

**CENTRAL ASIA:  
NARRATING AND UNDERSTANDING THE REGION**Laura YEREKESHEVA<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, 050000 Almaty;e-mail: [laura.erekesheva@kaznu.kz](mailto:laura.erekesheva@kaznu.kz)

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**Received:** 23.12.2021**Accepted:** 04.01.2022

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**Adeeb Khalid.** *Central Asia. A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present.* Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021, pp. 702.

The newest addition to the Central Asia scholarship written by one of the prolific writers on the region – Adeeb Khalid – explores the history of the region from the age of empires until nowadays. The monograph is structured around chronologically arranged key topics highlighting formation and transformation of multiple identities of the region, influenced and shaped by colonialism, Soviet modernization, secularization and development. Each of these themes are discussed within the corresponding chapters (Empire, Revolution, Communism, Post-Communism) supported by illustrations, maps, tables.

Focusing on the multiple facets of modernity and the ways how and with which circumstances it transformed the region, the author's goal is to provide a narrative of these transformations; whereas his key hypothesis is that Central Asia as "the product of history" reveals the same regularities as other societies "that experienced colonialism, anticolonialism, modernization and development in the past couple of centuries", and which history is not an exotic or isolated, rather it is "depressingly normal" (p. 22, 620). In a broader sense, the goal of the book is to provide the comprehensive narrative of the region, and to prove the general character and regularities that were typical for other societies that experienced the same patterns of transformations. Therefore, the book's main idea could be also described as how the multiple heritages of Central Asia have been transformed throughout modernity, its currents such as "colonialism, anticolonialism, development, social revolution, nationalism, state-led modernization, and social engineering" (p. 620). Modernity itself was triggered and shaped by various factors, among which encounters of the region with the empires were a significant one.

The rich and saturated history of the region condensed in the 702-page book volume leaves no prospects for its detailed analysis, which, in fact, is impossible to do in one paper - due to a variety of conceptual frameworks and themes for discussion, leaving alone the historical facts and narrative.

*The Concepts of the Multiple Heritages of Central Asia*

It has always been interesting to trace and see the reasons behind writing a book, that are usually a combination of multiple factors. In the case of Adeeb Khalid, a need for a field advancement to fill in a gap in the comprehensive history of Central Asia, was coupled with a culturally defined background of the Lahore native living in the West, to better understand the region which was next door and yet was not easily accessible.

The book's starts with the major definitions related to the region, firstly of its geography that for a long time was a subject of discussions. Acknowledging this, the author gives his own one, "a middle position" including "the five post-Soviet states and the Xinjiang region of the PRC", the area that, following similar and distinguishing trajectories over the last centuries, "has much more in common with each other rather than with their other neighbors" (pp. 22-23).

Highlighting empires as a key starting point that thrust Central Asia "into a new era of its history", the author's narrative focuses on the Russian and Qing empires activities in the region as a decisive factor to define the contours of the region. Due to this reason mainly, he distinguishes Afghanistan, as well as the Tatars, Bashkirs, Mongolia and Tibet as not belonging to the region (p. 23).

Toponymic definitions and spelling also came into focus of the author since they mirrored the various dimensions of the region's history, evidenced in Russian, Chinese, Arabic and Persian sources. (p. 34) This careful handling of the region's past, reflected in its toponymic vocabulary, is a worth-praising attempt to better understand both the linguistic and historical semantics of the region. It also contributes to clarifying specific terms and concepts especially those that had been politicized, included or, on the contrary, excluded from the political vocabularies.

The use of the term "Turkestan" and its variants in this regard is an informative case. The author distinguishes its multiple layers – as a generic term describing the ancient Turkic-speaking people and tribes, as a Russian-conquered province since 1865 and an administrative entity (Turkestan general-governance), as the part of the Qin Empire (Eastern, or Chinese Turkestan versus Western, or Russian Turkestan), as part of the Uyghurs' historical legacy (Altishahr), or as a part of contemporary China's political environment (Xinjiang). This distinction helps to place the particular events, people, religions, ethnic groups, etc. into the broader historical context, discourse. That means the need to always correlate the space and time axes of history and analyze the net results of this correlation in a comprehensive and inclusive way.

The author's key pillars of interest are the global forces of modernity - colonialism, communism and Islam. As a specific feature of the region, he also discusses the Turkism issue as well.

*Colonialism*

Khalid looks at colonialism through the lenses of the general regularities that took place throughout the globe. The concept of colonialism which, as the author mentions, has no unified approach, he sees as the "differences between the metropole and colonies and colonial subjects... conceived of in terms of

civilization, race, and ethnicity, and ... increasingly authorized by science” (p. 132). Further in the book he clarifies and discusses this thesis to show, how “the colonial difference was inscribed in space, social practice and law” of the region. (p. 134)

Two notions are worth mentioning here. The first one is his contribution to the debates on whether Imperial Russia’s advancement into the region could be viewed as a colonial one. Khalid’s answer is yes. He employs the following arguments: (1) the form of expansion doesn’t matter (overland vs oversea); (2) colonialism is a diverse phenomenon; (3) there were moral and political rather than physical distance between metropolis and colony (p. 620). This approach he extends further to Xinjiang by stating its dual character at that time, and the fact that it was more affiliated with the Russian Turkestan rather than with the Qing Empire (p. 621, 151). It seems that author underlines this aspect to distinguish the different trajectories of governing by both empires (Russian and Qing), as well as in support of his initial standpoint on the definition of the region, in which he stated that Xinjiang has much more in common and a shared history with other parts of Central Asia rather than Afghanistan.

### *Islam*

The need to place Islam vis-à-vis broader context, particularly, political power, is a way to understanding its role and seeing the results of these interactions at certain stretches of time. Khalid’s important statement is that “Islam is not a single, homogeneous entity. Islam has taken many forms over its long history and is a site of constant contestation”; this postulates the need to understand “what Islam meant at a given historical moment” (p. 625, 57). Throughout the book he gives numerous samples of the various role of Islam in the “pre-modern” history. As for the modernity itself, the theme of Islam vis-à-vis colonialism and jadids is of a particular interest.

While acknowledging the different approaches towards modernization by the proponents of the new method schools, the jadids, and the ulama, both geographically (in Russian Turkestan, Kazakh Steppe and Chinese Turkestan) and essentially, Khalid distinguishes their specificities as per the question of power. The ulama’s case showed that they could extend support to any political ruler (even outsiders as in case of Afaq Hoja who invited the Dzhungars, and even non-Muslims, or Russian empire, and even Soviet state after religious persecution) “as legitimate no matter how they came to power, as long as they did not oppose the shariat or hinder the work of the ulama” (p. 165). As a contrast to this, Khalid shows that the jadids’ attempts to modernization, in fact, were, firstly, the questioning of the authority of the Islamic “orthodoxy and the hold of traditional elites on it”, it “started as movement of religious reform before it took anticolonial and national positions” (p. 626).

### *Turkism*

Related to the question of reforms and nationalism is the question of identity, particularly, such specific for Central Asia identity as Turkism. Khalid looks at the sources of Turkism from a holistic perspective, considering its various influences stemming from both the Russian empire itself (categorization of the imperial subjects according to the ethnicity), and the Ottoman empire. Another

contributing factor is the scholarly development in the second half of XIX century Europe on the shared roots and languages of the Turkic groups of Eurasia (p. 162).

Khalid describes Turkism as the “new form of understanding community”. However, he distinguishes this concept from pan-Turkism: “it was not the same thing as pan-Turkism—the idea that all Turkic populations should unite in a single state” (p. 163).

The idea of Turkism that focuses on the linguistic roots and shared ethnic origin of diverse groups of people spread throughout the Eurasian continent, could be viewed as a product of that time of bifurcation. Turkism is a phenomenon that combines both boundaries of the ethnic groups and nations, and the transboundary, or transnational character of ideas and ideologies, similar to religion. From this perspective it is equally local and transnational, intense and spread. This duality gives its truly international character on the one hand, and yet it makes it prone to subduing to any other types of identity such as national, religious, and cultural, on the other. As a phenomenon (similar to Slavism), that articulates the language and the shared ethnic origin as a primordial and a non-constructed one, it tends to glorify the past as a “golden age” and acquires high mobilization potential at a times of systemic changes, of which the modernization process was a bright sample. It was not, therefore, surprising that these ideas circulated at the turn of XIX-XX centuries and added towards shaping the multiple identities of the region and beyond.

The author’s contribution to the theme could be his holistic approach – as in case of other issues, he looks at Turkism through local lenses, i.e., its spread and forms in its “heartland” (Bukhara and Samarkand), in Alinshahr, and among the Kazakhs. He highlights that the forms and outcomes of this process in these locales varied.

Summing up, it could be said that the academic field has been enriched by the new study on Central Asia. Adeb Khalid’s succinct and scrupulous narrative, full of details, but not at the detriment to the quality and general idea of the book, is a must read for anyone interested and studying the region.

Perhaps, the time has come to comprehend the region in an inclusive way, from a broader rather than merely “post-Soviet” or “colonial” perspectives. The region today is a much more visible and dynamic space and deserves to be understood and known from an all-embracing holistic perspective. Therefore, the first of its kind, the book is a worthy attempt to provide the readers, both general audience and scholars, with the comprehensive knowledge on the region from an inclusive rather than fragmented or lop-sided prism.