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# “ Toponymy of Central Asia: Proper Names or Forged Concepts? ”

Svetlana Gorshenina

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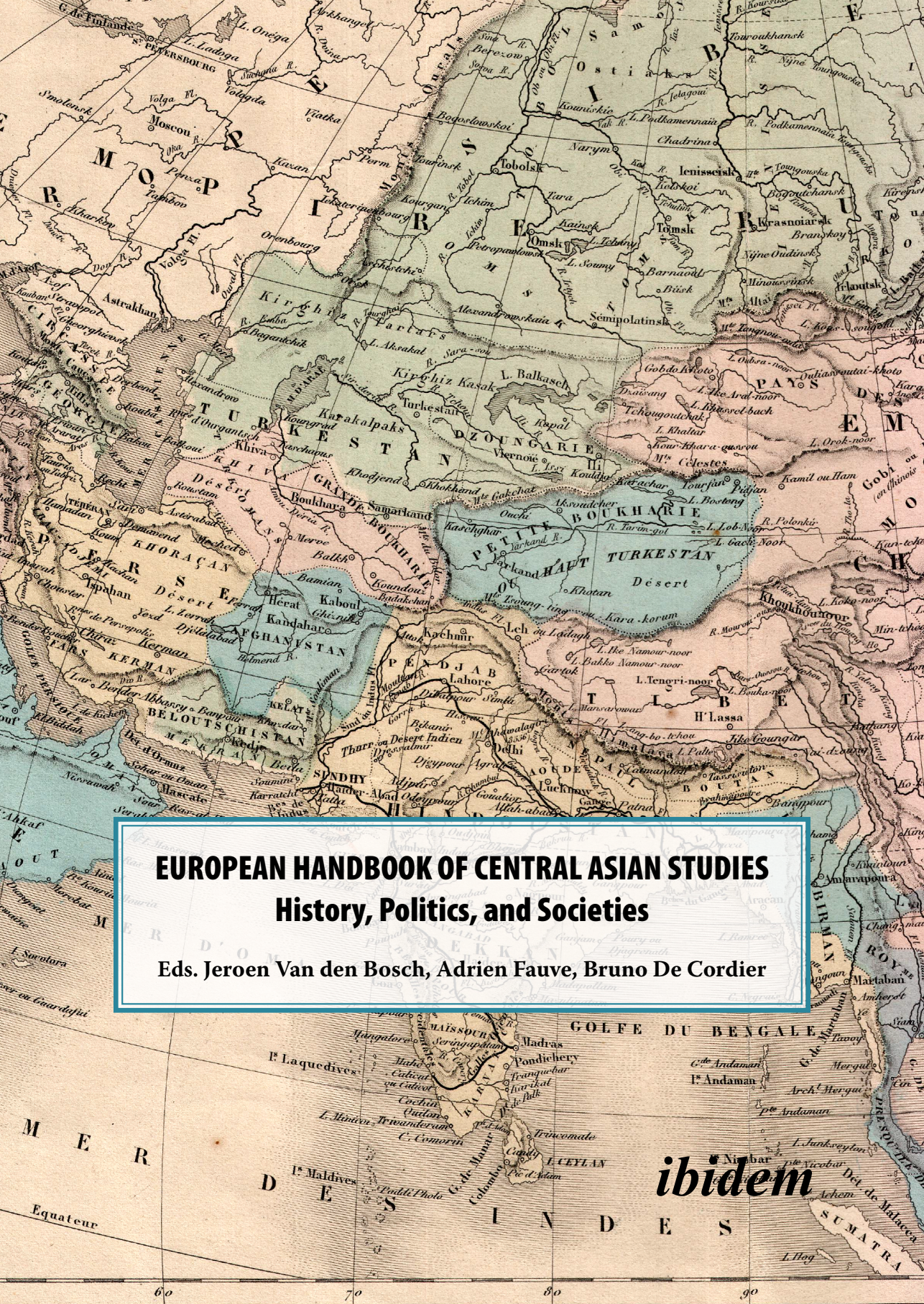
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# EUROPEAN HANDBOOK OF CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES

## History, Politics, and Societies

Eds. Jeroen Van den Bosch, Adrien Fauve, Bruno De Cordier

*ibidem*



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## Toponymy of Central Asia: Proper Names or Forged Concepts?

by

SVETLANA GORSHENINA<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ Chapter 2 (Bruno J. De Cordier and Jeroen J.J. Van den Bosch)
- ▶ Chapter 15 (Slavomír Horák)
- ▶ Chapter 16 (Sébastien Peyrouse)

### Case Study Assignment

Several definitions (geographical, ethnological, political, mythological or historical) are used with regard to the region: Central Asia, post-Soviet space, Turkestan, Silk Road, Central Eurasia, etc. The question is the following: do all these nomenclatures constitute 'proper names' (therefore, without meaning, whether positive or denigrating) or 'common names' (with specified content) based on concepts constructed in relation to specific epistemological and political situations? And how, according to what criteria, were these names chosen / invented? Are these names the result of a magic trick where the right word comes out of nowhere? Or is it a decoding of hidden things (i.e. the 'discovery' in itself of a pre-existing reality similar to the discovery of a diamond)? Or should one speak of a pure invention and seek to reconstruct the contexts in which these concepts were forged, then debated and commonly accepted?

If this is the case, another question arises: how, in a 'real' space with no particular landmarks or limits, have certain representations been established at the political, scientific or iconographical level? And how has this space, with no visible 'centre' or 'periphery,' been shared, named, constructed as a territory defined and limited either by the visible and the material, or by the invisible and the immaterial?

Our starting point is that in the process of creating meta-discursive objects, two acts remain primordial: (a) the cutting up of a geographical and cultural continuum and (b) the naming of the resulting parts. Students should therefore seek to reconstitute the particular context and understand how it was possible to suc-

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Fiona Kidd.

ceed in creating the verbal or graphic notions of Central Asia, and according to which criteria, justifications and arguments. In your answer, try to group the approaches along your identified criteria.

Answer these questions, based on the following Case Study together with handbook chapters 2, 15 and 16. You can also make use of these publications:

- Etienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: a History*, (Handbuch der Orientalistik, VIII- 10), (Leiden: Brill, 2005).
- Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- Felix de Montety, 'La 'Route de la soie,' imaginaires géographiques,' in: Michel Espagne; Svetlana Gorshenina; Frantz Grenet; Shahin Mustafayev; Claude Rapin (eds.), *Asie Centrale: transferts culturels le long de la Route de la soie*, (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2016).

### **Case Study: Toponymy of Central Asia: Proper Names or Forged Concepts?**

#### ***Multiple Terminologies: The Reasons for Their Appearance***

Like other meta-geographical spaces, Central Asia is a construct.<sup>2</sup> Its contours change according to discipline and approach, ranging from the relatively compact unit of the four Central Asian republics without Kazakhstan, to much larger areas, which, depending on the context, form various configurations with parts of Russia, Siberia, China, India, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran and the Caucasus. The names of these areas differ not only from one language to another, but also within the same language, according to whether one places the accent on the 'Middle,' the 'Centre,' or the 'Interior,' or whether one associates other concepts ('Eurasia,' 'Turan,' 'Silk Road,' etc.) or state structures. Today it is difficult to compare the terms used in the various languages<sup>3</sup> and to decide whether in one language similar terms such as, for example, 'Inner Asia' and 'Central Asia,' are synonymous or not.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed history of the concept of Central Asia see: Gorshenina 2012; 2014.

<sup>3</sup> In English, the following names are used variously: Middle Asia, Central Asia, Inner Asia; in French: *Asie centrale*, *Asie moyenne*, *Asie médiane*, *Asie intérieure*, *Haute-Asie*; in German: *Mittelasien*, *Zentralasien*, *Centralasien*; in Russian: *Srednyaya Aziya*, *Tsentrāl'naya Aziya*, *Vnutrennyaya Aziya*, *Nagornaya Aziya*; in Uzbek: *Urta Ocië*, *Markazy Ocië*, etc.



This terminological confusion is not the result of a peculiarity of this geo-cultural area. It stems in part from the complex history of its 'rediscovery' – in the sense that Central Asia constitutes one of the more 'refractory' regions in cartographic progress. This confusion reflects also the geo-political projects of European powers – mainly British and Russian – which have strongly influenced the process of knowledge construction in this area. 'Indigenous' definitions, despite the presence of some elements such as 'Turan' or 'Turkestan' are absent from the development of these concepts, while names that have been applied almost exclusively are 'imported' and formulated through the eyes and minds of outsiders. Finally, this confused situation owes much to the restructuring of Central Asia launched by the Bolsheviks during the national delimitation of 1924-1936 that led to the emergence of the Soviet republics – see also Map 8.1 to 8.4.

### ***Historical Traditions, Modern 'Rediscovery,' and Invented concepts***

Although historical names of regions in western Central Asia (such as Bactria or Chorasmia) are mentioned as early as the *Avesta*, the Achaemenid inscriptions (sixth century BC-330 BC) and Herodotus, it is the topographic vocabulary of the Greco-Roman authors (fourth century BC to the second century CE) that has influenced European constructions until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, resulting from the idolization of the classical heritage. These historical names were preserved and enriched by Arab-Persian geographers (9<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries). Benefiting from a different and chronologically closer vantage point, they disseminated the term '*Mā warā' al-nahr*' ('what is beyond the river'), which originated from the time of the Arab conquest of Central Asia (in the seventh and eighth centuries).

At the same time, medieval scholars constructed another image of Central Asia through the development of *mappae mundi* that relied on the Bible, the classics and the encyclopaedic works of the time, such as the *Speculum maius* of Vincent de Beauvais (1190-1264). Difficult to access, the area was amalgamated with European prejudices about simultaneously earthly Paradise, the Prester (presbyter) John, the people of Gog and Magog (symbolizing the Antichrist), and Alexander the Great. At the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries the visual representation of Central Asia witnessed the return of Ptolemy's *Geography* (second century CE), which prevented for a long time the emancipation of a more realistic image of the region, despite information gathered by the first travellers

from the West, beginning with Benjamin of Tudela (1130?-1173), between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. New toponyms that emerged in Europe added to the confusion: thus the terms *Asya Media* and *Imperium Medium* that Marco Polo (1254-1324) used to designate the Chagatai ulus were misunderstood as an allusion to the ancient Medes.\* The Central Asian area was also considered one of the three 'Indias,' or could bear the name *Turkia* or *Turkestan*. The name, however, which prevails in this fog is the denominational *Tartary*, apparently invented by Louis IX (1214-1270).\* The content of this pejorative term remains vague and is subject to a multitude of possible interpretations, including ethnographic, regional and political.

\*Pelliot 1959-1973, part. I, 1959, s.v. "Asya Media:" 55, s.v. "Ciagatai:" 254

\*Paris 1840: 146-147

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the first wave of European orientalists, Jesuits, and Russian explorers tried in vain to redefine the space in question based on new geographical and ethnological knowledge. Thanks to modern measuring tools new facts flowed unimpeded, yet the image of Central Asia was still very unclear in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Borders were only defined when they separated powers of equal strength, such as the Sino-Russian border, or later, the Russian-British contact zone. With respect to peripheries such as the 'steppes,' or the 'western regions' (now Xinjiang) and the 'roof of the world' (the Pamir and Hindukush mountain chains), the Russian, Chinese and British elites preferred the blurring of maps to a clear boundary line, while imposing their configurations and names on these peripheral areas. The invention of the term 'Transoxiane' by Barthélemy Herbelot (1625-1695) is one example of the Eurocentric efforts to redefine the space.

### ***Birth and Advent of the Term "Central Asia"***

Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century scholars became increasingly aware of the geographical position of these lands in the very centre of the Asian continent. At the same time emerged the first critiques of the name of *Tartary*, whose nature was incompatible with the idea of emerging nation states. The concept of 'Central Asia' began to arise everywhere. However, it only took shape in the years between 1810 and 1830, when travellers in Russian services, starting with Philip Nazarov (1813-1814) and Georg von Meyendorff (1820), began to use this term to designate the mid-point (*posredine*) on the route leading from Russia to countries further south or east, such as Persia, India and China. Thus, the term referred to the transitory character of this space, rather than to any 'central' role in world history.



This notion of Central Asia as a ‘mid-way’ place gradually gave way to the concept of centrality. This term entered western scientific language through works published in 1823-1826 by the German orientalist Julius Klaproth (1783-1835), working in Paris, on the basis of his reflections on linguistic and ethnological data, predominantly of Russian origin.

The decisive change in perception came in the 1840s when German geographers began to revise descriptions of the region from the view-point of environmental determinism. Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) is generally regarded – incorrectly – as the single ‘inventor’ of the term ‘Central Asia’ thanks to the eponymous book he published in 1843. The book is, however, a foundation to the extent that, as we will see later with Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), it attempts to bring together ideas of ‘purely scientific’ criteria. These include the geological genesis of the region, soil stratification, hydrography (including the direction of the flow of water), climate, vegetation, etc.

Humboldt does not cling to the unity of the terminology since, in regards to Central Asia, he also uses the terms ‘Inner Asia’ (*Asie intérieure*) and ‘High Asia’ (*Haute-Asie*). Central Asia is the subject of several definitions. One of these comprises a 10° wide band of *high- and lowlands*, centred on the 44.5 N parallel, while another is centred on Xinjiang.\* Starting from the triad ‘centre-periphery-transition,’ Richthofen proposed the term ‘*Mittel-Asien*’ for the Turanian basin, and positions ‘*Central-Asien*’ in the arid high-plateau of Hangai (approximately Xinjiang), where the water evaporates without flowing.\*

\*Humboldt 1843, t. I: XXVII, XXVIII

\*von Richthofen 1877: 3, 7-8

In the Russian speaking world Humboldt’s work resulted in the duplication of the term: initially the synonyms ‘Central Asia’ (*Tsentral’naya Aziya – Центральная Азия*) and ‘Middle Asia’ (*Srednyaya Aziya – Средняя Азия*) designated given spaces in a rather random way, whereas the perimeter of the territory covered by these two terms was generally more important than proposed by Humboldt. For Western geographers this approach was too lax regarding to the traditional ‘tartaresque’ view and ‘incompatible’ with cartographic innovations. They rejected it in favour of the rigid German scheme opposing the *highlands* to the *lowlands*, and in which ‘Central Asia’ refers only to the *high plateaus*, excluding the *Turanian basin*. Barely started in 1843, this discussion led to a break twenty years later, when, in a polemical context, Nikolaj Khanykov (1822-1878) proposed to define Central Asia as an ensemble of “inland basins”, comprising “lakes Van, Urmia, the Caspian Sea, the Aral Sea, etc.”\* Subsequently, Ivan Mushketov (1850-1902)

\*Khanikoff 1861: 205-206

and Lev Berg (1876-1950) presented other geological arguments to include the *lowlands of Russian Turkestan* within the limits of the *High Central Asia*.

It was not until the 1920s that this interpretation – fixed on the organization of mountain ranges, or the description of large depressions and closed basins – gave way to the concept of continental drift, cf. Alfred Wegener (1880-1930) and Emile Argand (1879-1940),\* itself later reinforced by the theories of plate tectonics (ca. 1970s).

\*Wegener 1920; Argand 1924

Meanwhile, in the context of the ‘Great Game,’ the centrality of Central Asia gained prominence through constructions of political geography and geo-politics. Élisée Reclus (1830-1905) and J. Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) developed a political and strategic vision that transformed the area defined as the ‘Heart of Asia’ into a *Pivot Area*, the possession of which was considered as a *conditio sine qua non* for world domination.

These speculations added a pejorative connotation to the term ‘Turan,’ pushing Russian intellectuals to elaborate a terminology based on their identity and geo-political projects. Reflecting theories of the ‘World of the Middle’ (*Sredinnyy mir* – *Срединный мир*) and ‘Eurasia-Russia’ established by Nikolay Danilevskiy (1822-1885) and Vladimir Lamanskiy (1833-1914), they shifted Richthofen’s *Central-Asien* westward and placed the centre of Asia within the borders of Russia – into the Asia they considered their own (Russian Turkestan) and as inseparable from the Tsarist empire. This Asia continued to bear the randomly applied names ‘Inner Asia,’ ‘Middle Asia,’ or ‘Central Asia.’ Implicitly, this operation later introduced a distinction between ‘homeland’ (Russian Turkestan = Middle Asia) and ‘lands yet to be conquered’ (Central Asia).

Given that the southern borders, fixed legally in several stages by the 1910s, remained as yet porous, such fluid terminology made it possible to modify the extension of colonial Russia: Inner/Middle Asian ‘homeland’ could always still easily encroach on Inner/Central Asian Non-Russian lands.

Seen by the Russians from the north, halfway between east and west, ‘Central Asia’ did not crystallize into a fixed scheme until the second half of the 1910s. In political and philosophical speeches, by making the allusion to the similar sounding of the used terms, ‘Middle Asia’ (*Srednyaya Aziya*) was finally considered a ‘logical’ extension and inseparable from the *World of the Middle* (*Sredinnyy Mir*)/*Eurasia/Russia/Tsarist Empire*. This ‘Middle Asia’ became largely synonym with the term ‘Russian Turkestan.’

If one tries to represent the existing schemas in a graphical form,

one also gets some pretty muddy pictures. On first reading, one can have this image: the quasi circular shaped 'Asia of the Middle' (*Srednyaya Aziya*) = ca. 'Russian Turkestan' is bordered from the south-west to south-east by the 'Asia of the Centre' (*Tsentral'naya Aziya*). This 'Asia of the Centre' (*Tsentral'naya Aziya*) (here regarding its graphical form) is shaped like a kind of comma leaning horizontally with its main point of weight situated to the east of the Russian Empire, stretching ribbon-like to the southwest along the Indo-Afghan border to northern Iran, without that section always being mentioned in the definition of this area. This spatial construction is a kind of outer buffer zone that should be included in the 'World of the Middle' (*Sredinnyy Mir*) / Russia, which should be protected from the non-Russian Asia. The 'Asia of the Middle' (*Srednyaya Aziya*) continues nevertheless to be a buffer zone inside the Russian empire.

A second reading allows for the enclosure of the 'Asia of the Middle' (*Srednyaya Aziya*), smaller, in the limits of the 'Asia of the Centre' (*Tsentral'naya Aziya*), a larger one with the contours mentioned above. The shape of this set takes an oval graphic form and may bear the name of either 'Asia of the Centre' or 'Asia of the Middle'.

The importance of the geo-political context is also evident in the fact that, after an initial refusal, the Russian elite accepted that *Russian Central Asia* took the name of *Turan*. This happened thanks to the speech of the *vostochniki* who managed to give a positive connotation to this term while positively presenting Russia as a half-Asian-half-European country. Similarly, debates about the name *Turkestan* reveal another, purely aggressive aspect of the foreign policy of the empire. The Russian elites wanted to preserve for its settlements the denomination of the 'Russian Turkestan' as opposed to 'Afghan' and 'Chinese Turkestan' and hopefully one day to bring together under its power these three Turkestan units.

Definitely, the duplication of terms for the region – 'Middle Asia' (*Srednyaya Aziya*), part of the 'homeland' already, and 'Central Asia' (*Tsentral'naya Aziya*), still outside – as well as the adoption of the term 'Russian Turkestan,' allowed for the distinguishing of the Russian possessions in Asia from those neighbouring regions ('Chinese Turkestan' and 'Afghan Turkestan'), that were destined for future conquest.

### ***Soviet Interpretations of Boundaries and Area Studies***

Soviet publications conserved this terminological pair ('Middle Asia' and 'Central Asia') and to a certain extent it still reflected

\*Gorshenina 2012: 189–300

the opposition between ‘homeland’ and ‘foreign territories.’ However, the reading of the first term – ‘Middle Asia’ (*Srednyaya Aziya*) – had fundamentally changed. Adapted to the Soviet reality and especially to the consequences of the national delimitation of 1924–1936,\* the meaning of the term stabilized in the early 1940s. In a broad sense, ‘Middle Asia’ (*Srednyaya Aziya*) corresponded to the four Soviet republics (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan) and to the southern regions of Kazakhstan. In a narrower sense, this ‘Middle Asia’ is limited to the four republics mentioned above (excluding Kazakhstan), which formed the ‘Middle Asian economic region’ (*Sredne-aziatskiy ekonomicheskiy region*) – one of twenty-one of the former USSR.

Despite all attempts at unification, the make-up of the second term – ‘Central Asia’ (*Tsentrāl'naya Aziya*) – was never fully standardized: for geologists it was largely synonymous with Richthofen’s *Central-Asien*, while in the eyes of historians and archaeologists, ‘Central Asia’ often included the areas of Soviet ‘Middle Asia’ together with all or parts of Kazakhstan, northern Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, as well as Mongolia and western China (Xinjiang).

An important change, however, marked reflections on this area: after the national delimitation of 1924–1936, the republics began to be seen as a ‘natural’ reality and these state territories began – and continue nowadays – to be routinely used for establishing spatial boundaries of events in a historical perspective.

The advent in the 1960s of *Area Studies*, operating with terms like ‘Turkic,’ ‘Iranian,’ or ‘Indian world,’ blew apart the conceptual unity of Central Asia. Now peripheral areas, shifted and blurred, partially overlapped each other. The requirement to exclude these ‘inappropriate’ areas outside the field of research has led to the entrenchment of a negative definition of Central Asia which excludes the outlying areas, to obtain the desired object of study (e.g., specialists in Islam reject Buddhist Central Asia and *vice-versa*). Moreover, the simplest principle to describe a space is to actually describe its envelope (e.g. scholars often define Turkestan as space limited by Russia, China, India, and Iran, so by the areas that envelope it).

### **Questioning the Concept**

The fall of the Soviet Union was followed by a reciprocal transfer of epistemological concepts and by increased academic exchange of researchers between ‘East’ and ‘West.’ A fresh look at the estab-

lished terminologies often brought the operational value of the term 'Central Asia' into question. Rejecting linear positivism and environmental determinism, researchers debated other defining criteria.

After more than twenty years, the debate still continues today. However, despite the diversity of indices put on the table (stemming from physical geography, language settings, religions, life-ways – nomadic or sedentary – or the common Soviet past) many of the proposed definitions are, it seems, still infected with the myth of nation-states, geographical determinism and the myth of centrality.

A noticeable exception is presented by the approach of Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen.\* It is primarily based on cultural considerations and proposes to designate Central Asia as an area, which, in the past, was represented mainly by Turko-Mongol, and – in its southwestern part – by Iranian culture. In this area the way of life has been shaped by the integration of pastoralism and agriculture in oases, as well as transcontinental routes that ensured a sustained level of trade. Ideological and cultural integration is manifest in several religious systems, dominated by Islam and Buddhism. Finally, following complex historical developments, Central Asia may be designated roughly as the sum of two cultural and religious areas: a Buddhist area in the east, under strong pressure to be assimilated by the Russian and Chinese regimes (with overall, Tibet, Mongolia and the Russian autonomous regions of Buryatia, Tuva and Kalmykia) and a Muslim area in the west, marked by the Soviet legacy and the world of Islam (for the ex-Soviet republics) in which Xinjiang enjoys a special status (the place of Afghanistan remains unclear).

\*Lewis and Wigen 1997: 179, 180-181, 186

However, attempts to dispel the myth of 19<sup>th</sup> century Central Asia might easily run the danger of creating new ones. The solution to these conceptual and terminological issues cannot lie in the invention of new terms, or in the development of more sophisticated definitions, based on an historiography that is extremely incomplete. Instead, one should start to understand Central Asia as an operational concept, a system of interpretation that might help us to better understand the individual elements involved. For such a perspective, the choice of a name is no longer crucial: it is first of all a label, with no necessity to multiply its synonyms.



## Bibliography and Further Reading

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*“The Handbook features leading European and international scholars studying Central Asia who bring rich insights from the region and offer robust analysis on a wide range of topics. It provides a useful guide to social science departments across continents.”*

Erica Marat, College of International Security Affairs, National Defense University.

*“A long-awaited pedagogical volume on an still unknown but key region in today’s world. A must-read for students and teachers on Central Asia.”*

Marlène Laruelle, George Washington University, Elliott School of International Affairs.

*“The Handbook contains rich material on various aspects of Central Asian past and current development. The multidisciplinary nature of the features, logical structure of the narration, as well as a team of leading European experts ensure a high quality of the handbook, which can be used not only for teaching, but also academic purposes.”*

Ablet Kamalov, Turan University, Almaty; President of European Society for Central Asian Studies.

**T**HIS HANDBOOK is the first comprehensive teaching material for teachers and students of Central Asian Studies with an actual strong pedagogic dimension. It presents 22 chapters, clustered around five themes, with contributions from more than twenty scholars, all leading experts in the field of Central Eurasian Studies. The book doubles as a reference work for scholars. The book is framed to address post-colonial frameworks and, where possible, untangle topics from their ‘Soviet’ reference frame and point out pitfalls, myths and new insights. Chapters aim to de-exoticize the region and draw parallels to European or to historical European-occupied territories.

The goal is to provide solid background knowledge about Central Asia to readers, and intertwine this with an advanced level of insight to leave readers equipped with a strong foundation to approach more specialized sources either in classroom setting or through self-study. Authors (together with didactic experts and editors) took great care to explain concepts and provide (working) definitions.

In addition, the handbook offers a comprehensive glossary, concise atlas, didactic sections, info boxes, overviews of intended learning outcomes, and a smart index (distinguishing between: names, concepts, events and places). Online lectures (YouTube), recorded by the authors themselves, accompany the handbook either as instruction materials for teachers or as visual aids for students.



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