

Understanding Eurasia in Multiple Perspectives

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Voices from the Soviet Edge: Southern Migrants in Leningrad and Moscow

By Jeff Sahadeo

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019, 273 pages, \$46.95, ISBN: 9781501738210

Russian Practices of Governance in Eurasia: Frontier Power Dynamics, Sixteenth Century to Nineteenth Century

By Gulnar Kendirbai

London: Routledge, 2020, 232 pages, \$160, ISBN: 9780367196752

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

By Adeb Khalid

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021, 556 pages, \$35, ISBN: 9780691161396

Insight Turkey 2021

Vol. 23 / No. 4 / pp. 277-285

Received Date: 07/11/2021 • Accepted Date: 29/11/2021 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2021234.15

The three works reviewed in this article address Eurasia in different periods and different areas of concentration. Each one provides valuable information in understanding the historical and political developments that have affected the Eurasian landmass. Understanding this huge geography, its people, its past and present situation require a holistic approach with detailed knowledge and awareness of regional peculiarities.

The first book, *Voices from the Soviet Edge: Southern Migrants in Leningrad and Moscow*, is a survey undertaken by means of interviews conducted among immigrants coming to Moscow and Leningrad during the last decades of the Soviet Empire. The stories of former subjects of the Tsarist imperialist regime of Central Asia and the Caucasus region becoming citizens of the Soviet Empire detail the experiences inflicted upon them due to the political, sociological, and economic changes that took place during the last decades of the Cold War era. The Soviet administration attempted to instill in people's minds the so-called 'friendship of peoples' which, in the post-Soviet era, complicated the nation-building attempts of the newly independent republics. The end of the twentieth century witnessed a growing tendency toward nationalistic behavior not only among those of non-Russian nationalities but among the Russian people as well. This book is an account of the societal changes that led to an increasing radicalization of urban Russians in the leading cities of Russia, such as Moscow and Leningrad.

The second book, *Russian Practices of Governance in Eurasia: Frontier Power Dynamics, Sixteenth Century to Nineteenth Century*, is devoted to the historic relations established between the nomadic Kalmyk and Kazak people and the Tsarist Russian rulers from the 16th to the early 19th centuries. The nomadic tradition of administration, as well as local and regional power struggles coupled with Russian imperial policies to subordinate Eurasian nomads, are explained in this work. This book also provides an understanding of the notables and aristocratic rulers of the Eurasian nomads in their ambition and influence within their own societies, which later changed the dynamic and balance for the benefit of outside rulers like the Chinese and Russians.

The third book, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*, is a comprehensive study of Eurasia. It is a history of Central Asia that takes the unexpected approach of studying the roots of today's post-Soviet and currently Chinese-controlled Central Asia, the so-called Xinjiang. Understanding the unity in many aspects of the identity of the present-day Turkic societies of Central-Inner Asia as a whole is important. The history, culture, religion, customs, and traditions are similar for the sedentary and nomadic societies that today are divided by international borders delimited by outside powers. Adeeb Khalid reveals this approach is often neglected in many studies of this geography and therefore makes a significant contribution in this area.

Voices from the Soviet Edge

The motto of the Soviet Union's socialist ideology was to establish a 'friendship of people' within the Soviet space to eliminate discrimination and maintain equality among the multinational population within the country. *Voices from the Soviet Edge* is an oral account of the emigration of those former citizens of the Soviet Union's peripheral regions to the former and current capitals of the Russian Federation, Leningrad, and Moscow. The book consists of seven chapters. As Sahadeo points out in his introduction, the first two chapters are devoted to the background of inter-ethnic relations established between the center of imperial Russia up to the Soviet maintenance of control in the periphery of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The third and fifth chapters deal with migrants coming from the periphery, i.e., the Central Asian and the Caucasian Republics, to realize their dreams of reaching the most advanced cities of the Soviet Union and benefitting from opportunities to work, trade, study, and receive advanced medical care.

Migrants born in distant republics wanted to enjoy material benefits and luxury –the extravagance of the city environment. The idea of their common citizenship within the Soviet realm was propagated by the indirect support of the official policy implanted in the minds of those in the periphery. Symbols of modernity drew many to the Soviet capitals, who dreamed of them as places where they would find a better quality of life. In reality, however, many individuals

experienced difficulties of settling in and becoming an integral part of the urban, Russian-dominated metropolises of the Soviet state. The earlier migrants who came to Leningrad and Moscow in the 1970s benefitted from opportunities that were extended to them through state-sponsored programs made available to all citizens of the Soviet system, regardless of ethnicity and nationality, intending to create an 'international' multicultural society.

The 'friendship of nations' was another important slogan in the USSR, particularly after WWII, for many citizens, despite North-South disparities. Some really believed this idea. However, as the author states "...friendship among nations in the Soviet Union was defined by the ruling power and was not a result of natural feeling..." (p. 57). referring to a statement made during one of his interviews. The sixth and seventh chapters, titled "Life on the Margins" and "Perestroika" reflect many changes in politics on the upper level and the problems arising from political and economic hardship in the Soviet Union during its last decade of existence. The author's quest to understand the roots of the Soviet state's inter-ethnic system led him to seek the roots of racism, national prejudice, and/or discrimination against the peripheral, non-Slavic individuals who chose to settle in Russian cities. Sahadeo cites a violent murder case directed against African students in 1963, which was reportedly exceptional. However as economic hardship began to press the Soviet society in the early 1980s, the

conflict started in Moscow. One such incident took place in 1981 in the Zhdanov bazaar in Moscow between Caucasians and Russians.

Peripheral emigrants always served to meet the material needs of urban centers in Russia. Throughout history, Russian cities were always dependent upon foodstuff coming from the countryside. During Soviet times and particularly during times of economic hardship, this situation became severe. Food and other consumer goods of many kinds were carried by migrants to the two Soviet metropolises; this petty trade supported migrants' material needs most of the time and helped the two Soviet metropolises with items of daily need. This movement was labeled the 'second economy' in the country. The situation began to worsen as the years of stagnation started, particularly in the last two decades of the Brezhnev years. At that time, an increasing number of migrants from the Southern republics, labeled by some racist slurs as 'black' (*Chernye*), came North. A major turning point for immigrants from the Southern peripheral regions came when Perestroika failed to end the economic crises. National tensions and racism began to replace the former Soviet motto of "friendship of people." Intolerance from the host population and increased racial violence forced the migrants to decide whether to 'stay or go' back to their indigenous regions and republics after the demise of the Soviet empire. Sahadeo provides readers with a detailed examination of numerous sources dealing with global studies of

migration and general research dedicated to understanding many parallel worldwide developments.

Russian Practices of Governance in Eurasia: Frontier Power Dynamics, Sixteenth Century to Nineteenth Century

Russian Practices of Governance in Eurasia is a survey of Russian imperial policies, politics, and methods of interaction toward the nomadic societies inhabiting the former lands of the Golden Horde starting from the sixteenth century until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gulnar Kendirbai introduces readers to the peculiar power management and dynamics of the nomadic societies that inhabited the lands of the former Golden Horde. Russian imperial expansion toward the Eastern region faced many obstacles. However, the Russian experience in dealing with Eurasian societies, and with the former subject societies of the Golden Horde gave them an understanding of how to run their business in the East of the Urals and the Southern regions of Russia.

Kendirbai's book is divided into five sections. The first is dedicated to Russian and nomadic patterns of power and explores how the authority of the Russian and nomadic societies was carried out. The second, third, and fourth chapters are devoted to Russian imperial relations with the nomadic Kalmyk, the western Mongolian tribes inhabiting the Northern Caucasian territory. Muscovite rulers

and later the Tsarist imperial administration used various methods in their relations with the unruly nomadic Kalmyks and other remaining societies after the collapse of the Golden Horde. As Kendirbai states, the Russian court integrated many elements of steppe political culture into its ceremonial and diplomatic etiquette (p. 31). As symbols of power-sharing, Russian authorities periodically distributed gifts, assigned annual salaries to nomadic rulers, gave titles and ranks, built free houses, and gave free clothes, textiles, food, and medicine. Nomadic rulers agreed to the establishment of Russian trading posts to gain access to agricultural and manufactured goods like tea, paper, fabrics, and gunpowder in exchange for livestock and animal products. However, as the centuries progressed, the Russian trading posts were replaced by military strongholds, which later served as centers of colonial commanding fortresses.

Nomadic societies and their leadership had their own understanding of their interactions with the Russian state. Despite the agreement between the Russian state and the nomads, it was not easy to rule the nomadic societies. Referring to a Russian academic, Kendirbai states that "...written agreements did not have any meaning in Asia because they restricted [the nomads] freedom of action" (p. 67).

The remaining chapters, fifth to eleventh, offer readers an account of nomadic Kazak relations with the Russian imperial administration and other neighboring political power

centers such as the distant Chinese state during the three centuries (16th-19th). Gulnar Kendirbai reveals similarities and dissimilarities between the two nomadic Asian societies, the Kalmyks and the Kazaks, in their dealings with the Russian administration.

Starting from the fifth chapter, the author gives an account of Kazak history up until the early 19th century. The Kazaks struggled to maintain their very survival, which depended upon their free movement across the vast pastureland of the Eurasian geography. They were in constant need of overcoming incursions and invasion of their land coming from the Mongol tribes, disagreements from Central Asian settled societies, and the extended arms and policies of bigger powers such as Russia and China. Domestic struggles for power among the Kazaks also played a significant role in their maneuver to ask for help, particularly from Russia and China. For example, the Khan of the Lesser Horde, Abulkhair, asked for Russian protection mainly for two reasons: first, a desire to reinforce his own rule over his subjects and rivals, and second to assign a hereditary status for his family (p. 107). Russian Tsarina Anna Yelizaveta Petrovna and her administration used Abulkhair's request to advance Russia's presence in the Kazak land (p. 109). Imperial Russian authorities benefitted greatly by offering gifts, titles, and other materials to nomadic notables. Kendirbai provides extensive details of such honoraria from the Russian court to nomadic Kazak notables and aristocrats, which later turned into overlordship on no-

madic Kazaks. Increasing Russian overlordship led to a Kazak struggle for power vis-à-vis Russian policies in the 19th century under the leadership of Kenesary Khan Kasymov. However, the book does not cover that period, nor the legendary resistance of Kenesary Kasimov, a grandson of Han Abilay, in the mid-19th century, which was supported by a significant majority of the society. Despite this omission, the book is a guiding work for anyone seeking to better understand relations between the Russian state vis-à-vis the nomadic Mongolian (Kalmyk) and Turkic-Muslim Kazak society in Eurasia.

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

This voluminous book covers the history and politics of Central Asia. Author Adeeb Khalid, a prominent scholar, and specialist on the history and politics of Central Asia begins his study with the establishment of the Chinese and Russian imperial systems and later the Chinese and Soviet overlordship in the region. Khalid's most striking approach is to include the history and politics of the inner/Eastern part of Central Asia, which is today's Xinjiang/Eastern Turkestan. The book is divided into four parts, titled "Empire," "Revolution," "Communism," and "Post-Communism." Altogether, it consists of 25 chapters. *Central Asia* covers a very broad area, not only geographically but historically and politically. Understanding the geography and society of the area

is not a new undertaking for scholars –a native Central Asian scholar, the late Baymirza Hayit, published a study in 1971 (*Turkestan Zwischen Russland und China*) that deals with the history and politics of Central Asia from a similar perspective as Khalid's –yet Khalid's account is arguably more precise.

The book starts with the early history of Central Asia and its interactions with various sedentary civilizations that left a mark in the 'multiple heritages' of the area. Invading armies from the North-East and South-West gave rise to the establishment of both sedentary and nomadic identities, beliefs, traditions, and lifestyles. Indian, Iranian (Persian), and Islamic civilizations all visited –and some remained– as part of the heritage of the area.

The second chapter begins with the late 18th century Qing and Zhungar struggle for power that inflicted considerable damage, particularly to the nomadic societies. The Qing conquest started after this period from the faraway capital of Chinese policies. The Eastern part of Central Asia, namely the geography stretching from the North of the Himalayas to the South of the Tarbagatay and Altay mountains, called Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan), was under the loose control of the central Chinese authority at the beginning of this period. The following six short chapters of the first part of the book, titled "Empire," deal with the Chinese and Russian attempts to colonize both the Western (Russian side) and Eastern (Chinese side) parts of Central Asia.

As Khalid notes, the effects of the Chinese and Russian policies of colonization began to be felt more strongly in the late 18th century. However, the early attempts of these outside powers did not change the age-old structure and traditions of the area. Local centers of power, such as the Khokand and Kashgar societies, continued their interactions. Eventually, however, the geopolitical balance of Eurasia began to change due to the increasing involvement of Russia and China over the long border starting from the far East to the Central Asian Turko-Muslim territories. The Chinese state power decline in the 19th century saved the Eastern part of Central Asia from the pressure coming from the central Chinese state. However, imperial Russian colonization took a stronger turn, particularly after the second half of the nineteenth century.

Yaqub Beg, *ba Dawlat* (possessor of fortune), who had a close association in Khokand in the Western part of Central Asia, declared the establishment of a Muslim state in Kashgar in 1866 (p. 85). Beg's state sought recognition from the outside world, and the first step for Eastern Turkestan was to initiate contact for international recognition from the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Caliph was an unquestionable leader of the whole Muslim world. This made the Ottoman Empire an important factor by having a *suzerain* society in one of the remotest parts of the world. Yaqub Beg's short-lived state declined after his death in 1877. The colonization policies of the Chinese government

and the mutual attempts of both the Russian and Chinese states to resolve their disagreement over this bordering area began after this period.

The sixth chapter deals with the establishment of colonial order over the Russian part of Central Asia in the last quarter of the 19th century. Similarly, the Qing government turned the Eastern part of Central Asia into one of their provinces in 1884 and proclaimed the area 'newly conquered territory.' Despite this fact, the 'great game' of Russian and British forces continued to be present in the area up until the turn of the century.

The seventh chapter gives an account of the modernizing attempts of Turko-Muslim intellectuals throughout the area. Leading intellectuals from Crimea to the Volga region, crossing the then-settled Russo-Chinese border, began to discuss the process of modernizing and reforming their societies. They were facing increasing imperial pressure coming from both sides. Chinese imperial collapse and two decades after the end of Russian imperial rule were the titles discussed in the eighth chapter.

The second part of the book, titled 'Revolution,' depicts the Soviet rise to power and the mid-twentieth century Eastern Turkestan Republic's declarations in 1933 and 1944 in the Eastern part of Central Asia, the so-called Xinjiang area. Both attempts ended with failure in Eastern Turkestan. This part reviews all of the 20th century events in eight chapters.

The third part of the book examines the Communist era in four chapters. Chapters seventeen and eighteen discuss the changes and policies inflicted upon Soviet Central Asian societies during most of the 20th century. The nineteenth and the twentieth chapters gave an account of the Communist-Maoist takeover of the Eastern Turkestan region, together with local native attempts to gain independence against the Chinese domination of the area in the 1940s and 1950s.

The final part of the book, consisting of another five chapters, reviews the post-Communist era in Central Asia. This part starts by giving an account of the end of the Cold War period and its global trajectories. The two parts of Central Asia followed different paths. The Soviet Central Asian republics became independent, as the new era opened an avenue for them to become full members of the international community of nations. This last part of the book synthesizes these changes under the titles, “Unwanted Independence,” “A New Central Asia,” “Nationalizing States in a Globalized World” and “Are We Still Post-Soviets?” in chapters twenty-one through twenty-four. The last chapter, titled “A Twenty-first Century Gulag,” analyzes the changes inflicted by the central Chinese authority upon the Eastern Turkestan “Xinjiang” region. Uyghur, Kazak, and Kirgiz were more subjugated to the Chinese state; the Sinicization of all inhabitants of Xinjiang started in 2016 by means of a state campaign, and millions were held at so-called

“political reeducation camps.” The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was the official name of the region at the beginning of the Maoist regime in the mid-20th century. The Chinese policy since then changed the concept of considering non-Chinese as a separate nationality. Beijing’s assimilation policy began to classify and treat the Turko-Muslims of Eastern Turkestan simply as an ethnic group (*Minzu*). As a result, they are now deprived of all of their indigenous identities and forcefully and purposefully turned into patriotic Chinese.

Conclusion

These three books provide the readers with an understanding of the previous era of Central Asian geography in grasping the roots of many historic, political changes of the present day.

Jeff Shahadeo’s book entitled *Voices from the Soviet Edge* is a contribution to general discussion and research about migration studies in general. This work is shedding light on many current issues in this area. It started as the Soviet citizens’ internal migration for getting a better chance of life in simple terms. Economic factors such as higher wages, job prospects, better environment were the targets of labor migrants in moving to Soviet urban centers. Migrants during the time of hardship helped the host population of Moscow and Leningrad in the management of the economy during the last decades of the Soviet Union.

Although this movement started as internal migration, changed later into the international migration category. This was of course the result of Soviet demise and consequential changes that made the 'former Soviet edge' independent republics/ another state. The Soviet Union as a home country turned into a host country as a result of such systemic changes. Economic hardship, psychological problems of adaptation to the new status as well as rising nationalism began to be displayed by the natives of Leningrad and Moscow towards the migrants. The identity status of migrants also began to be a question in the minds of such people.

Labor migration to the present-day Russian Federation still continues from the former 'Soviet Edge' by the poverty-stricken citizens of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The international migration issue occupies the current agenda in the world and Jeff Sahadeo's book is an important contribution to the depth and scope of this area.

Gulnar Kendirbai's book *Russian Practices of Governance in Eurasia* reveals the nature of Eurasian nomadic societies and their relationship with Russia and China in the past. The roots of Russian imperial ambition to extend their territories towards the East, first on the Central and later on the Eastern part of the former Golden Horde's territory offers detailed background knowledge to the reader. It gives important insight into understanding the centuries-old problems of administrative, economic, and

sociological shortcomings in today's independent state of Kazakhstan. Nomadic Kazak geography became a ground of competition between the Russian and Chinese ambition and conflict caused by other nomadic Mongolian tribes and tribal confederation. This invasion left a very tragic memory in the historic consciousness of the Kazaks even today. The internal struggle of power and influential ambitions of the local elite to remain in power and feel pride before his own kinsmen by being a part of imperial Russian servant was another important feature detail in this book. This Kazak behavior to be loyal to the Russian centers is still felt from the policies of the current Kazak elite in the present-day Kazak society.

Adeeb Khalid's book *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquest to the Present* is dedicated to the history of Central Asia covering many centuries of the past of this geography that's been divided between the two imperial (and the present-day) powers, Russia and China. An innovative approach of the author lies in his description of the roots of many commonalities of the eastern and western parts of Central Asia today. The centuries-long history of the area also brings into light how the region and society were shaped by the policies of external powers, Russia and China. This work is a political history yet gives much detailed information in understanding the present-day global international concepts related to the area. Particularly striking is his analysis regarding the current policy of the central Chinese authority. ■