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Nation-Building in the Shadow of Colonialism: The Case of Fergana Valley

Kolonyalizmin Gölgesinde Ulus-İnşası: Fergana Vadisi Örneği

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Abstract

Central Asian communities, initially colonized by the Russian Empire for its own interests, were reshaped many times in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) era. In this timeframe, the complex or undefined borders, which were not a problem due to being part of Soviet territory, became a source of conflict for the states following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Particularly in the Fergana Valley, issues between the borders of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan continued until 2025. This article aims to explain how the Russian Empire colonized Central Asian territories from the imperial period and how the USSR influenced the fate of nations in the region by dividing their lands in various ways. While colonialism has affected regional countries in various ways, the study examines the impacts of colonial legacies in the framework of borders and sovereignty. The research investigates how nation-building has been influenced by the legacy of colonialism. In conclusion, it is argued that resolving border issues in 2025 will further facilitate nation-building processes of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which struggled with border problems from the beginning of their independence.

Keywords: Colonialism, Sovereignty, Nation-Building, Fergana Valley, Borders

Öz

İlk olarak, Rusya İmparatorluğu'nun kendi çıkarları doğrultusunda sömürgeleştirdiği Orta Asya toplulukları, Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyetler Birliği döneminde birçok kez yeniden şekillendirilmişlerdir. O dönemlerde, karmaşık ya da belirlenmemiş sınırlar Sovyet topraklarının bir parçası olmaları dolayısıyla problem değilken, Sovyetler Birliği'nin çökmesi sonucu ortaya çıkan devletler için çatışmanın kaynağı olmuştur. Özellikle Fergana Bölgesi'ndeki Kırgızistan ve Tacikistan arasındaki sınır problemi 2025 yılına kadar devam etmiştir. Bu çalışma Rusya İmparatorluğu'nun Orta Asya topraklarını imparatorluk döneminden itibaren nasıl sömürgeleştirdiğini ve Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyetler Birliği'nin bu bölgedeki halkların topraklarını çeşitli şekillerde taksim ederek ulusların kaderini nasıl etkilediklerini açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Sömürgeciliğin çeşitli şekillerde bölge ülkelerine etkisi olmakla birlikte, çalışma sınır ve egemenlik bağlamında sömürge mirasının etkisine odaklanmıştır. Bu çalışma, ulus inşasının sömürgecilik mirası tarafından nasıl şekillendirildiğini araştırmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, 2025'te sınır sorunlarının çözülmesiyle bağımsızlıklarından beri sınır problemleri yaşayan Kırgızistan ve Tacikistan'ın ulus inşa süreçlerinin daha da kolaylaşacağı savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sömürgecilik, Egemenlik, Ulus-İnşası, Fergana Vadisi, Sınırlar

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INTRODUCTION

Colonial activities, driven by the self-interest of powerful states, have influenced the futures of weaker communities for centuries. Colonialism can be seen not only as a way of extracting resources from weak societies but also as a process that reshapes those societies' cultures and ideologies to advance their own purposes. Following geographical discoveries, many powerless societies across the world were subjected to invasions by colonial powers. When examining the Central Asian territories, it is evident that the expansion of colonialism began with Tsarist Russia and continued with the Soviet Union's colonial practices.

With the creation of the USSR, the communities in Central Asia were subjected to national delimitation to better serve Soviet interests. Thus, the borders established by the USSR's decisions became the boundaries of the national states and these borders were frequently adjusted to serve Soviet objectives. The Fergana Valley, which is the heart of the region, was divided among Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan by the USSR. Yet, during the Soviet period, it did not cause any conflicts among the communities sharing the region until they gained independence.

The concept of sovereignty is by far the most vital component in the formation of nation-states. A state's full sovereignty means having absolute control and authority over a specific, well-defined territory. After the Central Asian communities gained independence, their nation-building process began. In this context, examining the states that share the Fergana Valley reveals that they have been tackling border disputes since their independence up to the present. In particular, the ambiguous borders shared by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan created uncertainty about the limits of their sovereignty until 2025. This research aims to examine the arrival of Russian colonialism in Central Asia and subsequently investigate how the USSR's arbitrary redrawing of the region's borders influenced the nation-building processes of today's independent states, with a particular focus on the Fergana Valley. The study has utilized data from various sources collected through literature review methods. As part of the literature review, international peer-reviewed journals, books, academic papers published by think-tank organizations, research centers' reports, digital media archives, and magazines have been scrutinized. The research has been structured under four major thematic headings. First, the theoretical background has been explained. Afterward, the establishment of Russian colonization, then the Soviet Union era in Central Asia, and lastly the legacy of colonialism in the Fergana Valley have been analyzed. Finally, it is asserted that determining territorial borders is one of the most significant steps in promoting the nation-building process of countries in the region.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: COLONIALISM AND CONCEPTS OF SOVEREIGNTY

Colonialism

Colonial activities, which can be traced back hundreds of years, were initiated by Western powers to discover new routes and resources. Özensoy points out that even though there are examples of beyond Europe, such as Russia's expansionist strategies in Turkestan and

Siberia following the eighteenth century and the colonial policies of Japan in the Far East, the concept of colonialism is often regarded as primarily a Western European phenomenon. While colonialism existed in Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, it became especially important in the 15th century as a result of new geographical discoveries (2019: 820). Although technological developments, political factors, and religion were some reasons for geographical discoveries, one of the primary motivations was economics.

European countries had the opportunity to access mines by discovering new routes, and this led them to move away from agriculture-based economies and created new economic models (İmamoğlu, 2022: 1029). Europeans who desired to expand trade, discover new markets, and seize the source of gold and raw materials aimed to invade the wealthiest regions of the world (Luraghi, 2000: 16). In other words, after geographical discoveries, some European countries like Portugal, Spain, France, and England began implementing colonization policies in various regions of the world owing to the necessity for raw materials and new markets.

Colonialism is generally intertwined with imperialism even though each has its own distinct meanings. Loomba notes that colonialism refers to the occupation and seizure of foreign territories and resources (1998: 2). The concept of colony is derived from the Latin term *colonus* which indicates farmer. The origin of the word means that colonialism usually meant relocating people to a new land where they settled down permanently. However, they maintained their political allegiance to their home country. Conversely, imperialism originates from the Latin word *imperium* which refers to command. Therefore, imperialism defines the way in which one nation establishes dominance over another, either by means of settlement, sovereignty, or indirect mechanisms of control (Colonialism, 2006). According to Said, the term imperialism indicates the practice, the mindset, and the theory of a dominant metropolitan center governing a remote country, while colonialism is the establishment of settlements in a distant territory. It is generally a result of imperialism, (1993: 9). İplikçi also elucidates the difference between the two terms. He argues that imperialism can operate without official colonies, whereas colonialism necessitates the existence of colonies (2017: 1537).

Alternatively, Lenin conceptualized imperialism from an economic perspective and clarified its relationship with the capitalist system. According to him, imperialism is a stage of capitalism dominated by big companies and financial institutions. It involves capital exports and division of the world among major capitalist nations, which have already divided all global territories among themselves (1963). In addition to this, Loomba mentions that colonialism has a vitally crucial role for the development of European capitalism. Europe might not have transitioned to a capitalist system without colonial expansion (1998: 4). In summary, with the advent of geographical discoveries, colonial activities emerged. These colonial activities, closely related to imperialism, triggered the rise of capitalism.

Analyzing colonialism from an exclusively economic perspective would result in an incomplete understanding. Because multifaceted aspects and impacts of colonialism would be overlooked. There are several motivations beyond economic factors that contribute to the advent of colonialism. According to Tuğçe Kelleci, colonialism is not merely a state's governance or control over a distant territory, it extends beyond the control of the territory or economic exploitation. Colonialism impacts actors' lives, reshapes their identities, exerts dominance over

both their tangible and intangible aspects of existence (2023: 58). In this regard, Nandy agrees with Kelleci regarding the intangible effects of colonialism. He notes that colonialism also represents a psychological condition impacted by earlier social attitudes in both colonizers and colonized. It signifies a continuity of culture and brings with it certain cultural baggage (1983: 2). Colonialism encompasses more than just a master-servant relationship; it is a process of removing a society's past and reshaping it to align with the interests and desires of the colonial rulers (Osterhammel, 2005: 15). In general terms, colonialism is the practice of powerful nations, particularly Western countries, dominating, controlling weaker nations as well as manipulating, reshaping them in a variety of ways, such as economically, culturally, and ideologically.

İplikçi mentions that after colonization, powerful states have determined nations' geographic boundaries and assets. Moreover, they have shaped their perceptions of Asian and African communities as their opposites, as sources of fear (2017: 1532). Colonial powers legitimized their occupations by stating that they had a legal religious obligation to dominate the land as well as the culture of native populations. They portrayed themselves as bringing civilization to what they describe as "barbaric" or "savage" nations, asserting that their actions were for the benefits of those whose territories and peoples they were exploiting (Blakemore, 2023).

Under the colonialist policies of the Tsarist Russia, Turkestan became increasingly popular during Tsar Peter the Great's reign (Karataş, 2021: 66). Unlike the colonial practices of Western countries, Russian colonialism was generally continental; Russian populations were settled in the occupied lands, military dominance and cultural expansion played a significant role (Aydoğan & Korkmaz, 2025: 47). Despite the fact that the Russian Empire implemented colonial policies in the region since its era, Russia constantly rejects itself as a colonial power today. In this regard, Lavrov shared his views on the country's colonial past in an article written before his visit to African countries, and he said, "our country has not burdened itself with the bloody crimes of colonialism" (Lavrov, 2022).

At the same time, examining the history of Russian expansion reveals notable parallels with western colonialism, including similar timelines, methods of expansion, and mechanisms of control over colonized regions. While western nations expanded into America, Africa, and Asia, Ivan the Terrible of Muscovy pursued a comparable approach to extending his state's borders on the opposite side of the globe (Sumlenny, 2024).

Nation-State and Sovereignty

Concepts such as nation, nationalism, nation-building, nation-state, and sovereignty are closely related to each other. When broadly considering the concept of a nation, it can be described as a community of people who are politically organized within a specific territory and who share common cultural values, traditions, and history. Nationalism is a concept that cannot have a common definition among scholars. According to Karadağ and Yaman, nationalism emerged after the French Revolution and constituted the intellectual foundation of the idea of the nation-state (2018: 89). Moreover, a state [état] refers to a group that has its own government, a territory, and a population (Gökalp, 2014: 147). In the modern sense, the state is more than just having the capacity to govern and manage a nomadic people; it is an entity that

needs a connection to geography (Bezci, 2013: 24). The “modern state,” which became synonymous with the “nation-state,” is the most advanced type of political organization. Moreover, the concept of “sovereignty” legitimizes the existence of the “modern state”. Following the French Revolution, the key element that distinguishes the “modern state” from previous political structures is its sovereignty (Beriş, 2008: 56). In addition to these, nation-building mainly describes a domestic effort where political decision makers or state actors work in order to unite existing “cultural, ethnic, linguistic or religious” divides to create a unified national identity (Hoefte & Veenendaal, 2019: 173). The process entails the formation of a nation, which is a socially constructed entity that aims for political sovereignty (Hoefte & Veenendaal, 2019: 175). Therefore, it is generally accepted that the idea of nationalism and nation-states can be regarded as outcomes of modernity. Nation-states began to establish themselves on the international stage after signing the Peace of Westphalia. The perception of sovereignty was different before modernity. Yet, it was further redefined with the formation of modern nation-states, particularly following the French Revolution.

The concept of sovereignty was introduced into literature by Jean Bodin. According to him, sovereignty is the absolute and perpetual authority vested in a commonwealth which is referred to as “majesta” in Latin (Bodin, 1967: 24). Sovereignty refers to the transition from “fronts” (cepheler) to “borders” (sınırlar) at the beginning of the formation of the nation-state system. The state’s claim to autonomy within its own territory is confirmed by the recognition of its borders by other states. This distinction is one of the factors that separates the nation-state system from the pre-modern state system (Tan, Demir, Budak, & Sarı, 2017: 595).

The sovereign nation-state represents the type of political structure that enables a country to fully participate as an entity of contemporary international law. Many post-colonial states have inherited complex societal structures, economic and cultural diversity, and the colonial-era borders as defining characteristics (Bondarenko, 2021: 19). Various parts of the world were either under the exploitation of Western civilization for centuries or faced the threat of such exploitation before the nation-building process, and they formed their nation-states. In this extensive geography, it is not the nations that created the states but rather the states that created the nations. In this context, nation-states emerged from the independence of colonies or the dissolution of large empires with central governments. In less developed societies, the sequence is state formation first, it is followed by nation-building, and ultimately the establishment of a nation-state (Erkiş, 2013: 67-68).

One of the key elements can be emphasized as a sovereign state has the authority to make laws and effectively enforce them within its defined territory or territories (Giddens, 2008: 366). It may be highlighted again that one of the main components of sovereignty is having a clearly defined territory within which the legally recognized state operates. When considering a specific piece of land, one of the first elements that comes to mind is its boundaries. Gbenenye points out that a boundary is often defined as an “imaginary line” that separates two land areas. When this line runs between national states, it is typically outlined point by point in a treaty. The term “boundary” thus denotes a line and is commonly associated with concepts such as allocation, delimitation, and demarcation. In geographical studies, the term “border” is used to describe the adjacent areas that connect these boundaries (Gbenenye, 2016: 118). Sovereignty is not only an internal authority but also an external one; it involves

claiming authority in relation to other states. This claim asserts that within clearly defined borders, a specific state holds sovereignty and, therefore, no other state has the right to exercise administrative, legal, judicial, or military authority within those boundaries (Wallerstein, 2011: 84).

Briefly, one of the most fundamental components of a nation-state that emerged with modernity is sovereignty. To repeat, the sovereignty of a state refers to its authority to control a specific piece of land with well-defined borders, recognized by the international community. It can be said that for states that have fully achieved nation-building, it is crucial to exercise the principle of sovereignty over a clearly defined territorial area.

ESTABLISHMENT OF RUSSIAN COLONIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

By the 16th century, colonial activities became widespread, and major Western powers significantly advanced in their attempts to colonize the resource-rich lands of weaker communities. The 16th century was also a milestone in Turkestan, following the disintegration of Timurids, Central Asian territories were divided among three khanates: the Hokand Khanate in the east, the Bukhara Khanate in the center, and the Khiva Khanate in the west. The resource-rich territories near Russia were one of the reasons for them to turn their focus toward Central Asia. Indeed, the Russian interest in seizing control of this region was driven by a range of factors.

One of the reasons why Russia desired to seize Central Asia was because from the Urals to the Altai, the Kazaks had long been a source of trouble along Siberia's southern border. It was possible for them to raid villages, steal livestock, and sell captives into slavery in Khiva, Bukhara, and other southern states. Another motivation behind the Russian expansion was that the Kazakhs controlled fertile lands which were attractive for Russian settlement. Beyond the Kazakh Steppe, the abundant resources of Turkestan, Persia, and India offered enticing trade opportunities that historically captivated Russian interest. Moreover, this expansionist endeavor aimed to enhance Russia's standing among Asian countries (Pierce, 1960: 17-18). Although security issues may also be a factor in Russia's advancement in these territories, it can be said that the primary aim was to access the rich resources in the region. Furthermore, as Şevik mentions that Britain's presence in the region due to its Indian colony significantly concerned Russia. Thus, the region turned into a conflict zone between the two powers, Russia and Britain. He notes that during the era of Peter the Great, Russia desired to reach Britain's colony in India through Turkestan in the 18th century. For that reason, Russia and Britain fought for dominance over Turkestan in the 19th century (2024: 37).

Russian expansion in Transoxiana began following their defeat in the Crimean War in 1854 (Roy, 2018: 65). Before the Russian occupation of the region, a range of preparatory activities were undertaken. Şevik notes that the Russians dispatched a variety of specialists, such as scientists, diplomats, military officers, explorers, and traders to Turkestan. Their main responsibility was to gather extensive data about the region and prepare initial reports to facilitate the invasion. Based on the information from these reports, the Russians developed comprehensive strategic plans and policies for the occupation of Turkestan (2024: 37). For the

next decade, a series of Russian exploratory operations in Turkestan revealed the vulnerabilities and lack of unity among the khanates (MacKenzie, 1988: 213).

In 1847, after forcibly annexing the Great Horde, which was previously under the Kokand Emir's control, the Russians commenced their operations from the territories they controlled in what is now Kazakhstan (Roy, 2018: 65). The Russian advance southward from the Kazak steppe began from two separate directions (Khalid, 2021). A Russian army commanded by General V.A. Perovskii of Orenburg seized control of the Kokanese stronghold of Ak-Meshit' located on the Syr-Darya River in July 1853. It was renamed as Fort Perovskii and then emerged as the principle Russian forward base. By 1855, the so-called Syr-Darya Line, consisting of three additional Russian forts, marked the unofficial border with Kokand (MacKenzie, 1988: 213). Kara claims that this occupation gave a new aspect to Russian expansionist policies. The ruined fortress of Ak-Meshit was reconstructed, and efforts were undertaken to assemble large military forces to conquer the Turkic Khanates in the region (2021: 40). The conquest of the Khoqandi fortress of Ak-Meshit provided the Russian Empire a strategic position in Transoxiana. At the same time, the Siberian (Irtysh) line progressed southward from the east, establishing forts at Kopal, located at the base of the Alatau Mountains in 1847, and Vernoe (present-day Almaty) in 1854, after the fall of Aq Masjid (Khalid, 2021). However, due to the start of the Crimean War in 1853, Russia which was expected to be defeated in the conflict, temporarily postponed this objective (Kara, 2021: 40).

The Russians initially attacked Kokand, seized Pichkek (later renamed Frunze, now Bishkek) in 1860, Shymkent in 1864, and Tashkent in 1865 (Roy, 2018: 65). The takeover of Tashkent, a crucial center for interregional trade and the third-largest city in Transoxiana, represented a significant milestone in Central Asia's history. However, Tashkent was the first key city that occupied in the settled territory of Central Asia (Khalid, 2007: 34). Ultimately, in 1868, they captured Samarkand from the Emir of Bukhara (Roy, 2018: 65). Russian forces continued their advance through Turkestan, and they occupied Turkmenistan in 1874-1875 (Roy, 2018: 65). By 1876, Russia either conquered or brought under its control the entirety of Transoxiana (Khalid, 2021).

Thus, starting in 1876, Russian colonialism fully spread into the Central Asian region, initiating a phase of irreversible changes in this territory. From 1876 until 1991, the region was exploited and transformed under Tsarist Russia and subsequently the USSR. This situation profoundly influenced the fate of the states that now exist as independent entities on the international stage.

THE SOVIET UNION ERA IN CENTRAL ASIA

By the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian Empire was struggling with various issues. As Sadikov notes, the discontent of the people with the Tsarist regime was being exploited by certain revolutionary groups, who began conducting propaganda to incite rebellion. Strikes were occurring throughout the country. The public demanded an end to the conflict, but neither Tsar Nicholas nor government officials were seeking solutions to the unrest in society (2010: 102). Briefly, events in the early 20th century accelerated the fall of Tsarist Russia.

In the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, the expansionist mindset of the Russian Empire was replaced by a founding ideology rooted in communism, internationalism, and class-based principles, which led to the establishment of the Soviet Socialist Republics (Sadikov, 2010: 102). Just over five years after the Russian Revolution dismantled the Tsarist Empire, a multi-ethnic nation-state emerged from the civil war's chaos, promising a socialist future and preserving national identities (Davis, 2022). Four socialist republics were created on the former Empire's land: the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, moreover the Ukrainian and Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republics. These founding republics formed the USSR on 30 December 1922 (McCauley & Dewdney, 2025).

The Creation of Colonial Borders in Central Asia During the Soviet Period

Due to its abundant resources and strategic position, Central Asia, also known as Turkestan, has been of great importance not only to the Soviet Union but also to major powers throughout history. The region composed of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan is described by Golden as the "heart of Eurasia" (2015: 17). Central Asia, known for its fertile lands, had to serve the aims and interests of the USSR after the collapse of the Russian Empire. In addition, Turkestan was a region that the Soviet Union aimed to utilize to legitimize itself. Chokayev notes that at first, Turkestan was intended to be an "experimental field" for the implementation of Soviet policies regarding various nationalities. Furthermore, it was intended to serve as a flexible model for addressing a more general and more significant issue within the dictatorship of the proletariat, more specifically "the revolution for colonial liberation" (1931: 403).

The USSR aimed to establish its dominance over the region by Russifying the Muslim-Turkic populations and forming a uniform Soviet identity among them. In this regard, the Soviets initially drew artificial ethnic boundaries (Yarimoğlu, 2022: 31) and implemented linguistic criteria through a procedure referred to as "national territorial delimitation" (*natsional'noe razmezhevanie*) (Sengupta, 2000: 407), together with the formation of bureaucratic structures in Central Asia (Yarimoğlu, 2022: 31).

The Soviet Union gradually began to implement its plans for the region. Fierman points out that after April 1918, administratively, the area that had been the General-Governorship was reorganized into the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASSR), which was under the control of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic) (2019). In the early days of the revolution, the authorities considered the idea of preserving some of the vast administrative divisions from the Tsarist era, such as the Turkestan province and the semi-autonomous region of Bukhara and Khiva (Wheeler, 2019: 332). Through the involvement of Red Army forces in 1920, the regimes in Bukhara and Khiva collapsed. They were quickly reconstructed as the Bukharan Soviet People's Republic and the Khorezm Soviet People's Republic. In the following years, the entities mentioned above were integrated not only politically but also economically into the Turkestan ASSR and, consequently, into the broader Russian territory (Fierman, 2019).

From 1920 to 1923, the Soviet authorities solidified their control and consolidated their power by managing "transportation, communication, public finance, military, and economic

affairs". As of 1923, they established a facade of unification with the formation of the USSR (Sabol, 2007: 225). Unlike the Russian Empire, the USSR believed it was more advantageous for its own interests to allow the peoples of Central Asia to exist as separate republics. Consequently, they distributed the territories of Central Asia in various ways (Temür, 2023: 167). The concept of redrawing borders based on ethnic or national lines was first introduced at the end of 1923 (Abashin, Abdullaev, Abdullaev, & Koichiev, 2011: 105).

There were several reasons why the USSR needed to delineate borders in Turkestan. According to Sabol, first, the Bolsheviks thought it would improve coordination. Additionally, Turkestan was intended to serve as a Soviet model for the Eastern peoples. The second reason why the Soviet elites insisted on national delimitation was the belief that the social and economic differences among Central Asian peoples made it difficult to implement standardized regional policies, like those related to taxation policies and the education system, which required broad support. This division and emphasis on differences were expected to persist until the socialist production system standardized lifestyles, eradicating gaps between nomadic and settled communities, and a unified education system would reduce tribal cultural distinctions, fostering a unified national, and ultimately socialist consciousness (2007: 236).

According to the 1924 Constitution (which included 11 sections and 72 articles), the USSR was established as a federal republic that consisted of seven republics: Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and the Transcaucasian Republics (Gürkan, 1964: 181). In 1924, Turkestan (centered in Tashkent), Khorazmian and Bukharan Soviet Socialist Republics were abolished. Then, the region was restructured into the union republics of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (which included the Tajik ASSR). Kyrgyzstan became an autonomous republic (ASSR) within the RSFSR in 1926. In 1929, Tajikistan was elevated from its status as an autonomous republic within the Uzbek SSR to a full union republic. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan achieved the same status seven years later (Svanberg, 1996: 315). The Kirgiz SSR was not established until 1936 (Fierman, 2019). It is crucial to mention that in historical literature up to the 1920s, the term "the Kirghiz" or "the Kirghiz-Kaysaks" (meaning "the Kirghiz-Kazaks") referred to the Kazakhs, while "the Kara-Kirghiz" denoted the Kirghiz (Rahimov & Urazaeva, 2005: 2). By a decision of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee on 25 May 1925, the name of Kara-Kirghiz Autonomous Oblast was changed to the Kirghiz Autonomous Oblast (Kirgizskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast). Then, it was designated as the Kirghiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Kirgizskaya Avtonomnaya Sovyetskaya Sotsialističeskaya Respublika, KASSR) on 1 February 1926 (Buyar, 2017: 82). In the 1940s, various attempts were made to define the geographical and ethnic boundaries of certain republic territories, but these efforts did not lead to any meaningful results (Dadabaev, 2015: 13). After the establishment of the USSR, from 1924 onward, the Central Asian region was repeatedly divided among its peoples in various ways, and these borders were reorganized numerous times until 1936. By 1936, Central Asia had fundamentally been divided among different nations, and the borders of their territories had been defined. Thus, the fate of the future of Central Asian states was also shaped by the Soviet Union.

The Fergana Valley, rich in natural resources and characterized by intensive agricultural activities, was subjected to distinct forms of delimitation by the Soviet Union. The Fergana region is the most ethnically diverse territory in Central Asia. Even though Abashin and et al.,

claim that it was not a central focus in the discussions about Central Asian border delineation during the 1920s (2011: 114), Koichiev asserts that carrying out the Soviet national-territorial delimitation strategy in this territory was the most challenging part of the entire process (2003: 56). During the land allocations in this region, communities showed a tendency to pursue their own interests. Koichiev mentions that although Kyrgyzstan's claims in the eastern section of the Fergana Valley were primarily driven by ethnic factors, it frequently disregarded the 'ethnic indicator' principle as Uzbekistan benefited from having substantial minority groups like Tajiks or Kashgarliks (2003: 51). As mentioned earlier, during this period, the region was divided between the Kyrgyz SSR (Kazaks) and the Uzbek SSR until the end of the 1920s. The emergence of Tajikistan as an SSR in 1929 also necessitated a reassessment of the territorial delimitations.

Neither Moscow nor the leaders of the national republics considered Fergana Valley an area of major problems or conflicts. Following the new border delineations, the valley was divided into three national-administrative entities. Consequently, it lost its status as an independent economic and cultural entity. It became a peripheral area linking the three union republics into which it had been split (Abashin, Abdullaev, Abdullaev, & Koichiev, 2011: 114). During this period, since the three groups, namely Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks, were centrally governed from Moscow, the Fergana Valley, which was divided among them, did not become a center of any issues until 1991. Briefly, it may be said that the significant ethnic diversity in the region, along with the creation of new Soviet Republics in the late 1920s and 1930s, made the process of delimiting the area difficult.

TROUBLING LEGACY OF COLONIALISM: THE FERGANA VALLEY

After gaining independence in 1991, the Central Asian states started to build their nation-states. In this context, clearly demarcated territory gained importance. For Abashin, in Central Asian nationalist ideologies, territory is not only the physical area where a nation inhabits, but also a fundamental source for shaping national identity. Territory connects the nation to nature, and it makes people feel at home, on their ancestors' lands where they were born (Abashin, 2012: 161). It is not sufficient for a national community to only share a sense of common identity, it also wants to live in and control a certain lands. The idea of geographic integrity means that some areas are seen as belonging to a certain nation and are considered worth defending (Billig, 1995: 76). Therefore, like all sovereign states worldwide, the Central Asian nations deserve to have a homeland with well-defined borders.

When the Soviet Union dissolved, Central Asian states faced several challenges, one of which was unresolved border issues. Berker and Abdulkirimov point out that among the countries in Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan faced the fewest problems in border delineation. Both countries successfully addressed border disputes with their neighbors without significant difficulties. Kazakhstan settled its border problems with Kyrgyzstan in 2001, Uzbekistan in 2002, and Turkmenistan in 2017, and it became the first state in the region to overcome its border disputes. Turkmenistan, on the other hand, finalized its border determinations with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 2017 (Berker & Abdulkirimov, 2022). Therefore, once Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan gained independence, they successfully resolved

their border issues with neighboring countries. This not only averted potential major issues but also helped them overcome one of the fundamental challenges in their nation-building process.

Particularly, the uncertainty surrounding the borders in the Fergana Valley continued to cause problems for the states from 1991 to the present day. Elahi et al. mention that Soviet authorities manipulated the geographic borders of the Fergana Valley according to the Eurocentric 'Westphalian' nation-state model. This process involved disregarding the existing local structure of ethnic groups, cultures, and geographies. The Fergana dilemma is a result of this rigid strategy, which the Soviets eventually came to recognize (2023).

The maps drawn by the USSR depict varying borders in the Fergana Valley during the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s. Consequently, after the 1990s, each country that shares the valley wanted to use different Soviet-era maps to support their own interests (Borthakur, 2017: 338). In addition to undefined borders, the enclaves inherited from the Soviet Union are causing headaches for independent states today. There are eight enclaves in the region, which are areas of one country's land located within the borders of another country. Gabdulhakov mentions that Uzbekistan has four enclaves within Kyrgyzstan: "Sokh, Shahimardan, Dzhangail/Jani-Ayil, and Qalacha/Chon-Qora/Chongara". Kyrgyzstan also contains two Tajik enclaves: "Western Qal'acha/Kayragach and Vorukh". Additionally, Uzbekistan has only one Tajik enclave (Sarvan/Sarvak/Sarvaksoi) and also one Kyrgyz enclave (Barak) (2015: 2).

Particularly, the enclaves of Sokh (an Uzbek territory within Kyrgyzstan), Vorukh (a Tajik territory within Kyrgyzstan), and Shakhimardan (an Uzbek territory within Kyrgyzstan) have frequently been sources of tension when countries impose strict border controls due to disputes over delineation. The enclaves shared by neighboring countries have been hotspots for tension. The Fergana Valley experienced around 20 armed clashes from 1989 to 2009. Only in 2014, Kyrgyzstan reported 37 border conflicts (Bland, 2024).

Kyrgyzstan shares a 1,375-kilometer border with Uzbekistan, much of which runs through the Fergana Valley. Many residents in southern Kyrgyzstan realized the existence of the international boundaries during the events of 1999-2000 (Megoran, 2010: 41-42). As Rickleton notes that according to the bilateral agreement, Barak, a 208-hectare piece of Kyrgyz land completely encircled by Uzbekistan, was transferred to Uzbekistan. In return, Kyrgyzstan received a comparable area from Uzbekistan's Andijon Province (2024).

The two countries signed a protocol to finalize and demarcate the Kyrgyz Uzbek border which included several land swaps. Kyrgyzstan gained additional territory, but this was balanced by Uzbekistan's continued access to reservoirs located in the Kyrgyz region. The Orto-Tokoi (Kasan-Sai) reservoir, particularly, has been a contentious issue for decades. The negotiations also focused on Sokh; an Uzbek enclave entirely encircled by Kyrgyz territory (Putz, 2021). As outlined by Kun.uz website, in November 2022, an agreement between the Republic of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan regarding certain sections of their state border and the Andijan (Kempirabad) reservoir was approved by the relevant authorities of both governments. This agreement consists of 13 articles. Some details of the agreement are as follows:

- The agreement defines the border that stretches 302.29 kilometers in total, covering 35 segments of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz state border.
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- Uzbekistan will acquire 4,957 hectares of the Andijan reservoir area and an additional 19,5 hectares for the maintenance and protection of the dam. In return, 1,019 hectares of pastureland will be transferred to Kyrgyzstan as compensation.
- Kyrgyzstan will also receive 12,849 hectares from the Govasai section as compensation for the unconstructed Kempirabad canal located on the left side of the Andijan reservoir. Additionally, the Kyrgyz side has committed not to build hydraulic and other structures that would obstruct the natural flow of the Govasai River and to prevent technical contamination of the water.
- It was agreed to address the joint management of the Andijan reservoir's water resources and the Chashma Spring area in the Sokh region through separate agreements (2022).

Officials from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have made significant progress in settling their border issues over the years by holding numerous discussions and signing agreements. According to Eurasianet, on 23 January 2023, the leaders of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan came together to declare that the lengthy process of defining their border has been successfully completed (Imanaliyeva, 2023).

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also share a border which is highly problematic in the region. According to Beker and Abdulkirimov, over the past eleven years, over 150 incidents and disputes have been recorded, it resulted in casualties due to issues such as “agricultural irrigation, animal grazing, smuggling, and illegal border crossings”. An agreement was finalized regarding roughly 600 km of the 971 km border, but disagreements persist at around 70 border points in the unresolved section (2022).

The border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, marked by limited natural resources and diminishing water supplies, experienced frequent skirmishes over the years. In 2014, both countries closed their borders indefinitely following clashes over a disputed bypass road. The clashes involved mortar fire, causing casualties on both sides. The conflict erupted in 2021 and 2022, initially triggered by a water dispute in the Vorukh enclave, resulting in hundreds of deaths and the evacuation of up to 136,000 people (Bland, 2024). This period presented the most severe incident in their long-standing dispute. On 20 September 2022, the two nations signed a final peace agreement to resolve the border issue. By September 2022, the governments recognized only 504 kilometers of the border, but by April 2024, they agreed on approximately 800 kilometers of the border. Progress has been made since 2022 (Krauzman, 2024). Finally in 2025, two countries signed a comprehensive border agreement. Thanks to this agreement, many disputed areas along the border were clarified. The key elements of the agreement include border demarcation and land distribution, security and pre-conflict communication mechanisms, ethnic rights and the status of local communities, water and natural resources, and finally, economic cooperation and infrastructure projects (Manioğlu, 2025). As a result, the conflicts have deeply impacted not only on interstate relations but also regional security and humanitarian conditions. In this regard, multidimensional aspects of the comprehensive border agreement between the two states enhance its significance.

Furthermore, Tajikistan also shares a border with Uzbekistan. In 2002, approximately 1,000 kilometers of the 1,332-kilometer border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were

resolved. The unresolved portion was addressed under "good neighbor" policy of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev who began his term in 2016 (Berker & Abdulkarimov, 2022). It can be said that Mirziyoyev's approach to the border disputes with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan demonstrates his support for cooperation and his commitment to resolving issues through peaceful means.

In summary, the Fergana Valley has been a source of tension for the countries of the region since 1991. As a result of the intense efforts by the regional states, it appears that the border issues have been resolved. The constructive steps taken by the leaders ensured the delimitation of the borders by 2025.

CONCLUSION

Colonial activities driven by Westerners' geographic explorations to discover new routes, access new markets and resources emerged as a significant development in the 15th century. One of the colonial powers was Russia which exploited the lands and people of Central Asia for its own benefit starting from the time of the Russian Empire. The Russian colonization that began centuries ago has profound and far-reaching effects on the fate of Central Asian societies by the 21st century. Colonial Russia did not merely exploit the wealth of the territories but also aimed to transform the local population both ideologically and culturally to formulate a Soviet identity. Additionally, by defining the boundaries of the territories, the USSR irrevocably altered the fate of both the land and its people.

The commonly accepted belief is that the French Revolution signified the emergence of modern nations, nationalism, and nation-states which then began to reshape the world. Central Asian states also began the process of nation-building after gaining independence in 1991, or in other words, after officially freeing themselves from colonial rule. In this context, the concept of sovereignty and the notion of defined territorial boundaries continued to be a significant issue for Central Asian states.

During the independence period, the Fergana Valley, a pivotal part of the region, has repeatedly faced numerous problems due to its ambiguous borders. The ambiguity of borders leads to a circumstance in which the authority of a modern sovereign nation-state is not clearly defined. This situation also highlights the issue of whether it impacts the nation-building efforts of the states.

The clearly delineated borders not only define the sovereignty of a state but also describe the boundaries to which citizens are expected to establish an emotional attachment. When it is considered that people tend to develop a national sentiment toward their homeland, the ambiguous borders become a crucial matter. When it is taken into consideration that the nation is imagined as a limited entity (Anderson, 2006: 6), it may be argued that the clearly defined borders of the homeland shape the limits of citizens' imagination of their country.

To summarize, the principle of sovereignty over a clearly defined territory, which is essential for nation-building, failed to make progress especially in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan until 2025. As a legacy of colonialism, the fate of the territories of nations shaped by colonial powers was one of the pressing issues seeking resolution. However, the efforts of Kyrgyzstan

and Tajikistan brought a solution to a long-lasting issue. As of 2025, it can be said that both countries have made significant progress in their nation-building processes within the scope of territorial sovereignty.

Furthermore, for many years, clashes have occurred between people residing in the region due to undefined borders. To establish peace and security in the area, integrating societies in both countries is vital. In this context, the governments of the countries should formulate certain policies and work to ensure stability in the valley. After promoting peace and security among people in the region, a series of projects should be developed to foster social and economic cooperation. Moreover, participation of the NGOs in the region is necessary for the process. Because it is important that NGOs collaborate with society and involve them in the solution procedure in order to facilitate the resolution.

Author Contribution

The research was conducted by a single author.

Ethics Committee Statement

The research does not require ethical committee approval.

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