



Topic
History

Subtopic
Civilization
& Culture

Crossroads of Civilization

A History of Central Asia

Course Guidebook

Eren Tasar, PhD





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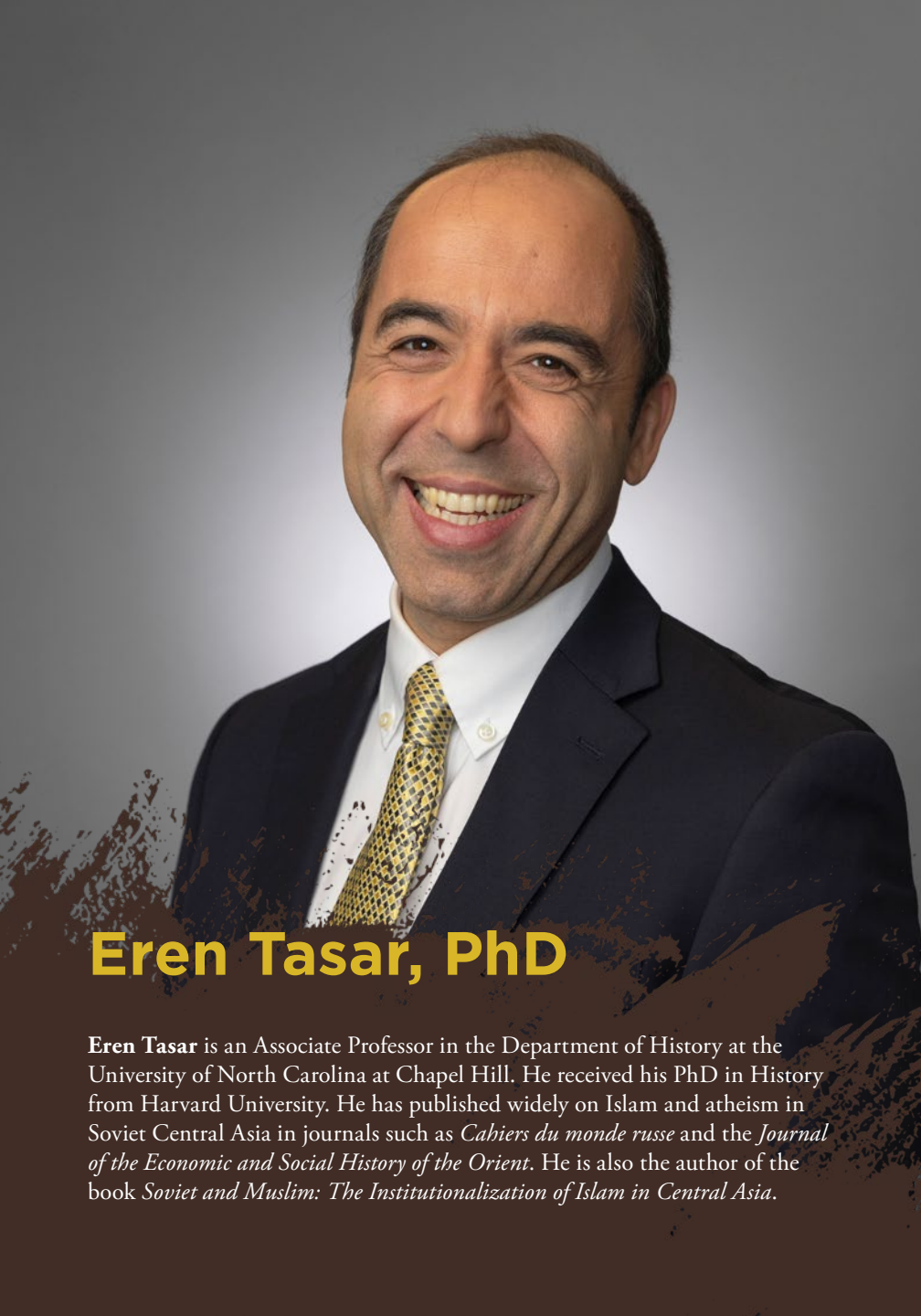
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Central Asia: A Lay of the Land

Covering more than a million and a half square miles, Central Asia is home to some of the largest deserts, longest rivers, and highest mountains on Earth. In southeast Tajikistan, winter temperatures can drop as low as -80°F . Less than 1,000 miles to the northwest, you'll find yourself in the vast deserts of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where summer highs can push higher than 120°F . Away from these extremes, the Steppe belt stretching through Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Russia boasts fertile soil sustained by a water table close to the surface. Here—and in parts of neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan—the climate is classified as Mediterranean. In this land of extremes, you also find one of the greatest crossroads of civilization in the world. Over 24 lectures, this course will take you on a journey of discovery to understand this region, its people, and its place in world history.

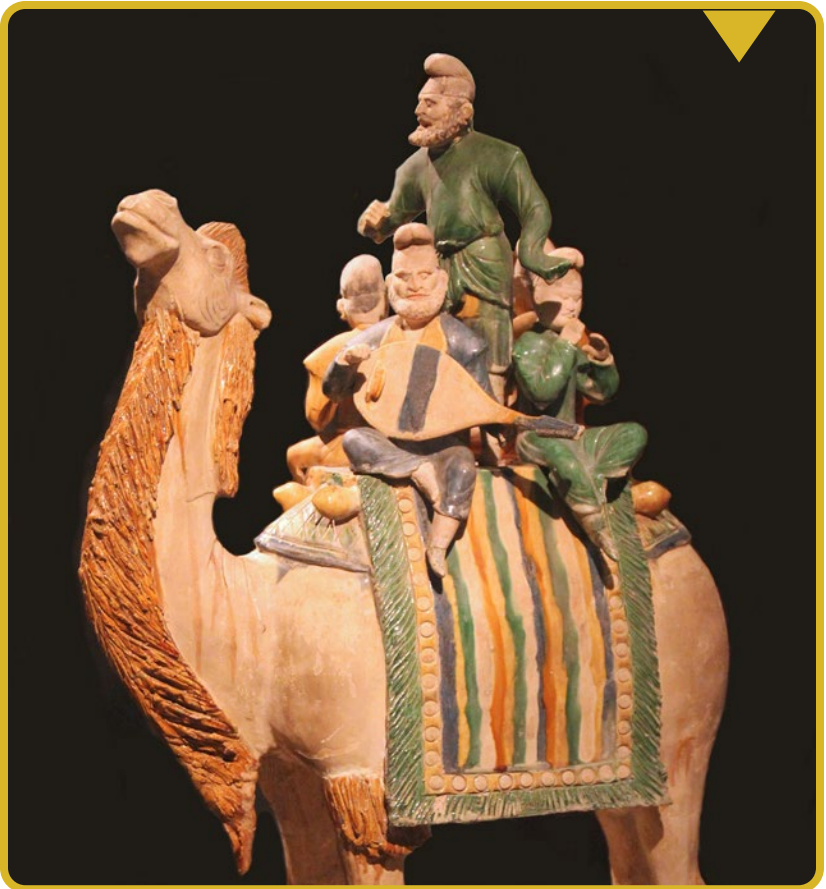
Nomads

Thousands of years ago, climatic extremes and the interplay of steppe and desert gave birth to two types of societies in Central Asia: the nomads—who lived in the desert and steppe—and the sedentary agriculturalists, who lived among the waterways and oases. The region's terrain gave the nomads a decided advantage over sedentary peoples. Most of the land in Central Asia is inhospitable, as it rests right in the middle of three ecological belts stretching across Eurasia.

A great deal of northern Eurasia south of the Arctic Circle is graced by coniferous forests. To the south, a massive region of high desert extends from Inner Mongolia to Western China, across most of the five 'stans, and through Afghanistan to Iran. Between these two enormous zones, a belt of steppe grassland stretches across the continent, passing through Mongolia and Russia's Altai region to southwestern Russia, Ukraine, and Hungary. These last two belts—the desert and the Steppe—have driven much of the movement of peoples, armies, and ideas in this region.

The Steppe is vast and harsh, with unforgiving winter cold and summer heat. Rapid temperature changes often take place in a matter of hours and are accompanied by strong winds and lightning. Moreover, precipitation is scarce in the grasslands, averaging 10 to 20 inches annually. So, for nomads, staying in one place too long amounted to a death sentence. Key to the nomads' movement was the horse, which was domesticated perhaps as early as the 4th millennium BCE in the steppes north of the Black Sea. Horse riding paved the way for the appearance of pastoral nomadism based on seasonal migrations. Nomads tended to favor mountain and hill pastures in the summer and lower grasslands in the winter.

The nomadic way of life was not labor intensive and did not require large settlements to sustain its needs. By some estimates, a single rider could manage a herd of about 100 sheep, which could sustain the average nomad household of five—consisting of a father, a mother, two children, and one grandparent. However, the fantasy of the nomadic family aimlessly ambling around the Steppe is a myth of the Enlightenment. As a resource-scarce setting, the region featured ferocious competition among nomadic peoples.



Families formed groups known as clans, which then amalgamated into larger tribes. Given the right political circumstances and the presence of a gifted ruler, they could even become confederations and empires.

In theory, everyone in a clan descended from the same eponymous ancestor, while everyone in a tribe shared an even older common progenitor. In reality, clan and tribal identities were quite flexible. The bottom line is that there was little to prevent a family from defecting to a rival clan and adopting its lineage.

Another recurring feature of Steppe politics resulting from resource scarcity was a pattern of one nomadic confederation displacing and driving out another. The origins of this process can be traced to the Great Wandering of Peoples, which started in the 2nd century CE. Though its initial cause is unknown, this event saw Germanic peoples move into the Western European part of the former Roman Empire, Hephthalites invade the Persian Empire, and Mongolic peoples descend on Northern China.

Defining Central Asia

A word is in order about what historians mean when they talk about Central Asia and Central Eurasia. Today, Central Asia consists of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, East or Chinese Turkistan, and Afghanistan. However, this definition is historically inadequate. The Steppe belt stretching from Manchuria to Hungary provided a way for nomadic empires to conquer neighboring sedentary civilizations with lightning speed, which is one reason the Steppe generated similar kinds of political cultures.

Nomads didn't just fight sedentary peoples—they also traded with them, worked for them as mercenaries, and adopted elements of sedentary culture they found attractive. This factor bodes in favor of a broader concept of Central Eurasia as a prism for understanding this region's peoples and cultures and their long tendrils of influence over Europe and Asia. Yet, this definition can also be misleading because nomads did not constitute the sole inhabitants of this area.

Turning southward from the vast steppes of what is now Kazakhstan and Mongolia, a massive expanse of high desert is sustained by great rivers originating in glaciers in the Hindu Kush and Gissar mountain ranges. In Central Asia, the oasis civilizations fed by this snowmelt are associated with an elaborate court culture, major religious complexes and academies, and trade entrepôts. Until the Islamic conquests of the 8th century, the region was generally divided into two realms: Sogdia to the north and Bactria to the south. The lands contained between the Oxus and Jaxartes rivers sustained much of these realms' urban civilization.

Cities

Central Asia's cities were built by Iranian peoples: The Persian word for city—*qand*—is found in the names of cities such as Tashkent and Samarkand. These oasis towns had their origin in fortifications constructed by Iranian tribes who adopted sedentary agriculture by 500 BCE. Across the desert region, such cities shared a certain kind of built environment consisting of three core features: the ark or citadel, the inner city comprising the main urban center, and the suburbs. The ark was the city's symbolic center; it included the ruler's castle, which also housed his commanders, the main offices of government, and a temple (or, later, a mosque). The urban area adjacent to the ark often featured several bustling markets and residential neighborhoods. Agricultural settlements that produced the region's famous fruits surrounded the city.



Scholars have a good idea of what the inside of people's homes might have looked like. Urban residential architecture in this part of the world largely focuses on mitigating the effects of the extreme summer heat. The streets of traditional Central Asian neighborhoods tend to be winding and narrow to create as much shade as possible. Clay and dung were liberally applied to walls to keep the heat out in the summer and retain it in the winter. Trees were planted everywhere and lovingly maintained.

As for traditional urban homes, their organization today has probably not changed much in principle. In a typical home, the first thing that greets visitors is an unassuming front door or gate, followed by a shaded outdoor entryway and a courtyard with a small garden. The family's bedrooms, the washroom, and the kitchen surround the courtyard. In winter, families entertain guests in a special room, but in the summer, they use a *dastarkhwan*—an elevated, shaded platform in the courtyard.

Yurts

Felt tents known as yurts have been a part of nomadic life in all of Central Asia's recorded history. A yurt is constructed out of crisscrossing wooden poles, which are layered on the outside with the hides of the nomads' own sheep and goats. Symbolically, the most important part of the yurt is the very top—a wooden crown that surrounds a hole that acts as a chimney, allowing smoke to escape. To prevent the strong steppe winds from getting inside, nomads used wooden frames for their doors and often built wooden doors too. When it rained, they might dig trenches around the yurt to prevent water from making the floor muddy and ruining the carpets.

In both their internal and external appearance, yurts are remarkably similar across Eurasia. The door usually faced southward—a nod to the sacred significance that Steppe peoples assigned to the north. The inside of a yurt comprised an organized built environment. The western part was where the men hung out, while women occupied the eastern half. The centerpiece was the stove, which was positioned directly under the crown to ensure that smoke got out quickly. The floor was made up of animal hides, rugs, and cushions.

Amazingly, experienced nomads could pack up this small world of comfort in as little as an hour, load it on several animals, and rebuild it in identical form hundreds of miles away.

Trade and Conflict

The cozy yurt and the sedentary residence were interconnected, especially at the elite level. Each side possessed things the other wanted. Nomads could provide not only horses, meat, and dairy products but also highly refined weapons and other metallurgical goods. Sedentary societies furnished fruits, vegetables, ceramics, glassware, utensils, and luxury items, such as jewelry, perfumes and incense, and slaves captured in raids. With their substantial military advantage, the nomads had the option of simply pillaging such goods from their sedentary neighbors, yet they vastly preferred peaceable relations through trade—partly because desert nomads largely relied on slow, durable one-humped camels for transportation. The Silk Road has its origins in the fact that nomad-sedentary trade relations reached epic proportions.



However, no serious account of Central Asia's history can tiptoe around the basically violent and unstable nature of nomadic society. A cycle encompassing the appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of nomadic empires is as old as recorded history. Scholars have advanced numerous theories to explain this phenomenon. One hypothesis emphasizes the Steppe's scarcity as the primary explanation for nomads' endless attacks on their agricultural neighbors and on each other.

More recent interpretations hearken back to the model of social cohesion—or *'asabiyya*—developed by the 14th-century North African Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun. He argued that the rise and fall of nomadic empires corresponded to generational change. Rulers with sufficient luck and talent could unite the fractured Steppe into a nomadic empire, but once the ruler died, things went downhill. Whoever succeeded the ruler adopted the comforts of palace life, and within a couple of generations, nomadic zeal succumbed to laziness, lethargy, and self-indulgence. A weak nomadic ruler allowed sedentary people to take over. Then, in the Steppe, the process began all over again.

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Scythian and Nomadic Culture

Southeastern Kazakhstan was a center of nomadic civilization from the 5th century BCE to the 1st century BCE. This part of Central Asia is known as the Seven Rivers region for the rivers that flow into Lake Balkhash. The abundance of water and a moderate climate have made the area particularly favorable to large-scale grazing and agriculture. Starting in the 1970s, a series of important discoveries across Kazakhstan and Siberia forced archaeologists to rethink assumptions about prehistoric nomadic cultures. They began to notice remarkable commonalities across three Eurasian regions separated by vast distances: the Seven Rivers region, the Altai region, and the Pontic Steppe north of the Black Sea, which is mostly in Ukraine today. As you will learn in this lecture, researchers started talking about a cultural continuum spanning 2,000 miles of the Eurasian Steppe—from Siberia to the Black Sea.

Kurgan Excavation

Archaeology emerged as a discipline in the 18th century, and most interest in prehistoric nomads focused on the north Black Sea in the 1st millennium BCE. The main reason for this is the work of a man named Herodotus, who was born on the Aegean coast around 484 BCE. He wrote what is widely considered to be the first history of the known world (to him, at least) and devoted an entire chapter of this book to people he called Scythians. Until recently, the reach and influence of this primarily nomadic people were thought to have been contained to the lands around the Black Sea.

However, with the explosion of interest in antiquity and classical Greece in 18th-century Europe, Herodotus's long-neglected *History* got a new lease on life. Over several centuries, scholars would reveal that the Pontic Scythians of ancient lore were merely one branch of an incredible nomadic culture that flourished across Eurasia from the 9th century BCE to the 2nd century CE. These Scytho-Siberians were the first peoples known to dominate Central Asia.

This story begins with Peter the Great, who made a trip to Amsterdam and encountered a collection of antiques owned by Dutch collector Jacob de Wilde. Upon returning home, Peter instructed the governor of Siberia to collect valuable grave goods from local kurgans—that is, burial mounds. The resulting collection was eventually housed in the Kunstkamera museum, which opened in St. Petersburg in 1714. Interest in excavating the ancient past of Russia's growing possessions skyrocketed over the coming decades.

In 1830, local enthusiasts discovered a massive burial site at the Kul Oba kurgan dating from the 4th century BCE. The site contained the bodies of a king, a queen, and one servant, along with a gold vase depicting four scenes of men wearing trademark Scythian attire: pointed hats, trousers, ankle boots, and belted coats. The finds gave a significant jolt to further excavations in the Pontic Steppe and Siberia.

As the Russians extended their empire southward into Central Asia, extremely well-preserved human and animal bodies were found in the kurgans of the Siberian permafrost. Then, in the 1920s, a cemetery of exceptional importance for the understanding of Scythian nomads was excavated. This

find—called Pazyryk—is located in Russia’s Altai region, around 100 miles northeast of the spot where the borders of Russia, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan almost intersect.

In 1953, archaeologist Sergei Rudenko published *The Culture of the Population of the Altai Mountains in Scythian Times*, describing the vast evidence that he and his colleagues had collected at Pazyryk. The findings included tattooed bodies, horses with ornamented gear, furniture, and elaborately decorated weapons. Coriander seeds from Persia and textiles and silks from India and China indicated wide-ranging trade relations.

More importantly, the animal art at Pazyryk was virtually identical to that encountered in the Pontic Steppe. Deer and other animals with their legs twisted or tucked in and facing each other in a symmetrical fashion are characteristic of what came to be known as the Tagar culture originating in the Altai-Sayan mountain region. The art is found on bodies, woodwork, metalwork, and even goldsmithing all across the Eurasian Steppe. These commonalities led Russian archaeologists to a new thesis: The Eurasian Steppe belt had created a Scythian-Siberian cultural continuum resting on the rapid movement of people and exchange of goods and ideas across thousands of miles of grassland.

Climate Change and Nomadism

Further Siberian findings forced archaeologists to reconsider the extent of nomadic mobility, particularly after excavations of two large cemeteries at Arzhan in the Siberian region of Tuva, which is not far from Mongolia. The Arzhan kurgan dates to the 9th or 8th centuries BCE, making it the earliest known evidence of the Scythian culture. First excavated in the 1970s, Arzhan-1 was 360 feet around, 13 feet high, and surrounded by a stone wall. The cemetery’s design and artifacts were unmistakably of the style found at Pazyryk and around the Black Sea. The amount of labor that went into constructing this funeral complex would have been staggering. Moreover, Arzhan-2 contained hundreds of gold items, some of which display an exquisite level of craftsmanship. The archaeologists found the distinctive animal style at this cemetery too.



What explains these similarities, the apparent need nomads felt to crisscross Eurasia, and their tendency to move from east to west? A large part of the answer rests in climate change. The Eurasian Steppe belt is the largest stretch of grassland in the world, stretching some 5,000 miles across the continent. As a nomadic culture, the Scythians survived on what they could gather or hunt from the land or on what they could herd. The primary source of food came from rearing livestock. Horses were central for transportation, meat, and use in ritual sacrifices. Nomads also raised huge herds of cattle and sheep for meat and hides. Milk from these animals—particularly horses—could be used to create cheese and fermented beverages.

However, herds need vast grasslands to graze on and water to drink—things not always in ready supply in changeable climes. The archaeological record suggests that one of the most common reasons the nomads moved was variation in the Steppe climate. In Kazakhstan and Mongolia, several

extremely severe winters commonly follow one another for a year or two. A steady chain of catastrophic winters can have a disastrous effect on nomadic life. Extreme weather events can cover steppe grass in an impenetrable sheet of ice, leading to mass starvation of livestock. So, the seemingly endless stream of migration from east to west must be explained by the desperate struggle to survive.

Nomadic Customs

The Siberian and Kazakh excavations that have taken place since the 1950s have revolutionized researchers' understanding of the interconnectedness of Inner Asian nomads, forcing them to look at sources on the Scythians written in antiquity in a completely new light. Herodotus's *History* was written around 430 BCE on the Black Sea coast in the Greek colony of Kyrgyzstan. The book relates that mourners at funerals ritually mutilated themselves with knives and arrows. Instead of taking baths, people used the vapor from heated hemp. *History* also describes the mummification and preservation of dead bodies, in addition to one instance in which the bodies of 50 strangled young men and 50 horses were preserved as part of a mass sacrifice.

Many people thought this was the stuff of legend. However, these observations about the customs of nomads living near the Black Sea have been confirmed by excavations of nomadic burials from thousands of miles away, and the evidence for sophisticated body preservation at Pazyryk is even more compelling. The list of things Herodotus got right—from cannibalism to the practice of turning enemy skulls into goblets—goes on and on.

Taken together, Herodotus's account and the excavations carried out across the Steppe tell researchers a great deal. In this society, the funeral of an important person held great political and symbolic significance. A deceased king should be well provided for in the next life, so wives, concubines, slaves, equerries, and members of the bodyguard were strangled or killed with blows to the head to accompany him. The ruler also took with him elaborate jewelry, gold crafts adorned with precious gems, masterfully executed woodwork, embellished and embroidered felt and leather clothing articles, and beautiful weapons.



The afterlife was a real place for these people, but funerals mattered in this life too. Even before the ruler's death, people were probably planning the funeral ceremony. Viewings of the body and massive ceremonial feasts served to project the clan's authority onto would-be rivals. At Pazyryk and Arzhan in particular, the grave goods are notable for coming from hundreds of miles away—and even as far afield as China.

The Saka and the Persians

Persia became a powerful empire in the aftermath of the fall of the Assyrian Empire in 609 BCE. Fifty years later, the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great controlled territory from the Aegean Sea to the Indus Valley. In such a vast

area, the Persians came into contact with many nomads. Like Herodotus, they referred to these peoples as Scythians—or Saka, in Persian. The Persians spoke of three kinds of Saka: First were the Saka with the pointed hats, who lived in the grasslands and marshes around the Aral Sea. Second were the Saka who consumed haoma and lived in the desert. The haoma plant can be made into a drink with properties comparable to those of alcohol. Third were the Saka beyond the sea, who corresponded to Herodotus’s Pontic Scythians.

The Scythians with the pointed hats caused the Persians the most trouble. In 530, Cyrus the Great—founder of the Achaemenid Empire—declared war on the Saka queen Tomyris and paid for the effort with his life. His successor, Darius I, was left to exact revenge. In 519, the Persian Achaemenids captured the Saka king Skunkha. The event is dramatically captured in the Behistun Inscription erected by Darius I, which depicts several chained kings and rebels being presented to the king. The inscription is carved into



rock and is one of the most dramatic monuments of antiquity, testifying to the symbolic authority Darius I sought to project over his nomadic subjects. However, another inscription at the Achaemenid capital of Persepolis depicts Scythians in pointed hats bringing gifts, including a stallion. From the 6th century BCE, trade and exchange of goods between the Persians and Scythian Pazyryks across Eurasia was an important part of the relationship.

Thousands of miles away, at Pazyryk, grave goods were uncovered that could only have come from the Achaemenid Central Asian provinces of Bactria and Sogdia, including a knotted Persian rug. Moreover, Scythian artwork across Central Asia includes Persian imagery, such as lotuses, palm trees, winged bulls, and sphinxes. Most likely, these influences reached the nomads through Achaemenid frontier posts in the empire's easternmost provinces. There, Persians and Scythians lived together, and peaceful interaction seems to have been the norm.

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Early Empires on the Steppe

Many of the innovations in the birth of large agricultural empires came from the nomadic Steppe; including the domestication of the horse in the 4th millennium BCE. Moreover, nomads spread ideas and goods long before Indian Ocean trade routes began to connect China, India, and the Roman world around the 2nd century BCE. The Eurasian Steppe was shaped by interactions between the nomadic tribes at its core and the sedentary civilizations that surrounded it. In this lecture, you will look closely at the empires on the fringes of the Steppe belt around the time of Christ's birth: the Achaemenids in Iran, the Hellenic kingdoms that emerged after Alexander the Great's invasions of Central and South Asia, and the Han dynasty in China. In doing so, you'll see that it's impossible to disentangle the history of nomads from that of sedentary societies.

The Achaemenid Empire

The Achaemenid dynasty was the first state to attempt mastery over the Central Asian Steppe. Cyrus the Great founded the empire in 559 BCE, and by 530, he had extended its borders to Egypt, the Aegean Sea, the Indus Valley, and lands up to the Syr Darya river. In his final years, he crossed the deserts of what is now Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, incorporating this Central Asian territory as three provinces: Khorezm, Sogdia, and Bactria. The Scythian nomads inhabiting the forlorn desert between the Aral and Caspian seas submitted as vassals.

The Achaemenid Empire would last only 200 years, leaving its mark in ways both direct and subtle. The vast demands for tribute made by Achaemenid emperors reinforced economic and trade ties with Central Asia. From a cultural and political perspective, Achaemenid rule sat lightly on subject



peoples. Persia allowed its governors to work through local elites and use local languages. A sophisticated urban ethos sustained by commerce began to develop in provincial capitals, and distinctive regional identities centered on the cities started to emerge, especially in Bactria and Sogdiana. These two regions enjoyed the breathing room to do what Central Asians have always done best—to take the best features of conquering cultures and mold something new out of them. Researchers see this in the Oxus treasure, which is a hoard of gold and silver discovered by the Amu Darya in the 19th century. Many of the remarkable pieces unearthed display the metalworking traditions of Sogdia and Bactria fused with the styles and symbols of Achaemenid Persia.

The Central Asians didn't just receive cultural influences; they exported them too. This is most apparent in the Achaemenid emperor's audience hall, the Apadana in Persepolis. Encompassing some 10,000 square feet, the hall's distinctive feature is the wall reliefs depicting embassies from 23 subject nations of the Achaemenid Empire. However, like so much imperial spectacle, the Apadana only tells part of the story.

The Achaemenids had plenty of trouble with nomads. One of the reasons Cyrus the Great expanded into Central Asia was to subdue the great nomadic confederation known as the Massagetae to the Greeks. His attack against them was unsuccessful, culminating in his death in battle around 530. The emperor's successor—Darius I—now had to try to secure the empire's northern borders from nomadic incursions.

The Greco-Bactrian Kingdom

Interestingly, it was not the Scythians who eventually destroyed the Achaemenid Empire but a hotheaded Macedonian named Alexander. From 334 to 323 BCE, he created an empire stretching from Egypt to Punjab. He defeated Achaemenid ruler Darius III in two decisive battles in 333 and 331. Soon, Alexander the Great had all the prominent kingdoms of his world at the time. What would he do next? In the long term, the answer proved the most consequential on the cultural front. Alexander honored the elite cultures and religions of his new subjects and set himself up as a successor to



Alexander The Great

the Achaemenids. After marrying Roxana, the daughter of a Bactrian noble, he wed a daughter of Darius III. Then, he encouraged all his soldiers to wed Persian brides, and he adopted all the trappings of a Persian monarch.

After his early death at the age of 32, Alexander's empire collapsed in short order, hacked into individual fiefdoms by his generals. However, the pattern of state-sponsored cultural fusion went on to a glorious life of its own in Central Asia. The entire period of the 4th to 2nd centuries BCE featured a deliberate policy of settling Macedonians and Greeks. These towns became outposts of Hellenic culture on the fringes of the known world (to the Greeks, that is). Retired soldiers from the Macedonian armies settled here and intermarried with the local population. For almost 2 centuries, these soldiers retained their devotion to the ideals of Greek civilization with singular purpose and ferocity.

For example, the Greco-Bactrian city at Ai Khanoum in northern Afghanistan was a Greek town right in the middle of Central Asia. It was built on the site of the palace of an Achaemenid governor and may have

been the economic and military center of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. Ai Khanoum is laid out with characteristic features of a Greek city, including numerous shrines to Greek gods, such as Zeus and Hermes, and a large amphitheater.

At its height, the Greco-Bactrian kingdom extended as far as the Indus River, the Syr Darya, and the Caspian Sea. Some of the largest golden coins of antiquity were minted under its last great king, Eucratides. However, Eucratides was beset by enemies on all frontiers, and the kingdom began to break apart. Scythian nomads raided Ai Khanoum from 145 to 138, and another nomadic confederation fleeing China—the Yuezhi—destroyed the city. Though they surely didn't realize it at the time, the Yuezhi were destined to open the next great chapter in the history of Central Asia, not by annihilating Greco-Bactrian civilization but by absorbing it.

The Kushan Empire

The Yuezhi arrived in Bactria around 135 BCE as a typical nomadic confederation, consisting of five large clans. One of these clans was the Kushan. A century later, around 30 CE, the Kushan leader took control, and within a century, the Kushan Empire controlled territory from the Indus Valley to the Syr Darya.

Kushan civilization absorbed and refined all the influences of the South and Central Asian cultures it controlled, including Yuezhi, Scythian, Persian, Bactrian, Greek, and Chinese. The Kushans never imposed a state religion, and in Bactria, their art fused Buddhist iconography with Greek sensibilities. The Kushan achievement in synthesizing Hellenism with Central Asian traditions shines best in the realm of sculpture. Near Ai Khanoum, across the Amu Darya River in Uzbekistan, lie the excavations at Khalchayan, where a Yuezhi chieftain built a palace that was excavated in the early 1960s. The experimentation in sculpture carried out here influenced art in the region for at least 300 years.

The nomadic Kushans adopted sculpture as a means of portraying rulers and deities. Their depiction of faces employed local facial types and boasted the Greek emphasis on perfection in poise and proportion. As the Kushans

adopted Buddhism, they employed this detailed, realistic frontal style to depict their Buddhist bodhisattvas—celestial beings who have postponed entering Nirvana to help mankind. This realistic Greco-Roman style was wedded to the impressionism of Indian sculpture and the formalism of Iranian art. The result is a wonderful mix of cultures and an attempt to depict deities as real people. Archaeological sites across Afghanistan are saturated with such stucco Gandharan deities, which are named after the Gandhara region, where the Kushan capital of Purusapura was located.

The nomadic Yuezhi were the progenitors of the settled, cosmopolitan Kushans. However, nomads always retained their prominence. Two sites dating from the late 1st century CE illustrate the side-by-side existence of elite nomadic and sedentary cultures. Kapisa—not far from Kabul—was the Kushan summer capital. Here, archaeologists uncovered two hidden brick rooms that contained a treasure trove of luxury goods from across the world. The Begram Hoard included stone and enameled glass vessels from Egypt and the Roman Empire, furniture decorated with ivory from India, and painted bowls from China.

Approximately 230 miles to the northwest, researchers found a nomadic burial that was no less impressive, dating from the same time. The Tillya Tepe excavations undertaken by Soviet and Afghan archaeologists in 1978 unearthed the body of a man interred with five women, who were probably concubines sacrificed to accompany him into the next life. More than 20,000 gold, silver, and ivory ornaments, coins, and other luxury items were buried with them. This kind of elaborate burial, centered around human and animal sacrifice, was practiced in the heart of sedentary Central Asia with much pomp and ceremony, illustrating how closely nomadic and sedentary elites interacted.

The Han Empire

The Yuezhi who became the Kushans also provide scholars with a link to another great empire of antiquity—China. Around 1200 BCE, the area between China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan became a zone of exchange between the fertile central plains of China and the nomadic zones of the Ordos and Mongolian Plateau.

By the time of the Yuezhi, the Han dynasty ruled China, doing so from 206 BCE to 220 CE. This dynasty was the first to unite all of China's core territory for an extended period. This development had major implications not only for the Chinese but also for the nomads living in the northern zone. Now, any nomadic incursion into Chinese territory symbolized an attack on the Han Empire as a whole. The risks for the nomads were greater—but so were the potential rewards.



The nomadic confederation that rose to the occasion was known to the Chinese as the Xiongnu, led by the energetic Modun. In less than a decade, the Han were forced to sign an unequal treaty with Modun, who was given equal status to the Han emperor and became the first nomadic ruler to make tribute collection a core, organizing principle. The Xiongnu went on to inflict a century of humiliating defeats on the Chinese. Eventually, the Han were able to assert control, but even then, the Xiongnu did not submit to Chinese vassalage until 51 BCE.

One noteworthy development during this period was the construction of the Great Wall of China, which was started by various predecessors of the Han to keep the Xiongnu out. With time, the wall's purpose changed from being primarily defensive to offensive. As powerful states pushed nomads north and west, the wall represented a kind of land grab for at least three reasons. First, its purpose was to incorporate nomads as Chinese subjects. Second, the wall helped prevent these nomads from fleeing to Mongolia, where they could regroup for further attacks. Third, it was designed to bar oppressed Chinese peasants from fleeing to the nomadic Steppe in the hope of escaping the brutality of Chinese feudalism and the country's never-ending civil wars.

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The background features a collage of historical images. At the top left is a black and white photograph of a group of people on horseback. To its right is a classical painting of two figures on horseback. Further right is a grid of smaller images, including architectural drawings and a figure. A large, bold yellow number '4' is positioned in the upper right quadrant. The central part of the page is dominated by the title 'Sogdiana and a Cultural Crossroad' in a large, bold, yellow font. Below the title is a large, expressive black ink splatter that extends across the bottom half of the page. The bottom right corner shows a landscape with a mountain range under a bright sky.

4

Sogdiana and a Cultural Crossroad

Ancient Central Asia's place in world history has long been captured by the term *Silk Road*, which distills the region's importance for the great civilizations of Europe and West and East Asia. However, the concept of the Silk Road is less helpful for researchers interested in Central Asia itself. This vast expanse of Eurasia transformed the people and ideas who entered it, especially in the realm of religion. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, and Manichaeism all interacted with local cults, deities, and belief systems, and the result was one of the most diverse religious landscapes in human history. This lecture will discuss religion as a prime example of cultural fusion in Central Asia—and one that still has a great deal of relevance in contemporary culture and history.

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism was the ancient religion of Iran and had an enormous impact on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The religion's founder—Zarathustra, or Zoroaster—was probably born in the upper Amu Darya region in the 13th century BCE, around the time Moses may have lived. In his hymns, Zoroaster taught that the Iranian deity Ahura Mazda stood above all deities and should be worshipped as the Lord of Good. Ahura Mazda was locked in battle with the Lord of Evil and ruler of the demons, Angra Mainyu or Ahriman.

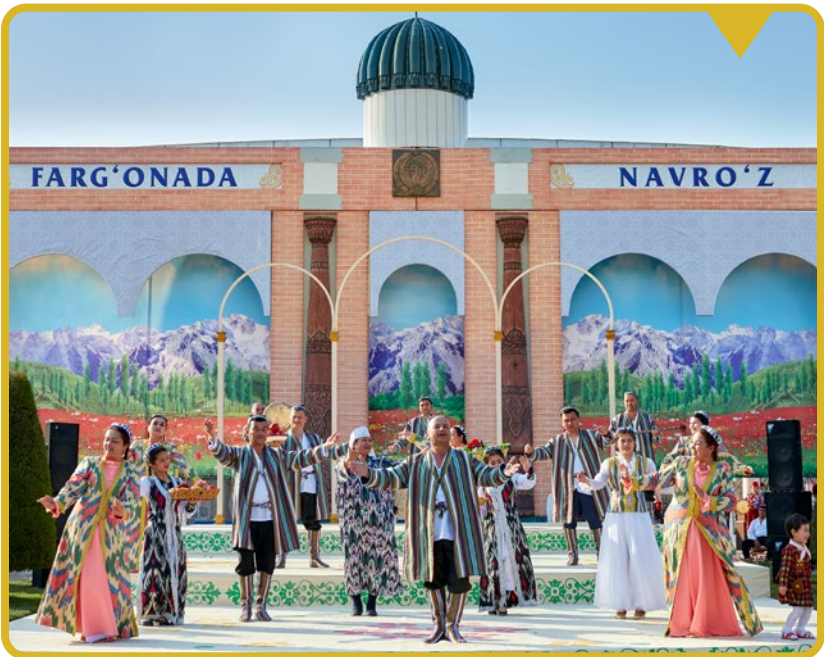
Zoroaster built on Iranian religious beliefs of his time, such as the pantheon of gods of water, fire, and the elements. However, he was critical of many Iranian practices, such as bull sacrifice. Later religions would incorporate Zoroaster's disdain for popular religious practices and his insistence on free will.

Researchers believe that Zoroastrianism was the main religion of the Achaemenid Empire, but the sources of the period do not mention Zoroaster even once. The Parthians—who eventually succeeded the Achaemenids—also practiced Zoroastrianism, but only their successors, the Sasanians, embraced it as their official religion. In theory, Zoroastrianism held that all humans are responsible for struggling against evil. In practice, under the Sasanians, the priestly class of magi took over the moral guidance of society. The magi practiced celibacy and an austere lifestyle and interpreted dreams and omens. Far from the urban centers of Persia, the role of the magi could have overlapped with that of shamans among the Saka nomads.

In the Achaemenid province of Sogdiana—which corresponds roughly to modern-day Uzbekistan and parts of neighboring republics, located right on the Silk Road—many of the ancient Iranian practices that Zoroaster had frowned upon remained a core part of Zoroastrianism. At Yerkurgan in central Uzbekistan, a temple dating from the 2nd or possibly 1st century BCE illustrates the Zoroastrian practice of exposing the remains of the dead to the sun, but with local variations. The temple comprises a tower and two platforms, each with a specific function. Human remains were placed in the tower and exposed to the sun for an extended period before being brought down to the western platform. Then, the bones were stripped of

any remaining flesh, ritually washed with bull urine, taken to the eastern platform, and placed in an urn or container. The worship of the bull is an ancient Indo-Iranian practice that Zoroaster specifically singled out for criticism. The ancient Iranians associated the moon with a bull and believed that all organisms on Earth came from the bull's semen, dripping from the moon.

You don't need to look hard to find Zoroastrianism under the surface today. The highlight of the Zoroastrian calendar is the vernal equinox—or the festival of the New Year, Navruz. Celebrated on March 21, it is one of the biggest holidays of the year from eastern Turkey to Xinjiang. In Uzbekistan and other parts of Central Asia, Navruz is a major day of communal feasting, singing, and general merrymaking. The highlight of the holiday is the food. Vast cauldrons of sumalak—a thick, brown porridge with a slightly sweet aftertaste—are prepared only for this day. The dish represents the very essence of Navruz.



Buddhism

The vestiges of Zoroastrianism in Central Asia are everywhere today, even in government propaganda. However, finding overt signs of another religion important to the region's history—Buddhism—is more difficult. Buddhism appears to have had little effect on Sogdiana, but neighboring regions are another story. In the 2nd century CE, Buddhist missionaries from the Parthian Empire first brought the religion to China. The Tarim Basin in today's northern Xinjiang boasted many Buddhist monasteries. And under the Kushans, Bactria became a major Buddhist center.

Trade appears to have been an important part of Buddhism's success. Siddhartha Gautama emphasized renouncing this world and its earthly trappings, but his followers and disciples—the sangha—spread his doctrine by traveling far and wide, living off of charity. With time, Buddhist networks attracted the attention of merchant communities in India and Central Asia. By the 2nd century CE, the relationship between these merchants and the sangha was solidified. The merchants paid for the establishment of monasteries, but what they received in exchange requires a bit of explanation.

Mahayana Buddhism developed a belief in supernatural beings who could serve as intermediaries for ordinary people, helping them achieve an end to suffering. If properly induced, these bodhisattvas could create their own paradises to help people along the path to nothingness. This concept was at least one of the reasons that Buddhist merchants lavishly patronized monasteries. The result was a chain of Buddhist monasteries stretching from China to Central Asia and down to India. Buddhist culture in Central Asia reached its zenith from the 2nd century to the 7th century CE, and it is no coincidence that the rise of Buddhism in the region corresponded to the emergence of major trade routes between China and Rome.

The pinnacle of Buddhist architecture in Central Asia was the Buddhas of Bamiyan in central Afghanistan. Built around 600 CE, these gems were carved out of rock. One was 125 feet high and the other 180 feet high. The buddhas' flowing robes reflected the synthesis of Hellenistic and Indian art fostered by the Kushans centuries earlier. Mural paintings on the ceilings of the two chambers show Gupta, Sogdian, Sasanian, and even Byzantine influence.



Unfortunately, throughout history and even today, various attempts have been made by one ideology or belief to eradicate the influence of the others. For instance, on April 27, 1978, a violent communist coup took place in Kabul, ushering in decades of destruction, civil war, murder, and hunger. Decades later, the fundamentalist Taliban took Kabul in 1996, and 5 years into their rule, they enacted a ban on images. For some Talibs, this meant vandalizing or destroying the Buddhist past. The Taliban managed to annihilate 2,500 priceless works of art, many of them treasures of Bactrian Buddhist civilization. And on February 27, 2001, they announced their intention to

destroy the Buddhas of Bamiyan. Destroying the enormous statues proved harder than it seemed, and the Talibs ended up using anti-tank mines. Finally, a rocket delivered the coup de grace to the last Buddha's head.

Undoubtedly, many treasures of Buddhist material culture remain hidden underground across Afghanistan and the republics to the north, waiting for future excavators and better times. Much harder to trace is any vestige of another world religion that took Central Asia by storm in the pre-Islamic centuries: Christianity. Today, almost all Central Asians belong to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence of Sunni Islam. Surprisingly, however, Christianity once had a huge following in Sogdiana and among the nomadic Turks to the north. Nestorian Christianity is virtually extinct today, but it was the interpretation of Jesus's teachings that first entered Persia, Central Asia, and China.

Nestorian Christianity

Nestorius became patriarch of Constantinople in 428 and waded into a controversy that divided the early church: the nature of Christ. He took the position that Christ contained two persons—one human and one divine. The opposite position—which turned out to be victorious—held that Christ only has one nature that unites his humanity and divinity. The Byzantine emperor Theodosius II doesn't seem to have cared, but his sister, Pulcheria, hated Nestorius. At the First Council of Ephesus in 431, she got him exiled. Though Nestorius died around 451, his teachings lived on in what eventually became an autonomous Nestorian Church.

Byzantine persecution of the Nestorians eventually led them to seek refuge in Persian lands. The Sasanian Empire became a center for Mediterranean astrologers, astronomers, philosophers, doctors, and literati fleeing Byzantine intolerance. By the end of the 5th century, Nestorian teachings were the official doctrine of the church in the Sasanian Empire. The religion seceded from the Byzantine church and established its center at the Sasanian capital, near Baghdad.

The Sogdians lost no time in embracing the religion. Given the points of overlap with their Zoroastrian worldview, the leap of faith might not have



been a great one, yet the trade-minded Sogdian merchants also had more material concerns in mind. The arrival of Nestorianism coincided with important economic developments. Starting in the 5th century, Sogdiana experienced a golden age at the Silk Road's center; they eventually became great missionaries for Christianity. Nestorian texts entered Sogdiana and the Tarim Basin almost exclusively in Sogdian translation and made it to China by 635, shortly before the Arab invasions.

In the steppes of Kazakhstan and Mongolia, Christianity endured well after the Arab conquests, achieving prominence among the elites of Chingis Khan's era. In 550, Nestorian priests baptized Turkic nomads and wrote a Turkic language down for the first time, in the Syriac alphabet. What little researchers know suggests that Christianity took off in central Turkmenistan in a form that differed little from the nomads' shamanistic religion, with its emphasis on the power of nature and ancestors and its drinking rituals and taboos.

Compared with Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, Nestorianism left a light mark. As Richard Foltz notes, Christianity was a major Central Asian religion for more than 1,000 years—until the 1300s—yet barely any trace of it exists today. Even the archaeological record is thin. Foltz theorizes that the explanation lies in trade. Buddhism benefited from Indian and some Chinese patronage, and later, Islam would be tied to the Arab conquests of the Umayyad Empire and the Arabo-Persian civilization of the Abbasids. However, Nestorianism was a refugee religion in the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire and experienced periodic persecution by the Zoroastrian magi. Moreover, Sogdian merchants seeking to spread Christianity lacked the sponsorship of a state ideologically committed to their faith. Even when it comes to belief, money talks.

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5

The Xiongnu and Tensions with China

This lecture will dig deeper into the culture of the Scythians, focusing on their remarkable Steppe civilization and the first great exemplars—the Xiongnu. The empires of antiquity knew the nomads as both foes and allies, and nomadic confederations were often bewitched by the allure of sophisticated court cultures. One person who noticed this pattern was the scholar and philosopher Ibn Khaldun, who developed the famous theory of group solidarity called *‘asabiyya*. Khaldun observed that the diet, dress, husbandry practices, and social life of desert nomads bound them together and gave them a seemingly fanatical unity, which was a huge advantage in battle with sedentary neighbors. Once the tribes had established empires, however, they settled into the libertine ways of sedentary aristocrats and became easy prey for new nomadic invasions. Then, the cycle started all over again.

The Xiongnu Empire

In 200 BCE, the Xiongnu nomads of Mongolia defeated the young Han Empire. Two years later, the Han emperor was compelled to sign a treaty with Modun—the Xiongnu leader—recognizing him as an equal. Modun transformed the Xiongnu tribes into a disciplined, united force, but behind the façade of the formidable Xiongnu confederation was a fragile coalition of nomadic lieutenants.

The Xiongnu Empire was divided into eastern and western kingdoms. Each kingdom had a “wise king”; beneath them was an elaborate hierarchy of nobles, commanders, and governors. Each king commanded an army of tens of thousands of men. Thus, the Xiongnu formed a well-disciplined military society that united many disparate tribes across a wide region into a complex, integrated hierarchy.

But Modun’s rule only endured as long this elaborate hierarchy remained loyal, and to maintain this loyalty, he desperately needed Chinese prestige goods. In this respect, Modun was a typical nomadic ruler. Elite hierarchy was enforced through elaborate burials. Luxury items of unimaginable value were



buried with powerful chieftains, as were the retainers, concubines, and wives sacrificed to accompany them. Elite burials also presented an opportunity to display the power of the dead chieftain's clan or tribe, so the funeral ceremony was a chance to reinforce and strengthen the existing hierarchy—to ward off new challenges to the ruling clan's hegemony.

In later centuries, nomads called Huns would cement this pattern with the Romans, and the pagan Turks would do much the same with the Byzantines. However, Modun set the mold. He appears to have primarily been after silk, fine textiles, and wine. These goods were the most valuable part of the annual tribute the Han paid to him. But the bulk of the tribute consisted of foodstuffs not available in the Steppe. Han statesmen observed that food was the best way to curb the Xiongnu urge to raid.

The Han-Xiongnu War

Border markets were important sites of exchange between nomads and sedentary people. In the Achaemenid provinces bordering the Central Asian desert, nomads acquired luxury items, such as wool carpets produced in Persia. These items found their way to elite burials at sites like Pazyryk. For nomads, the finer things in life were a question of staying in power or being violently deposed. One of the primary functions of a ruler was to distribute large quantities of prestige goods to his commanders, and these goods could only come from neighboring sedentary areas. For example, in 51 BCE, a Xiongnu chieftain who submitted to the Han received 20 crates of gold, 200,000 copper coins, 77 suits of clothing, 8,000 articles of silk, 6,000 crates of silk floss, and 34,000 bushels of rice.

The Xiongnu also had something the Han wanted. In 138 BCE, the Han emperor dispatched an envoy to seek out an alliance with the Xiongnu's nomadic rivals. Zhang Qian, the envoy, was eventually taken prisoner and spent 10 years as an honored Xiongnu captive. Before escaping and returning to China, he managed to visit the Fergana Valley, where he stumbled upon something remarkable—horses that sweated blood. The red color of their sweat, which was probably caused by a skin parasite, led Zhang to call them “heavenly” horses. More importantly, they were large compared to the ponies used by nomads. Tales of these horses electrified the Han emperor's

imagination. Raising the vast number of horses required by various Chinese militaries was no small feat, but wholesale horse production was what the nomads did best. The Han wanted these horses, and the nomads were in the way.



The Han-Xiongnu war broke out in 133 BCE and was fought over 2 centuries. Over time, the Han slowly gained the upper hand. The first step was to secure the horses they needed to best the formidable Xiongnu cavalry. The so-called War of the Heavenly Horses began in 104 BCE after the Han emperor sent an expedition far west to secure the Fergana Valley. Moving soldiers into this region was costly and complicated. For a 300-day march across China to reach the west, each soldier required 18 bushels of rice. The oxen carrying this rice and other supplies required 20 bushels of wheat each. Moreover, the animals could not survive more than 100 days crossing the deserts of the Tarim Basin and the Taklamakan. Exhausting their supplies—and on the verge of starvation—the army was forced to turn back. Two years later, a second expedition of 60,000 men, 100,000 oxen, and 20,000 other

pack animals finally succeeded in crossing the arid expanses. The army subdued the nomadic kingdoms of the Fergana Valley and installed friendly regimes. The soldiers also captured thousands of Fergana horses, which would become the core of the great Han cavalry armies.

Ultimate victory for the Han came from exploiting divisions within the Xiongnu confederation, which was riven with infighting. Via bribes with lavish gifts and strategic marriages with Chinese princesses, various Xiongnu clans were peeled off. By 50 CE, a confederation of eight major tribes had broken away to form the Southern Xiongnu, becoming vassals of the Han. The Northern Xiongnu resisted for a time but were eventually crushed and subsumed into a new nomadic confederation—the Xianbei. This confederation eventually became vassals of the Han too.

Having defeated their great rivals, the Han had a significant incentive to maintain a permanent presence in Central Asia, particularly in the west. In the caravan towns of the Tarim Basin, they could tap into the lucrative transcontinental trade routes that were beginning to emerge. This region would eventually be a major crossing point for the Silk Road. Moreover, through their contacts with the Yuezhi, the Han could derive greater trade wealth. Their thirst for jade was endless, but most jade mines were south of the impassable Taklamakan Desert. Thus, the idea of the military farm—or *bingtuan*—emerged.

To maintain their presence and prevent nomads from seizing the region, soldiers were permanently stationed in garrison towns in the west. They were given land to feed themselves and their families and also had the freedom to make money from trade. Despite the uncooperative land the soldiers had to work with and recurrent nomadic raids, the *bingtuan* provided the foundation for a skeleton Chinese presence in the Tarim Basin that would ebb and flow until the 18th century.

Artistic Exchange

Far from being monolithic, the Steppe boasted merchants, artists, monks, missionaries, and other travelers from across the sedentary world. Some of these outsiders settled permanently in nomadic encampments as honored

guests. Scythian art represented a blend of many influences, but nomadism was its core feature. As archaeologist Barry Cunliffe notes, the Celtic art that took Europe by storm in the 5th century was itself a product of European nomadic interactions with the Central Asian Steppe.

Scythian animal art emerged in northern Kazakhstan and Mongolia from the 9th to the 3rd centuries BCE. Stags with enormous antlers, ibexes, and various predatory felines are common themes. The animals appear in the most unlikely poses, with swirls, waves, and flourishes. To the ancients, abstraction may have been one way of imparting emotional meaning to the hunt—the existential struggle to kill fast-moving prey, free to run away across the open grasslands.



Nomadic art likely derived much of its communal meaning from nomadic religion. The nomadic peoples of the steppe and desert—and even the foragers of the Siberian forests—had a remarkably unitary belief system revolving around two poles. The first pole was one's ancestors, who played a key role in the life of all nomadic communities. Clans were organized around a common, heroic ancestor. The spirits of these ancestors had to be appeased through

ceremonies and rituals, and a person's deceased loved ones continued to play a role in their life. Even well into the Islamic period, nomads kept devotional altars in their yurts dedicated to their ancestors.

The second pole is exchange with nature. Many Eurasian peoples believe that natural objects are invested with healing or cosmic energy. Central Asia, Siberia, and Mongolia are saturated with holy mountains, elevated points, springs, and groves where pilgrims try to tap into healing energy. Ancient Steppe nomads developed cults of earth, water, forests, and mountains and worshipped deities. For example, the pre-Islamic Turks believed that powerful spirits could take the shape of animals, such as male wolves and camels. Although anyone could tap into earth energy, it was best to do it through a special practitioner called a shaman. One of their jobs was to harness the force of special objects possessing spirit benefactors.

Although shamans had status, their role was communal. These practitioners might interpret omens and signs and invoke blessings before a major battle, but they also practiced medicine and prepared herbal medicines. Some would go into a trance-like state at times to better reach the spirits or assist others in doing so by strangling them. People often came to shamans for help. The shaman's trade was in objects possessing healing properties, such as the horns, nails, claws, and talons of certain animals and birds. Part of their job was to guide people to the right talisman depending on their needs. No powerful chieftain did anything without a shaman at his side.

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6

Rise of the Turkic Empires

By the 560s, the Turks had created the first empire in world history to directly link Europe with China. The Turk Empire understood trade and sedentary states in ways that set it apart from other Steppe confederations: The Sogdians thrived as the Turks' commercial agents, and 2 centuries later, they brought a new religion called Manichaeism to a new Turkic state called the Uyghur khaganate, where it became the official religion. In this lecture, you will get to know the two states that rocked the Eurasian world from the 6th to the 9th centuries. In doing so, you will see how they built on patterns of cultural borrowing and developed into sophisticated states, undertaking ambitious trade ventures and using new religions to cement their ideology.

The First Turk Khaganates

Researchers have little information about how the term *Turk Empire* was used. All they really know is that it referred to a nomadic confederation rather than an ethnicity. Peter Golden—perhaps the foremost authority on the early Turks—traces the appearance of the Turks in written sources to the collapse of the Xiongnu Empire, which set off a chain of events that reverberated for more than 500 years. In the Eastern Steppe, a new nomadic confederation formed from the remnants of Xiongnu and took shape from the 4th to the 6th centuries. Called the Juan-juan or Rouran Khaganate, it extended across Mongolia and Northern China.

Around this time, the Ashina clan of the Turks sprung into history. Their leader—Bumyn—appears in sources from 542 as a vassal of the Juan-juan. In 546, Juan-juan leader Anagui requested Bumyn's help with a nomadic revolt, and the Ashina leader complied. As per Steppe custom, he then requested a bride from Anagui, who refused and added an arrogant reply to boot. The Juan-juan's enemies, the Wei, were watching this exchange and hurried to offer Bumyn a bride of their own. At this point, in 552, an angry Bumyn used his new Wei allies to destroy the Juan-juan. Anagui committed suicide, and the first Turk khaganate was born.

Bumyn rapidly set about subjugating the subject peoples of the Juan-juan. However, he died within a year, and his brother Ishtemi was left to expand the khaganate to the west. Allying with the Sasanian Empire, he defeated the Hephthalites in the 560s before establishing domination over most of Central Asia. Thus began the slow but steady displacement of Iranian influences and languages with Turkic ones. By the time Ishtemi died around 575, the Turk Empire stretched from Mongolia to the Caspian Sea.

Some 2 centuries later, in the dying days of the second Turk khaganate, the Turks erected a remarkable literary monument to capture their pride in this achievement. The Orkhon inscriptions are credited as the first examples of Turkic literature. These two rock memorials in Mongolia's Orkhon River Valley are written in the Old Turkic alphabet. The most famous of the inscriptions captures the main themes of central importance in nomadic political culture: military prowess, heroism, and justice. Note that justice was

at the center of the nomadic ethos. The ideal ruler treated his subjects equally and could thereby demand absolute submission from the people subordinated to him.

Foreign Diplomacy

In the 6th and 7th centuries, the star of the show was a Sogdian silk merchant named Maniakh. Around 586, he convinced the Turks to let him lead a trade delegation on their behalf to the Sasanians in Persia. He brought a substantial cargo of silk, which the Sasanians purchased—and then publicly burnt. This insult to the Sogdian was designed to send a message: Don't tread on our turf. After Maniakh returned home to report his failure, the Turks sent another delegation. The Sasanians murdered all of them. The Sasanian Empire of the 6th century was still one of the mightiest in the world, so the Turks couldn't do much in retaliation.

In the meantime, however, the Turks had a chance to develop trade relations with the Byzantines. Shunned by the Sasanians, Maniakh met a warm reception at Justin II's court in Constantinople. The visit was a success. During the next 8 years, the Byzantines sent five embassies to the Turk khaganate. Moreover, at the other end of their empire, the Turks enjoyed surprisingly cordial relations with China. The Tang dynasty—which ruled from 618 to 907—had a fascination for all things foreign, including Christianity. Though mostly not Christian, the Turks became a frequent presence at the Tang court. Some of them were even appointed to high military positions. With the Turks came more and more Sogdians.

In one example of cultural exchange, Chinese music changed completely during this era. Steppe nomads were known for excelling in musical performance. String instruments with bows were probably a nomadic invention. Tang emperor Xuanzong maintained 30,000 musicians, many of them Central Asians. His powerful concubine Yang Guifei liked dancing, so Sogdian dancers—known for their daring leaps—came to the court in droves. As in many societies, lavish patronage of the arts was one means of displaying power.



However, Yang's talent did not save her from her enemies, who convinced the reluctant emperor to have her executed. The man most responsible for Yang's murder was one of the emperor's lieutenants—An Lushan. After becoming governor of three military districts, he declared himself emperor and then launched a 7-year rebellion that nearly destroyed the Tang dynasty. An Lushan posed an existential threat, so the Tang had to call on a hitherto marginal Turkic group to save them.

The Uyghurs

The Uyghurs were able to subdue An Lushan's rebellion—but at great cost to the Tang. The latter's rulers became increasingly reliant on the Uyghurs, who in turn exacted greater and greater tribute. By the time the Tang dynasty collapsed in 907, it was a pitiful shadow of its former self, having broken into 40 independent fiefdoms.

With Uyghur help, the Tang were able to make a major dent in Turk power. In 744, the Uyghurs defeated an Ashina clan that had taken over the Turk state, and 15 years later, they erected a rock pillar proclaiming that the Turks had “ceased to exist.”

Like the Turks they deposed, the Uyghurs were Turkic nomads. The empire they created was a typical product of the Steppe in many respects, consisting of nine Turkic tribes called the Toquz Oghuz—or Nine Family Names. The Uyghurs were the leading tribe. In structure and ritual, they were similar to the Turk khaganate, and like other nomadic rulers, they attached primacy to ritual submission and practiced human sacrifice when a khagan died.

Notwithstanding these similarities, the Uyghurs represented something new. In 762, the Tang recruited their leader, Bogu, to evict rebels who had taken their capital, Luoyang. After kicking the rebels out, Bogu got to know the large Sogdian merchant community in Luoyang. These Sogdians professed a religion that was new to China: Manichaeism. Bogu was won over, and he and the Uyghur elite promptly converted.

Manichaeism

Manichaeism owes its name to Mani, a Parthian aristocrat born in 216 CE. After a series of revelations, he proclaimed himself the last prophet in history after Zoroaster, Buddha, and Christ. Mani presented the universe as a struggle between light and darkness. Spirit—or good—exists in particles of light trapped within matter, which represents evil. Mani’s ideas owe a lot to Zoroastrianism, but he called himself an apostle of Christ.

In his lifetime, Mani was able to convert some Sasanian princes to his cause but was ultimately outwitted by the wily Zoroastrian magi and their leader, the high priest Kartir. Mani died in a Sasanian prison around 276, but his religion took off like wildfire, especially among the Sogdians. Manichaeans fled Sasanian and Byzantine persecution in droves, settling along the cities of the Silk Road. Baghdad may have been the Manichaean center, but by the late 500s, it was rivaled by Samarkand, which became an independent

Manichaean bishopric. Mani's teachings were translated into Sogdian and made their way to the Tang court, where they were tolerated as a nomadic religion.

Researchers don't know why Bogu adopted Manichaeism as the Uyghur state's official religion in 762, but several possible explanations exist. First, the Sogdian elect succeeded in translating Manichaean concepts into terms the Steppe nomads could understand. Second, Manichaeism offered the Uyghurs a way of demonstrating their superiority over the Tang. Third, the Uyghurs may have wanted to distinguish themselves from their enemies in the Steppe. Their Turkic rivals—the Kyrgyz and Qarluqs—had many Christian converts. Finally, the Uyghur elite needed Sogdian financing for its endless military campaigns and internal squabbles. Whatever the truth of the matter, the Sogdian elect became the main power at court, second in influence only to the Uyghur ruling elite. Anti-Manichaean Uyghurs assassinated Bogu in 779, but Manichaeism remained the official religion.

Cultural Patronage

Another thing that set the Uyghur khaganate apart from other Steppe states was their cities. With Sogdian money and Chinese engineers, the Uyghurs built impressive settlements whose ruins survive to this day. The jewel in the crown of their cultural patronage was the cave complex at Bezeklik, in northern East Turkistan. Here, workers carved 77 caves into the rock and decorated the walls with beautiful mural frescoes. Bezeklik depicts Buddhist and Manichean heaven and hell scenes along with Uyghur aristocrats in court attire.

The murals also evince another distinctive feature of the Uyghur state: its alphabet. This script was derived from the Sogdian alphabet, which itself was a product of Aramaic and Syriac writing systems. In turn, those systems were derivatives of Arabic and Hebrew scripts. The old Uyghur script was adopted by the khaganate to replace the runic alphabet employed in the Orkhon inscriptions. Its use is a reflection of the wealth and complexity of the Uyghur state, which purchased or demanded massive quantities of silk from the Tang dynasty. A modified form of the script survives today in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.



As Ibn Khaldun might have predicted, the Uyghur khaganate succumbed to many of the same forces that had been the undoing of the Turk khaganate: Uyghur rulers had grown too comfortable in their cities, too quarrelsome to build consensus among their tribes, too dependent on their Sogdian priests and financiers, and too integrated into the Chinese economy. This time, the Kyrgyz dealt the fatal blow. They sacked the Uyghur capital in 840, and the Uyghur khaganate was no more.

By the time of this collapse, the Muslim Arabs were well on their way to cementing control over the Central Asian regions of Khorezm and Sogdiana. Henceforward, the nomadic Turkic states that would emerge in the Steppe would be Islamic—all but one, that is. In Russia, Ukraine, and northwest Kazakhstan, a Turkic confederation called the Khazars was on the rise.

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7

Khazars and Khaganates

Around 630, a new nomadic confederation took the Central Eurasian Steppe by storm. They subdued rival confederations, incorporating them as subjects or driving them away. They routed a newly ascendant power—the Muslim Arabs—and intimidated an old one, the Byzantines. Many iterations of such a story exist. However, as you will learn in this lecture, the Khazars did something unprecedented: They converted to Judaism, blending it with the shamanic beliefs of the Steppe. The Khazar khaganate thus became the only Jewish state to take root outside of the Middle East. The Khazars also created a powerful, wealthy state that dominated the Steppe in what is now Russia, Kazakhstan, and the Caucasus for nearly 3 centuries.

The Khazars

The Khazar khaganate formed a dynamic society, with a multiethnic, multireligious population. It had a sophisticated grasp of the Volga River trade and was the only power of its day to withstand the onslaught of the Arab armies spreading the new religion of Islam. The Khazars' obscure origins as a people rest in the chaotic collapse of the western Turk khaganate in the mid-7th century. They probably emerged out of tribes belonging to the Ashina—the royal house of the Turk khaganate—and the Sabirs, who were another Turkic people who had been subjects of the Turks.

The Khazars established a capital on the Volga River, so much of the trade going between North Asia and the Islamic world to the south passed through their hands. The first power to ally with them was Byzantium, which had exchanged several embassies with the western Turk khaganate in the 6th century. In 704, Emperor Justinian II, who had been exiled to the Black Sea, attempted to recruit Khazar help. He married a Khazar princess, who changed her name to Theodora. Justinian repaid the Khazars for their help by murdering two high Khazar officials and running away to Bulgaria. But when he did eventually regain the throne, Theodora joined him, cementing the Byzantine-Khazar alliance. Nearly 3 decades later, the future emperor Constantine V renewed the alliance by marrying the Khazar princess Cicek, who converted to Christianity and changed her name to Irene.



Constantine V

Khazaria's undoing ultimately came from a subject people known as the Rus. They were a product of the Volga River trade, which was booming thanks to long Khazar stability. Bustling trade towns developed along the river's shore, and Slavs and Scandinavian traders from further north interacted and intermarried. The Rus khaganate remained a loyal vassal of the Khazars for much of its existence, yet by the late 800s, various Rus chieftains were ready to strike out for themselves. They found ready allies among Turkic nomads who were also tiring of Khazar rule, such as the Bulgars and the Pechenegs. This Slavic-Turkic alliance proved too much for the Khazars, who saw their wealth and possessions melt away across the late 9th and early 10th centuries. By the time the Grand Prince of Kiev—Sviatoslav I—sacked the Khazar capital in 969, the khaganate was a shadow of its former self.



Conversion to Judaism

How and why did the Khazar ruling elite convert to Judaism? Much of the evidence is circumstantial enough that some researchers dispute whether the conversion to Judaism even happened. However, two Jewish sources have been the source of scholarly debate.

The most important source is the famous Khazar correspondence. Dating to the mid-10th century, it is supposedly an exchange of letters in Hebrew between the Khazar khagan Joseph and a man named Hasdai ibn Shaprut that explains the emergence of Judaism in the Steppe. Shaprut was a Jewish minister in the government of the Muslim Umayyad caliphate in Córdoba, Spain. In the letter, he reports that he has made numerous inquiries to his merchant contacts about the Khazars. Eventually, this letter made its way to the Khazar khagan through a German Jewish merchant. Joseph responded gratefully and reported that a khagan named Bulan invited three learned men—a Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew—to present the merits of their faiths. Judaism emerged from this debate victorious.

In the 19th century, the Khazar correspondence was assumed to be a forgery or an attempt by Shaprut to get attention. Some scholars believe he got his documentation from the Schechter letter. In 1896, Solomon Schechter consulted an enormous collection of documents contained in the archive of a Cairo synagogue, where he discovered an unsigned 100-line letter dating to around 950. The letter states that Jews emigrated to Khazaria from Armenia and intermarried with the population. Like the Khazar correspondence, it features a religious dispute that Judaism wins. Today, researchers debate the authenticity of both documents.

However, accounts of Christian and Muslim travelers to Khazaria do confirm the ruling elite's Jewishness, though they have frustratingly little else to say. For example, the Abbasid geographer Istakhri learned that Khazaria's Jewish population was limited to the king and his court. Ibn Fadlan was one of the few Muslim writers who actually traveled to Khazaria, and he reported much the same thing.

Still, researchers have little information about what Khazar Judaism actually consisted of in practice. Stronger evidence displays that the ruling elite knew Hebrew, which has huge implications for religious life. As illiterate speakers of an Altaic language, Khazar chieftains would have had to invest substantial time and energy to learn Hebrew. Knowledge of the language would've offered them the means to study the holy books of Rabbinical Judaism and increased their connection to the broader Jewish world of the Middle East and Mediterranean. This idea could be especially important considering evidence suggesting that Jewish merchants made their way to Khazaria.

The Khazars demonstrated no desire to spread Judaism. In the 10th century, Istakhri reported that the khaganate's chief minister was Muslim, as was the capital's population. The capital city was divided into two parts: The khagan and the court resided in Atyl, the western and smaller half of the city. The larger part of town, Khazaran, was inhabited mostly by Muslim merchants and some Christians. One attraction Judaism might have held for the ruling clan was exclusivity. The Khazars likely chose Judaism to distinguish themselves from their competitors.

Though the extent of their Jewishness remains open to debate, no one disputes the Khazars' shamanism. For instance, graves from Khazaria have images of naked warriors with masks and spears dancing in ritual combat. The Khazars also practiced human sacrifice before their conversion to Judaism, and shamanic practices continued after they reportedly became Jews around 740. After converting, they continued to perform ritual strangulation to bring their rulers closer to the spirit world, enabling them to predict how long they would rule. The ostentatious burials the Khazars performed for rulers were also in keeping with the Steppe traditions of the Scythians.

Dismantling of the Khaganate

Judaism was not the only thing that set the Khazars apart from other Turkic Steppe states. From the mid-700s onward, the khaganate had two rulers: a sacral one and a temporal one. The sacral ruler—the khagan—was literally a talismanic figure who never appeared in public. His deputy, called the bek, was the official who actually governed. The bek was responsible for order and fortune in this world, while the khagan was responsible for order and fortune in the cosmos. Physical isolation defined the latter's person. Ibn Fadlan stated that the khagan came out of his tent once every 4 months. The only official allowed to see him was the bek, who entered his tent barefoot, with a piece of wood in his hand. Upon entering the tent, the bek set this wood on fire and could only speak to the khagan when the fire burned out. The only other people permitted to see the khagan were his 25 wives and 60 slave girls.

So, the Khazars were shrouded in mystery, with conflicting reports about every aspect of their origins and governance. Just as scholars have trouble pinpointing the start date of the Khazar khaganate, they also disagree on

when it ended. The sack of Atyl by Sviatoslav I in 969 seems like a fitting date. Around this time, the Khazars converted to Islam, partly because they had come to rely on elite Muslim soldiers from Khorezm—an old Achaemenid province east of the Caspian Sea. The Rus and the Khorezmians appear to have divided the khaganate among themselves. The Khazars dispersed but retained a distinctive identity.

The Russian Primary Chronicle is the principal source about the Kievan Rus and refers to Khazar Jewish communities in the kingdom. Moreover, the khaganate's political culture lived on in unexpected ways. When Ibn Fadlan visited Kiev, he noted that the Rus state had adopted the Khazar political structure. At the time, Kiev had a prince running the show and a sacralized Rus khagan who lived in a fortress from which he never emerged.



Ibn Fadlan

Successor States

During the Khazar era, numerous peoples closely associated with the modern states of Eurasia begin to appear in the historical timeline. At the heart of Central Asia, several Turkic confederations arose, including the Kimek-Kipchak, the Qarakhanid, and the Oghuz. Like the Khazars, the origins and nature of these peoples remain speculative, and most written evidence of their early existence comes from Arab and Abbasid chroniclers.

Perhaps the most influential of the Turkic successor states was the Oghuz confederation. A surviving book of myths and legends—the *Book of Dede Korkut*—is a crucial and rare source of clues about their pre-Islamic nomadic life. Their social structure, culture, and language reflected those of their Turkic Steppe forebears.

Though the Oghuz first dominated the area that is today between the Caspian and Aral Sea, their descendants would travel much further afield. Eventually, the term *Turkmen* would come to replace the word *Oghuz*. Today, the Turkmen predominate in Turkmenistan and live in several Middle Eastern countries. Osman I—the 13th-century founder of the Ottoman dynasty that would eventually create the greatest of all Turkic empires—was of Oghuz ancestry.

The Khazar, Oghuz, and other successor Turkic states provide an important window into the Eurasian Steppe at an important transitional moment. In the centuries to come, the absorption of Central Asia into the Islamic world would completely transform the region and its peoples.

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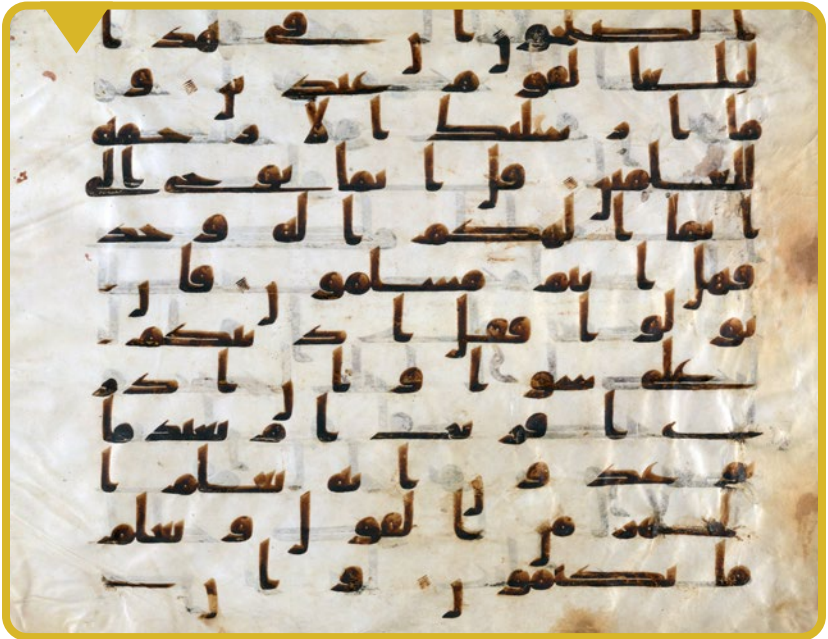
The Arrival of Islam

8

In the desert city of Mecca, Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation in 610. And 25 years later, his followers defeated the powerful Sasanian army at the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah. They took the oasis city of Merv in 651, and in 751, they defeated the Chinese at Talas. After the Battle of Talas, the Muslim conquest of Central Asia south of the Syr Darya River was complete—but the actual story isn't so simple. The world of Islam acquired a pronounced Central Asian flavor in its first 100 years. Within yet another century, Central Asia would become a cradle of Islamic civilization, going from one of the most religiously diverse places on Earth to one of the most uniformly Muslim. Yet, as this lecture will illustrate, within this seeming uniformity developed a cosmopolitan brand of Islamic civilization that absorbed the cultures and beliefs of nomadic and sedentary peoples.

The Advent of Islam

The city of Mecca is situated in the forlorn Najd plateau, and in the 7th century, it was a small, bustling commercial entrepot. One of Mecca's native sons, Muhammad, was a prominent figure in the town's economy, having married a wealthy widow named Khadijah. Around the age of 40, he took to meditating in a cave on a mountain outside of town for weeks at a time. During one of these retreats, he was visited by the archangel Gabriel, who communicated God's divine revelation to him and continued to do so for the next 23 years. The result was the Muslim holy book—the Qur'an—which Muslims regard as the last of God's revelations and the literal word of God.



With its emphasis on justice, fairness, kindness, and equality, Muhammad's message soon attracted a large following. However, to the pagan Arabs, the Islamic religion's most important characteristic was its monotheism.

Muhammad taught that there was only one God, who sent revelations to mankind through his prophets. The idol worship practiced by the pagan Arabs had to come to an end. Muhammad stated that the Qur'an was the last of a long chain of divine revelations stretching back to Abraham and, ultimately, Adam and Eve. The early Muslim community was bent on spreading God's final, perfect message to the entire world.

Historians have advanced several explanations for the rapidity of the Muslim conquests. One theory is the undeniable energy that the Muslims derived from spreading a new religion with proven universal appeal. Another hypothesis is that the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires were both faltering in the 7th century, so they couldn't respond effectively to desert fighters who had seemingly united overnight. Yet another explanation regards the Muslim invasions of Persia and Byzantium as one gigantic raiding enterprise. The Arab tribes of the Najd region were valiant, fearless, rough, and eager to take their neighbors' wealth. The simplicity of Islam's message—with its emphasis on the oneness of God—appealed to them most. The early Islamic state resembles some of the nomadic empires of the Steppe.

Taking Over Central Asia

Historian Hugh Kennedy divides the conquest of Central Asia into four periods. The first phase stretches from the conquest of Merv in 650 to 705. In the 630s, the Muslim armies crossed into Sasanian Persia and began 2 decades of seemingly unstoppable conquest. Within just a few years, they had overrun the Sasanian capital at Ctesiphon. After the fall of Nahavand in 642, the Sasanian king Yazdegerd III fled to Merv, which was the provincial capital of the far-flung Khorasan province—encompassing parts of modern-day Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. However, the local population was hardly going to sacrifice everything to defend an empire clearly doomed to defeat. Yazdegerd was murdered near Merv, and the Sasanians were no more.

Merv was one of the great oasis cities of Central Asia and the Silk Road. Over many centuries, the capital had seen Greek, Persian, Turkic, and other Steppe influences wash over it. Now, the city would become the launching point for the expansion of Arab and Islamic influence into Central Asia. However,

the Arab conquest of Central Asia was greatly slowed after the capture of Khorasan. Merv's isolation in the middle of the Karakum Desert made it costly to venture too far north. The lands beyond the Amu Darya River were remote and arid. The lands beyond Merv were ruled by many small Sogdian principalities and fiercely independent Steppe peoples. The Sogdian cities of Samarkand and Bukhara were not only wealthy from the Silk Road but also allied with the powerful Turkic tribes of the hinterlands. Various well-defended states that had broken away from Persian influence were also present. For a time, the Arabs idled on the edge of Central Asia.



The second phase of conquest stretched from 705 to 715 and began with the Abbasid governor Qutaybah ibn Muslim. With an army of 50,000 at his disposal, he aimed to unite the Arabs. He did so by replacing raiding with organized conquest and immediately retook the ancient Buddhist town of

Balkh, which had briefly submitted to the Muslims but then rebelled. Two major campaigns—against Bukhara from 706 to 709 and against Samarkand from 710 to 712—cemented Muslim control of Sogdiana.

The violence of the conquests was terrible. For example, in 706, Qutaybah took the city of Paykand, which was not far from Bukhara. After he left, the city rebelled, and the governor returned to retake it. He laid siege to the town, and when Paykand finally succumbed, he massacred the men and enslaved the women and children. The city never recovered. Stories of this sort led many Sogdian princes to temporarily convert to Islam, but others fought to the death.

The death of Qutaybah—which was ordered by a Bedouin chief named Waki in 715—opened a third stage in the Muslim conquest of Central Asia. This phase was marked by a period of resistance from the recently conquered Central Asians. In 720, Divashitch, the Sogdian ruler of Penjikent, renounced Umayyad authority. He attempted to unite with other remaining Sogdian princes to push out the Arabs. The rebellion was crushed by 722, but neighboring foes posed more trouble. The Arab conquest of Samarkand and Bukhara had greatly disrupted the balance of power in the region. The Chinese and the Turkic nomads were the most troublesome. The Turgesh khaganate had long-established relations with the Sogdians and critical trade interests in the region. They inflicted several crippling losses on the Arabs and even seized back Bukhara for a time. However, the caliphate sent major expeditions and eventually reestablished the Muslim position by the late 730s.

The fourth and final stage of the conquest was more pragmatic, stemming in part from the challenges the Umayyads faced in administering the vast new regions that had been conquered. Verse 9:29 of the Qur'an commanded the Muslims to impose a tax on subject peoples—the *jizyah*—without offering much clarity on what this actually meant. Such taxes were commonplace in this period. Prophet Muhammad himself did not impose it consistently. In Central Asia, the issue of how to treat conquered peoples became a major source of tension. The Umayyads imposed the *jizyah* on people even if they converted, which made these converts second-class Muslims. Another problem had to do with Islam's desert origins: Arab society was tribal, and not belonging to a tribe meant you were nobody. The result of all this tension was

a major revolution that changed the course of Islamic history. In 747, Persian soldiers who had converted rebelled in the Iraqi city of Kufa. They marched on Merv and declared a new state.

The Umayyads and the Abbasids

Until this point, the Umayyad dynasty had kept the growing Muslim polity together. Their dynasty was established in Damascus in 661. But they had attained power at the expense of Prophet Muhammad's descendants and were implicated in the murder of two sons of the assassinated fourth caliph, Ali. Many Muslims regarded them as villains. Moreover, from Damascus,



the Umayyad rulers indulged in a lot of Byzantine-style debauchery. Enough was enough: In 750, an army of Arab and non-Arab Muslims proclaimed a new dynasty. The Abbasid caliphate elevated a descendant of Prophet Muhammad's nephew to the position of caliph. The Umayyads fled to Spain, where they ruled their own minor caliphate until the 11th century.

The nexus of power in the Islamic world was transferred away from Damascus to Baghdad, where the Abbasids soon made their capital into one of the great centers of learning in the world. The Abbasid caliphate was an Islamic state that abandoned the political culture of the Najd. Instead, they saw themselves as the successors of the sophisticated, cosmopolitan cultures of Iran and Mesopotamia, especially in matters pertaining to scholarship and learning. The Abbasids also took on Sasanian and Byzantine imperial trappings, creating powerful institutions that allowed them to concentrate wealth in the central treasury. They spent lavishly on public works, grand buildings, and high culture. Most importantly, the Abbasid caliphate fused the old desert ethos of early Islam with the cultures of fresh converts, creating a new synthesis that scholars refer to as Persianate or Islamicate civilization.

The Abbasids also brought a new era of stability to their far-flung Central Asian possessions. Abu Muslim became the new governor of Khorasan. He was a powerful Persian general who had been born in Merv and led the armies that had toppled the Umayyads and installed the Abbasids. Despite his name, Abu Muslim seems to have had Zoroastrian sympathies and beliefs, which may explain his popularity in the region. His more conciliatory policies toward the many peoples and faiths of Khorasan ushered in a period of relative peace.

The last challenger to Arab domination over the region—the Tang dynasty—was defeated in 751 at the Battle of Talas. Islamic control over the key arteries of the Silk Road and the main crossroads of Central Asia would now be virtually unchallenged for the next 4 centuries. However, in Islam's 1st century, the Turkic Steppe to the north of the Syr Darya remained untouched by the religion. The Abbasids chose a more peaceable route to further expansion into these regions. Rather than conquering armies, Muslim missionaries and emissaries became the norm beyond the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, slowly finding converts among these outlying communities.

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9

The Age of the Polymaths

The arrival of Islam in the 7th century had heralded violent conquest, but by the 9th century, Abbasid rule had fostered an Irano-Arabic cultural synthesis in the former cities of Sogdiana, as illustrated in this lecture. The raiding mindset of the desert was abandoned in favor of the administrative apparatus of Iranian tradition: the legacy of the defeated Sasanians, Parthians, and Achaemenids of old. In literature, the Arabic language was wedded to the idiomatic sophistication of Persian letters. Some of the most important politicians and literati were recent Buddhist and Zoroastrian converts to Islam. The architects of this cultural synthesis were the Samanids, who presided over Abbasid influence in Central Asia during the 9th and 10th centuries. They also did something the Arabs had not: They brought many Steppe nomads into Islam. The Turks who became Muslim laid the groundwork for another new synthesis of Central Asian origin—Turko-Islamic civilization.

The Samanids

The Samanid dynasty emerged out of the Abbasid sphere. Recall that the Abbasids—who traced their line to Prophet Muhammad’s uncle Abbas—overthrew the Umayyads in 750 with an army of non-Arab converts who had been adopted as honorary members of Arab tribes. The Abbasid revolution’s effects were manifold. The capital shifted from westward-looking Damascus to eastern-looking Baghdad. Conversion to Islam advanced, and the new climate nurtured the mystical movement known as Sufism. Most importantly, Islam went from being an Arab religion to a multiethnic one.

The Abbasid caliphate was enduring, but it was riven by rising tension between the two main branches of Islam—Sunnism and Shi‘ism. A more alarming concern was the elite’s reliance on elite Turkic soldiers who had converted to Islam but soon became the powers behind the throne. In 861, the caliph al-Mutawakkil was assassinated by his Turkic bodyguards, who took over. In 945, the Abbasid capital of Baghdad was captured by the Persian Buyids. Out of this instability, warlords in peripheral regions, such as Central Asia, struck out on their own.



The Samanids would prove the most enduring and influential of the dynasties that arose in the Central Asian provinces of Abbasid influence. They ruled until around 999. Historian Deborah Tor has suggested that the Samanid achievement can be understood through four themes. First, they were a Sunni power at a time when Shi'a Islam was ascendant, helping to ensure that Central Asia became the nearly homogeneous Sunni realm that it is today. Second, they revived Persian letters. Dari was a late version of Middle Persian and the language of the Sasanian court; it became the elite tongue of the eastern Islamic world.

Third, the dynasty's founder—Ismail—became an exemplar of the ideal Islamic ruler. Crucially, the ruler must be just. The Samanids captured this idea in an all-important maxim: The ruler must command the right and forbid the wrong. However, the ruler must also practice jihad, expanding the territory in which Islam could be freely practiced. For the Samanids, expanding meant attacking and enslaving the Turkic nomads of the Steppe. Last, by the mid-10th century, the Samanids had almost single-handedly converted much of the Turkic Steppe to Islam.

The Samanids gave Bukhara the layout its old city has today, expanding the walls of the citadel. To showcase their power to the public, they constructed mosques, squares, palaces, and caravanserais. The Samanid family mausoleum is perhaps the most stunning of all Samanid structures to survive to this day. Built in the late 9th or early 10th centuries, the building is modeled on a Zoroastrian fire temple and boasts a characteristic domed roof and four arched entrances. It is an evocation of the values of the society that created it—an homage to abstract ideals of beauty, transcendence, complexity, design, and interconnectedness.

Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari

Some of the greatest minds in history emerged from such a society, including Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari, who was born in Bukhara in 810. He became one of the most famous scholars in Islamic history due to his work on the hadiths—or reports—about the actions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad.

The compilation of these reports had commenced under the Umayyads in the early 700s. The process was chaotic. Imam al-Bukhari was one of the first Islamic scholars to confront the issue of hadith fabrication head-on. At the age of 16, he traveled to the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina and stayed in the region for many years, collecting hadiths and assessing each report's reliability by holding it up to two standards. First, did it evince an obvious factual, political, cultural, or other bias? Second, did it come from a reliable chain of narrators with a good reputation? On this basis, he produced several Sunnahs—collections of verified hadiths. Today, they are among the foundational texts of Islamic scholarship and law.



From a world-historical lens, researchers can draw several conclusions from Imam al-Bukhari's work and the setting that made it possible. The scholar wrote at a time when the Islamic world was becoming more complex and expanding. A legitimate, widely accepted record of the prophet's teachings was a vital reference point for this society. Qur'anic exegesis, commentaries on the hadiths, and commentaries on those commentaries became the lifeblood of

this evolving legal and intellectual community. Out of 600,000 or so hadiths that Imam al-Bukhari reportedly collected, he considered only a little more than 7,000 to be worth including in his compendia. Intellectuals remember him today for his dedication and scientific rigor.

The generation after Imam al-Bukhari embraced Greek logic, mathematics, philosophy, medicine, and poetry. At Baghdad in the 9th and 10th centuries, Aristotle and Plato were all the rage—partly thanks to Jewish and Nestorian Christian intellectuals who had fled Byzantium, bringing with them texts and knowledge that would soon be translated into Arabic. Bukhari patronage created a new generation of philosophers. The effervescence spread to Samanid Bukhara, which was famous for its libraries. The setting was ripe for fostering creativity and genius.

Farabi

One unlikely figure who changed the course of philosophy was Abu Nasr al-Farabi. He was born around 870—the year of Imam al-Bukhari’s death—in a truly unlikely place. The desert town of Turkistan in southern Kazakhstan, north of the Syr Darya River, was squarely in the no-man’s-land that the Arabs called the Land of the Turks. Farabi was long known as “the first Turk to make a name in philosophy,” as Will Durant once wrote. He was most likely the son of a Turkic palace slave soldier.

Farabi idealized the philosopher king and, thus, enlightened rule by a singular monarch or leader. He provided the foundation for much of medieval Islamic philosophy and also heavily influenced intellectual life in Europe, where he was known as Alfarabius. His emphasis on happiness as the main goal of life and intellect as an emanation of God has made him popular nowadays too. However, his contributions were not limited to philosophy. Farabi’s *Great Book of Music* was the most important treatise on music of its day.

The cosmopolitanism of Farabi and his peers—gingerly jumping from logic to math to music to medicine—generated the term *polymath*. Polymaths were geniuses whose intellectual and linguistic capabilities knew no bounds. The generation after Farabi gave birth to a Central Asian figure of arguably



Abu Nasr al-Farabi

even greater importance. Ibn Sina, who is known as Avicenna in the West, was a Central Asian polymath whose writings and activity as a physician formed the basis of modern medicine.

Ibn Sina

Ibn Sina was born in 980 in a town north of Bukhara. Uzbek, Tajik, and Iranian nationalists all claim him for themselves. He was the son of a minor Samanid official who prized education and hired a tutor. The young Ibn Sina memorized the Qur'an by the age of 10, and at the age of 18, he was

appointed court physician to the Samanid ruler, Nuḥ ibn Mansur. Ibn Sina's energy was boundless. He wrote around 450 works in fields as disparate as astronomy, alchemy, geography, and theology.

However, his reputation towers in the field of medicine. His five-book *Canon of Medicine* was the most important medical textbook in the Muslim and Christian worlds for a long time. Book I describes basic diseases and their symptoms and a general philosophy of health and treatment. Book II describes medicinal plants, minerals, and animal substances along with their potential applications as treatments. Book III describes more complex medical conditions, including sexually transmitted diseases and nervous disorders. Some of Ibn Sina's greatest original contributions are in this book, including detailed and reasonably accurate descriptions of migraines, cataracts, and strokes. Book IV describes surgery, hair, skincare, and fever. Finally, Book V provides instructions for preparing more than 600 different medicines.

Ibn Sina's achievement is hard to comprehend not only because it extended to every branch of knowledge but also because of the tremendous turmoil of the era. During his lifetime, the Samanid kings were regularly deposed and killed by their elite Turkic slave soldiers, who were recent converts to Islam. In the 10th century, these Muslim Turks acquired increasing power. Several Turkic dynasties—the Ghaznavids, Qarakhanids, and Saljuqs—eventually arose and overthrew the Samanids once and for all.

In his twenties, Ibn Sina fled to Khorezm, where he became an administrator. While there, he met a polymath who was his equal. If Ibn Sina is the father of modern medicine, then Abu al-Rayhan al-Biruni is the father of anthropology.

Abu al-Rayhan al-Biruni

Biruni's career is inextricably tied to the Turkic Ghaznavid dynasty. Its ruler, Mahmud, asked the ruler of Khorezm to send him some intellectuals. Ibn Sina fled town, but Biruni complied. Mahmud then took Biruni along when he invaded India, and the result was one of the treasures of all human creation—the two-volume *History of India*. Biruni's work is an exhaustive summary of every aspect of North Indian society in the 11th century. While



Mahmud was pillaging Hindu temples, Biruni was interviewing Hindu sages, ascetics, doctors, monks, and astrologers. No detail of life was too trivial to escape his attention, from the customs of the common poor to the intricacies of Indian mathematics.

Biruni also used trigonometry to try and calculate the radius of the Earth based on the height of a hill he was standing on and the dip in the horizon from the top of that hill. Moreover, he wrote dozens of texts on astronomy and mathematics, and his correspondence with the Persian astronomer al-Sinjari proposes a radical concept for the times—that the Earth rotates on its axis. Many centuries would pass before this theory was confirmed.

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10

The Coming of the Mongols

Bloody. Fearsome. Murderous. These words probably come to mind when you think about the Mongols, who took the world by storm in the 12th century. But in the past 20 years, scholarship has become more nuanced. The vast Mongol Empire developed complex institutions to govern its diverse subjects, adapting aspects of Steppe politics to the climate, topography, and population of the areas it conquered. The Mongols did sack and pillage where there was resistance, but they were much more strategic about carrying out massacres and destroying cities than they've been given credit for. In fact, as you will learn in this lecture, the Mongols largely built upon the legacy of a succession of Turko-Persian nomadic empires that had progressively integrated Turkic culture with Islam between the 9th and 12th centuries. The Silk Road reached its zenith due to their rule across Eurasia.



The Qarakhanids

In 1206, Chingis Khan held a conference near Ulan Bator to lay down laws and commence his invasion of China. Arguably, the real story began well after his death. In 1235, his son Ogodei launched invasions to the west, and 5 years later, most of Russia had been taken. The conquest culminated in the infamous sack of Baghdad in 1258, ending the Abbasid caliphate. The following year, Great Khan Mongke died with no successor. The empire fragmented into four units: the Golden Horde in Russia, the Il-Khanate in Iran and Iraq, the Yuan dynasty in China, and the Ulus Chagatai—or Chagatai khanate—in Central Asia.

In Central Asia, nomadic rule was nothing new. When the Mongols arrived, they took over a sophisticated infrastructure of coexistence between nomads and sedentary people. In the centuries before the Mongol conquests, three Turko-Islamic empires had already made their mark on the region: the Qarakhanids, Saljuqs, and Khorezmians.

The Qarakhanids are representative of the Turko-Persian empires generally, and it was these seminomadic states of Central Asia that the Mongols would later build upon. The main clan of the Qarakhanids was probably of Turkic Ashina origin and appears in the late 9th century in what is now northern Kyrgyzstan. Early on, they clashed with the Samanids, who took their main trading town—Taraz, in southeast Kazakhstan—in 893. However, over the course of the 10th century, Samanid domains were gradually eroded. Ilig Khan Nasr conquered Bukhara on October 23, 999, bringing an end to the dynasty that had brought Islam to the Turks.

The Qarakhanids quickly adopted the trappings of a great empire and tried to maintain peace between the nomads and sedentary peoples by investing in infrastructure and urban development. Management of unavoidable nomadic-sedentary conflict was a solid legacy of theirs that the Mongols would pick up on. Another such inheritance was Islam. By the late 900s, the Qarakhanids were the first nomadic dynasty to adopt it as something like an official religion. However, the Islam of the Turkic nomads did not mark a radical break from Steppe religious beliefs and customs—it was saturated with miracle workers and supernatural occurrences. The Mongols would follow this important precedent when they became Muslim 2 centuries later.

Perhaps the Qarakhanids' most enduring legacy is in the realm of intellectual life. What could be called Turkic literature first came into being under their watch. From 1072 to 1074, Mahmud al-Kashgari compiled his *Compendium of the Languages of the Turks*—an encyclopedia of old Turkic language, culture, religion, and politics. The book was written in Arabic and intended for the Abbasid caliphate, but the text contains substantial Turkic quotations. For al-Kashgari, the Turks—especially the Muslim ones—were a distinct people with a mission in the world of Islam.

During the centuries preceding the Mongol conquest, the Islamic world was becoming more Turkic for two reasons. First, the age-old westward migrations of nomads from Siberia were taking on a more Turkic character. Second, the Samanids had brought large numbers of Turkic slaves into Abbasid realms. In Iran and Iraq, they became an elite guard, eventually taking power for themselves. In both cases, the Turks were encountering Islam and converting. However, rather than assimilating completely, they injected a strong dosage of Steppe beliefs into the Islamic culture that had taken root in Transoxiana.



The sedentary Muslims—Arabs, Persians, and Sogdians—had come to accept the Turks as peers, but none of this implied unity. The Qarakhanids fell prey to the same irresistible forces that had torn apart other nomadic empires of the region. They would give way to the Saljuqs, the Karakhitai, and then the Khorezmians, who all briefly seized power in the heart of Central Asia. Yet each dynasty continued to fuse nomad and sedentary traditions. Literature, architecture, arts, and crafts all flourished during this period, fueled by the never-ending stream of trade from west to east.

The Khorezmians

The final Turko-Persian khanate of the region—the Khorezmian empire—was at its height in the 13th century and possibly the greatest power in the Muslim world. Under the Khorezmians, Turko-Persian rule over Central Asia

reached its zenith. They had gotten the great social and cultural balancing act begun by the Qarakhanids down to an art form. Who could threaten their rule now?



The danger materialized in 1216 in the guise of a trade delegation. In the Steppe, rulers commonly assessed their enemies' strength by sending out merchants. Predictably enough, Chingis Khan sent a delegation of 450 Muslim merchants, whose safe passage had been guaranteed. En route, however, a Khorezmian governor stopped the Muslims, stole their goods, and had them all executed. The khan was furious and sent more envoys to demand that the governor be punished. They were killed too.

The result was one of the most destructive chapters of the Mongol conquest: Chingis invaded in 1219, and his soldiers—Mongols and Turks—razed Bukhara and Samarkand to the ground. By some estimates, the damage they caused set Middle Eastern agriculture back 200 years. The Khorezmians put up stiff resistance, but their legacy of empire building would never be restored again.

The Chagatai Khanate

A Mongol state emerged on the Khorezmian empire's ashes—the Ulus Chagatai. Chingis's second son, Chagatai, received a vast territory that stretched from East Turkistan to western Uzbekistan. However, the state could boast of little wealth in the arid, mountainous realm. Moreover, without a strong state tradition or major agricultural wealth, the Mongols had frequent civil wars. Chagatai's death in 1241 ushered in conflict between his descendants and those of his brother Ogodei.

Over the next century, two patterns emerged out of this perennial conflict. First, the Chagatai khanate was divided into two states. The term *Ulus Chagatai* came to apply only to the western part—Transoxiana. The Mongols living in the east called their realm Mughulistan. Second, real power devolved from Chingisid princes. Those claiming the bloodline of the Great Conqueror became figureheads, while the chiefs of the large tribes wielded real power. Both trends mitigated against concentrating power centrally.

Discernible patterns of change lurked beneath the never-ending conflict. As elsewhere, the Mongols maintained strict separation between nomads and sedentary people, but in Transoxiana, this practice was more relaxed. The Mongol emirs lived close to the fields and gardens that they owned and formed close relationships with Islamic leaders in the agricultural zones, delegating authority to them in large cities. Nevertheless, their legacy in economic affairs was mixed. Nomadic strife meant that agriculture never recovered from the Mongol invasions. The Seven Rivers region in southeastern Kazakhstan had been one of region's breadbaskets, especially under the Qarakhanids. But after killing or deporting the farming population, the Mongols transformed the territory into pastureland.



They were more astute when it came to trade. The Ulus Chagatai stood in the middle of the Silk Road. Taxing passing caravans was one way to compensate for poor returns on agriculture. The larger the caravan, the more money the Mongol emirs could count on. The Mongols of Central Asia did everything in their power to promote trade. They established mints across Transoxiana to produce high-quality silver coins and created the region's first united monetary economy. Moreover, by constructing stage posts and securing highways, they tapped into the vast wealth controlled by their Yuan brethren in China.

The Mongols also tried to integrate the Central Asian economy in other ways. A puzzle concerned how to promote trade between the Fergana Valley and Kashgaria. Both areas are fertile, rich regions, yet they are separated by some of the most forbidding mountains in the world. The Mongols

rebuilt the city of Andijon as a trading hub, creating infrastructure and incentives for merchants to undertake the dangerous journey. However, the benefit from these investments proved ephemeral in the long run. A popular rebellion that toppled the Yuan in 1368 meant that the Ulus Chagatai had new, anti-Mongol neighbors. Additionally, in the following decades, new technologies would lead to an overnight surge in maritime trade, spelling the decline of the Silk Road.

The Chagatai Legacy

Under the Mongols, the entire region became Muslim, yet their record on religion was mixed. During the initial conquests of the 1220s, cities—and the mosques in them—were razed to the ground. From a long-term perspective, religion and trade pale in comparison with the Mongol role in spreading the Black Plague.

Disease was a component of what Marie Favereau has coined the Mongol exchange in reference to the flourishing of art, skilled crafts, botany, medicine, measurement systems, and crafts. But this exchange had a dark side: *Yersinia pestis*—the bacterium that causes the plague—is found in steppe soils. It is transmitted by burrowing rodents. Marmots, which were a chief source of fur pelts in Russia, became infected. Caravans became vectors of both wealth and pestilence, and the result was the most lethal plague in recorded history. Some scholars estimate that more than half of the population of Europe and the Middle East died in the 1340s and 1350s.

What is less well known is where exactly the plague originated—which is where Central Asia comes into the story. In 2022, an international team of archaeologists published a study of two cemeteries in the Chu Valley in northern Kyrgyzstan. Syriac inscriptions and crosses on the tombstones indicate that the victims practiced Nestorianism. These Christians were likely the first victims of the Black Plague. *Y. pestis* had wiped this community out 8 years before the first recorded reference to the plague in Europe. Central Asia was a victim of its own prosperity: The Chu Valley was a natural stopping point for merchants going to and from China. The plague could not have found a better starting point for its devastating career.

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11

Tamerlane, the Sword of Islam

Tamerlane was the last of the great nomadic conquerors of the Eurasian Steppe. In the 14th century, he founded the Timurid Empire and emerged as the most powerful ruler in the Muslim world, referring to himself as the “Sword of Islam.” As this lecture will discuss, various concrete reasons explain why Tamerlane merits attention today. First, his self-made state was vast, encompassing most of Central Asia and the Caucasus, Afghanistan, and Iran. Second, his troops killed as many as 17 million people in the last quarter of the 14th century. Third, Tamerlane created a proto-centralized government that concentrated all power in his hands, demolishing much of the decentralized Steppe political culture of the Mongol Empire. Finally—and ironically, perhaps—he was a great patron of the arts. The Timurid era ushered in a golden age of Persian and Turkic poetry, literature, miniature art, and architecture.

Tamerlane's Rise

In the mid-14th century, the Mongol Empire was a shadow of its former self and had broken up into various successor states, yet its legacy was a major source of political legitimacy. The Chagatai khanate was led by a khan who had to be a Chingisid—a descendant of Chingis Khan. However, the khan exercised little actual control, and the actual politics of the khanate involved a never-ending jockeying for control by different tribes. Both tribal and non-tribal Turco-Mongolian nomads and settled city dwellers, peasants, and mountainous peoples comprised the khanate. In one way or another, all the tribes owed their corporate identity to affiliation with the army of Chingis Khan. They received much of their wealth from the settled population and much of their manpower from the non-tribal nomads.



Chinghis Khan

Tamerlane was born in the 1330s near his future capital, Samarkand. His nomadic tribe—the Barlas—commanded particular prestige and could claim that it had descended from an original tribe of the confederation of Chingis Khan. Researchers know little of Tamerlane’s early years, but the similarities between his rise to power and the career of Chingis Khan are too manifold to dismiss. Like the Great Khan, he did not hail from a prominent lineage of his tribe and was not a son of his tribe’s chieftain, yet he began his career by cultivating a small group of followers who demonstrated absolute loyalty to him because of his leadership qualities.

In 1360, when Tamerlane was probably in his twenties, Steppe politics presented an opportunity: Nomads known as Mughals who lived in the eastern part of the Chagatai khanate invaded Transoxiana, which was home to the Barlas tribe and the city of Samarkand. Hajji Beg—chieftain of the Barlas tribe and Tamerlane’s uncle—decided to turn back the Mughals with his army. Upon reaching the Amu Darya River, Tamerlane asked for his uncle’s permission to return to the town of Shahrissabz to fend off the invaders. By acceding to his nephew’s request, Hajji Beg made history and sealed his demise as leader of the Barlas. A dizzying succession of battles, flights, periods of exile, and alliances formed and broken followed.

Tamerlane initially became one of several junior partners to tribal leader Amir Husayn and even married one of the latter’s sisters. As soon as this coalition drove the Mughals out of Transoxiana in 1364, the two had a falling out, and Tamerlane allied against Husayn with the very same Mughals he had driven out. The rivalry concluded with Husayn’s assassination in about 1370. Tamerlane then married four of his former brother-in-law’s widows and distributed the other wives as gifts to allies and strategic partners. In doing so, he took control over all of Husayn’s non-tribal troop contingents. Within a decade of the Mughal invasion, Tamerlane had gone from a wandering opportunist to the most powerful nomadic chieftain in Transoxiana. In 1370, he took the symbolic decision to adopt the title of *guregen*—or son-in-law to Soyurghatmish, a puppet ruler descended from Chingis Khan. On paper, this ruler was the khan of Transoxiana until his death in the 1380s. However, the pomp accompanying Tamerlane’s enthronement ceremony on April 9, 1370, made it clear who was boss.

Tamerlane the Conqueror

By 1379, Tamerlane had brought all of the tribes of the Chagatai khanate to heel. To keep it all together, he kept his army busy in never-ending invasions of a large chunk of the Eurasian continent. He took much of Iran by the mid-1380s, and in 1386, he began a campaign that culminated in the complete subjugation of the Caucasus. His second campaign against Iran featured a run into North Asia to chase a protégé-turned-rival—the khan of the Golden Horde. Tamerlane's armies reached Moscow in 1395 before turning around to wrap things up in Iran. Then, in 1398, he made a quick run down to Delhi and slaughtered much of its population.



The legends of brutality would only grow. Tamerlane's conquest of the Middle East lasted from 1399 to 1404 and featured a wholesale massacre in Damascus, a prolonged siege, and then the capture of Baghdad in 1401. Chroniclers believe some 20,000 Baghdadis died after the sack of the city. Tamerlane clearly enjoyed cruelty. Cities that refused to surrender were

wiped off the face of the earth. In Azov, on the Black Sea, he enslaved the entire Christian population and demolished all Christian property, including churches. And when the Ottoman garrison of Sivas surrendered in late 1400, Tamerlane buried alive most of the 4,000 Ottoman Armenian soldiers stationed there.

Tamerlane's military achievements and colorful antics should not distract from his one, absolutely consistent aim—to keep the army busy and deflect any tensions arising within the ruling elite. Endless campaigning was a common tactic that leaders of nomadic empires used to keep their holdings together, but Tamerlane went further. He facilitated massive population transfers among his nomadic soldiers to forestall opposition. Non-tribal soldiers from Transoxiana formed the core of his army, and they were kept busy on foreign expeditions for most of Tamerlane's career. The conqueror wasn't interested in setting up a permanent administration, let alone holding back on pillage and murder to profit from commerce and agriculture. This notion is the only explanation for the fact that he conquered and reconquered the same regions several times.

Tamerlane's Legacy

Tamerlane and his empire are deeply etched into the collective memory of the societies that he conquered: the peoples of Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. However, he is not remembered only for violence. Today, he and his descendants are also known as patrons of the arts. Tamerlane set the mold by deciding to make Samarkand an imperial capital on a scale unrivaled anywhere else.

The conqueror erected massive structures over the tombs of important Islamic saints across Central Asia, including the Shah-i Zinda complex in Samarkand. He appreciated the symbolic authority such imposing architecture could project. The fruits of Tamerlane's appreciation of the arts are most visible in the careers of his successors. What Stephen Dale calls the Timurid century—that is, the 15th century—was at once a period of political decline and cultural advancement. The Timurids presided over the rise of the miniature



as an art form in Iran, supported the career of the poet Mir Ali Shir Navai—who turned Chagatai Turkish into a literary language—and created many of the region’s notable architectural masterpieces.

After his death, Tamerlane became a fixture in the folk culture of the societies he conquered due to the relations he cultivated with holy men, living and dead. In life, he erected elaborate mausoleums over the tombs of Sufi saints and had his relatives buried within these imposing funerary complexes. The message was that the saints must be on Tamerlane’s side. He also frequently sought the company of holy men and Islamic scholars, using his relationship with them to bolster his legitimacy.

Tamerlane died as he had lived—on campaign. In the fall of 1404, he launched an invasion of China. By this time, he could no longer walk and had to be carried on a litter. He made it only 270 miles to Otrar in southern Kazakhstan, where he died around February 17, 1405. His empire fell apart almost immediately, but his legacy endures today across the territories he conquered due to his ability to manipulate the political and religious cultures of the Turco-Mongolian Steppe and the sedentary Islamic world.

Throughout his career, Tamerlane cultivated the image of a grand nomadic warrior following in the footsteps of Chingis Khan, yet he presided over territories that were largely agricultural. Through lavish patronage of the arts, he sought to adopt the trappings of an Islamic monarch, forcing thousands of the world's greatest artisans and craftsmen to come to Samarkand. His architects established a new type of architecture that defines the region's cities even today: The Timurids built on Persian architectural models but on a scale matching Tamerlane's stadium-size ego. Timurid edifices are monumental, with multiple minarets, enormous domes, and intricately executed tilework in a trademark turquoise hue. The zenith of this architecture is Tamerlane's own tomb, the Gur-e Amir in Samarkand. It features two ribbed domes and two minarets sheathed in geometrically complex patterns of tile that reflect sunlight and moonlight in equal splendor.

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12

Islam and Sufism in Central Asia

Recall that Zoroastrianism emphasized light and purity and established a foundation for the later popularity of Christianity and Islam. When the Arabs brought their tribal Islam to Sogdiana in the 7th century, Zoroastrian elites took little time to jump ship. The resulting fusion incorporated the learned tradition of the Zoroastrian magi and the commercial wealth and urban culture of the oasis towns. The Turks, the Mongols, and then the Timurids added a new layer, bringing Steppe traditions into the Islamic orbit in an intricate, multilayered synthesis. However, *synthesis* is not the way Central Asians think about their religious life. Most of them will tell you that they are Muslim—and they're right, of course. To see why, this lecture will take a more intimate look at the spaces, traditions, and beliefs that have comprised Islam in this region, specifically Sufism.

Sufism and Hanafism

Sufis are practitioners of Islam who embrace its more mystical, ascetic, and spiritual aspects. In the late 9th century, the mystic Sahl al-Tustari of Basra developed the idea of a cosmic Muhammad. According to him, the prophet sat at the top of a hierarchy of God's friends. Sufis who devoted themselves to Islam and achieved a sufficient degree of purity, fidelity, and devotion could be ranked among those close to God; in death, they would become saints.

Like monasteries, Sufi orders played a significant role in education and scholarship. Sufi masters taught disciples non-esoteric subjects—such as Arabic grammar and Greek philosophy—and esoteric subjects, like chanting, visualization, and geomancy. These masters attracted patronage from rulers, who gave them lands and funded their lodges; in turn, Sufis Islamized the landscape and society. They taught in madrassas, passed judgment in courts, served as administrators, and led prayers in mosques.



As the hierarchy of friends gained acceptance, Sufism became something tangible. Ordinary people could not be friends of God—but they could become friends of God's friends. Some Sufi masters enjoyed rock-star

popularity in their lifetimes as living talismans. Upon their death, they took on a mystical saintly character for the living, and their tombs became shrines. On the Steppe, tribal lineages began to trace their origin to Sufi saints. Thus, Sufism became an integral part of ethnicity.

However, in 9th-century Baghdad—the capital of the Abbasid caliphate—a class of Islamic scholars took on the mantle of interpreting and defending the tradition of Prophet Muhammad, which is known as the Sunnah. They rejected the mystical aspects of Sufism and increasingly presented themselves as the best guide to following the Qur'an and the teachings of the prophet. These scholars were becoming part of the new elite of Islamic jurisprudence, which would greatly reform the study and teaching of faith across the Muslim world—and the promulgation and interpretation of Islamic law, the shari'a.

In the 8th and 9th centuries, four major schools of Sunni Islamic legal interpretation emerged. The Abbasid caliphs adopted the oldest—the Hanafi school—and spread it across their realm, even to the distant provinces of Central Asia. Today, all Central Asian republics still largely abide by Hanafism, which is usually considered the most liberal among the schools of Islam. It broadly holds that punishment for sins committed on earth will be a matter for the reckoning hereafter and also allows greater latitude for local customs and laws to influence the application of the shari'a. This practice would have suited the Abbasids, who were attempting to establish the supremacy of Islam over a very diverse area. The schools of Islamic jurisprudence represent a more methodical, rational, and legalistic approach to Islam that was in keeping with the age of the polymaths and a more scientific worldview emanating from Baghdad. However, Sufism is not an alternative system of legal interpretation but an approach to God that is more mystical, esoteric, and even romantic.

Khoja Ahmed Yasawi

The mausoleum of Sufi saint Khoja Ahmed Yasawi juts out of an oasis town north of Tashkent. Yasawi was born in the late 11th century, and some reports have him becoming a Sufi adept at a young age. The first Central Asian Sufi

order—the Yasawiyya—is named after him and is credited with spreading Sufism across the region and establishing centers of Islamic learning on the Kazakh Steppe.

Yasawi's influence went far beyond chains of disciples. Today, a book attributed to the saint—the *Book of Wisdom*, or *Divan-i hikmat*—has outsized importance in Central Asia. It decries violence and materialism in this world, exhorting readers to be humble, faithful, and patient in the eyes of God. This work did not become popular until the 19th century and was certainly not written by the saint. Nevertheless, the lines eventually attributed to him touched the common folk and became a part of religious rituals at the community and even family levels. Religious songs and music around Central Asia incorporate stanzas from his poetry.

Tamerlane appreciated the power of Yasawi's legacy, which is why he tried to associate his name with it. The construction of the saint's mausoleum was funded by the epic looting undertaken at Tamerlane's behest. However, the conqueror did not stop there. Six years before his death, he commissioned



what may still be the largest cauldron ever built. Weighing 2 tons with a capacity of 3,000 liters of water, the bronze *tayqazan* was placed prominently inside Yasawi's mausoleum. Muslims praying in the nearby mosque could perform their ablutions using this water.

Whether Yasawi would have appreciated such attention is questionable. He followed the typical Sufi model of someone who has renounced the world. Today, his grave attracts a steady stream of visitors, but a humble site outside the building is equally as important—a cave. According to legend, at the age of 63, Yasawi retreated here for 40 days and never came out. Only another saint was able to retrieve and bury his body, some 100 meters away. Turkic saints commonly retreated to an underground chamber, often before dying. In Sufi belief, death is a release. Sufi poets frequently describe it as a point of entry into God's pure love.

Pilgrims' belief in Yasawi's holiness makes his shrine a destination for tens of thousands of visitors every year—but this belief has also made such shrines a target of every shade of reformer the Muslim world has seen over the past 200 years. European colonial administrators, Islamic modernists, Soviet communists, and Muslim fundamentalists have all called for the shrines to be shut down. Moreover, Tsarist and Soviet ethnographers advanced a theory that shrine pilgrimage was merely Zoroastrianism or paganism masquerading under an Islamic veneer. However, this claim misses the point: Central Asian Muslims don't visit shrines because they are pagans; they do it to get closer to God and Prophet Muhammad. This belief is displayed most prominently at the Throne of Solomon, which is a holy mountain in the Fergana Valley.

The Throne of Solomon

Kyrgyzstan's second-largest city is Osh. It emerged not next to but around a mountain shooting up from the earth like a geyser. Mount Solomon—or the Throne of Solomon—seems miraculous. No agreed explanation exists for why the site got this name, but the shrine has generated a cult rivaled in size only by that of Yasawi. In the mid-1950s, at the height of communism, more than 100,000 thousand pilgrims visited the mountain on Eid al-Adha, which

is the most important Islamic holiday. Typically, the pilgrims don't seem too concerned with the identity of the saint buried at the summit. Rather, the sacred energy of the mountain itself draws them.



All pilgrims assert that pilgrimage to the Throne of Solomon is equivalent to hajj, which is one of the five pillars of Islam and the most grandiose pilgrimage of all. It's centered on the holy heart of Islam—a structure in Mecca called the Kaaba, which Muslims must circumambulate. Given the distance and cost, hajj has never been a real possibility for most Muslims, so Sufism has stepped in to fill the void. Across the Islamic world, important shrines have functioned as a substitute. These places are often referred to by locals as the second Mecca.

Critics of shrine pilgrimage present this belief as proof that saints and Sufis are nothing more than a bunch of charlatans. However, historically speaking, this claim is unfair. Take the example of the first Sufi martyr, who was burned at the stake in 922. Al-Hallaj famously declared, "I am God," promoting the Sufi belief that people must annihilate their egos and become

part of God. Most people mistakenly believe that he was executed for making this heretical statement. Instead, he was killed because he preached that Muslims could perform hajj by circumambulating a table in their own home. At places like the Throne of Solomon, a sort of compromise between two possibilities exists: One is the real hajj, which historically meant taking years to travel to Arabia. The other is hajj of the soul, which people can perform in their hearts without going anywhere.

In 1964, the Soviets shut down the Throne of Solomon. They dynamited a chamber into the mountain and built a museum of atheism. Pilgrimage resumed immediately, though, as the pilgrims could now pose as visitors to the museum. This story testifies to the close connection between Sufism and politics. The region's rulers—from Tamerlane to Stalin—have all been jealous of the enormous symbolic power wielded by saints. Tamerlane's successors would find themselves playing second fiddle to the great Sufi empire builders of the early modern era.

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13

The Timurid Renaissance

The 200 years following Tamerlane's death in 1405 saw radical shifts in Central Asian politics. In the 15th century, a Chingisid dynasty called the Shibanids overthrew Tamerlane's descendants. In turn, they paved the way for the Uzbeks to take over in the 16th century. Meanwhile, continual migration of Turkic nomads into Transoxiana spurred Turko-Islamic civilization to new heights. Nomadic rulers settled into the court culture of the oasis towns, sponsoring religious institutions and patronizing the arts and sciences. All the while, Sufi masters made increasingly daring forays into politics, becoming the true power behind the throne. Taken together, these changes yielded a sophisticated Islamic culture based in cities that included the nomads of the desert and steppe. This lecture focuses on the period spanning the late 14th to the early 16th centuries—or the Timurid renaissance.

Renaissance

The renaissance began with Tamerlane himself, who was every bit as much a patron of the arts and culture as he was a bloodthirsty tyrant. Yet the renaissance women of the Timurid Empire cannot be ignored. An Islamic monarch usually considered his wives and sisters to be an extension of his own power, so these women were expected to sponsor architectural projects of their own. Tamerlane very much encouraged this practice. Many of the great gems of Islamic architecture exist only thanks to the sponsorship of royal women. For instance, the Friday Mosque in Samarkand was commissioned by his senior wife, Saray Mulk.



After Tamerlane's death, his son Shah Rukh was able to assert control over eastern Iran and Transoxiana. Now as the controller of the Silk Road routes, he and the Timurids grew immensely wealthy and used that wealth to patronize the arts and science.

Involvement with the arts and sciences rested at the core of what it was to be a Timurid. Tamerlane's grandson Ulugh Beg embraced this legacy with gusto. In 1417, he built a madrassa that still bears his name—it is the cornerstone of Uzbekistan's main tourist attraction, the Registan Square. The madrassa was one of the best universities of the Muslim world in its day, and Ulugh Beg himself gave lectures there.

Though much of their teaching and scholarship involved Arabic, madrassas were a Turko-Islamic institution. The first formal madrassa with a systematic curriculum was founded in Baghdad in 1067 and would become the model for the many such schools to come. It was named the Nizamiyyah after its founder—Nizam al-Mulk, the chief minister of the Turkic Saljuq empire. Such academies had existed before, but the minister established vehicles for funding them. Madrassas became an essential piece of any Islamic landscape, spreading quickly because the newly converted Turks wanted to advertise their piety.

In Central Asia, the madrassa built on an existing model—the vihara, or Buddhist monastic college. These colleges were laid out on a square with a courtyard in the center, which was overlooked by small chambers in which classes took place. Students sat on cushions in a semicircle around the instructor and would debate him.



Fall of the Timurids

Shah Rukh had held the empire together and fostered a vibrant intellectual culture, but as time wore on, the Timurid realm faced greater obstacles. At least one challenge was predictable. Like other empires in the region, the Timurid state was an appanage system. The emperor rewarded his lieutenants with land holdings that often became hereditary. This practice worked well enough in parts of the world where there was enough fertile land—and population—to go around. But in resource-scarce Central Asia, appanage could only work when the state succeeded in conquering new territory. Tamerlane had done it, but his descendants couldn't.

However, the bigger challenge was ideological. In the 15th century, the Mongol Empire was long gone, but the principle of Chingisid legitimacy remained. Tamerlane had respected it by marrying into the family. Nevertheless, he never pretended to be a Chingisid himself. The tyrant had overcome this chip on his shoulder through sheer force of military genius and political talent, but neither Shah Rukh nor Ulugh Beg was up to the task. Chingisid upstarts claimed that the Timurids were illegitimate. Such talk created a liability for the Timurids that an up-and-coming politician on the Steppe sought to exploit.

That opportunist was named Abu'l-Khayr Khan. He was descended from Shiban—the fifth son of Chingis Khan's eldest son, Jochi. This confederation was known as the Shibanids, but in Tamerlane's time, they had already started calling themselves Uzbeks. By 1429, Abu'l-Khayr was able to take control of the confederation. With the support of the Manghits, he began attacking Timurid territories. In 1446, he established himself on the banks of the Syr Darya River, which put him in an optimal position to interfere in Timurid affairs. For Ulugh Beg, the timing could not have been worse: His father, Shah Rukh, died the following year, and various princes challenged his seat on the throne. As he crisscrossed Central Asia stamping out rebellions, some of these rivals began asking for Abu'l-Khayr's help.

But Abu'l-Khayr wasn't powerful enough to push out the Timurids yet, and his Uzbek khans frequently flouted his orders. Infinitely worse, Western Mongols invaded the Steppe in 1457. These invasions were catastrophic, and in the ensuing years, some of the most powerful Uzbek chieftains deserted

him. Still, the Shibanids presented an ongoing threat to the stability of the Timurid realm. After Ulugh Beg's murder in 1449, the empire never really got back on solid footing. Rule passed between the hands of various princes. A brief reprieve occurred under Abu Sa'id in the 1460s, as he spent much of his reign attempting to improve the lot of the common people by engaging in agricultural projects. Yet after his death, the core of the Timurid realm split, with rival factions in the two capital cities of Herat and Samarkand.

These regions were still great centers of learning and culture, however. The last Timurid ruler was Sultan Husayn Bayqara, and he turned Herat—now in modern-day Afghanistan—into a magnet of learning. But despite the great splendor of Timurid court, the splintered Timurid domains were vulnerable to any rival who could unite against them by the late 15th century. The Shibanids, under Abu'l-Khayr's grandson Shibani Khan, would succeed here. In the first decade of the 1500s, Shibani got his own confederation in order and finished off the Timurid states in Transoxiana. This achievement ushered in what one historian has called the “Shibanid century.”

The Shibanid Century

Shibani and his successors cemented their control over the oasis cities, which began to recover from the incessant warfare of earlier centuries. Uzbek tribes from the north flocked to his rule, migrating into Transoxiana. Many of these nomads would eventually transition to a sedentary or seminomadic lifestyle, interacting closely with their peasant neighbors. They would come to distinguish themselves from the nomads in the Steppe, who began to be known as Kazakh.

The Shibanids had vision and invested in irrigation and commercial infrastructure. Fine ceramics, metalwork, and textiles continued to emanate from the great settled cities. The Shibanids' most cherished cause was their beloved Bukhara. From its glory days as the Samanid capital, the city had fallen into disrepair, but in 1535, the construction of the Miri Arab Madrasa changed everything. It became the most important center of learning in Central Asia and symbolized Bukhara's association with Islamic scholarship and piety.



Khoja Ahrar

Bukhara and its madrasas furnished the educated elite for much of Central Asia in the 16th century. The city's prestige was eclipsed only by that of another powerful institution: the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Sufism had acquired massive dimensions across the Islamic world. Masters attracted lavish sponsorship from politicians and built lodges next to the shrines of revered saints, where they trained disciples—many of whom went on to train their own students. The chain of transmission between masters and disciples across generations was known as a *silsila*. And a desirable *silsila* originating from a particularly revered master opened doors to wealth and respect.

One Central Asian who appreciated this process and sped it up was Khoja Ahrar. He was born in 1404 and lived almost till the end of the century. Ahrar cemented the role of Sufism in politics, especially the Naqshbandi Sufi order, which traces its origins to the 14th-century mystic Baha al-Din Naqshband. The saint's teachings inspired many followers, but Ahrar molded them into an institution. He could rightly be called the founder of the Naqshbandi Sufi order.

Wealth and power had a lot to do with it. Ahrar forcefully argued that Sufis should amass wealth to promote the better good, and the later Timurids sought his blessings. He amassed enormous land holdings that were akin to plantations and may have been the wealthiest person in Central Asia. He seems an apt target for the criticisms of Sufis that emerged in the later colonial era. In the 19th century, both colonial Europeans and the Muslim reformers influenced by them would portray Sufis as power-hungry opportunists.

However, these clichéd representations are out of place in the context of the 15th century. For most Central Asians, Ahrar is remembered not for his money but for his piety and miracles. He cleaned up the soiled garments and bedding of the sick and generously donated money to the poor. In these and other ways, he was a typical saint—but he was also an empire builder. The Timurids maintained brutally onerous Mongol-style tax systems, so Ahrar created a system known as Himayat to shield the peasants. A seminal article by Jürgen Paul argues that granting this protection was one way Ahrar built up the Naqshbandi order as a wealthy institution: To avoid the draconian taxes of the Timurids, peasants and merchants sought to become tenants of Ahrar.

Ahrar established a foundation for other Sufis to acquire wealth in later centuries. More and more Sufis positioned themselves as protectors of the common man, and secular rulers threw more and more riches at them. Patronage of Islam became an essential component of the model of a Turko-Muslim monarch. It encompassed not only Sufism but also madrassas, the arts, and the sciences. All these realms became more refined and increased their personnel and wealth. The Timurid renaissance set the foundation for the oasis and Steppe civilization that the Russians encountered 200 years later.

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14

New States and Confederations

Two centuries—the 1600s and 1700s—separate the Shibaniid dynasty from the Russian conquest. In this lecture, you will move from east to west, looking at the new kinds of states and societies that emerged across Central Asia. East Turkistan saw the emergence of a Sufi state to the south and a Buddhist khanate in the north. To the west, the Kazakh khanate coalesced in the Steppe. And across Transoxiana, three powerful khanates crystallized around the cities of Kokand, Bukhara, and Khiva. Some of them lasted longer than others, but all experimented with state building in different ways. Moreover, in the midst of the rise and fall of dynasties, the ethnic composition of the nomadic regions was transforming. Tribal confederations coalesced around categories such as Kazakh, Turkmen, and Uzbek, with consequences that would become clear in the 20th century.

Altishahr

Today, East Turkistan is ruled by the Chinese Communist Party, which calls it Xinjiang. For most of its history, this part of Central Asia—particularly the southern part—maintained its distance from China. Nestled between the Himalayas and the vast Taklamakan Desert, the region is naturally protected from invaders and has gone by various names. In some sources, it's known as Altishahr; in others, it's called Kashgaria, after the city of Kashgar.

For much of its history, Altishahr has been culturally and politically closer to the Fergana Valley and exported important influences across the mountains to western Turkistan. Around 1600, however, it was Altishahr's turn to be influenced. Kashgar received a visitor named Ishaq Wali, who'd been dispatched by his father—known as Makhdumi Azam, or the Great Master. Azam was a disciple of Khoja Ahrar and instructed his son to spread the teachings of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Consequently, the Chingisid khan of Kashgar became Wali's disciple.

The Naqshbandi message took off like wildfire across the oasis towns. Azam's descendants followed the example of Khoja Ahrar to the letter, and while spreading the gospel of self-renunciation and piety, they acquired wealth and power. But by the mid-1600s, different branches of Azam's family were locked in a civil war. In 1653, Wali's descendants poisoned and killed Khoja Muhammad Yusuf, who was descended from Azam's eldest son. Yusuf's son—Afaq Khoja—looked outside Altishahr for help.

The options before Afaq were not appealing. Altishahr was surrounded by Buddhist states. In Tibet, the Gelukpa sect of Buddhism had wrested control of Lhasa in 1642 with Mongol help. Their leader took the title of Dalai Lama and had imperial ambitions for empire building. Meanwhile, northern East Turkistan had fallen in the orbit of the Western Mongols—or Oirats. The Oirats were a persistent thorn in the side of the Turkic nomads of the Steppe, the Chinese, and their fellow Mongols. In 1676, the Oirats set up the Dzungar khanate under their leader, Galdan.

The Dzungars were a nomadic confederation of Oirats. Since their conversion to Buddhism a century earlier, the Mongols had recognized the spiritual authority of the Dalai Lama, who found common cause with Galdan in



trying to stop the rise of the Qing Empire. The great Qing leader—the Kangxi emperor—had set his sights on Central Asia. The Dzungars and Tibetans appreciated the magnitude of the threat, and both wanted a ruler in Altishahr who owed them a favor.

The Sufi Afaq was an unlikely supplicant in the court at Lhasa, but he got what he wanted: The Tibetan abbot threw his weight behind Afaq and instructed Galdan to do the same. The Dzungar leader then marched an army down to Kashgar and installed the Sufi on the throne. For the next century, Afaq and his descendants would rule the oasis towns, paying tribute to the Dzungars and, later, the Qing. This century of Sufi rule, extending from 1678 to 1759, saw a flourishing of literature and art.

The Dzungars and Kazakhs

The Chinese occupation of the 1730s cut short this remarkable period in the region's Islamic history. At the time, the Qianlong emperor had little interest in Altishahr, but he'd had enough of the Dzungar khanate. In 1720, Qing armies defeated the Dzungars in Tibet. Three decades later, the Qianlong emperor conquered Dzungaria, partly through invasion and partly with the help of dissident nomads. The old pattern of the Steppe was at play: When disunity was present, Chinese rulers could play different chieftains off one another—but the nomads always united once again under a charismatic leader. This time, however, the emperor decided to break the cycle. In 1755, he ordered the extermination of all able-bodied Dzungar men. Women, children, and the elderly went into bondage to Qing soldiers or other Mongols; they were not allowed to keep their tribal names. In the words of historian James Millward: “The Zungar people vanished.”



Qianlong's defeat of the Dzungars in the mid-18th century effected cataclysmic changes in East Turkistan, leading the Qing to maintain a permanent presence in the northern part of the region and allowing them to extend their rule to Altishahr. The northern and southern parts of East Turkistan were thus united under direct rule for the first time, and Beijing has maintained its control over the region ever since.

However, in other parts of Central Asia, older patterns continued. Qianlong's onslaught created an exodus of Dzungars from East Turkistan into the Kazakh Steppe. Such mass migrations from west to east have been a recurrent feature of Eurasian history, with fleeing peoples encroaching on the land of other nomads they encountered. Such was the long fight that took place between the Dzungars and the Kazakhs across the 17th and 18th centuries.

Many theories abound for the origin of the term *Kazakh*. A convincing one holds that it is simply the Turkic term for brigandage. The Shibanids had also engaged in Kazakhness before they settled into the oasis towns of Transoxiana, where they stuck to another label—Uzbek. The nomads who remained in the Steppe gradually coalesced around the label of Kazakh. Around 1465, the khans Janibek and Kirai abandoned the Uzbek Abulkhair and set up the Kazakh khanate, which would exist in some form until the 19th century. Its elite consisted of Chingisids, who called themselves White Bone. The rest of the Kazakhs were called Black Bone and were in turn divided into the Senior, Middle, and Junior Hordes.

In the 18th century, Kazakh society faced an existential threat from the Dzungars. In 1723, Oirat troops attacked what is now southern Kazakhstan. Untold thousands of Kazakhs fled for their lives. The Barefooted Flight led to massive nomadic migrations to the west and south, as far afield as the Fergana Valley and the shores of the Caspian Sea. Transoxiana entered a heightened period of conflict between nomadic and sedentary people.

The Kokand and Khivan Khanates

In the Steppe itself, the consequences were no less important. A minor Chingisid noble named Abulkhair united the three hordes and repelled the Dzungars in the 1720s. Unfortunately, it was not enough, so he looked north to Empress Anna of Russia. In 1731, Abulkhair took an oath of allegiance to the empress. The significance of this precipitous moment in Central Asian history was probably not clear at the time. For one, the deal applied only to the khan and his followers; the Senior Horde would not enter Russian subjecthood for nearly another century. Second, such oaths were par for the course in Steppe politics, and few nomadic rulers regarded them as binding.



Abulkhair Khan

One reason the Senior Horde opted out of Russian protection was that a new state to the south seemed a better bet. The khanate of Kokand emerged in the Fergana Valley, where an Uzbek tribal dynasty called the Ming had created a state in the mid-1700s. In his book on the Kokand Khanate, historian Scott Levi suggests that several things make it stand out. First, the khanate's leaders were not Chingisids. They ruled along the lines of sedentary Islamic monarchs, not khans of the Steppe. Second, Kokand had a keen understanding of international trade. With the Qing conquest of Altishahr in the 1750s, it took advantage of limitless trade opportunities with China. Third, as Fergana's agriculture relies on snowmelt, the khanate undertook

far-reaching irrigation works, which gave Kokand the wealth to expand far beyond the valley. In the early 19th century, it launched invasions to the north, taking Tashkent and extending into the Kazakh Steppe.

On the other end of Central Asia, a similar polity was emerging around the city of Khiva in Khorezm, which had a history of prominence stretching back to Achaemenid times. Watered by the delta of the Amu Darya River, Khorezm is a gigantic oasis surrounded by forbidding desert. In 1511, a confederation of Shibanids set up a state at Khiva, and a century later, they made the city their capital. The state came to be known as the Khanate of Khiva and outlived even the Tsarist Empire by several years.

The Khivan khanate's days of glory are associated with the Uzbek Qonghirats, who invested massive resources into transforming the city into a religious and commercial center. Though Khiva never rivaled Bukhara in either sphere, it still acquired regional prominence, and the khanate was an extremely distinct society. Even today, Khorezm stands out for its diversity. The region sits right in the middle of several cultural zones. The population of the oasis was Persian speaking for much of its history but switched entirely to Turkic during these centuries. Vast expanses of desert spread to the north and south.

Anyone in control of Khorezm had to figure out how to deal with fiercely independent nomads. Culturally, this process produced something original. The Uzbek spoken in Khorezm has a distinct flair: The vocabulary, pronunciation, and idioms are much more familiar to speakers of Turkmen—or modern Turkish—than the Uzbek spoken on the other side of the country. Even the culture and dress feel different.

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15

Bukhara and the Madrassas

The city of Bukhara was the seat of the most powerful Central Asian state at the time of Russian conquest. It was the center of learning and culture in the region, attracting students and scholars from as far afield as Siberia, India, and Syria. Bukhara also radiated influence, and its merchants, ambassadors, and madrasa graduates all engaged in something akin to empire building. This lecture will take an in-depth look at this remarkable city and the mark it made on the world. You'll trace its emergence as an emirate whose territory extended into Afghanistan and much of Tajikistan and learn about its cultural and intellectual life and architecture. By the time of the Tsarist conquest, Bukhara was a vibrant oasis. Today, it represents a golden age in the minds of many Central Asians.



Bukhara Takes Control

In 1598, the Shibanid dynasty had come to an end, and the Ashtarkhanid dynasty had risen to power. They established tenuous control over much of Central Asia but are generally regarded as weak. In 1747, the dynasty succumbed to two disastrous invasions—one from the west and the other from the east. Recall that Dzungar activity devastated the Kazakh Steppe in the first half of the 1700s and that the Qianlong emperor exterminated the Dzungars in the 1750s. These massive population movements led to nomads making trouble in Ashtarkhanid territory.

At this vulnerable moment, a new Iranian empire erupted out of nowhere and began to create trouble to the west. An Iranian general, Nader Shah, overthrew the Safavid Empire and established a new dynasty, the Afsharids. With lightning speed, he then took Afghanistan, devastated the Mughals, and sacked Delhi. In 1740, he crushed the Ashtarkhanids. However, his

empire proved short-lived. Like many a brilliant tyrant, Nader Shah became manic and superstitious, and in 1747, his top lieutenant assassinated him. The Afsharid Empire disappeared as quickly as it had emerged.

Throughout Central Asian history, any time a political vacuum occurred, someone eventually picked up the pieces. In Transoxiana—or Turkistan, as it was coming to be known—the contenders were different Uzbek tribes. In Khorezm, the Manghits and the Qonghirats had fought for decades. The latter emerged victorious and set up the Khanate of Khiva. Bukhara was left to the Manghits. Around 1747, chieftain Muhammad Rahim executed the last Ashtarkhanid ruler, took the title of amir, and established the Manghit dynasty. The Emirate of Bukhara was born.

Modernization

Interestingly, while amirs had been a dime and a dozen before, there was only one after Rahim. Ideology had a large role to play here. Though they were of Mongolian descent, the Manghits were not Chingisids, so their ability to seize power showed that descent from the world conqueror was no longer a requirement. Moreover, the title of amir had strong Islamic associations, positioning the ruler as pious and just. It also evoked the agrarian empires of the Middle East. Put simply, an amir controlled a state that was centralized—or at least centralizing. By the 18th century, the old nomadic ways of Steppe rule by khans and tribal chieftains on horseback were growing antiquated in a world of gunpowder, colonialism, global trade, bureaucracy, and scientific revolution. As European colonial powers made greater inroads in the Islamic world, more Muslim rulers styled themselves as amirs and sought to construct enduring institutions of government.

Researchers see the beginnings of this process from 1785, when Shah Murad became the amir. He issued coinage backed by gold and silver and replaced the various peasant taxes—many of them descended from Mongol times—with a single monetary tax. From the ruler's perspective, this change made things more efficient and created a more reliable revenue stream through which to govern the state.

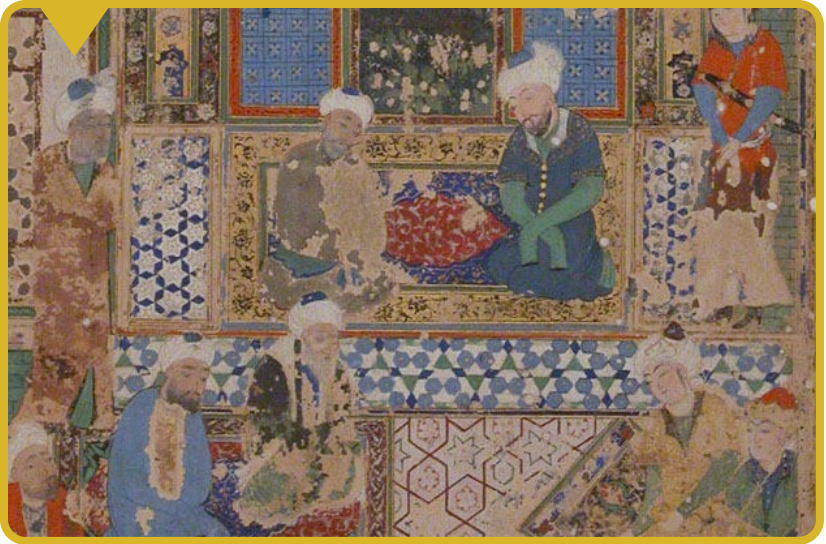
The modernizing trend continued in the next century. For millennia, the great armies of the Steppe were levied temporarily during times of war. However, with gunpowder and modern military tactics, war was changing. In 1826, Amir Nasrullah created a standing army of professional soldiers with steady pay who drilled year-round. This force allowed Bukhara to embark on a campaign of expansion, taking Balkh in Afghanistan and briefly conquering Kokand as well.

The Ulama

Bukhara and its environs host some of the most important shrines in the Islamic world. As historian Allen Frank suggests, “Bukhara’s religious significance derived above all from the city’s Sufi associations as an abode of saints and a source of sanctity, rather than from the more restricted intellectual associations that emerged later.” One saint in particular made the city stand out. Baha al-Din Naqshband—whose mausoleum was built in Bukhara—is the 14th-century saint whose name is associated with the Naqshbandi order. From the 17th to the 19th centuries, this order expanded, and the aura of the great saint gave Bukhara what Frank terms a “sacred reputation extending far beyond Central Asia.” Naqshband’s tomb and the graves of prominent Naqshbandis were prime pilgrimage destinations for Muslims from around the world.

Bukhara’s intellectual stature was a natural consequence of its sacred reputation. Sufi masters established themselves, their students, and their libraries at complexes that literally sat on top of the tombs of saints. Their activity was scholastic, but their income derived from saintly prestige. An entire social category emerged from this nexus between the intellectual and the supernatural—the ulama.

The ulama took their name from the Arabic word *ilm*, which means knowledge. They were Islamic scholars by virtue of their training in madrassas, but in much of the Islamic world, their status was associated with membership in Sufi orders. As interpreters of the Qur’an and Sunnah, they continued the Sufi tradition of bringing Muslims closer to Prophet Muhammad. Members of the ulama served as judges, scholars,



administrators, tax collectors, archivists, and tutors to noble families, poets, musicians, and doctors. Today, both their composition and social role have changed, but they still hold enormous prestige in the eyes of Muslims.

In a place like the Bukharan Emirate, that prestige certainly stemmed from arduous, years-long training in madrassas. Historian James Pickett argues that the ulama's defining feature was eclecticism. The greater the stature of the intellectual, the more diverse his areas of expertise. What Pickett calls the core sequence of madrassa education took a decade to complete and included foundational subjects such as Arabic grammar and theology. Those destined for prominence usually pursued additional study in topics like medicine, calligraphy, and mysticism. The more adventurous went on to study occult sciences.

The Poi-Kalan

Most of the Manghit-era madrassas don't exist anymore, as the Soviets destroyed them or converted them to other uses. However, one thing that has stood the test of time is Bukhara's holy heart—the massive complex known as

the Poi-Kalan. This architectural rotunda's defining feature is the magnificent Kalan Minaret, which was built by the Qarakhanids in 1127. Standing 154 feet tall, its purpose was ostensibly to call Muslims to prayer with the *azan*. If the minaret were ever to fall over, it'd likely fall on Bukhara's biggest mosque. The Masjidi Kalan was completed around 1514 and had a capacity for 10,000 prayer-goers, but filling it probably wasn't the point.

Central Asian cities had two types of mosques: neighborhood and congregational. Practicing Muslims are supposed to pray five times a day. Men are encouraged to do so with others at a mosque but are only required to do so at the noon prayer on Friday. This prayer is held in a congregational mosque that can accommodate large numbers of people. Sponsoring such mosques was a political act for Muslim rulers, linking their rule to God.

On days other than Friday, regular traffic at the Poi-Kalan likely would've been headed to the Miri-Arab madrassa. It was a magnet for students from across the Russian Empire, where Islam was the second-largest religion. In Russia, Allen Frank notes that "no single destination approached Bukhara either in numbers of students, or, more significantly, in the prestige accorded to its graduates. Bukhara under the Manghit dynasty was in fact a center of intellectual ferment and debate."



Bukhara's Cultural Blending

A large part of Bukhara's sophistication stems from its reputation for cosmopolitanism, which has to do with its Jewish community in many ways. The Bukharan Jews form an integral part of the tapestry of the region's cultures.



Researchers can trace a sizeable Jewish community in Transoxiana as far back as the 12th century. In Bukhara, a separate Jewish quarter has existed since at least the 16th century, and in 1820, a community of at least 10,000 reportedly lived in three separate residential areas. They were prominent in dyeing, silk weaving, and trade. Bukharan Jews even developed their own dialect—Judeo-Tajik—which is a version of Persian heavily influenced by Hebrew.

Bukhara's broader ethnic and linguistic mosaic is no less interesting. The city has long been associated with Tajik, which remains its dominant language today. Tajik is close to Iran's Persian and Afghanistan's Dari. It is a direct descendant of the Sogdian dialects used throughout Transoxiana since

Achaemenid times. Traders in the oasis towns knew Turkic languages to promote trade with the Steppe, but most Bukharans would have had little reason to learn it until well into the Soviet period, when the city became part of Uzbekistan. During the Soviet period, all Bukharans learned Russian too. As a result, the city is now trilingual. Tajik, Uzbek, and Russian are all spoken and frequently blend with one another.

This sort of linguistic blending is characteristic of most societies. However, with the emergence of nationalism, it became problematic. The nationalism that developed in Europe in the late 18th century viewed language as a marker of ethnicity. Certain nationalists in Central Asia have embraced this concept with vigor. When the Soviets drew the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the 1920s and 1930s, Tajik nationalists set their sights on Bukhara. They viewed the old Samanid capital as the center of Tajik civilization. One of their core arguments was that Bukharans, who speak Tajik, belonged in Tajikistan. Regardless, Stalin—the Soviet ruler—placed it in Uzbekistan, where it remains today. In any case, there's no evidence that most people in Bukhara at the time regarded themselves as anything but Bukharan. In 1926, the first Soviet census listed Bukharan as a nationality alongside Tajik, Uzbek, and Russian. Many Bukharans still regard themselves as Bukharan first and foremost.

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16

Russia's Conquest of Central Asia

As you will see in this lecture, Russia was an unlikely conqueror of Central Asia. From a bird's-eye view, events have always followed a familiar pattern in Eurasian history, moving from east to west across the Steppe belt. Typically, Russia was but a distant observer to the action. Moreover, compared to other states that formed world empires, it was poor. Its city-states had often been on the receiving end of conquest—not the other way around. However, by the late 19th century, the Russians had changed the map of Central Asia, and millions of Muslims found themselves under direct non-Muslim rule for the first time in half a millennium.

The Rise of Moscow

When Chingis Khan's grandson Batu invaded Russia in 1239, Moscow was an isolated trading town in the state of Kievan Rus. The Mongols had little interest in this area and gave their vassals—the Muscovite princes—an opportunity to expand their own power. While collecting taxes on behalf of their Mongol overlords, the Muscovites incorporated surrounding Slavic cities and towns into their domain. The part of the Mongol Empire that controlled Russia was called the Golden Horde. When it began to fall apart in the early 1400s, Moscow was poised to benefit. Over the next 150 years, it absorbed Russia's city-states and also interfered in the affairs of the still powerful nomadic groups residing in the Steppe. In the mid-1500s, Ivan the Terrible made several important conquests that marked an important turning point. In 1552, he took the Khanate of Kazan. Eighteen years later, he destroyed the Slavic merchant oligarchy of Novgorod.



Ivan's Rurikid dynasty died out in 1598, opening the way for a decade of anarchy, civil war, and Polish occupation known as the Time of Troubles. This period ended in 1613 with the rise of a new dynasty that would rule Russia until 1917. Compared to their successors, the Romanovs of the

17th century were weak. They devoted much of their rule to asserting control over Russia's nobility. [This violent process led to a strong autocratic system. Muscovite rulers were bogged down in stopping seemingly endless rebellions, invasions from Europe, and incursions from Steppe nomads. However, amid it all, Moscow made enormous territorial gains. In 1667, it signed the Treaty of Andrusovo with Poland, dividing Ukraine in two. And it ratified the Treaty of Nerchinsk with China 2 decades later, cementing Russian control over the rich fur trade in Siberia.

Moscow had come a long way since the days of the Mongols, but this wasn't enough for one Romanov. Peter the Great was the first Russian ruler to have any direct impact on Central Asia. He viewed Moscow as poor, insular, and backward. His youthful tour of Northern and Central Europe took him to cities that were hubs of industry, technology, and wealth. Reportedly, the antiquities collection of Nicolas Chevalier at Utrecht stirred Peter's lifelong passion for ethnography. The birth of Scythian archaeology can be traced to that fateful day. Peter returned from the trip convinced that Russia's massive size and wealth could make it a world power—provided that it could modernize.

His signature interest in the navy led him to rout two of the great powers of the day, Sweden and Turkey. Peter also established the ideal of a centralized, well-functioning, imperial state, which explains his interest in controlling Russia's southern border—especially the Steppe. As elsewhere in the world, the future colonial power's first and primary interest was economic. In 1713, a Turkmen arrived in Russia telling tales about gold in the Amu Darya Basin. This story piqued Peter's interest, and he dispatched an army to the Ustyurt Plateau to force the khan of Khiva into submission. However, the expedition was a failure, and Peter laid his Central Asian dreams to rest. He died in 1725.

Exerting Control

During the second half of the 18th century, the Russians began paying closer attention to their nomadic subjects. A massive peasant rebellion in 1773 set off alarm bells in the court of Empress Catherine II. Led by a cossack named Emelian Pugachev who had served in the Russian army, the uprising was multiethnic and multireligious. It attracted nomadic and seminomadic

Bashkirs, Tatars, Chuvash, Udmurts, Kazakhs, and Dzungars. The rebellion was crushed within 2 years, but it raised a longstanding security problem. Russian soldiers could not monitor and tax nomads—let alone punish them—if they could disappear into the vastness of the Steppe. Russia needed to control the entire region.

In 1822, Russia asserted control over the Junior and Middle Hordes of the Kazakh Steppe—or at least it tried to. In June, Siberian governor Speransky drafted a surreal document that must have left many Kazakhs scratching their heads. The Statute on the Siberian Kirgiz set out to coopt the Kazakh clan structure for Russian ends. It divided the Middle Horde into districts, each of which would be led by a sultan appointed by the Russian military authorities. Moreover, customary Kazakh courts were made subject to Russian ones. Speransky thought that the nomads would eventually want to become more like sedentary Russians.



Speransky

But things didn't turn out that way. The Russians garrisoned cossacks, who were elite military soldiers long tasked with punitive expeditions and other dirty work. Their depredations hardly made for good PR. Worse still, a network of Russian forts restricted migration routes vital to survival. All of these factors culminated in a massive rebellion in 1837. Kenesary Qasymov—a grandson of the great Kazakh khan Ablai—assembled a coalition of khans from across the three Kazakh hordes. His imposing army of anywhere between 20,000 and 50,000 men posed the greatest threat the Russians had seen to their rule in the Steppe. Kenesary launched brazen assaults on Russian forts and attacked Russian caravans. However, when a party of Kyrgyz who viewed him as a brigand murdered him in 1847, his rebellion died.

Taking the Steppe

As Kenesary's rebellion surged in the 1830s and 1840s, Russia's military resolved to move south. In 1839, General Vasily Perovskii launched an invasion of Khiva, which Russia viewed as a rogue state. But Khiva was some 750 miles south of the Russian fort line in the Steppe. Much of the forbidding journey was over desert. As Alexander Morrison points out in *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia*, Russian technological superiority was not enough—it all boiled down to camels.

The two-humped Bactrian camel lives out in the open in temperatures that range from 120°F to 40°F. Each of the humps can store up to 80 pounds of fat, allowing the animal to travel long distances without eating. Moreover, it can produce several gallons of highly nutritious milk a day. Finally, a camel loaded down with goods can travel 20 to 30 miles in a day.

In preparation for the 1839 campaign, Perovskii obtained 10,000 camels from Kazakh nomads. Unfortunately, the camels' hardiness wasn't enough for the Russians. To carry their heavy loads in such forbidding territory, the animals needed to rest overnight and for 5 hours during the day. The Russian army failed to appreciate the importance of this daily rest, so most of Perovskii's camels died from hunger, exhaustion, and disease long before reaching Khiva.

The lesson was clear: If the Russians were to subdue Khiva and other southern states, they needed a chain of forts along the way that could serve as depots and redoubts for the army and help defend supply lines back to Russia. While suppressing Kenesary's uprising, they built a chain of small fortifications. Raimsk was founded in 1847 on the Aral Sea—right in the Khivan khan's backyard. In 1853, the Russians took the fortress of Ak-Mechet, which was the most important outpost of the Kokand Khanate. The following year, they established the fort of Vernyi, which is called Almaty today.

Taking Central Asia

By the mid-1850s, the question on everybody's mind concerned what would happen next. Historians are still arguing about the answer today. Conquering the Steppe was one thing, but taking on Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand was quite another. Why would Russia expend money, men, and effort for this vast, poor, alien region? Morrison notes that the men who spearheaded the conquest belonged to what he calls the Napoleonic generation. If there was such a thing as a Napoleonic ethos, colonialism was a big part of it. Whatever the case, the stage was set in November 1864 when the Russian government issued a communique asserting the nation's right to protect itself from rogue tribesmen.

General Mikhail Cherniaev took Tashkent on June 15, 1865. At the time, Tashkent was the largest city in the Kokand Khanate, and its occupation signaled Russia's intent to move further southward. The following year, Kokand khan Xudoyor agreed to become a Russian vassal. Two years later, the Bukharans sued for peace as well. The emirate was retained as a vassal state, but it ceded Samarkand to direct Russian rule.

A final challenge remained: The Khanate of Khiva was holding out, insulated by vast deserts to the north and south. The physical challenges remained the same, but Russia's position had changed. Now, it could rely on a network of bases and on allies from among the local Muslim population. On August 12, 1873, the Khivan khan finally signed a peace treaty with Russia. At this point, the three main states in southern Central Asia had been reduced to the status of protectorates. Kokand was disintegrating day by day, with Russian



General Michael Cherniaev

help. In 1876, it would be directly incorporated into the Russian Empire. Moreover, Russia added the fertile territory of the Zeravshan River Valley—breadbasket of the Bukharan emirate—to its possessions.

The forbidding Karakum Desert and its Turkmen tribes remained an issue. What was arguably the final chapter of the conquest took place at Gok Depe. The Ahal tribal confederation remained the last and most potent threat to Russian rule of the desert. Some 20,000 Ahals set up a stronghold in a hill fortress, and in 1879, a Russian force of around 3,000 men attacked the fort. They slaughtered thousands of Turkmen but were ultimately repelled. The Russians returned 2 years later under a more brutal general—Mikhail Skobelev—who laid siege to the fortress in January 1881 and massacred some 10,000 Turkmen. With the establishment of Transcaspia as a province on May 6, 1881, the Russian conquest of Central Asia was complete. The vast but sparsely populated Pamir region would be annexed in 1895 without resistance.

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17

Colonial Turkestan and Tashkent

Russia entered the oasis towns of Turkestan as a civilizer and conqueror, in the mold of the European colonial empires of the day. In 1867, the Governate-General of Turkestan was proclaimed, incorporating five provinces and two protectorates encompassing most of Central Asia. Tashkent would become its new capital and, in time, a microcosm of Russian colonial society. In this lecture, you'll get a glimpse of the vast—and often disastrous—changes unleashed by Russian rule. Yet even amid disruption and violence, the late 19th century was a creative era for the region. Russian imperial rule created opportunities in the realms of trade, learning, media, and politics that Central Asians took advantage of.

Documenting the Steppe

Konstantin von Kaufmann became the first Governor-General of Turkestan in 1867. He was a typical product of the Russian aristocracy—torn between Russian patriotism and the disdain all aristocrats had for peasants, which lent a great irony to his desire to colonize and Russify Central Asia. He was interested in learning more about Central Asia and tapping its potential, yet his labor was in the service of an increasingly racist empire.

Kaufmann believed that colonized people were inefficient and lazy—unable or unwilling to make the most of the land they lived on. To this end, he studied ways to “civilize” local production techniques. In 1871, he commissioned the naturalist Oshanin to lead a sericulture experimental station, ostensibly because local methods of handling silk were unhygienic and inefficient. Kaufmann even imported 12 cattle from Holland, hoping to crossbreed them with smaller local cattle.



Konstantin von Kaufmann

Perhaps Kaufmann's best-known legacy is the magnificent photograph collection he commissioned—the Turkestan Album. It consists of some 1,200 photographs divided into four volumes: archaeology, ethnography, trade, and history. The album is a poignant documentary record of Central Asia as it existed at the outset of Russian rule. For Kaufmann, however, it was a political document. Russian colonial administrators sought to classify and understand colonized populations to better control them.

Kaufmann was not the only one interested in documenting the Steppe. By the late 19th century, an army of surveyors and explorers—often under the auspices of the Russian Geographical Society—were making their way into Russian Turkestan. Despite the scholarly veneer, their fascination held an exploitative and often brutal edge that would truck with no resistance to Russian domination. Even the genteel Kaufmann had issued the following instructions concerning his campaign against the Yomut Turkmen in 1873: “Visit upon the nomadic Yomut and their families complete and utter ruin and annihilation.”

Kaufmann's successor—Governor-General Mikhail Cherniaev—epitomized this much more representative aspect of colonialism. After taking Tashkent in 1865, he had been recalled to Russia and sent into retirement, supposedly for disobeying orders. Though his rank was later restored, Cherniaev blamed Kaufmann for this affront. Upon becoming governor-general, his first order of business was to destroy as much of Kaufmann's work as possible. He closed the silk experimentation station, slaughtered the bulls his predecessor had brought from Holland, and killed 16 of the offspring created from crossbreeding with local cows.

Colonial Intervention

But Russian rule reverberated far beyond pet projects and vendettas hatched in the governor's palace—it also reshaped Central Asian society. The millions of Muslims living in the Governate-General of Turkestan experienced far-reaching change in law, taxation, and the economy. Before the Russian conquest, the region's courts were staffed by madrasa graduates. When a case came before them, judges known as qadis tried to mediate. If that failed, they issued a ruling based on Islamic and customary law. As historian Paolo Sartori

has shown, people could appeal these decisions to the royal court. Litigants also hired madrassa graduates as scribes and sometimes as advocates who could be compared to lawyers. Therefore, courts were the main setting in which Islamic scholars interacted with ordinary Central Asians.

The Russians viewed these qadis as inherently corrupt, but they could not bring themselves to abolish Islamic courts outright. They lacked the capacity to set up a legal system in a region they barely controlled or understood. Instead, Kaufmann famously advocated for “benign neglect” of Islamic institutions. Starved of official patronage, he hoped that they would decline on their own and that the Central Asian population would naturally gravitate toward imperial Russian courts.

However, what emerged was a typically colonial, polyglot legal system. Laws issued in 1867 and formalized in 1886 established four types of courts. Three of these—the district, provincial, and senate courts—were tied to the Russian administration and held jurisdiction over certain types of cases, such as crimes against the state or government property. They also presided over any cases involving a Russian. The fourth category was the Islamic courts, which were reconstituted by the state as native courts. They operated much as before but with some significant changes. Most importantly, the qadis were no longer appointed by the ruler but elected by representatives of 50 households. The election had to be confirmed by the state. This system was particularly susceptible to the corruption that the Russian administration in Turkestan became famous for.

Colonial intervention wasn't limited to appointments. Rulings issued by Islamic judges could be appealed to a justice of the peace, and anyone could file a complaint with the local military commandant. These measures progressively restricted the native courts' authority. Rather than shut the courts down, the Russians undermined them by making other options available. Sartori has demonstrated that Central Asian Muslims actively used Russian courts when things didn't go their way in native courts. In the end, the native courts that had once defined the legal landscape merely became a part of it.

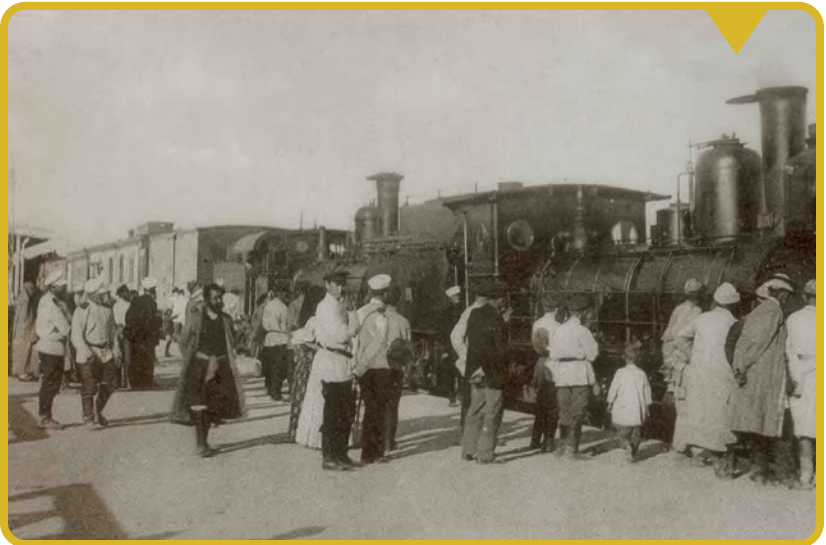
The Railway

In the 19th century, Russia was one of the most corrupt countries on earth—and the Governate-General of Turkestan had the reputation of being the most corrupt corner of the empire. European Tashkent was certainly straight out of the colonial playbook. The Russians drew inspiration from British India, which was the gold standard of what a colony was supposed to be. When the British approached a North Indian town, they would set up a military base cantonment next door, which would turn into a fully-fledged European settlement. Only whites were allowed to live in this cantonment. The European town and the native town were a fixture of the colonial-built environment. From the get-go, this was the model Kaufmann aspired to. The Ankhor Canal now runs through the center of Tashkent and once divided the so-called native city from the European city. Starting as a large-scale barracks, the European quarter eventually evolved into a microcosm of Russian society.



European Tashkent reached the peak of its cosmopolitanism when the Trans-Aral Railway connecting it to Orenburg was completed in 1906. It also linked the rest of Russia with the Trans-Caspian Railway. Over the previous 2 decades, this line had connected Tashkent to the Caspian Sea, joining the colonial capital with Samarkand, Bukhara, and Merv. Since time immemorial, this had been an arduous trek along the Silk Road measured in weeks. Now, the trip became a journey by steam measured in days or even just hours. Connectivity was a necessity for this remote area if it was to pay dividends to the Russian Empire. Moreover, the Russian army could now deploy around the region much faster and with reliable supply lines.

The railroads also brought Russian settlers, merchants, farmers, bureaucrats, teachers, and missionaries to the colonial centers. Orthodox churches were constructed to serve the Russian population, and new schools and academies worked to educate Russian children and promote the region's Russification. In 1868, only around 2,000 Russians could be found in Tashkent; by 1910, there were more than 47,000. The local population grew too. With railroads and industry come urbanization. The Russian headcount of 1910 found that the "Uzbek" population of the city had more than doubled in the same period.



The native city—that is, the original Tashkent—was supposed to remain separate. Indeed, the two towns looked completely different despite being right next to each other. However, these differences disguised their interdependencies. In a classic study of colonial Tashkent, historian Jeff Sahadeo notes that the Russian authorities relied on Central Asian officials to run and collect taxes in the native town. Hundreds if not thousands of Muslims went to the European quarter to work in Russian stores and enterprises. And Russians crossed into the native city to purchase crafts, find medicine, visit healers, and frequent brothels. Russian administrators clung to the fantasy that their side of town was more civilized.

Disease came along with Russians and railroads too. A major outbreak of cholera in 1892 was part of a global pandemic that began in Bengal and spread to Europe. The era's bustling steamship traffic played a major role in spreading the disease, and the increasingly globalized world could now reach even the remote corners of Central Asia. The epidemic killed as many as 25,000 people in Russian Turkestan. The outbreak started in the European side of Tashkent in 1892, but the city commandant still blamed poor native hygiene and cracked down hard on the native town. Muslim burial rites were forbidden, and male medical clerks barged into the women's quarters of private homes to examine women and girls without warning. An unknown number of people died in the inevitable riot that resulted.

Expansion

Like their British counterparts to the south, Russian administrators would point the finger at Islam rather than their own incompetence any time Muslims made trouble. While colonial Europeans derided Islam as fanatical, superstitious, insular, patriarchal, unhygienic, and antimodern, colonialism relied heavily on allies among the Muslim population to sustain its rule. However, as the 19th century wore on, such Muslim allies were increasingly seen as less reliable. Russian authorities took draconian measures toward Islamic figures and institutions. Notably, they began seizing Islamic charitable endowments for state use. Even so, the influence of Russian administrators didn't extend too far beyond the urban centers and railways. The *aqsaqal*—or village elder—was still the only real authority in the countless tiny villages and settlements across the Steppe.

However, the Russians were slowly expanding their reach. Garrison towns and provincial hubs were built to link their distant holdings and defend against rival claims. Ashgabat—today the capital of Turkmenistan—was little more than a collection of yurts and mudbrick homes before the Russians created a provincial outpost there in 1881.



In 1911, only around 6% of the population in Turkestan was Russian, and Central Asia was much poorer than colonial territories elsewhere in Asia and Africa. If it were to greatly profit from its colonial adventures here, the empire would need to create new sources of income with new cash crops and Russian settlers to grow them.

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18

Cotton, Colonialism, and Rebellion

To pay the bills of colonialism, Russia needed to transform Turkestan into a region that turned profit. This lecture will discuss two decisions that would dramatically change the demographic and geographic landscape of Central Asia in ways that are still felt today. The first was to send Russian settlers to colonize the Steppe, and the second was to develop a vast system of cotton plantations. Since the time of Modun and before, new arrivals had violently displaced the local population. However, prior invasions had come from the east, and the invaders had been fellow nomads. This time, the new arrivals came from the north, and they were impoverished farmers. Never before in Central Asia had nomads been so thoroughly flooded by sedentary colonization.



Cotton Cultivation

In the mid-19th century, cotton was the basis for most industrial textile production. When supplies of it to Europe were interrupted by the American Civil War and prices rose everywhere, Governor-General Kaufmann saw an opportunity. Cotton requires lots of sunlight and warmth, which are rare in most of Russia but plentiful in Turkestan. Kaufmann sent two agents to Texas to purchase processing equipment, and near the end of his tenure, he set up a lab outside of Tashkent to grow the upland variety of American long-fiber cotton. The *Gossypium hirsutum* L variety took off.

Cotton cultivation in Russian Turkestan increased from several dozen acres in 1883 to 184,000 acres just 5 years later. The completion of the Trans-Caspian Railway set the stage for massive exports, which totaled 50,000 tons in 1890. By 1913, one-fifth of irrigated land in the provinces of Syr Darya, Samarkand, Fergana, and Transcaspia was devoted to cotton. Inevitably, the price of cotton in Turkestan became tied to the global market, and the economy became export driven.

However, the result for most farmers was massive indebtedness, particularly among peasants. Moscow-based companies gave them seeds and cash advances to grow their own cotton. The idea was that they would pay the amount back at the end of the season and earn some profit for themselves. But four factors ensured this didn't happen: First, cotton is extremely labor-intensive. Peasants had to hire seasonal labor to work their fields, and the wages they paid out were not enough to cover the cost of the seed. Second, cotton is one of the most water-intensive crops in the world, which is hardly an ideal fit for the arid plains of Turkestan. Russian engineers constructed new canals and irrigation systems to feed ever-larger areas with water from the rivers and lakes, exacerbating the effect of droughts when they periodically came.

Third, a volatile problem of opportunity cost arose. Hoping to reap profits from the rising cost of cotton, Central Asian farmers shifted from producing core foodstuffs to fiber. This practice caused the price of food to skyrocket and threatened the food supply. Fourth, an entirely new hierarchy of moneylenders—each charging interest—began disbursing cash advances to farmers. Indebted peasants had to sell their land when the inevitable day came that they could not pay. They became landless laborers, working for a pittance in cotton plantations, mines, or major irrigation works.

Conquering Kazakh Lands

To the north, things were even worse. The Russians had a vision for the flowering of the Steppe, but the Kazakhs—who remained some of the last peoples in the area still practicing a largely nomadic way of life—had only a minor role to play in it. The Tsarists viewed this territory as empty and hoped to transform the Seven Rivers region into a giant grain-growing area.

Massive Slavic migration into the Kazakh lands did not commence until the 1870s. A relatively peaceful phase of conquest occurred before that period. These migrants were from Russia, but they weren't Slavic. Russian expansion in the early 19th century allowed for the migration of large numbers of Muslims from the Volga-Ural region and, later, southern Central Asia. Their

arrival generated little violence. In the Kazakh Steppe, the term used for these Muslims was *chala*. The Chala-Kazakhs were honorary Kazakhs, adopted by tribes as full-fledged members.

However, in the second half of the 19th century, Russian rule in the Kazakh Steppe shifted in a more violent direction. Once the region was connected by railroad and the rudiments of Russian authority, the trickle of Russian colonists became a flood. By 1911, Slavic settlers comprised 40% of the population. With state support, they drove Kazakhs from their pastures into agriculturally unviable land or over the borders into what is today China and Mongolia. The consequences for the Steppe civilization were disastrous. The Russians tried to turn the region into a grain breadbasket but created little more than a dustbowl in dry years.

Yet even amid the destruction of their traditional lands, the Kazakhs looked to preserve and record their culture. By introducing new economic practices, establishing novel-built environments and forms of transportation, and promoting new types of media, colonialism created new opportunities for self-expression and upward mobility. Amid the violence, a new type of intellectual class was emerging. These intellectuals took advantage of the opportunities created by colonial rule—both in seeking government employment and in using the still heavily censored press. They were both the chief beneficiaries and chief opponents of colonialism.



A good illustration is Kazakhstan's national poet Ibrahim Qunanbayuli, who is better known as Abai. Born in 1845, he was a product of the Kazakh Steppe and its rich, ancient tradition of unwritten folk poetry. His concerns were the themes of oral Steppe literature: heroism, bravery, love, and betrayal; the region's games, entertainment, drink, and feasts; the power of song and oral performance; and a critique of all forms of fanaticism, greed, and oppression. Throughout Abai's life, illegal settlement from Russia picked up speed. From 1893 to 1905 alone, the state seized 76,000 square miles of Kazakh land—settling 400,000 Slavic peasants there.

The only contingency plan in evidence was the same wishful thinking observed with cotton. With military support, Russian settlers evicted Kazakhs from the little fertile land in the hostile region. The land that was left to them was anything but valuable. In the poorest neighborhoods and on the outskirts, destitute Kazakhs became economic refugees in their own homeland. They worked as hired labor for Russian landowners in unsafe and unregulated mines and in public works and irrigation projects.

The 1905 Revolution

Central Asia was not the only place in the empire that was suffering under the heavy-handed and misguided policies of the Tsars. Much of the empire's population was angry. In early 1905, the Russo-Japanese War was heading toward a humiliating defeat for Russia. At much the same time, an enormous revolution broke out in the western part of the empire.

On January 22 in St. Petersburg, an Orthodox priest led a crowd of several thousand workers to hand the tsar a petition demanding better working conditions and political rights. Cossack troops gunned down several hundred unarmed protestors. The Bloody Sunday massacre started the biggest uprising the Tsarist regime had faced since the 1770s. It involved both peasant and worker unrest—especially in western, non-Russian parts of the empire, such as the Caucasus. Many historians view it as the first chapter in the unrest that led to the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. Large parts of the empire descended into anarchy. Tsar Nicholas II quelled the unrest by making some concessions, allowing Russia's first parliament to open, though he prorogued it 75 days later.



In Central Asia, the 1905 revolution is important for the political possibilities it created. In Turkestan and the Steppe, the workers' movement was an almost exclusively Slavic affair. When the empire's nearly 1 million railway workers went on strike in October 1905, laborers in Tashkent, Samarkand, and other cities followed suit. Moreover, on May 24, the Turkestan Sapper Battalion mutinied; on November 15, the First Tashkent Reserve Battalion did the same. However, this proletarian activism had a darker side. Despite their working-class credentials, the Slavic laborers in Central Asia shared the state's racism toward the Muslim population. The stage was set for a major clash when the Tsarist state fell apart.

The Uprising in Semireche

However, the local population was hardly silent in the face of the crumbling regime. A year before the Bolsheviks took power in St. Petersburg, a vast uprising on the Steppe took place. The rebellion had everything to do with colonialism and a global conflict—World War I—that was, at root, about European colonies. In early 1916, the Russians were bogged down in the

West, and the war with Germany was going badly. Russian military planners estimated they needed a million more men, so they resolved to conscript 480,000 Central Asians. Half would be from Turkestan and half from the Steppe. Up to this point, Muslims had been exempted from military service. Now, they were drafted to dig trenches.

Conscription sparked sources of discontent that came together in a perfect storm. The uprising took off across Central Asia, but its most brutal epicenter was Semireche—the Russian name for the Seven Rivers region. In her study of the uprising, historian Aminat Chokobaeva argues that the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs living there perceived Russian settlers as an existential threat. Unsurprisingly, much of the conflict centered around the food supply. The army requisitioned a significant portion of Turkestan’s livestock and food for the war effort. In 1916, food shortages led to bread riots instigated by Russian settlers, who attacked Central Asian traders they suspected of price gouging and hoarding.

In Semireche, the violence was personal. Central Asians and Russian settlers perpetrated the ugliest possible forms of brutality against each other. Fighting broke out between Kazakhs and Russian soldiers in late July, not far from Almaty. Subsequent clashes centered around conscription centers and bread distribution points. While diverting 35 infantry companies from the front, the state also armed Russian settlers, who gunned down Central Asians in gruesome attacks. By the time the rebellion was put down in October,



the death toll encompassed 3,000 Russian settlers and more than 100,000 Central Asians—mostly Kyrgyz. As many as 250,000 Kazakhs and Kyrgyz fled to East Turkistan, where at least 70,000 died from disease or starvation.

Tsarist colonialism in Central Asia had come to an ignominious end. The 1916 rebellion profoundly shaped the course of events after the Tsarist collapse—devastating Central Asia’s economy and inaugurating an era of famine, anarchy, and hardship that would last until the early 1920s. No less importantly, it introduced anticolonial activism as one of the main ways Central Asians articulated their disparate political aspirations. The raw memory of Russian settler violence and the visceral nature of anticolonial sentiment played right into the hands of the Bolsheviks. Their leader, Vladimir Lenin, presented communism as a struggle against colonialism.

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19

Revolution, Modernization, and Famine

By early 1917, the Russian Empire's borderlands were ablaze with ethnic violence. And among the Russian population, protests and riots over rationing, food shortages, conscription, and military setbacks rocked cities and towns. However, as this lecture will illustrate, the 1917 revolution's long-term cause was class. Half a century earlier, German philosopher Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* had argued that capitalism is a fundamentally unstable economic system because of its inherent need to endlessly produce value. Its reliance on industry led to the birth of the proletariat—or working class—who would have no choice but to bring capitalism down. Under a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, a new economic system called communism would take shape. Marx envisioned a utopia in which class and oppression no longer existed.

The Rise of Communism

Marx's influence in Russia was so great that an entire school of his followers arose there well before the 1917 revolution. Around the same time, from the 1880s onward, some cities in the western part of the country began to industrialize. Impoverished peasants flocked to cities unequipped to handle the migrants, creating a familiar pattern of a destitute, enraged working class. By the 1905 revolution, they were making serious trouble for the state.

Ultimately, a worker's rebellion overthrew the 3-century-old Romanov dynasty on March 8, 1917. Then, a provisional government set itself up in the 18th-century Tauride Palace; its democratically elected parliament occupied only one wing. At the other end, representatives of multiple working-class factions set up a council—or soviet—that held the real power. The most disciplined and extreme faction ended up taking control. Under the iron rule of Vladimir Lenin, the Bolshevik Party called for a worker takeover of the state and a transition to communism. The second revolution of 1917 took place on November 6, ushering in 74 years of rule by the Communist Party.



Lenin was elated, but there was just one problem: In 1917, Russia was a predominantly rural, agricultural, and deeply religious country. The theoretical challenge was how to justify a proletarian, atheist state in an agrarian setting teeming with religion. Luckily for the Bolsheviks, communicating Marx's unreadable teachings to the masses gave them a lot of leeway. In both Central Asia and Russia, most people couldn't read. Even for those who could, Marx's works weren't translated into local languages until the mid-1920s. The Bolsheviks could therefore present communism as a struggle not against industrial capitalism but against racism and colonialism.

Nationalism

Muslims had strong grounds to be suspicious of the Bolsheviks on account of their atheism. Moreover, in 1917, the Red Bolsheviks only controlled the capital in St. Petersburg and major industrial cities and towns like Moscow. Vast swathes of the country had reverted to local rule, and some would join up with the counterrevolutionary forces known as the Whites. The ensuing civil war lasted until 1923. The Reds and the Whites fought viciously. The conflict killed millions of people and cut off the food supply to Central Asia, where hundreds of thousands starved to death in 1918.

Another problem was the behavior of the few Russian proletarians in Central Asia: They had seized power in Turkestan with the collapse of Tsarist rule, yet they did not regard the Muslims around them as worthy of socialism. Lenin immediately grasped that racist, colonial Russians calling themselves socialists would drive Muslims away from communism. His solution was affirmative action. He had initially deployed the term as a criticism, but it became the guiding principle of Soviet rule. Lenin was determined to pull the rug out under separatist nationalism by promoting a nationalism of his own.

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) would be organized on a national basis, with 11 ethnic republics and a gigantic Russian one. They would all be given borders and national communist cadres, and their national languages and cultures would be promoted. They'd each even be given their own national characteristics, all the way down their own national ballet

and opera. Affirmative action would promote a pro-Soviet, pro-communist nationalism. The five 'stans exist today for this reason alone. Lenin's successor—Joseph Stalin—drew their borders between 1924 and 1936.



This idea arguably worked in the long run, but in Central Asia, a problem arose: Nationalism did not exist as a mass phenomenon. Even people who identified themselves as Uzbek or Kazakh did not view these terms as political categories that could serve as the basis of a nation-state. The exception was the Jadids. Strongly influenced by Turkish nationalism, they had begun promoting a distinct Turkestani identity and language during this period. These reformers sought to revolutionize Central Asian society. They challenged what they saw as the inertia and perversion of a people plagued by ignorance, addiction, misogyny, and pederasty. The Jadids gravitated toward the Bolsheviks as they appreciated the communists' commitment to social justice, equality, and anticolonialism. However, these groups did not always see eye-to-eye. The Jadids envisaged a united Turkestani identity, but the Bolsheviks resisted this so-called Pan-Turkish idea.

The Bolsheviks persisted in dividing the region into distinct identities. They codified the local languages and standardized them in newfangled Latin and then Cyrillic alphabets to sever any connection with Iran and Turkey. Under Stalin, the internal borders of Central Asia were chopped and changed. By the 1930s, five Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) were present in the region—the Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Tajik republics.

Stalin Takes Over

The 1920s was a tumultuous decade, especially in Central Asia. No one knew which direction the wind would blow. After winning the civil war, the Bolsheviks still had to stamp out local resistance fighters. Most of these fighters were peasants who'd had their food seized by communist activists, but some of them were Russian settlers who threw their lot in with their Muslim neighbors. However, the Bolsheviks also had many Central Asian allies. They actively recruited Muslims into the Communist Party without even asking them if they were atheists. What mattered most was crushing resistance and making Bolshevik rule appealing. This approach led Lenin to adopt the New Economic Policy, which allowed peasants to engage in free market trade and even let state organizations make a profit. The priority was preserving communist rule at any cost by keeping the peasants happy.

In this calculation, Central Asia had a special role to play. The Bolsheviks were in control of a territory that had once been ruled in an unabashedly colonial fashion, and they knew the colonial world's oppressed masses were watching what they would do next. If they hoped to spread communism to a place like British India, they needed to start off on the right foot in Central Asia. So, in another pragmatic concession of communist doctrine, Bolshevik rule in the region was initially pro-Muslim. They legalized Islamic law, placed Islamic judges on the communist state's payroll, and actively recruited Muslim clerics into the government.

However, by 1932, the cult of Joseph Stalin was in full swing. He wanted to assert complete state control of the economy and abolish the market. The enormous agricultural revenues from regions like Central Asia were to be directed to industrialize the USSR and expand the proletariat. Though

the economy was Stalin's top priority, he wanted society to change at the same time. The region's Islamic culture inevitably became a prime target—particularly the Muslim veil.

Named after the Arabic word for attack, the *hujum* campaign was supposed to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution and was launched on March 8, 1927. However, it ended up as an exercise in violence against Muslim women's bodies. At the most benign level, male party members were given an ultimatum: Unveil your wives or be expelled. At its worst, the campaign involved militias descending on a town, rounding up any women they could find and organizing public veil burnings. At least several thousand women were brutally murdered by male relatives for unveiling; the Bolsheviks spread images of their mutilated bodies to show that they were in the right.



Collectivization

The *hujum* was but a prelude to the societal violence unleashed by Stalin. In 1928, he launched his collectivization drive. The entire agricultural sector—comprising most of the Soviet population—was organized into collective farms. The free market became illegal. Now, Stalin could get grain and cotton

from the peasantry for next to nothing and use the profits to build factories. His planned economy forcibly directed the Soviet Union's economic capacity into developing heavy industries like steel, concrete, and machinery. This plan was crude but effective.

The 1920s and 1930s were some of the fastest economic growth periods in Russian history. The Bolsheviks built entirely new economic sectors virtually from scratch. Some of this industrialization slowly benefitted Central Asia. New factories opened to process cotton and raw materials in cities like Tashkent and Samarkand. The newly minted Soviet republics of Central Asia began to slowly urbanize. Moreover, collectivization allowed for some degree of mechanization. Soviet advisors introduced tractors, harvesters, and modern fertilizers onto collective farms, ending some of the backbreaking labor requirements.

Yet collectivization was also brutally hard on farmers, who lost much of their freedom and economic livelihood in the process. Colossal opposition from the peasants often led to localized rebellions, which played right into Stalin's hands. The communist playbook was straightforward: Descend on a village, find the people at the bottom of the pecking order, appoint them to the local soviet, and empower them to find and arrest class enemies. These policies killed as many as 9 million people. Not coincidentally, most of the class enemies were politically undesirable. In Central Asia, a large number of them were religious figures. Stalin's terror was not just economic but also ideological. Madrassas were shut down, and Islamic figures who had been on government payroll were arrested. Even the progressive Jadids were kicked out of the Communist Party.

Stalin took so much from the peasantry that they had nothing left to eat. The Kazakh famine that began in 1930 consumed 1.5 million people. But even as Stalin received reports about mass starvation, he increased grain requisitions and banned the delivery of food to starving districts. As much as 40% of Kazakhstan's population was internally displaced or fled to China. The Kazakhs went from being a majority to a minority in their own homeland.

However, not everything was apocalyptic. Higher education, healthcare, and basic social welfare programs were haltingly established in the first decades of communist rule. Most health indicators began to rise, and the Bolsheviks also embarked on ambitious campaigns to improve literacy among the population.

At the same time, new generations of Soviet-educated technicians and specialists were appearing. Unfortunately, the spiritual, cultural, and human cost of such progress was high, and many paid the ultimate price for it.

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Stalin, War, and New Identities

Many communists would recall the collectivization era of 1928 to 1933 as a golden age. In their view, communism empowered poor people to visit justice upon the rich. But most of the millions of people who perished in the Gulag weren't class enemies, so why would communists look back on this era as a utopian and even democratic time? The answer involves what happened next: In August 1936, Stalin began targeting fellow Bolsheviks who had opposed him at one time or another. An ocean of arrests ensued, culminating in 1937—the worst year of the so-called Great Terror. Under the secret police chief Nikolai Yezhov, at least 700,000 people perished. Stalin annihilated the first generation of Soviet communists and their families. As you'll see in this lecture, they were to be replaced by younger cadres who had only known his rule and would unquestioningly follow his ideological vision.

The Great Terror

The Jadids—the nationalist intellectuals who had been early allies of the Bolsheviks—were chief among the Great Terror’s victims. In the early 1920s, the Soviets had presented themselves as friends of oppressed nationalities, forming alliances with those who had been repressed by the Tsarist regime. But now, in 1937, that same nationalism made those groups suspect. Virtually every major intellectual that the Soviets had worked with in Central Asia was executed.

In less than a year, the Great Terror swallowed up all of Central Asia’s early converts to communism and wiped out an entire generation of intellectuals and political figures. Its impact on Central Asia extended to religion too. Islamic scholars had been disproportionately repressed during collectivization, but they had been able to blend into the rest of the population. However, hiding became harder during the Great Terror. In 1937, the secret police conducted systematic roundups, and the arrest of religious figures was significantly more comprehensive.

Some of those who were arrested and made it back were regarded as saints. Allen Frank’s *Gulag Miracles* concerns the legends circulating in Kazakhstan after World War II that concerned Islamic scholars who’d been arrested and performed miracles in Stalin’s camps. Such legends show how Islamic and Steppe ideas reproduced themselves in Soviet conditions. Far from disappearing, the values, moral vocabulary, and even institutions of Islamic Central Asia still permeated Soviet life.

The Great Terror also devastated entire ethnicities. In the 1930s, Stalin worried about Nazi Germany and a militaristic Japan. Increasingly, he viewed entire ethnic groups as potential fifth columns. For instance, the Russian Far East had a population of 200,000 Koreans, whose ranks included prominent communists. In 1937, Stalin deported virtually all of them to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. They were dumped in concentration camps—or sometimes out in the steppe or desert, left to fend for themselves. The ranks of these so-called special settlers only grew.

Russia's German community went back to the reign of Catherine II. The Volga Germans had benefited from Soviet affirmative action in the 1920s and had even been given their own territory—the Volga German Autonomous SSR. Yet Stalin decided that all Soviet Germans could potentially be Nazi spies. In 1941, he abolished the Volga republic, sending up to 400,000 off in trains to Central Asia. Smaller deportations ensued, such as that of Crimean Tatars from the Black Sea. Central Asia became a place of exile for Stalin's countless enemies. The death toll was horrific, both during the journey and after the settlers' arrival.

Oral histories suggest that the reaction from the Central Asian population was mixed. Some met the new arrivals with hostility, but there are also tales of generosity from the local population. Such heartwarming stories are now embraced by Central Asian states, which present tolerance as a core feature of their people's values. Whatever the truth of the matter, the longstanding social consequences were enormous. After Stalin's death, the region would benefit from this infusion of diversity.

Operation Barbarossa

In the shorter term, one event would have more immediate effects. On June 22, 1941, Hitler broke his treaty with Stalin and attacked the USSR. Operation Barbarossa was the largest land invasion in history, and the Soviets were completely taken by surprise. Within a month, the Germans were 200 miles from Moscow. Stalin made a fateful decision: In October 1941, the conscription pool was extended to all male citizens aged 16 to 28, with compulsory military training for all men aged 16 to 50.

Recall that during World War I, the Tsarist government had drafted Central Asians not to fight but to dig trenches. This action was the spark that caused the 1916 rebellion. Now, Central Asians were being drafted as equals, with the Soviet press celebrating their contributions. Even a small republic like Tajikistan went all in. With a population of just around 1.5 million in 1939, almost 300,000 Tajiks—nearing half the male population—would eventually serve in the Red Army during the war. Thousands of Tajik women volunteers were also eager to fight at the front. Official propaganda lionized the war against fascism as a struggle the Soviet people undertook to save humanity.

But equality with Russians went both ways. Soldiers in the Red Army faced appalling treatment regardless of their ethnicity. Violent hazing was widely tolerated, and officers were known to send men charging at the Germans by firing at them from behind. Central Asians confronted additional challenges. Racism was pervasive, universal, and usually violent. Moreover, virtually none knew Russian, and not understanding an officer's orders was sufficient grounds for a savage beating. Central Asian conscripts had to adapt quickly just to survive. The experience must have been paradoxical and traumatic—they were thrust into an alien, bloody setting, experiencing racism and exclusion while being assured of equality with their Russian brethren. Approximately 4 to 5 million young men were pulled from their communities and Sovietized overnight.

Like the rest of the USSR, Central Asia was transformed into a war economy, and the region acquired new economic importance. In the months after Operation Barbarossa, the Germans occupied the most valuable territory in the USSR. Virtually all Soviet armament, aircraft, and tank production was concentrated in the lost territory—not to mention 40% of the country's population and much of the most fertile agricultural land. The Soviet government undertook a mass evacuation not only of its citizens but also of industry. More than 2,500 factories and plants were evacuated to Central Russia, Siberia, and Central Asia.

As many as 1 million Soviet citizens were also evacuated to Central Asia. The 100,000 Russians who moved to Tashkent alone included many of the Soviet intelligentsia. However, most of the population of the region remained in the countryside and experienced the war primarily through one Soviet institution: the collective farm. Wartime mobilization arguably cemented their role in Soviet agriculture. In territory closer to the front, agriculture all but collapsed. Moreover, in the peak years of the war—1941 to 1943—the number of collective farms fell from 35 million to 15 million. Across the country, 12 million men were pulled out of collectivized agriculture, so women became the majority in both agricultural labor and industry. Thus, Central Asia's collective farms took on new importance. Millions of the region's men were suffering and dying fighting the Nazis. All the while, the population was being integrated into the Soviet economy and culture.

The Turkestan Legion

Though soldiers faced appalling conditions in the Red Army, those unlucky enough to be captured by the Germans were in for a worse experience. The Soviets and Germans placed each other's prisoners in camps unfit for humans. In camps on the eastern front, death from malnutrition, disease, exposure, and arbitrary executions was common. The Nazis singled Central Asian prisoners out for special treatment as *untermenschen* (inferior people). One notorious incident in the Netherlands in 1942 involved 101 prisoners of war (POWs)—most of them from Samarkand—being paraded through the Dutch town of Amersfoort in a circus-like display. Twenty-four of the prisoners died from starvation and exposure; the remaining were shot in April 1942.

This horrifying event provides some context for one of the darker episodes of Central Asia's involvement in World War II—the pro-Nazi Turkestan Legion. It was one of several such military groups set up by the Nazis, stemming from a belief that Soviet Muslims would prefer Hitler's rule to Stalin's. The Turkestan Legion ended up attracting some 180,000 Soviet POWs, most of whom were Uzbeks. By its dissolution in 1944, some 65,000 of these former Red Army soldiers had died in combat.



The legion is an ugly chapter in the war's history, but these soldiers were likely not motivated by attraction to Nazi ideology. They had seen how the Nazis treated people they deemed inferior. Languishing in camps and threatened with medical experimentation by camp doctors, many signed up out of desperation. Others surely had an axe to grind with Stalin, as they had seen their loved ones starve to death in the Kazakh famine or be exiled to a certain death for being rich peasants. In the end, many of the legion's veterans were sent back home and executed, but some went to Turkey, West Germany, Canada, and the United States.



Commemoration

By the time the Red Army marched into Berlin on May 2, 1945, the death toll among Central Asians was atrocious. Out of Uzbekistan's population of 6.5 million, approximately 1.5 million fought at the front, and 400,000 perished. More than 300,000 soldiers from Kazakhstan died. Even a small republic like Tajikistan lost more than 50,000 people. The civilian toll was almost as large in some republics due to massive requisitions of forced labor, deaths at the front, and the horrific toll among special settlers.

Though the Central Asian republics are now independent, the war is still commemorated. For the region, the war was about much more than fighting. It integrated a large part of the population into the Soviet economy and gave them a foothold in the Soviet narrative of progress. Moreover, it laid the foundation for a more unified Soviet identity. Millions of disparate people were thrown into the maelstrom of war. They fought side by side in a bitter—but ultimately successful—struggle for survival. Central Asians were every bit a part of that war effort. A new generation of heroes returned from the front bedecked in accolades they could never have received in the Tsarist era. Their exploits were splashed across the front pages of newspapers and on propaganda posters across the Soviet Union. The war thus set the stage for Central Asia to not only contribute to the country's economy and politics but also inject something new into Soviet culture.

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21

Life in Soviet Central Asia

The Nazis invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. On September 5, 1943, Stalin summoned the three top bishops of the Russian Church and asked them what they wanted. He'd heard reports that Soviet citizens were greeting the Nazis as liberators, in part because they reopened churches. He also needed to appease public opinion among his new allies—the religious Americans. Stalin appealed to the church to support the war, and the church obliged. Then, in the early 1940s, he reopened or created religious institutions across the country. His change of heart on religion is a fitting indication of just how much the war impacted Soviet society. This lecture will discuss the changes taking place during this period in Soviet Central Asia.

The Post-Stalin Era

The late 1940s were a hard time. Stalin's paranoia turned into violent antisemitism, and famine continued to plague the western parts of the union. However, a kind of normalization was taking place. In Central Asia, its most striking feature was that people started practicing religion in the open once more. As the fateful decade ended and a new one began, more reasons for optimism cropped up. Cities expanded and became more attractive places to live, benefiting from the influx of new industries and economic development prompted by World War II. For instance, Almaty—the capital of the Kazakh SSR—more than tripled in population between World War I and the 1950s. The city became a major food processing center, and the food supply across the region stabilized.

The next great improvements came after Stalin's death on March 5, 1953. By many accounts, the period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s was a golden age in Central Asia's modern history. The region's growing cities saw the birth of a new Soviet culture made possible primarily by interethnic marriage. Stalin's successor—Nikita Khrushchev—prioritized housing, and the apartment buildings he built still dominate the urban landscape of all post-Soviet countries. The change was subtle, however. Concrete buildings and neighborhoods initially appeared in pockets surrounded by traditional neighborhoods, which are known as *mahallas*. The contrast between the Soviet parts of town and the more numerous *mahallas* had an unmistakable colonial ambiance. In the parts of town with Soviet architecture, Slavic migrants predominated. However, in traditional neighborhoods, locals would only encounter Slavs who'd married into Central Asian families.

Over time, the line between the Soviet city and the *mahalla* became more porous as the cities changed. In Tashkent, this process accelerated due to a tragic event. On April 26, 1966, a massive earthquake struck the very center of the city. It leveled many of the oldest *mahallas* but left the newer concrete buildings intact. The government immediately started rebuilding. Instead of restoring the traditional neighborhoods to their former state, the authorities constructed apartment complexes in their place on the grounds of earthquake safety.



However, more important than what happened in Tashkent is what happened next to it. The government set its sights on Chilonzor—a largely rural suburb southwest of the city. They built an entirely new city there that was incorporated as a district of Tashkent in 1981. The authorities offered 100,000 nearly free apartment units. Slavic construction workers moved into the buildings they'd worked on, and special settlers—Germans, Koreans, Chechens, and Crimean Tatars—and mixed families moved in too. The most prominent newcomers were Uzbeks, and Chilonzor became a multiethnic Soviet space with a distinctly Uzbek flair. The Soviets celebrated it as the place where a new Soviet man would be born, but there was nothing new about the cultural fusion taking place. What the propagandists of the day referred to as Soviet internationalism was a new take on what Central Asians had been doing all along.

Central Asian Soviet Achievements

Located on the southern border, Tashkent was the USSR's fourth-largest city and was advantageously positioned to revitalize some of Central Asia's ancient Eurasian connections. It became the face of the post-Stalin Soviet Union to

much of the postcolonial world. On January 10, 1966, the leaders of Pakistan and India signed the Tashkent Declaration in the city, ending the Second Kashmir War.

Other Soviet projects put Central Asia on the map too. In 1949, First Lightning—the first atomic detonation in the Soviet Union—took place at the Semipalatinsk Test Site in Kazakhstan. This shocked the West, which presumed the Soviets to be years away from such an achievement. The nearby city of Kurchatov was one of the major centers of the Soviet atomic program and one of the most secret cities in the USSR.

At the southern end of Kazakhstan, another secretive city called Baikonur was established in the 1950s as the primary site for Russian missile and space launches. On October 4, 1957, the Soviets shocked the world again when they launched the first artificial satellite from the Baikonur Cosmodrome. They would also go on to launch the first man and woman into space and the first intercontinental ballistic missiles from Baikonur. One could say that Central Asia inaugurated the space race.

Cultural Melding

People visiting urban parts of Central Asia mistook what they saw as Russification. For instance, Tashkent was certainly a metropolis with a lot of Russian language—and Russians. Uzbeks who wanted to live in the nicer parts of cities like Tashkent had to speak Russian, dress in Western fashion, and adopt Russian cultural norms to some extent. Those aspiring to a career in the Communist Party were expected to marry Russians to prove their internationalism. Speaking Uzbek in public in Tashkent was considered bad behavior until the 1980s. However, Russians weren't the ones frowning on this; rather, Sovietized Uzbeks preferred to speak Russian. Central Asian elites had adopted the Russian language and even communism as their own. Even smaller towns in places like Kazakhstan would have conveyed the impression of a heavily Russified local culture and language. But while perhaps outwardly Russian, a distinctive Soviet culture with a heavy dosage of Central Asian content lay beneath it all.

Consider the case of Islamic scholars imprisoned in the Gulag. They would be the last people one would expect to embrace the Soviet system, yet upon their release, that's exactly what they did. Scholars who had served as judges in shari'a or customary law courts continued to practice law in the 1950s by obtaining Soviet law degrees and serving as judges in Soviet courts. Allen Frank uncovered the same phenomenon in the field of medicine: Sufi figures who practiced traditional medicine became doctors after getting out of the Gulag, and they encouraged their children to pursue the same professions. Before the Soviet period, the position of judge or traditional healer had often been a dynastic one, staying in the same family for generations. Dynastic continuity also inserted itself into Soviet institutions, taking advantage of the opportunities for upward mobility generated by the communist system.

Even during an epoch as violent as collectivization, Central Asian understandings of community reproduced themselves in Soviet conditions. For example, in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, collective farms were organized along kinship lines. The experience was traumatic, but the trauma was experienced in communal terms familiar to the people living through it. This point about collective farms is important for another reason: Rural people experienced Soviet culture just as much as city dwellers. Collective farmers watched the same TV programs as everyone else in the USSR. Many collective farms also had cinemas, which showed films from across the Soviet Union. Starting in the 1960s, they also showed Bollywood thrillers, which took much of the USSR by storm.

Media was one way in which rural people engaged with Soviet culture. Another was education. The curriculum across the entire Soviet Union was standardized. The fact that young people spent a big part of their day in a Soviet public school marked a major part of the socialization of several generations of Central Asians. However, the regional twist here was a negative one: In Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and parts of other republics, students and their teachers were forced to pick cotton for at least 1 month out of the year—and sometimes 4 months. Though it was billed as a patriotic and positive athletic activity, the reality is that the practice was a form of forced labor in dangerous conditions. The cotton season takes place in July and August, the hottest time of year. Naturally, students' parents did everything in their power to bribe their way out of picking cotton, so only the poorest, least privileged children had to do it.



Cotton Monoculture

The previous example is only part of the story of the impact of cotton in Central Asia. In the mid-1950s, agricultural planners began diverting the Amu Darya and Syr Darya to reclaim land in the steppes and desert. In 1962 alone, they irrigated 1,158 square miles of previously unused land. Then, they created 34 collective farms to produce cotton on the newly available territory. In Uzbekistan, cotton production reached nearly 4 million tons in 1964. The cotton monoculture was born, encompassing all of Uzbekistan, much of Tajikistan, and parts of the other three republics. The cotton industry generated a vast industrial and educational infrastructure in the countryside. Managerial positions, agronomical academies, experimentation stations, and technical schools all promoted upward mobility for previously marginalized Central Asians.

Arduous manual labor was one dark side of the cotton monoculture. Another was environmental degradation. The Aral Sea was once the mightiest inland ocean in the world and was known for its rich variety of fish, especially sturgeon. The Kazakh and Karakalpak people who lived on the Aral's banks were known as fishermen. An entire body of folklore, legends, and myths arose around this majestic body of water. However, by 1960, the sea had shrunk to half its normal size, and this decline produced a massive public health crisis that the Soviets never acknowledged. As the water receded, salinity in the soil increased for hundreds of miles around, finding its way into the food supply. Traces of fertilizers that were no longer washed from the soil also entered foodstuffs. Leukemia, anemia, and cancer rates skyrocketed. By 1989, the Aral Sea had disintegrated into separate bodies of water. Efforts by the Kazakh government to restore the northern part of the sea have met with some success. For the first time in many years, fishermen are at work there again. The communities of the southern part—in Uzbekistan—continue to struggle, though.



The tragedy of the Aral Sea is a metaphor for the balanced verdict historians must settle for: Soviet policies created tragedies perhaps without precedent in the region's history while also engineering opportunities for millions of people.

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Prosperity and the Fall of the USSR

In the long run, the USSR's planned economy would prove unsustainable. However, as you'll see in this lecture, its great strength lay in its ability to direct resources and investment toward the long-term strategic development of economies rather than the market drive toward shorter-term gains. The Soviet republics of Central Asia were some of the greatest beneficiaries here. During the 1970s, the region was experiencing a remarkable period of accelerated economic development that transformed it from a largely agricultural periphery into a semi-industrial zone. The legacy of that investment is still visible everywhere in Central Asia today. For instance, take the Nurek Dam, which was built by Soviet engineers on the Vakhsh River in Tajikistan. The dam began operations in 1972 and brought electricity to much of the country for the first time.



Rise of the Republics

The Soviet planned economy helped provide capital, technology, and training to strategically diversify Central Asian economies. Great sums of wealth were redistributed from more prosperous areas like Russia and Ukraine to the poorest regions. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek went from being one of the poorest republican capitals to a major city of the union via investment. Almost half a million apartments were built in the 1960s and 1970s to house nearly half the Kyrgyz population. The newly housed became workers in a flood of new factories—making cement, sheet metal, glass, electricity, and textiles. Between 1960 and 1980, Kyrgyzstan’s industrial output increased fivefold. The nation’s population nearly doubled in the same period, and life expectancy rose from just 55 years in 1960 to 69 years by the end of the Soviet period.

Kazakhstan made even greater strides. The mining sector was prioritized, and by the 1960s, newly discovered deposits of lead, titanium, copper tin, and magnesium were being exploited. During the era of Dinmukhamed Kunayev—who served as the Kazakh Communist Party secretary from 1960 to 1986—Kazakhstan’s economy became the third largest in the Soviet Union after Russia and Ukraine. Enormous metallurgy plants opened to process the vast new quantities of raw materials. More than 40 cities were established from scratch on the Kazakh Steppe to house workers and communities around the mineral boom. This economic growth brought dramatic increases in living standards.

In Uzbekistan, Sharof Rashidov—the secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party from 1959 to 1983—was particularly influential. As a close confidant of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, he was given considerable autonomy and funds from Moscow to pursue grand economic plans. To unlock the state’s energy potential, he secured funds to open up gas fields, thermal power plants, and hydroelectric power stations. After the war, light industry and manufacturing boomed in Tashkent. The city became a notable exporter of tractors, radios, and electronics to the rest of the USSR. Rashidov also had the Soviets build Central Asia’s first metro in Tashkent.



The Cotton Scandal

The planned economy also subsidized many areas of Central Asian life, keeping the prices of imports from the rest of the USSR artificially low. Moreover, the Soviet system educated several generations of Central Asian engineers, doctors, scientists, managers, and other professionals free of charge. Employment was a guarantee to Soviet citizens. Without profit as the driving force of the economy, many unprofitable and unproductive industries were kept open to keep people working.

However, this system could not last forever. By the 1970s, the Soviet planned economy was sputtering and stagnating. Lack of competition or profit motivation among the new massive state-owned enterprises removed the need to innovate or find efficiencies in operations. Moreover, the system was riddled with inefficiency and corruption. The Central Asian republics were ruled over by an entrenched party elite that lined their pockets and created elaborate networks of patronage and nepotism.

Such corruption dramatically came to light during the so-called cotton scandal that took Uzbekistan by storm in the 1980s. When Brezhnev died in November 1982, numerous officials in Moscow voiced an open secret: For at least a decade, Uzbekistan's Communist Party under Rashidov had been falsifying cotton statistics. In 1983, a massive investigation into Uzbek cotton management began. That year alone, it emerged that the Uzbek party overreported 981,000 tons of cotton production. The problem began with ecological devastation caused by the reckless overuse of irrigation, pesticides, and fertilizers triggered by unsustainable cotton production plans. Rashidov and his colleagues created an intricate system of bribes and forgeries to hide the growing disaster from Moscow. Even worse, he used these false numbers to receive billions of rubles in payments for nonexistent cotton exports to Russia. Much of this money went unaccounted for. Soviet prosecutors found that the corruption permeated every level of the Uzbek Communist Party.

The cotton scandal is one of many such crazy stories of corruption, bribes, suicides, murders, assassinations, and heists that went on behind the façade of Soviet egalitarianism. However, it affected ordinary people too. Collective farmers were forced to record cotton amounts they hadn't picked. In some cases, collective farm chairmen operated their institutions almost as feudal

possessions. The communist system was so top down that all power was concentrated in the head of the farm. If a member of the collective farm needed something special—such as getting his kid into university—he would plead with the chairman to use his connections to make it happen. This act was informally part of the chairman’s job. Most workers didn’t have enough income to pay him a bribe, so the one thing they could offer was their absolute loyalty and obedience. Such was the dark side of the communist planned economy.

The Soviets and Islam

During the 1970s and 1980s, nationalism in the Central Asian republics increasingly included members of the intelligentsia, most of whom were members of the Communist Party. Among Central Asians, this group had benefited from communism the most. Increasingly, however, they dreamed of greater autonomy for their republics. They began to subscribe to the notion that Soviet rule had stifled their national development rather than promoted it. And all of them complained that when Stalin had drawn up the borders, he had given their republics less than they deserved.

Interestingly, scholars, Central Asian elites, and even pious young Muslims in the region today commonly state that Islam “survived” the ravages of communism. These people don’t realize they are parroting Soviet propaganda. Since the 1950s, observers of Islam in the USSR have relied uncritically on Soviet publications, which boasted that religion was on the decline because of education, literacy, women’s growing presence in the workforce, and other predictable reasons. Soviet officials claimed that state atheism had been successful, and many scholars took these claims at face value. However, a rapidly growing body of scholarship is demonstrating that repression of Islam was the exception rather than the rule over the 74 years of Soviet history. That isn’t to say that Soviet citizens enjoyed religious freedom, though. For instance, attendance at mosques was discouraged. Yet many people still managed to observe the Islamic wedding rite and attend shrines—even in urban areas. Half a century of communist social engineering did not obliterate the religious and cultural pillars that had been built in Central Asia over a millennium.

However, the climate for religion did gradually worsen in the 1980s. The trigger was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on December 24, 1979. The year before, a wildly unpopular communist regime had taken control of the region in a bloody coup. They were so brutal that the Soviets decided to replace them. A contingent of 30,000 Soviet soldiers killed the communist leader and replaced him with another more to Moscow's liking. Over the next decade, war claimed 15,000 Soviet soldiers and more than 1 million Afghan lives. The overt religiosity of the Afghan resistance fighters—the mujahideen—caused the Soviets unease. The Islamic Revolution in Iran also took place in 1979, and the Soviets immediately feared that Islamist political resistance could spread into Central Asia.

Much of this thinking stemmed from old prejudicial assumptions about Islam as a violent religion. The Communist Party feared that Central Asians in the Red Army would become infected with Islamic extremism while in Afghanistan. In reality, the reverse was true: Thousands of Central Asian soldiers heroically served their country. Many of the Red Army soldiers who defected to the mujahideen were actually Christian Russians who converted to Islam. Ultimately, while the Soviet-Afghan War did have a destabilizing effect on communism in Central Asia, it wasn't because of the spread of radical Islam. The decade-long war exacted an enormous financial and material burden on the already teetering Soviet economy.



When Mikhail Gorbachev took over the Communist Party on March 11, 1985, he vowed to reform the Soviet economy and promote freedom of speech. He cleaned house, appointing new party secretaries to all the Central Asian republics to disrupt the entrenched and corrupt ruling elites. However, he also announced a new campaign on Islam, and the new party leaders in Central Asia were given conflicting missions. They talked the talk of democracy—of reforming the planned economy—while also increasingly empowering the local KGB to monitor and crack down on mosques and religious study circles. If the Soviet Union had survived under Gorbachev, who knows how things might have turned out?

However, the collapsing planned economy, declining living standards, widespread shortages, endemic corruption, revolutions in Eastern Europe, and growing popular desire for freedom and democracy were far bigger problems. The USSR's collapse was largely driven by a power struggle at the center. Russian nationalists led by Boris Yeltsin ultimately triumphed, forcing Gorbachev out and the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. The five 'stans suddenly found themselves on their own. The party leaders appointed by Gorbachev quickly transformed themselves into presidents of now-independent republics. With communism a thing of the past and atheism repudiated, one might think they would've abandoned the campaign against Islam—instead, they accelerated it.

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The Uyghurs and East Turkistan

Currently, around 1 million Muslim Uyghurs languish in forced reeducation camps in East Turkistan—or Xinjiang, as it's known in Chinese. The region is now witnessing a horrific campaign of cultural assimilation presided over by China's Communist Party. The state monitors every aspect of Uyghurs' everyday life, through a sophisticated surveillance apparatus. By and large, Uyghurs are prevented from leaving the country, and even their movements within China are restricted. How did things get so bad? The constituent regions of East Turkistan have gone by different names throughout history, yet the people have always considered themselves connected primarily to their Turkic brethren in the west rather than to China in the east. As you'll learn in this lecture, the facts bear this out.

East Turkistan

Today, the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang is vast and comprises multiple different cultural zones. The south is the most isolated and was spared from invasion for much of its history due to the forbidding Taklamakan Desert and the Kunlun and Karakoram mountain ranges. A long sliver of fertile land that has nurtured a series of oasis towns—the largest of which is Kashgar—lies between the desert and the mountains. This part of East Turkistan has often been referred to as Kashgaria. More than 1,000 miles to the north is the region long known as Dzungaria. By and large, these two cultural regions have interacted with their neighbors to the west and with China in different ways. The term *East Turkistan* has appeared historically, but its present usage was adopted by Uyghur nationalists in the 19th century.



Chinese ideologists state that Xinjiang has always been a part of China's territory, that the concept of East Turkistan is a new creation, and that Uyghurs are part of the Chinese nation. As with many falsifications, these statements contain a kernel of truth. In the 1st century CE, the Han entered

the region to battle their archrivals, the Xiongnu. During this time, the Han established garrisons and military farms across the region and also traded extensively with it in search of the prized jade of the Tarim Basin. So, the Chinese presence here is the result of dynamics in Steppe politics that predate even recorded history.

East Turkistan is a place where modern categories of state, nation, and even race are frequently mapped onto earlier time periods in ways that don't make sense. The Communist Party views the region as Chinese, while Uyghur nationalists view it as the homeland of a Uyghur nation. With a bit of modification, the latter version of history is much more plausible. Consider the Tarim mummies. The Tarim Basin is incredibly arid, which has allowed the hundreds of bodies buried there to remain incredibly well preserved. The oldest ones have Indo-European characteristics, such as high cheekbones and red or blonde hair. [The discovery of such mummies suggests that migrants from Siberia long predated a Chinese presence. The Uyghurs have pointed to them as proof that their descendants lived there long before the Chinese.

However, Chinese archaeologists dismiss that claim and point out that East Turkistan was always a hodgepodge of different cultures, partly due to the Silk Road. In the region's museums, Chinese mummies are now displayed prominently next to Caucasoid ones. Such typical nationalist fare misses the point: The modern Uyghur nation is a product of cultural blending—including Turkic, Tokharian, and traces of other long-lost people. But the term *Uyghur* as it's used today means something quite different than it might have in the 9th century during the heyday of the Buddhist Uyghur khaganate. To understand this development, one needs to take a closer look at the relationship between Dzungaria and Kashgaria.

Yakub Beg

To the north, Dzungaria had always been governed by the patterns of Steppe politics. However, in the south, empires found it easier to access the Tarim Basin's priceless jade by working through local rulers. In the 17th century, the powerful Dzungar khanate wreaked havoc on China and the Kazakh Steppe but was content to run the south through local Naqshbandi families. This pattern was about to change, though, because there was a new sheriff in

Beijing. The Qing Qianlong emperor installed in 1735 viewed the Dzungars as an existential threat. In 1755, he invaded Dzungaria and wiped the confederation from the face of the earth.



Qing Qianlong Emperor

The Qing brought East Turkistan under Chinese rule in a way that was much more regulated and centralized than anything previous Chinese dynasties had done. In the north, they created military farms, settled Manchu and Mongol soldiers, and established Chinese administrative units to regulate the Han population. By contrast, Muslims were ruled by local elites cooperating with Beijing. Qing rule did not bring immediate change to the south, though. For at least 100 years, Beijing still considered this far-flung region not worth the investment required to occupy it, so power remained in the hands of dynastic Naqshbandi families.

Then, in 1865, a general from Kokand named Yakub Beg took advantage of weak Qing rule in Western China to launch an invasion of Kashgar. One by one, he conquered the cities of the Tarim Basin, and by 1871, he controlled a formidable state in southern East Turkistan. He adopted a strict interpretation of Islam as his official ideology and presented himself as a bulwark against Chinese infidels. In the Muslim world, Yakub gained stature as an anticolonial liberator on behalf of Islam. More than anyone else, the British Empire welcomed him with open arms. London was eager to extend its influence into Central Asia, and the British took the extraordinary step of granting Yakub's state diplomatic recognition. He signed commercial treaties with both the British and the Russians.

Yakub's emirate can help dispel two common misconceptions about East Turkistan. The first has to do with the region's isolation. Even in periods of chaos, it has actively participated in patterns of global exchange. Despite its impoverishment, the emirate brought the far-flung Tarim Basin to the very center of international attention. The second misconception has to do with Islamic rule. Yakub presented himself as a Muslim crusader, but his audience was international—not local. In the Tarim Basin, power had been concentrated in Sufi dynasties. Their rule may not have been benevolent, but they did have local legitimacy. The charisma of saintly lineages played a big role in this, as did the cult of saints. Yakub displaced these families and installed outsiders, many of whom he brought from Kokand. Their rule had little resonance with the local people. This factor may help explain why the population did not rise to his defense when Beijing retook the territory.

The Qing Period

In 1877, the Qing finally reconquered East Turkistan. Yakub died for unknown reasons. In 1884, Xinjiang was officially declared a Qing province, which opened a new chapter in the region's history. Now, Chinese administrative structures were applied uniformly across the entire province. The Qing wanted to Confucianize East Turkistan, and one of the staging grounds for this program was education. They opened new schools to train Uyghurs in Confucian literature and Qing etiquette. The goal was to create an indigenous class of loyal bureaucrats.

Historian Eric Schluessel has investigated a much darker side of this civilizing project. The Qing army that had been used to conquer East Turkistan had been recruited from the central Chinese province of Hunan, which exported its own influence under the guise of Qing rule. One result was what Schluessel calls a new “sexual economy of Confucian colonialism.” The army deemed it imperative to marry the tens of thousands of Hunanese men stationed in the region to local women as part of a plan of cultural assimilation. The result was a state-sponsored network of sexual trafficking that targeted vulnerable Muslim women. In the minds of military reformers, this process was done in the name of building civilized family units bound by Confucian filial piety.

However, in the late Qing period, a Turkic national identity began to coalesce at the elite level. A group of intellectuals proposed that all sedentary Turkic Muslims in East Turkistan were Uyghur.

Uyghur Identity and Communist Takeover

Horrible upheaval followed the Qing Empire’s collapse in 1911. Much of the empire’s vast interior broke up into petty fiefdoms ruled by local warlords, and East Turkistan was quickly consumed by disorder and violence. But as historian David Brophy has shown, the ensuing period saw Uyghur identity crystallize.

In East Turkistan, the center of gravity moved to the Soviet Union. Among the Uyghurs in Soviet Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, some found it advantageous to join the Communist Party. Following Stalin’s affirmative action policies, they promoted a standardized Uyghur literary language and continued to institutionalize the idea of a unified Uyghur identity. By the 1930s, East Turkistan had all but become a Soviet province. Sheng Shicai—head of the ostensibly Marxist People’s Anti-Imperialist Association—took power in 1933 and began aligning the region toward the USSR. He alternated between embracing and repressing Uyghur nationalists. Interestingly, he formalized the term *Uyghur* in his rubber stamp legislature.

After the Japanese defeat in World War II, China descended into civil war. With Stalin's blessing, the Uyghurs launched a major rebellion. The result was the East Turkistan Republic (ETR) in 1944. By the summer of 1949, Mao's People's Liberation Army was marching toward East Turkistan. The ETR leadership had been given the signal by Stalin to make a deal with the Chinese communist government, and Mao invited a delegation to Beijing for talks. They first went to Almaty, where they boarded a plane for Beijing. However, they were never heard from again. Whatever happened, the ETR and Uyghur independence were finished. Despite its brief existence, Uyghur nationalists cite the republic as evidence of their claims to statehood. And when the Chinese communists disbanded the ETR, they accepted *Uyghur* as the label uniting the sedentary Turkic population. Thus, Uyghur national identity was permanently inscribed in the region's political framework.

Interestingly, many Uyghurs viewed the communists as a welcome alternative to the Chinese nationalist government—after all, Mao was a Stalinist. However, in the early 1950s, the party promoted a dramatic Han Chinese migration program into East Turkistan that had a strong whiff of assimilation. Mao also presided over the horrific Great Leap Forward of 1958 to 1962 and Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976. Everyone in China suffered. In minority regions, such as East Turkistan, party youth activists killed clergy, shut down shrines, and attacked symbols of Muslim culture.



Today, more than 1 million Uyghurs have been placed in so-called vocational reeducation camps, which feature forced sterilization of Muslim women, rape, and arbitrary violence. Moreover, their children have been taken to state-run orphanages. This sinister, reimagined assimilation campaign is funded by the Chinese Communist Party's limitless wealth and cutting-edge surveillance technology. However, East Turkistan has now been propelled to the center of the international human rights movement, and the Uyghur nationalist movement has gone global.

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24

Independence and Modern Central Asia

In terms of day-to-day government, the Soviet collapse did not change much—at least not immediately. Since the 1970s, party officials had conducted much of the actual governance of the republics. Infrastructure, tax collection, higher education, law enforcement, and even the secret police operated with increasingly less oversight from Moscow. Some of the republics even had their own foreign ministries. In certain respects, they had governments that functioned well enough on their own, which is important to keep in mind. Often, you'll hear that the Central Asian republics were completely unprepared for independence or even that independence was forced on them. As you'll learn in this lecture, these statements aren't false—they just don't do justice to the nuances in the region in the late 1980s.

Republic Independence

In November 1990, Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev proposed the Union Treaty, which would give the 15 Soviet republics autonomy. The three Baltic republics and Georgia refused to sign, and Western Ukraine was also opposed. The following January, major protests erupted in Lithuania and Latvia. Then, in March, two communist party bosses in Central Asia declared themselves presidents of their own republics. One was Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov, and the other was Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev.



Nursultan Nazarbayev

Between August 31 and December 16, 1991, all five Central Asian republics declared independence, and on Christmas Day, the Soviet flag was lowered at the Kremlin. By this time, all 15 Soviet republics—including Russia—no longer recognized the USSR. While euphoria and excitement abounded, these feelings were tempered by uncertainty about the future. Central Asia's economy was intricately tied to the Soviet planned economy. Moreover, these republics did not have their own currency or military, and most major roads, pipelines, railways, and air routes led to Russia.

Issues like water and energy were much more critical. The five 'stans had radically different endowments. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have plenty of fossil fuel, while mountainous Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan produce hydroelectricity. However, the four southernmost republics and southern Kazakhstan were tied to a single power grid set up in the 1980s. Now, they had to worry about buying and selling their resources to one another.

The 'stans received another significant shock when Russia's Central Bank withdrew Soviet-era rubles from circulation in July 1993. Russia demanded that the former republics transfer their gold reserves to Moscow in exchange for the new banknotes. Impoverished Tajikistan acquiesced, but Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan set up their own currencies. Overnight, people's savings in rubles became worthless, and inflation ate up their purchasing power. Both begging and sex work became much more visible, even in provincial towns. In the meantime, the public health infrastructure collapsed.

If there were success stories in the 1990s, they were at the top. Communist bosses transformed themselves into champions of capitalism and the market. The post-Soviet space was a world of robber barons. What was heralded as privatization really meant theft of state property. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan had vast oil and gas wealth, which was previously managed by massive state-owned enterprises. Now, fire sales were held to privatize the crown jewels of the planned economy. Much of this incredible public wealth made its way into the hands of relatives, friends, and political allies. Post-Soviet oligarchies took shape at a horrific cost to ordinary people. An entire generation of young people suffered from unemployment, poor health care, chronically underfunded education, corruption, arbitrary police violence, the absence of freedom of expression, and dashed hopes and dreams.

The Tajik Civil War

One place that buckled under the pressure was Tajikistan. As the poorest of all Soviet republics, it had depended inordinately on subsidies from Moscow to directly fund up to half of its annual budget. In May 1992, the nation descended into a brutal civil war that killed around 100,000 people and pushed 1 million from their homes. The few scholars who study this conflict still debate what its root cause might have been.

In the 1920s, Stalin had initially been unsure what to do with this fringe of Central Asia. When he settled on the borders of the Tajik SSR, the republic cobbled together several disparate regions—the historical northern powerhouse of Khujand, the area south of the Hisor range, and the large but thinly populated region of Badakhshon. The SSR's odd composition led to violence even in the Soviet era. In the 1950s, several hundred thousand highlanders were forced to move south to work in the cotton fields, and they and their descendants experienced systematic neglect from the state. Much of their anger was directed at the Tajik SSR's leadership, which was dominated by elites from Khujand and Qurghonteppa. Worse still, young Tajik men were disproportionately recruited to fight in the Afghan War.

In this climate, a movement known as the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRP) took shape. They were not diehard Islamists but did call for the reintegration of Islam into the public sphere. When the fighting began in May 1992, the IRP rapidly became a bogeyman. However, the conflict for control of independent Tajikistan was really between a neo-communist elite and a weak coalition of secular, liberal, and Islamist forces called the United Tajik Opposition. The bitter war finally ended in 1996 with a power-sharing agreement between the Tajik government and the IRP.

Uzbekistan's Crackdown

One lesson from the Tajik conflict proved very mobile—the bogeyman of Islamic extremism. Neighboring Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, had been confronted early on by Islamist activists in the Fergana Valley. As early as 1990, they had begun demanding that women wear the veil and pressuring stores to stop selling alcohol. Outwardly at least, Karimov had

done all the right things to establish his Muslim bona fides. He had sworn his first oath of office on the Qur'an, performed the hajj to Mecca, and presided over the opening of thousands of state-controlled mosques and madrassas. However, the new state's DNA was thoroughly Soviet. Like Gorbachev, Karimov saw Islam as a political force that threatened Uzbekistan's power and unity. By the mid-1990s, he'd outlawed all opposition parties. Even resolutely secular activists were jailed on trumped-up charges of radicalism. The message was clear: Islam would be allowed, but only on the state's terms.



Islam Karimov

While the crackdown on religion remained muted at first, it significantly stepped up in the wake of two events. The first took place in Tashkent on February 16, 1999. Six car bombs—including one outside parliament shortly after a visit by Karimov—exploded near government buildings. The government blamed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Based in Afghanistan, it had been founded by a preacher named Tahir Yuldashev and an Afghan veteran and elite paratrooper named Juma Namangani. The bombings gave the government a justification to conduct mass arrests.

After the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, things in the nation became even worse. The US quickly occupied Afghanistan and established a refueling station in central Uzbekistan. Needless to say, the rental money American taxpayers paid to the Uzbek government did not find its way to ordinary people. The economic situation in the early 2000s continued to deteriorate.

The 'Stans Today

Violence and poverty marked the first 10 to 15 years of Central Asian independence. However, doom and gloom don't tell the whole story. The people in these countries are proud of their 3 decades of independence and have much to celebrate. Kazakhstan's rise in the world has been particularly impressive. Its GDP per capita has tripled since 1990, and nearly every indicator of human development has improved in the country. Life expectancy has risen, as has citizens' access to quality education and healthcare.



Kazakhstan has become one of the more prominent success stories of post-Soviet transition, at least economically. This progress is reflected in the growing pride around Kazakh identity and language, which are now conspicuously promoted. People are taking pride in identities that they would have kept quiet about in Soviet times. The country is not without its problems, though. Major protests in January 2022 effectively shut down the nation, and Nazarbayev—the Communist Party secretary turned president—was kicked out of office.

The other four republics have all had to make their own way in a brave new capitalist world, each facing different challenges. With the world's fourth-largest reserves of natural gas and significant deposits of oil, Turkmenistan has experienced significant economic growth too. However, it has also been highly vulnerable to fluctuations in global energy prices, and its economy has expanded and contracted quite wildly.

In Uzbekistan, the dictator Karimov clung to a command-style economy for decades after independence. His death in 2016 led to the country significantly opening up to market reforms. Cotton still forms a huge pillar of the economy, but gold and other precious minerals have also been major sources of growth in recent years.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan both remain dependent on agriculture and subsistence farming. They have struggled to attract foreign investment, and organized crime and corruption are major problems in these nations. In desperation, some Tajiks have turned to heroin trafficking with neighboring Afghanistan, creating a booming black market in narcotics. By some estimates, it's worth as much as half of the entire country's GDP. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's economic and security challenges have led both to become increasingly dependent on Chinese foreign aid, investments, and loans. Finally, around 3 million Central Asians work in Russia in dangerous mining and construction jobs. In 2023, remittances from these workers comprised 31% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and 51% of Tajikistan's.

Another challenge that has faced all the new republics is the transition to democracy and open society. Progress has been slow. Scandals, protests, riots, and resignations have become increasingly commonplace in the region's politics. Yet while the political situation may seem dismal, it also signals hope

for the future. Central Asians have become more civically engaged and are willing to hold the political class to account. Moreover, religious tolerance has markedly improved, even in Uzbekistan.

The recent rise of Central Asian cultural capital is also interesting. For example, some years ago, a style called *suzani*—which refers to an embroidered textile panel, usually featuring bright colors and floral design—took American budget retailers by storm. *Suzani*-themed designs appear on bags, blankets, curtains, dresses, blouses, and even underwear.

Intricate and bright, *suzani* motifs can add vitality, creativity, and energy to the designs of other cultures. This process of creation brings to mind how the Steppe belt brought nomads into contact with settled peoples. The result was always an extended period of cultural fluorescence. Surprisingly, the same pattern has emerged in the last century. The suffering Stalin visited on the region can only be compared to the crimes of Chingis Khan. However, even before the former's death, a new culture was taking shape here—both Central Asian and Soviet. What will the next iteration of this time-tested pattern look like?

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