

Book review

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL ASIA

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This volume is a collection of research papers on a region consisting of the five former Soviet Republics: Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Tajikistan; Turkmenistan; and Uzbekistan. These countries are also informally referred to as "the -Stans" as their names end with the Persian suffix "-stan", meaning "land of". This naming also implies ethnic lines, as each of the five countries is inhabited by respective ethnic majorities.

The five countries came into existence only after the final dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) in 1991. Prior to that, for centuries, these vast territories, equalling the size of continental Europe, were relatively unknown to the outside world, as they gradually came under the rule of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and then were part of the USSR until its collapse.

This handbook is timely, as it offers the first comprehensive, cross-disciplinary overview of key issues in Central Asian studies, after the three-decade existence of the five countries. The nearly 500-page book consists of 30 chapters, thematically organized in seven parts covering the following topics: history; politics; geography; international relations; political economy, society and culture; and religion.

While the coverage of the seven parts is wide ranging and deals with diverse interests in the region, the sections on history, politics and political economy most likely would easily resonate with readers' general interests.

The historical background in part I of the book consisting of four chapters serves as a great point of departure. All five countries are Muslim majority, an indication of the early penetration of Islam into Central Asia in the eighth century, among the earliest outside the Arab peninsula. After the long Islamic period, the region fell into the firm rules of the Russian and the Soviet empires. The last two empires rules differently from the way European powers colonized faraway lands, as they were "integrated" into the empires within similar political entities and in a contiguous land setting.

The Soviet Union era with its central planning economic system is particularly important, as it directly preceded the birth of these five independent Central Asian states. One important feature was “the collectivisation of agriculture or the expropriation of peasants and nomads and their concentration in State-controlled collective farms” in the 1930s to support the ambition of the Former Premier Josef Stalin for rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union (p. 41). The labour and produce of Central Asian herders and farmers were used to back Soviet industry and the industrial labour force. In short, the five Central Asian Soviet Republics were the hinterlands.

In the second half of the twentieth century the Kremlin treated Central Asia as a “developing” region that needed investment, technology and expertise from the more developed part of the Union (chapter 4: development in post-war Central Asia). This followed three main pillars of economic development applied to the region. First was energy, in the forms of hydropower, oil and gas. Second was demography, due to anticipation of the “excess” labour from agriculture reallocated for industrialization as postulated in the Lewis model stemming from the rapid population growth in the Central Asian republics in the post-war period. The third pillar was education, as the new industries required engineers, architects, and economists. This resulted in the exponential expansion of higher education in the post-war era of Central Asia.

Part II consisting of four chapters is on the political realm. The result of the formation of the five independent Central Asian States in 1991 emanating from the five Soviet Republics was varieties of authoritarian regimes (chapter 5: varieties of authoritarianism in Central Asia). This was the outcome of two countervailing trends. On the one hand, they had no history of democratic politics and were emerging from a long period of Soviet authoritarian and central planning rule. On the other hand, at the same time, these new States emerged in the context of a global movement towards democratization, which Samuel Huntington called the “third wave of democratization”.

At the beginning, reflecting the democratic moment at the end of the Cold War, some form of contested politics and elections were experienced in the region. However, the processes only produced authoritarian rulers with relative stability, except for Tajikistan which descended into a period of civil war during the period 1992–1995 (chapter 5).

In most cases, the new autocrats were the previous leaders from the Soviet era. Nursultan Nazarbayev, the first president of Kazakhstan for nearly three decades till his resignation in 2019, was the Prime Minister of the Kazakh SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic). Soon after his resignation as president, the country’s capital city was renamed Nur-Sultan, reminiscent of cities, such as Leningrad and Stalingrad, from the Soviet era that were named after their leaders. Islam Karimov, the first president of Uzbekistan, who served in that position until his death in 2016, was the last First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan.

The same is true for Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan, the first president, who held the post from 1991 until his death in 2006. He was last First Secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party (1985–1991). Statues and pictures of him dominated public places in the country and he declared himself as president for life.

Overall, as newly independent states after the end of the Cold War, the five Central Asian states are still very much in the early phases of their national identity building compared with other developing countries that emerged as new nation States soon after the end of World War II.

The political economy section (part V) is a very good source for understanding the economies of post-independent Central Asian States. In this regard, in chapter 19 (economic reform and development in Central Asia), three periods are noted. First is the nation-building and transition from a central planning model to market-based economies in the 1990s. Second is the resource boom period of 2000–2014. The last one is the post resource boom era that has forced the countries to diversify their economies and integrate more with the global economy. This section also includes a discussion on the modernization and development in the regions (chapter 22), which can be traced to the Bolshevik revolution with the idea of having a strong, industrialized and socialist State. The unique legacy of Soviet era development has shaped the region's post-Cold War engagement with international development.

Most former Soviet States, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan was an exception, suffered considerable economic collapse and social regress, such as deindustrialization, high inflation, rise in poverty and declines in life expectancy. They mainly followed a course of liberalization, economic reforms and deregulation, as promoted by donors and international organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Development and Co-operation (OECD). As Popov and Chowdhury (2016) argued, Uzbekistan outperformed the other former Soviet republics by rejecting such neo-liberal policy reforms and following heterodox approaches. Nevertheless, there are considerable disagreements on the way the transition in these countries has been handled, and interested readers may wish to consult the 2001 publication, *Transition and Institutions: The Experience of Gradual and Late Reformers* (edited by Giovanni Andrea Cornia and Vladimir Popov).

The other four sections: geography; international relations; socio and culture; and religion offer an interesting diverse coverage for more specialized interests. The contributors of the book are comprised of 36 established and emerging scholars based in different parts of the world, including Central Asia.

As mentioned earlier, this handbook takes a comprehensive approach to covering cross-disciplinary issues rather than focusing on a single discipline. As Central Asia

area studies continue to develop, one may expect to see more specialized volumes, such as a handbook of Central Asian economies and a guidebook on Central Asian politics.

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