and Updated Edition

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First published in 2007, James A. Millward's *Eurasian Crossroads* is the definitive general history of Xinjiang. The first three chapters survey the earliest times to the nineteenth century; the next two chapters discuss modern transitions, from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s. The next two chapters cover the Mao and the post-Mao eras up to the early twenty-first century. The 2021 edition has a new chapter, "Colonialism, Assimilationism and Ethnocide," bringing readers to current developments.

Much of the recent writing on Xinjiang history has been shaped by contemporary nationalistic agendas, as Millward notes. The stated goal of his book is not to weigh in on political issues besetting Xinjiang today, but it certainly provides the essential historical context to understand them. Most importantly, the continental, racial, and national categories that we take for granted today do not readily apply to historical times. A dispassionate and balanced account, Millward's history of Xinjiang is one of interacting peoples, cultures, and polities, not a single nation or identity.

Several historical patterns emerge from his well-documented narrative, with compelling contemporary relevance. One was the recurring rulers from different outsiders. Because of its geography, Xinjiang was embroiled in an enduring rivalry between nomadic powers based in Mongolia (via northern Xinjiang) and dynastic states based in North China. Throughout much of the history of southern Xinjiang, where Uyghurs have been concentrated since the mid-800s, the frequent pattern of rule was one set of outside rulers replacing another, notwithstanding the local ruling families that reigned in other times. China was but one of the major players in Xinjiang's history, notably during the Han, Tang, Yuan, and Qing dynasties.

Another pattern was Xinjiang as a frontier security matter for North China–based states. When these states expanded westward to Xinjiang, they were primarily driven by campaigns against nomadic powers further north. Indirect rule, rather than incorporation, followed each conquest. After the final conquest in the 1870s, the Qing court established provincehood in 1884, introducing for the first time Chinese-style administration and other nation-building reforms. Yet the prevailing rationale was not