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**Journal of Politics and Development**

ISSN 2632-4911

**Volume 12 ■ Number 1 ■ Winter 2022**



# the rest: journal of politics and development

*Previously published as Journal of Global Analysis (JGA)*

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*\* The surnames are listed in alphabetical order.*

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# BOOK REVIEW

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Adeeb Khalid

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

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021, ISBN: 9780691161396, 576 PP., Price: \$35.00)

The book opens with a captivating overview of the ancient inhabitants of the region. This quick introduction articulates an idea that some nomadic tribes became settled, resulting in the formation of the first city-states in the region. The author extends this overview, drawing parallels with and connecting it to ancient times. This background that covers several centuries provides the reader with a sense of geographic areas that the book focuses on (later, this territory is identified by the author as Eastern and Western Turkestan). In addition to it, these first chapters intrigue a reader with the magnificence of the first local civilizations, the signs of which could still be noticed in the streets of the fabulous Central Asian cities such as Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand that remind an imaginative reader of the famous “Thousand and One Night”.

The book expands the geographic understanding of the region further by using some maps that identify the location of the city-states mentioned before and the nomads who lived around them. Unfortunately, the illustrative value of the maps is not very high, and they do not help to have a precise understanding of the territory and the population in focus. The vagueness of the maps can be easily explained by nomadism that was quite widespread in the region that the city-states claimed control of. Nomadism does not recognize borders and implies population growth and decline due to natural (and often undocumented reasons) in addition to migration, conflation, and

deflation. Nevertheless, more detailed maps with some demographic details would be beneficial for the readership.

The introductory overview includes the great Mongolian conquests of the 13th-15th centuries. They had a long-lasting effect on the local population and culture of the population in Central Asia. Besides conquering the huge territories, Genghis-khan and his descendants formed the local elites, they connected different parts of the world and defined the way Central Asians lived up until the Russian Empire started advancing and conquering the Western Turkestan (today’s Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan) in the 19th centuries. The might of China and its interest in Eastern Turkestan (today’s Xinjiang province) was another determining factor that the author considers profoundly starting the actual history exploration of the region with the mid of the 18th century and the Han-Uyghur relations. Even though the importance of the British Empire in the region is without a doubt at that time, too, the book only tangentially mentions it. The reason for it is that neither Afghanistan nor Iran is included in the analysis. The author omits Mongolia, too, justifying his choices by research rationale at the very beginning of the book. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the importance of these countries, which encourages a curious reader to explore further individually.

The modern period of the region starts with the Soviet era. The national policies of

Bolsheviks and, especially Josef Stalin, were the foundation of what the former Soviet Central Asian republics and the nations are today. The simultaneous processes were going on in China that always had a significant presence in Xinjiang. Such presence was gradually growing until it turned into full control of the region. This was accompanied by the attempts of integration up until recently, when, according to the author, China decided that the Uyghurs were "a lost cause". The author presents the efforts of both empires in integrating Central Asian nations in a comparative way (p. 368-370). The book spots the weak and strong parts of the imperial policies of the Soviet Union and China precisely. These policies could often be defined as genocidal, even though in some strange ways they also could be considered as the ones that produced some positive effects.

One more captivating and significant topic that the book considers is collective identity. The author analyses it from different perspectives. His exploration includes not only remarkable and fateful events such as armed uprisings, famines, interethnic clashes, historical heritage but also literature and mythology. Influential authors such as Abdurauf Fitrat, Chokan Valikhanov, and later Chingiz Aitmatov contributed immensely to the construction of the local ethnic and national collective identities (p. 203, 245). So made the Great Patriotic War that started with the attack of Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union in 1941. The author rightly noticed that this war turned Central Asians into Soviet citizens (p. 306), and this happened despite all the negative experiences (e.g. famine) that the Soviets brought to the population of the region.

The book gives many more invaluable insights into what was going on in Central Asia during the Soviet times and how the situation was developing in China's Xinjiang. It talks in detail about the production of cotton, which became a significant and defining part of the local industry; the catastrophe of the Aral Sea, which is directly related to cotton production; the nuclear and

space programs that the region hosted; the creation of the Communist elite and the efforts to increase people's literacy. The book describes the development of the Sino-Uyghur relations, which perfectly presents the roots of the current political and social disaster in Xinjiang. An attentive reader could also get the idea of how the territory three times bigger than Spain became a host of the biggest concentration camp today.

The last chapters of the book describe the post-Soviet and the most recent developments in Eastern and Western Turkestan. They introduce Turkey as the new player in the region and provide a comparative analysis of the local political elite in the five post-Soviet republics. The current wave of terrorism and the war against it, the Islamization of the region, and reconfiguration of economic ties update a reader with the latest political developments that will play their role in the future of Central Asia.

In general, the book by Adeeb Khalid, "Central Asia. A New History from the Imperial Conquest to the Present", is one of the newest and comprehensive studies on the region. It is a very broad and, at the same time, concise introduction to Central Asian history. It serves the introductory purpose perfectly for various audiences. Students of different disciplines, new to the region and experienced scholars, or just curious readers would find all the essential (even if brief) events of Central Asian history in this book. The book can serve as a perfect guide for those who would like to conduct a more profound exploration of the political, social, cultural, and economic aspects that impacted the region and its formation.

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