

Knowledge Production on Central Asia: Transcultural Approaches in Central Asian Studies

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Central Asian studies is a relatively young discipline, though the region that it demarcates has been of interest to various disciplines for many years. Cengiz Sürücü¹ dates the demarcation of Central Asia as a region of study to when it became part of the Great Game between Russia and Britain in the nineteenth century. In the writings of administrative officers, spies, scientists, linguists, and military officers of the day, the region was described as a dangerous, dark, empty, and wild space. Sürücü writes: “It is in this period that Central Asia became a subject of systematic knowledge production.”²

The two main bodies interested in the region were the Royal British Geographical Society and its Russian counterpart, the Russian Geographical Society, both of which shared “an impressive level of communication and exchange of information through a pool of information-sharing networks.”³ This perception of Central Asia as *terra incognita*, mysterious, exotic, enigmatic, and attractive, remained even beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union and was still found in scholarship as late as the 1990s.⁴ The editors Manfred Sapper, Volker Weichsel, and Andrea Huterer open their collection of articles on Central Asia with the words “Das heutige Zentralasien ist weitgehend *terra incognita*” (The territory of Central Asia today is by and large *terra incognita*).⁵ With this characterization, however, these editors are less interested in mystification and exoticization than in urging researchers to work on the region and its contemporary complexity. Unlike historical Central Asia, contemporary developments appear particularly challenging to research. The reason lies in the recent history

1 Cengiz Sürücü, “Exploring Terra Incognita: A Reading on the Pre-History of Central Asian Studies,” *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 75–100.

2 Sürücü, “Exploring Terra Incognita,” 77.

3 Sürücü, “Exploring Terra Incognita,” 83.

4 Sürücü mentions *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia* by Denis Sinor (1990) as an example of when the region was opposed to a civilized world.

5 Manfred Sapper, Volker Weichsel, and Andrea Huterer, “Editorial: Mosaiksteine,” in *Machtmosaik Zentralasien: Traditionen, Restriktionen, Aspirationen*, ed. Manfred Sapper et al. (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2007), 7.

of the region and the necessary re-orientation of scholars after the former Soviet Socialist Republics gained their independence.

German academia presents a particularly useful example for approaching the complexities of Central Asia and how they have been studied. German scholars today consider Central Asia to include the area from Afghanistan to Mongolia, and from Xinjiang to the Black Sea. Some academic departments, however, limit Central Asia to the five post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, at times including Afghanistan. Scholars may also include the Caucasus and hence use the Soviet period as a point of departure and direction from which to examine the region. This is particularly the case for Eastern European studies (*Osteuropastudien*), Eurasian studies, or Inner Asian studies (in the Anglophone world) that look at the region from the perspective of historical Russia and the Soviet Union. A different perspective is adopted by Ottoman studies and Persian studies, both based on cultural and linguistic similarities (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Uzbek are Turkic languages, while Tajik is an Iranian language) and political interests. Sinology, Buddhist studies, Russian ethnography, and Islamic studies have equally been interested in the region as the periphery of well-established disciplines. In this “mental map,” Central Asia is a negative concept: “Es beginnt jeweils dort, wo der eigene kulturelle Einflussbereich nicht mehr greift” (It begins where one’s own cultural influence zone stops working).⁶ Bert Fagner criticizes conceptions of Central Asia as a continental mass that lacks culture, a space of cultural emptiness, a culturally unoccupied space.

Academic centres like Cambridge, SOAS in London, or Harvard—just to name a few—have, however, dedicated programmes to the region for decades, whereas the Humboldt University in Berlin merged the only Central Asian Seminar in Germany into a subsection of the African-Asian Institute, despite the efforts invested by its leadership in promoting Central Asian studies. The duty of Central Asian studies is hence to turn the periphery into a centre and focus on the people, their history, culture, practices, and politics. Authorities like al-Bukhari, one of the major Hadith collectors of Sunni Islam, and philosopher-scientists like Ibn Sina (Avicenna), as well as empires and civilizations, have emerged in the region connecting northern and southern Asia, the east, and the west as far as Europe. There is no reason why Central Asia should be treated as a periphery by more established disciplines; to do so is to ignore its internal complexity, language diversity, history, politically-distinct paths, global relationships, and cultural productions.

6 Bert G. Fagner, “Zentralasien—Begriff und historischer Raum,” in *Zentralasien: 13. bis 20. Jahrhundert. Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, ed. Bert Fagner and Andreas Kappeler (Wien: Promedia 2006), 12.

Transcultural approaches have criticized area studies as regional containers and suggested looking for relationships, interconnectivities, and entanglements across regions. However, this demands a solid knowledge of several languages, as well as social and political contexts. The field of Central Asian studies offers itself to a transcultural approach through its interdisciplinary knowledge production and recent disciplinary history. This paper will trace the history of Central Asian studies and argues that the peripherization of the region in academic disciplines and in politics has hindered the region and its people from being acknowledged as key players in Asia's historical and contemporary development.

Central Asia does not represent the further development of an empire and hence its disciplinary grounding has been slow. Furthermore, since the 1990s, its various countries have taken diverse paths, from Turkmenistan's closed dictatorship to the democratic efforts in Kyrgyzstan. The region hosts populations from various linguistic groups and a variety of religious orientations, which makes generalization difficult and risky. In order to serve the world market in the 1990s, books with "Central Asia" in their titles often focused on only one country but were marketed as if the book's observations could be applied to the whole region. Too much plurality in a relatively small space seems to cause problems for establishing Central Asian studies as a discipline; for example, a linguistic teaching staff of five to ten specialists would be required to cover only the most important languages. It is particularly this complexity of emerging and disappearing ethnic groups, linguistic groups, religious movements, intellectual traditions, and political orientations that makes the region a challenging and fascinating transcultural subject for research. The task of Central Asian studies is, however, not to serve as a substitute discipline that provides missing information to more established (post-colonial) disciplines. Instead, this article understands Central Asian studies to be a serious engagement with questions that are relevant to the people living in the region, which necessarily stretches beyond and across Asia. This change of perception is necessary to move away from communication *about* the region, which, among specialists in the nineteenth century, mystified the region in orientalist ways; rather, we wish to adopt a multi-perspectival approach.

Any ambition to present a full review of its academic history would necessarily fail, as the study of Central Asia in Europe is far too diverse. Central Asia as a field of study has been shaped by Ural and Altaic language specialists such as Denis Sinor and Alexandre Bennigsen, both active in Paris, and their students; the term has also been framed by various specialists in historical disciplines. In Russia, the study of the Soviet Union's southern tiers was shaped by oriental studies until the 1930s, and then was taken over by ethnographers and archaeologists. Thus, the aim in this article cannot

be to isolate one discipline but instead investigate how academic knowledge production has helped shape a region that is today referred to as Central Asia or Eurasia, and how Central Asian studies can contribute to a transcultural approach.

The discipline of Central Asian studies draws from ethnography, oriental studies, and disciplines focusing on Russia (Eastern European studies, Eurasian studies, Inner-Asian studies, Slavic studies, etc.), and its history cannot be treated in isolation. This multi-disciplinary approach to the region has led, on the one hand, to research fields that, at times, communicate little with one another but, on the other hand, has saved the region from the dilemma of area studies, namely, to isolate the history, culture, and politics from neighbouring countries/regions, thus creating regional containers that are products of university policies and regional politics rather than historical reality.

Cold War approaches: Sovietology

Since it is of little interest to Europe and the United States, Central Asia has remained a marginal region, one that comes into focus only when violence and war make it globally relevant, for example when groups such as al-Qaeda carry out an attack.⁷ This biased interest in the region is rooted in Cold War academic approaches, which Devin DeWeese has called “Sovietology.”⁸ With this, he draws attention to the ideologically driven approaches to studying Central Eurasia and more specifically Islam in Central Asia. Until the 1990s, studies on Central Asia were divided sharply between research inside the Soviet Union and studies from outside the region, which were both marked by Cold War ideologies. Access to the region was restricted for Western scholars. Therefore, many were forced to rely solely on documents produced by the Soviet Union as well as visits to academic institutions. Some Francophone and Anglophone researchers had a particular interest in the Islamic part of the Soviet Union, among them Alexandre Bennigsen, Chantal Lemerrier-Quellejay, Marie Broxup, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, Enders Wimbush, and Shirin Akiner. DeWeese refers to the Bennigsen School to exemplify a Sovietological approach that is not only embedded in Russocentric research contexts, but uses sources uncritically:

Plagued by inadequate data and problematic sources, and thus rife with methodological problems that have never been seriously

⁷ In contrast, the civil war in Tajikistan between 1992 and 1997 passed almost completely unnoticed.

⁸ Devin DeWeese, “Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro’i’s *Islam in the Soviet Union*,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13, no. 3 (September 2002): 298–330.

explored, either by Bennigsen's disciples or by his school's critics, the Bennigsen approach was in some respects pioneering in that it raised the profile of peoples and issues that were largely ignored by the wider community of Russocentric Sovietologists; yet, although its scholarly limitations should have been apparent, it has exerted a stultifying and even pernicious influence on the study of Islam in the Soviet environment, as its conclusions and approaches prompted repetition and imitation rather than serious critical discussion and challenge.⁹

In his critique of Yaacov Ro'i's book *Islam in the Soviet Union*, De Weese writes "Despite the collapse of the Soviet state, the study of religious life among the traditionally Muslim peoples of the former USSR has continued to be dominated by an academic 'tradition' that may be termed 'Sovietological Islamology'."¹⁰ Particularly problematic is the terminology with which Islam is described since the standard vocabulary was introduced by Bennigsen and his students. "What it presents is certain aspects of Islam in the USSR as viewed through the (often quite murky) lens of government documents prepared by those Soviet officials charged with finding the best means to curtail religious practice and hasten the disappearance of religious belief."¹¹ This Sovietologically informed disciplinary tradition created an image of Islam in Central Asia that DeWeese identifies as not being useful to understanding development on the ground. Security studies built on this approach, while considering economic processes relevant for the region, still accept the government's claim that Islam is the main source of insecurity.

In Europe and the United States, the anti-Soviet agenda dictated the path of research in the 1960s and 1970s to a large degree, which primarily meant that Soviet texts were read in reverse.¹² This was certainly true for Islam, which became identified as the core element of anti-Soviet resistance

9 DeWeese, "Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology," 299.

10 DeWeese, "Islam and the legacy of Sovietology," 298.

11 DeWeese, "Islam and the legacy of Sovietology," 301.

12 "Reading in reverse" means to interpret a comment in Soviet sources in a specific way: if, for instance, a source states that some people still fast during Ramadan, then a Sovietological way of reading would see fasting as resistance to the Soviet Union. In Soviet discourses of the 1970s, fasting was a traditional "survival" of the past and signal of a not yet perfect socialist society and, read in reverse, for Western scholars, it was a sign of active resistance.

through a reverse reading of Soviet texts.¹³ Alternative perspectives have been appearing since the 1980s, when several ethnographers from Western Europe and the United States managed to conduct research in the Soviet Union and contact became more frequent and open.¹⁴ Among these ethnographers, Tamara Dragaze must be mentioned for her work in the Caucasus and Tajikistan.¹⁵ Her many publications provide a solid reflection on the research environment and the manner of conducting research, as well as the larger academic context. The view that Islam had served as opposition was redressed after the 1990s, when it became clear that Islam had not only existed throughout the Soviet period, but had been integrated, tolerated, and accepted by the authorities.

These Sovietological approaches were increasingly deconstructed and rejected by younger generations, for whom travel to the region, and thus access to local archives and people, became possible. While most social anthropologists and historians have moved beyond the Cold-War approach, security studies have not only missed reflecting upon past research paradigms but maintained a discourse that characterizes Islam in Central Asia as a risk to stability. Such an approach dominates views in political research centres and international organizations such as the OSCE. Security studies have nourished a narrative on terrorism and security threats that dominates all public discourse.¹⁶ This narrative certainly informs the politics of international development organizations, and the existence of terrorists has become the most lucrative

13 See for example Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemerrier-Quellejey, *Islam in the Soviet Union* (London: Pall Mall, 1967); Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1983); Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars, Sufism in the Soviet Union* (London: Hurst, 1985); Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986); Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (London: Hurst, 2000).

14 Ernest Gellner, ed., *Soviet and Western Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University, 1980).

15 Tamara Dragadze, "Anthropological Fieldwork in the USSR," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 9, no. 1 (1978): 61–70; Tamara Dragadze, "Soviet Ethnography: Structure and Sentiment," in *Exploring the Edge of Empire: Soviet Era Anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, ed. Florian Mühlfried and Sergey Sokolovskiy (Münster: LIT, 2011), 21–34.

16 See for instance Martha Brill Olcott, "Islam and Fundamentalism in Independent Central Asia," in *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies*, ed. Yaacov Ro'i (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 21–39; Martha Brill Olcott, "Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2007/01/17/roots-of-radical-islam-in-central-asia/35w9>, January 17, 2007; Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Counterterrorism and Human Rights: Explaining Differences in the Scope and Brutality of States' Responses to Terrorism" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2007); Mariya Y. Omelicheva, *Counterterrorism Policies in Central Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); L. R. Polonskaya and A. V. Malashenko, *Islam in Central Asia* (Reading: Ithaca, 2008); V. V. Naumkin, *Central Asia: State, Religion, Society* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1993); V. V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

financial resource for states in Central Asia, which identify terrorists and security threats on a regular basis, a prerequisite for the massive financial help they receive from the West. The division between policy makers and academics has increased in this domain.¹⁷ The question of the relationship between culture and religion has hence split the academic community and policy makers.

One of the reasons for these conflicting approaches is the lack of research institutes that fund and investigate the diversity of contemporary Central Asia, and that would provide not only a solid linguistic education, but research into historical and contemporary research independent of political interests. With one department of Central Asian studies in all of Germany, the structural conditions for a more detailed view on the region are more than limited. Instead, much politically driven research ignores the region's transcultural entanglements and its historically central position by applying global security paradigms.¹⁸

This politicization and securitization of Central Asia has also isolated the five Central Asian republics in academia and hindered them from gaining a more diverse and fine-grained view of their societies, particularly in their new engagements with neighbouring societies and the wider world. Many of the post-Soviet states developed into solid autocratic regimes that, as the money flows for security issues, increase their security apparatus rather than the quality of education and academia. Without exception, all five post-Soviet countries struggle with recovering from a past that coincides with their birth as republics, with their more or less clearly defined contemporary borders, and the ideological barrier to a broader interconnected history. Academics are asked to write books with titles such as “The History of the Kyrgyz People,” “History of the Tajiks,” etc., and in so doing apply only one ethnically defined angle to history. In some of the republics, history became solidly merged with ideology to the degree that, for instance, in 2015, the rector of the University of Khujand in Tajikistan suggested cutbacks in the Department of History that would only leave enough teachers to meet the needs of schools. In Turkmenistan, the last history book employed in schools from the Soviet period was forbidden per decree in September

17 “Understanding Islamic Radicalization in Central Asia. An open letter from Central Asia scholars to the International Crisis Group,” *The Diplomat*, January 20, 2017. <http://thediplomat.com/2017/01/understanding-islamic-radicalization-in-central-asia/>.

18 For a critique of these securitization approaches, see John Heathershaw and David W. Montgomery, *The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asia Republics* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs [Chatham House], 2014); John Heathershaw and Nick S. Megoran, “Contesting Danger: A New Agenda for Policy and Scholarship on Central Asia,” *International Affairs* 87, no. 3 (May 2011): 589–612; John Heathershaw and Chad D. Thompson, “Introduction: Discourses of Danger in Central Asia,” *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 1 (March 2005): 1–4.

2000, and the teachers now have to rely solely on the president's guide book, *Ruhnama*, for their lessons.¹⁹ In other words, history and ethnography, as well as other subjects such as music, art, etc., that were an integral part of Soviet universities are increasingly considered irrelevant or a matter of ideology that primarily serves political interests. We may consider this development as a reaction to the peripherization of the region by more established disciplines, which limit the scope of questions to the concerned disciplines' interests. Central Asian societies invest in participating in the world and believe the best way to do so is with a strong national narrative²⁰ and modern technology.

While the process of nationalization has been considered necessary after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the form this identity formation takes leads to disintegration rather than to an understanding of and reflection on the past. Right now, we can observe a nationalizing of history that passes unnoticed by Europe's wider academic community, but which is followed with great concern by researchers specializing in Central Asian history. Transcultural approaches, particularly to historiography, ethnography, and archaeology could encourage one to think of history as a series of interconnected processes that do not necessarily result in a national product. The history of the interdependencies of nomadic and sedentary populations, a history of the mobility of linguistic groups, economic exchanges, various religious encounters, family formations, notions of culture and civilization, urban developments, and many other subjects would both show the strong links between the various countries and neighbours in Asia and beyond, as well as root the different republics as political entities in a world of nation-states without questioning their integrity.

Academic research in Eurasian studies or Central Asian studies originating outside the region have approached their subject through cross-cutting topics, and to name them all would fill a book. However, many works have been collected in critical bibliographies.²¹ It is worth mentioning

19 Marlène Laruelle, "Wiedergeburt per Dekret," in Sapper et al., 153.

20 Central Asian researchers are usually employed to work on their own country and society and promote their "own culture" rather than for theoretical considerations, a fact that Muhiddin Faizulloev seriously criticized as early as the Soviet period as a pattern of recruitment. See Sophie Roche and Muhiddin Faizulloev, "The Faithful Assistant. Muhiddin Faizulloev's Life and Work in the Light of Russian Ethnography," in *Working Paper of FMSH* <http://www.fmsch.fr/en/c/6540> [Accessed November 24, 2014].

21 Stéphane A. Dudoignon and Komatsu Hisao, eds., *Research Trends in Modern Central Eurasian Studies (18th–20th century): A Selective and Critical Bibliography of Works Published between 1985 and 2000*, vols. 1–2 (Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, 2003–2006); Stéphane A. Dudoignon, ed., *Central Eurasian Reader*, vols. 1–2. (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2008 and 2010).

Bert Fragner's suggestion to look at the role of the Persian language in shaping education, empires, religious orientations, and economic dynamics.²² Soviet document-based approaches such as the book by Yaacov Ro'i²³ are also valuable if the documents are properly contextualized, and even the much-criticized notion of the "Silk Road" can be productive for the research of cultural transfers, as demonstrated by Michel Espagne et al.²⁴ Another focus of interest has been taken by projects that depart from within Central Asia, such as the project on religious lineages and their heritage by Ashirbek Muminov, in cooperation with the French IFEAC (French Institute for Central Asian Studies) and Japanese scholars from Tokyo University, which resulted in a series of publications over a period of fifteen years.²⁵ Gender studies historians have also been leading the way, for example, with Marianne Kamp's work based on the method of oral history.²⁶ While such historical research necessarily cuts across the boundaries between contemporary nation-states that came into being only at the beginning of the twentieth century, disciplines working on contemporary Central Asia face the much greater challenge of having to take the Soviet past into consideration while respecting the different paths the five independent republics have taken since the 1990s. Exemplary here is Professor Baldauf, who has repeatedly provided insights into the concept of culture that the Soviet Union applied. Whereas cities had played a central role in cultural production, education, and politics before the Soviet period, in its search for a proletariat, the communist regime elevated the rural village (since the 1930s collectivized in *Kolkhozes*) into a cultural identifier.²⁷ What the communists were hoping to do at times turned into the opposite: the public burning of the

22 Bert G. Fragner, *Die "Persophonie": Regionalität, Identität, und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens* (Halle: Das Arabische Buch, 1999); Bert G. Fragner, "Hochkulturen und Steppenreiche: Der Kulturraum Zentralasien," in Sapper et al., *Machtmosaik Zentralasien*, 9–26.

23 Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, 791.

24 Michael Espagne, Svetlana Gorshenina, Frantz Grenet, Shahin Mustafayev, and Claude Rapin, *Asie centrale: Transferts culturels le long de la Route de la soie* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2016).

25 Central Asian research in Japan has been in a precarious situation similar to that in Europe. According to Hisao Komatsu, even though since the 1960s individual researchers in Japan have explored the history of Central Asia, its geographic designation and content has changed and remained little institutionalized until it integrated the larger research programmes in the frame of the Department of Islamic Studies (IAS) at the University of Tokyo. Hisao Komatsu, *Central Eurasian Studies in Japan: Focused on Islamic Area Studies* (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, forthcoming).

26 Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity and Unveiling Under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2006).

27 Ingeborg Baldauf, "Mittelasien und Russland/Sowjetunion: Kulturelle Begegnungen von 1860–1990," in Fragner and Kappeler, *Zentralasien: 13. bis 20. Jahrhundert*, 189.

paranji (*faranji*, full veil) did not destroy it but rather elevated it to the symbol of Uzbek identity, Baldauf remarks.²⁸ The tension between the historical, entangled past—transcultural by definition—and contemporary developments that differ among the countries and various linguistic and ethnic groups will not be solved by viewing the region as a periphery. Instead, this tension can be the beginning of a productive dialogue among disciplines in the frame of Central Asian studies (or its variations, for example Inner Asian or Eurasian studies) employing a transcultural angle and methodological approach.

Central Asia in Russian Academia

In Tsarist Russia, Turkestan held a colonial position and research was embedded in oriental studies.²⁹ Interestingly, unlike for India and Africa in European academic fields, no area studies developed from the Russian–Central Asian relationship. The restructuring of the region between Siberia and the Hindu Kush as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution appears to have been so profound that the region dropped out of academic interest for half a century. After the 1930s, Soviet orientalists were not supposed to study Central Asia and instead concentrated on the countries outside the Soviet border, with Japan and the Middle East being the most popular subjects.³⁰ Central Asia became a laboratory for Soviet evolutionary theories and a way to measure the success of socialism.³¹ Since the Central Asian Soviet republics (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) were part of the Soviet world, they were not regarded as part of the *vostok* (“far orient”). However, Soviet orientalists specialising in Arabic were among the first to “rediscover” Islam in the region during

28 Baldauf, “Mittelasien und Russland/Sowjetunion,” 196.

29 For a history of Soviet oriental studies, consult the works of Michael Kemper, among others Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann, eds., *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge 2011); see also David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2010); and Alexander Morrison, “‘Applied Orientalism’ in British India and Tsarist Turkestan,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 3 (June 2009): 619–647.

30 This was a break with the Tsarist mandate that required orientalists to study the region and create an academic image of Turkestan, a “technologie culturelle du pouvoir” (a cultural technology of power). See Svetlana Gorshenina, “La construction d’une image ‘savant’ du Turkestan russe lors des premières expositions ‘coloniales’ dans l’Empire russe: analyse d’une technologie culturelle du pouvoir,” *Cahiers d’Asie centrale* 17/18 (2009): 69–84.

31 One of the results of treating Central Asia as a laboratory for evolutionary approaches was the adoption of aggressive policies against nomadism and nomads and their way of life, see Baldauf, “Mittelasien und Russland/Sowjetunion,” 188; Andreas Kappeler, “Russlands Zentralasiatische Kolonien bis 1917,” in Fragner and Kappeler, *Zentralasien: 13. bis 20. Jahrhundert*, 140.

Perestroika. The influence of these scholars on the way Islam came to be classified and how national history was rewritten is crucial.³²

Islam as a subject of investigation during the Soviet period, however, was a matter to be studied outside the Soviet Union and a subject reserved for oriental studies. And even here, Arabic language and culture were far more central than religious topics, yet both were thought of as belonging together.³³ Research focused on Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, and other countries maintaining brotherly relationships with the Soviet Union, as well as those with potentially revolutionary populations. Student exchange programs were maintained with Yemen, Syria, and Morocco, from which Central Asian students also profited.

Central Asian studies thus did not exist as a separate subject as the region was part of a larger project, that is, the Soviet Union. Consequently, the task of Soviet ethnographers was to integrate the region into a Marxist evolutionary theory. This theory accorded each group a specific position in an evolution scheme (*pyatichlenka*) extending from primitive society, via slavery, feudalism, and capitalism, to socialism and communism, which represented the pinnacle of evolution. Among ethnographers, the concept of *pyatichlenka* became the obligatory analytical model for categorizing ethnographic material until Yulian Bromlei changed the paradigm of ethnicity in the 1970s, after which the whole of the Soviet Union was no more than a patchwork of ethnic, sub-ethnic, and super-ethnic groups.³⁴

The national narrative that provided the foundation for shaping the region into national unities in 1920—ethnicity was to a large degree linked to linguistic markers—was nurtured along with Soviet cultural imperialism. In universities, ethnography was part of history and archaeology. Most ethnographers were therefore busy with investigating past traditions or modern adaptations, for instance life in *kolkhozes*.³⁵ It is through ethnographers or,

32 Sophie Roche, *Central Asian Intellectuals on Islam* (Berlin: Klaus Schwartz, 2014).

33 Janet Seitmetova, “‘Biography,’ Interview about Dina Wilkowsky,” in Roche, *Central Asian Intellectuals on Islam*, 109–143.

34 In 1969, Yulian Vladimirovich Bromlei published an article titled “Ethnos and Endogamy” in the journal *Sovjetskaya Etnografiya*, in which he displayed his ideas and further developed the ethnic concepts of Sergei Shirokogorov, an ethnographer of the early twentieth century. One of the main books on this subject is Yulian V. Bromlei, *Ocherki teorii etnosa* [Essays on the theory of ethnos] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo “Nauka,” 1983).

35 For a good introduction to Soviet ethnography, consider Tamara Dragadze, “Some Changes in Perspectives on Ethnicity Theory in the 1980s: A Brief Sketch,” *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 31, no. 2–3 (1990): 205–212; Frédéric Bertrand, *L'anthropologie soviétique des années 20–30. Configuration d'une rupture* (Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2002); Sergey Abashin, *Die Sartenproblematik in der russischen Geschichtsschreibung des 19. und des ersten Viertels des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2007); Mühlfried and Sokolovskiy, *Exploring the Edge of Empire*; Roche and Faizulloev, “The Faithful Assistant,” 85.

more correctly, the Institute of Ethnography in Moscow, that theories of culture were developed. Such theories became possible through studies based on the disciplinary tradition of *kraevedenie* (*krai*: “region,” “administrative district”; *vedenie*: “study,” “knowledge of [something]”), which encouraged the study of localities in all their facets, and with “local” researchers accompanied by Russian specialists.³⁶ Culture—not to be mixed with religion—was the realm of ethnographers working inside the Soviet Union.

Sergey A. Arutyunov sees ethnography as having played “second fiddle to Marxist historical science.”³⁷ However, the ethnographer Sergey Abashin, who has extensive ethnographic experience in Central Asia, said that “authorities often distrusted them,”³⁸ and that ethnographers maintained a certain autonomy in research. Nevertheless, the monographs written on collective farming “were saturated with ideology,” Abashin observes, in order to demonstrate political loyalty.³⁹ What were not seen in those monographs were the heated debates, accusations, and the self-criticism among the ethnographers.

Muhiddin Faizulloev, who studied in Moscow and worked with Russian ethnographers, evaluated the relationship between himself (as a Tajik ethnographer) and Russian ethnographers as follows:

I asked them “Why don’t you want me to study Russian ethnography, the life of Russian families? Why don’t you want me to study the Russians of Ryazan or Kostrama or Orenburg. Why?” They talked around this but did not provide an answer and ignored the question. I told them why do all people study us? You know, they used to call us a “laboratory,” they do their experiments with us, we are people who compared to them are “backward,” this is why they study us.⁴⁰

Central Asia was a region where Russian ethnographers could study previous “stages of humanity,” a “laboratory” as Faizulloev explains.

36 Emily Johnson compares it to German “Heimatkunde.” “Contemporary Russian lexicographers generally define the term as ‘the study of the natural environment, population, economy, history, or culture of some part of a country, such as an administrative or natural region, or a place of settlement.’” Emily D. Johnson, *How St. Petersburg Learned to Study Itself: The Russian Idea of Kraevedenie* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006), 3.

37 Sergey Aleksandrovich Arutyunov, “Interview with Sergey Aleksandrovich Arutyunov,” in *Mühlfried and Sokolovskiy, Exploring the Edge of Empire*, 121.

38 Sergey Abashin, “Ethnographic Views of Socialist Reforms in Soviet Central Asia: Collective Farm (Kolkhoz) Monographs,” in *Mühlfried and Sokolovskiy, Exploring the Edge of Empire*, 83–98.

39 Collective farms were seen as a modernized form of rural peasantry, and were hence a popular subject among Soviet ethnographers in the 1950s and 1960s.

40 Talk with Faizulloev, September 2014. Sophie Roche and Muhiddin Faizulloev, “The Faithful Assistant,” 28.

Thus, ethnographers and archaeologists (both part of the history department) were academically responsible for researching the southern republics of the Soviet Empire. However, Islam was not a central subject for these researchers because, officially, the Soviet Union had overcome religiosity by dealing only with the “remains” of a “backward past.” These scholars were responsible for documenting development and backwardness, ethnic, super-ethnic, and sub-ethnic groups, and characteristics to guide people in their integration into a Soviet unity. The ethnographers were orientalizing, or better, othering, the southern republics, whereas Central Asian studies as a distinct subject did not exist.

Soviet ethnographers re-discovered Islam in the 1980s and began to engage in a discussion that tied Islam to ethnicity. Sergey Poliakov complained about the ignorance of studying Islam inside the Soviet Union: It is also a pity that our publications present traditionalism and everything associated with it as nothing more than harmless holdovers from the past that do not seriously affect the development of our society. Great pains are taken to avoid the study of the economic, social, and political structure of modern Central Asian society, even at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, which remains silent.⁴¹

Assuming that Islam was the realm of orientalists, Polyakov blames them for having missed “seriously studying and criticizing domestic traditionalism.”⁴² Indeed, during a conference organized by the Institute of Oriental Studies in 1986, only one out of the twenty papers was about Central Asia.

By the time of Perestroika, ordinary Muslims in Central Asia had rediscovered Islam as a source of intellectual engagement and local religious authorities had more students than ever before. At the same time, mosques were built, rebuilt, and re-opened, and literature was distributed by the religious elite. Arabic gained sacred status as the cultural language of Islam. Since independence, social anthropologists and students in Central Asian studies from Europe have conducted intensive research on Islam and presented studies that capture the contradictions, practices, discourses, and plurality of religious life in the region.⁴³

41 Sergei P. Polyakov, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia*, trans. Martha Brill Olcott (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), 137.

42 Polyakov, *Everyday Islam*, 134.

43 See Annette Krämer, *Geistliche Autorität und islamische Gesellschaft im Wandel: Studien über Frauenälteste (otin und xalifa) im unabhängigen Usbekistan* (Berlin: Schwarz, 2002);

Studies on Central Asia after the fall of the Berlin Wall

While the Soviet Union worked on the integration of Central Asia, the political West⁴⁴ considered Central Asia to be a colony-like periphery and assumed that the population was naturally against Soviet power.⁴⁵ Sovietology presupposed the existence of a forced political structure that worked against people's interests and their sense of freedom. In this narrative, Soviet politics were presented in a negative light, while experiences on the ground were lacking to redress the picture. It is in this context that Islam was imagined to be the primary motor of opposition and thus the weak point of the Soviet Leviathan. Dietrich Reetz, who worked as diplomat of the GDR in Pakistan in the 1980s, was told by his American counterparts that Islam would do the job of destroying the system from within without the need for a war between the superpowers. It is well-known that the Taliban were the result of such politics and that they profited from the considerable support of the US intelligence agencies. The Taliban's main enemy were the "unbeliever" communists until the Soviet army was defeated, after which internal division led to a split between the Taliban (their primary goal being the liberation of Afghanistan and the establishment of an Emirate of Afghanistan), and al-Qaeda with their agenda of world revolution.⁴⁶ The West completely ignored the fact that Islam had been an integral part of the Soviet system, not only tolerated by the latter but institutionalized (in the SADUM)⁴⁷ since 1943 and ideologically recast to suit the political agenda of different periods.⁴⁸

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the region opened up, on the one hand allowing Western researchers to conduct fieldwork and visit the region, and on the other hand allowing researchers in the region to travel to the

Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, *"Religion is Not So Strong Here": Muslim Religious Life in Khorezm after Socialism* (Münster: LIT, 2008); Maria Elisabeth Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Manja Stephan, "Das Bedürfnis nach Ausgewogenheit: Moralische Erziehung, Islam und Muslimsein in Tadschikistan zwischen Säkularisierung und religiöser Rückbesinnung," (PhD diss., University of Würzburg, 2009).

44 "The West" is used in opposition to the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War.

45 Ingeborg Baldauf, *"Kraevedenie" and Uzbek National Consciousness* (Indiana University: Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1992).

46 Booklets of Islamic underground groups at this time justify their struggle with the opposition to the Soviet Union.

47 Translated as the "Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan."

48 In the 1920s, Islam was considered to have revolutionary potential and hence thought to be compatible with socialism. Later it was, like other religions, classified as an "opium of the people," resulting in purges of religious personnel, after which Islam was identified as a remnant of the past that would eventually disappear. In the 1980s, Islam became part of ethnic identity and was thus impossible to eliminate as part of the various national identities.

EU and discover its research traditions. Within the academic field, the end of the Soviet Union was seen as a victory of one system over the other. This is exemplified in the German universities of the former GDR. The “cleansing” of the universities was done quickly and based on blunt political assumptions discrediting many excellent researchers. The tragedy of Berlin’s academic staff at the Academy of Sciences was the dismissal of many highly competent researchers on the grounds of political loyalties; these researchers were replaced by Western-oriented scholars or downgraded in their status. The Academy of Science in East Berlin was dissolved, and only a few of the researchers were integrated into the new institution, the Zentrum Moderner Orient.

This process was difficult for both sides. Dietrich Reetz asserts “daß man—mit Ausnahmen—relativ wenig voneinander wußte, einander nicht sehr intensiv zur Kenntnis nahm und jetzt sehr Unterschiedliches mitbringt” (that we, with exceptions, knew very little of one another, had not taken much cognizance of each other’s work, and now we contribute very differently).⁴⁹ Reetz described the process that shaped Asian Studies in the early 1990s and wondered at how little West German colleagues took notice of the work done in the GDR. By the 1990s, two different research traditions had developed with different notions of Asia and definitions of Central Asia. If the West was guided by anti-Soviet ideologies in academic research, Asian studies (*Asienwissenschaften*) in the GDR followed Soviet anti-Imperialism.⁵⁰ While in West German universities the study of Asia was open to all students, in the GDR this was reserved to a small group of elites trained to serve in the political apparatus one day. Consequently, the small number of students per teacher in the GDR was a dream for every Western scholar and the philological education was of the highest standard.

In the 1990s, the Central Asian Studies Seminar (*Zentralasien Seminar*) at the Humboldt University in Berlin was turned into a department within a larger institute, with a focus on African and Asian studies.⁵¹ The head of the department, Professor Baldauf, has opened new fields of research including memory studies (*Erinnerungen an Zentralasien*) and language policies during the early Soviet period. Among the various achievements, Lutz Rzehak’s outstanding book on the transition from Persian to Tajik when ethnic groups, nationalities, and political entities were created in Central Asia (1920s)

49 Dietrich Reetz, “Entwicklung und Stand der Asienwissenschaften in der DDR,” *Asien: Deutsche Zeitschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur* 38 (January 1991): 76–87.

50 Reetz, “Entwicklung,” 76.

51 For a short history of the Institut für Asien- und Afrika-Wissenschaften at the Humboldt University in Berlin, see <https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/info>.

is especially noteworthy.⁵² Central Asian studies have become part of area studies with a focus on a linguistic education supplemented by historical, ethnographic, and social subjects.

In the early 2000s, the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology together with the Oriental Institute and the Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Regionalstudien (ZIRS) at the University of Halle hosted one of the largest groups of researchers working on Central Asia outside of Russia and Central Asia. The lively discussions and the variety of projects made it an intellectual centre for contemporary research on Central Asia. The research scope covered subjects such as kinship and conflict studies, history, economy, religious revival, and politics. More than ten PhD theses were defended between 2000 and 2010. Unfortunately, this collaboration remained exceptional and did not develop further, as all three institutions changed focus. While the Central Asian focus has not completely vanished, Halle has lost its leading position in the research of contemporary Central Asia in Germany.⁵³

Some prospects

Since the end of the Soviet Union, research on and in Central Asia has developed in several directions driven by political interests, financial conditions of research institutes and universities, and individual research interests. While historical approaches have been integrated into various institutes that include Slavic studies, Eastern European studies, and history departments, studies on contemporary Central Asia remain short-lived, dependent on the duration of grants and the topics suggested by funding institutions. Hence, the terra incognita of which Sapper, Weichsel, and Huterer spoke is now a mosaic of unrelated research. Within this mosaic, the commonly repeated tropes of security studies appear to be the easiest explanation for complex situations. What the field of Central Asian studies thus urgently needs are reliable planning and long-term research perspectives in order to move out of the peripheral position that more established disciplines have accorded to the region. Transcultural methods go beyond monolingual research and political boundaries: their strength is to zoom in on micro-processes and zoom out on larger entanglements, to look at synchronic events and diachronic processes.

52 Lutz Rzehak, *Vom Persischen zum Tadschikischen: Sprachliches Handeln und Sprachplanung in Transoxanien zwischen Tradition, Moderne, und Sowjetmacht (1900–1956)* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2001).

53 Under the leadership of Roland Hardenberg, social anthropology in Tübingen had been emerging as a new centre for Central Asian studies, but there were no efforts to maintain this focus. Today, specialists on Central Asia are spread among many universities, including Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Freiburg, Berlin, Hamburg, and Regensburg.

This demands in-depth knowledge of the subject and of several regions, a challenge that consumes time and resources. Historically, Central Asia remains relevant to all area studies in Asia but contemporary approaches are not the simple continuation of former imperial paradigms. Rather, political ruptures, religious orientations, and economic relationships have required different approaches for Central Asia since the twentieth century. A transcultural approach would also include more participation by researchers in and across Central Asia. Often researchers from two national universities in Central Asia know less about each other than they know about scholars in Europe. Thus, Central Asian studies are a construction site to which many disciplines contribute, and in this way the discipline has encouraged the integration of transcultural approaches from its very beginning.