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**MULTI-ETHNIC EMPIRES AND THE FORMULATION  
OF IDENTITY IN CENTRAL ASIA**

Beatrice F. Manz  
Davis Center for Russian Studies – Harvard University

**NCEEER** 

The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research  
910 17<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W.  
Suite 300  
Washington, D.C. 20006

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## **Executive summary**

When scholars have turned their attention to identity, they have most often explored the phenomenon of nationalism. Much of the comparative and theoretical writing about nationalism examines the larger identities of the past largely in relation to modern nationalism of the European type, with the goal of explaining how past identities differed from the modern nation

Historians of the Mongol or Islamic worlds in the Middle Ages cannot dismiss the political significance of large-scale secular identities in the past. Such identities are constantly referred to in medieval texts – we read of Turks, Tajiks (Persian speakers), Arabs, Kurds, Kazakhs, and these names clearly had importance for the people of the period. But we cannot understand these groups if we remain within the frame of reference of modern nationalism. An emphasis on nationalism can also mislead us in our understanding of modern ideologies, particularly in areas like Central Asia where European influence is relatively new.

This paper examines the formation of long-lasting group identities in Central Asia. Many of these identities had a number of the markers that are familiar in the modern world – common history, language and other perceived affinities. But they differed sharply from modern national identities in the connections perceived between various ethnic markers, and the expectation aroused by a common communal feeling.

One crucial element in the formation of pre-modern identities was their function within the multi-ethnic empires that controlled much of the world. Systems of imperial legitimation and state structure strongly influenced the formation and understanding of ethnic groups. Definitions of identity and the expectations attached to them could outlive the empire itself, and survive within another system. I would suggest that the imprint of earlier empires and systems of thought still exists in modern Central Asia, and continues to color perceptions of identity, definitions of difference, and expectations of community.

The fall of the Soviet Union and the continued rise of ethnic unrest have brought new attention to two topics of interest to historians: the formulation of secular identities, and the impact of multi-national empires. Perhaps because of the topicality of these issues, most scholarship concentrates on their recent history. When scholars have turned their attention to identity, they have most often explored the phenomenon of nationalism, seen as the most widespread form of political and ethnic solidarity. They have traced the history of nationalism as it developed in Europe and spread to the rest of the world. Much of the comparative and theoretical writing about nationalism examines the larger identities of the past largely in relation to modern nationalism of the European type, with the goal of explaining how past identities differed from the modern nation.<sup>1</sup>

Attempts to define ethnic groups of the past according to criteria based on contemporary concerns have led a number of scholars to protest against the imposition of modern categories on peoples distant in time and space. Writers reacting against modern third-world nationalism built around ancient civilizations unearthed by western scholars argue that no national or proto-national identities existed in the past, and that to trace their development is a distortion of history.

For historians of the Mongol or Islamic worlds in the Middle Ages neither of these approaches is fully satisfactory. We cannot dismiss the political significance of large-scale secular identities in the past, because such identities are constantly referred to in medieval texts – we read of Turks, Tajiks (Persian speakers), Arabs, Kurds, Kazakhs, and these identities clearly had importance for the people of the period. On the other hand, our acceptance of the frame of reference that modern nationalism has imposed on us presents a problem in understanding earlier identities because it blinds us to other systems

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<sup>1</sup> See for example G. Eley and R.N. Suny, eds, *Becoming National*, Oxford, 1996, "Introduction," pp. 4-5, 18-19, and Anthony Smith, "The Origins of Nations," pp. 106-131.

of thought. When we examine earlier identities and loyalties primarily to determine their relation to nationalism, to class them as either national or non-national, or as sub-national, supra-national or proto-national, we risk missing the political meaning that identities held for people whose loyalties were quite simply unrelated to a national framework.

In this paper I will step back from both the nation state and nationalism, to examine the formation of long-lasting group identities in Central Asia which had political and communal importance. Many of these identities had a number of the markers with which we are familiar in the modern world – common history, language and perceived affinities. They differed sharply from modern national identities not so much in size as in the connections perceived between various ethnic markers, and the expectation aroused by common communal feeling. One crucial element in the formation of pre-modern identities was their function within the multi-ethnic empires that controlled much of the world: systems of imperial legitimation and state structure strongly influenced the formation and understanding of ethnic groups. Definitions of identity and the expectations attached to them could outlive the empire itself, and survive within another system. I would suggest that the imprint of earlier empires and systems of thought still exists in many parts of the world, and continues to color perceptions of identity, definitions of difference, and expectations of community.

It is not only in relation to history that the exclusive use of European nationalism to explain large-scale collective identity can prove misleading. The behavior of the Central Asian republics on the breakup of the Soviet Union took many observers by surprise, since interest in language use, the revival of religious observance and displays of anti-Russian sentiment had encouraged expectations of strong separatist sentiment, which failed to manifest itself. Nor have attempts at Turkic unification, which some observers predicted, won popular support. Central Asian reactions to independence can be understood better if we examine the content and use of identities inherited from earlier empires of this region. To understand the actions of various Soviet republics, we should study the structures of the

empires they belonged to. We must recognize that although multi-ethnic empires have many common traits, their differences are equally significant, and should not be disregarded.

One state which has particularly influenced modern Western views of multi-ethnic empires and their legacy is the Austro-Hungarian empire, the collapse of which during the First World War opened the way for the formation of new twentieth-century European states. The centrality of the Austro-Hungarian example to European experience and the spread of nationalism in the modern world may have blinded us to the reality and importance of other types of structure and of identity. I would suggest in particular that the Islamic, Mongolian and Russian empires, very different in structure and ideology, shaped the societies they controlled, and that their legacy has likewise survived, and deserves attention.

### **The Habsburg empire**

Let me start with the familiar European experience, and show why this has so influenced our thinking about empires and identities. The Austro-Hungarian empire took its modern form and name in the early nineteenth century, just as the age of nationalism began. As nationalism intensified and more peoples joined the ranks of the conscious nationalities. Europe watched with increasing concern the drama played out in the one local multi-national empire. When political thinkers turned their attention to national demands, they took this empire as their example, and saw its problems as the ones to be solved.

We should recognize the influence of the Austro-Hungarian empire on thinking and policies at the turn of the century, but we need not ourselves accept it as the standard of a multi-national empire; in fact, if we compare it to empires elsewhere, we find it interestingly atypical. This empire originated in the dominance of the Habsburg dynasty over the Holy Roman Empire of the European Middle Ages, and thus combined a Roman universalist imperial legitimation with legal legitimation derived from numerous regional institutions. Most lands came into the dynasty's possession already formed, retaining their political structures and individual legitimacy as duchies, principalities, kingdoms. Within most of these

a local diet or council of hereditary nobles, ecclesiastical officials and townsmen formally recognized the power of the ruler, and together symbolized the status of the region as a separate political and historical entity.<sup>2</sup> The empire's mosaic regional base influenced the nationalist policies of the nineteenth century. Peoples seeking autonomy and local privileges based their claims on the sovereignty and sanctity of the medieval kings and nobles who had defined their regions. The possession of local legitimacy served to bolster a developing national identity in which language, historical community and region were closely connected.

Another important element of nineteenth century nationalism came from the language policies of the Habsburg Empire, and particularly the predominance of German as the language of both nobles and cities, thus the language of high culture. The distinction between "master" or historical languages – German, Italian, Hungarian – and subordinate languages, such as Czech or Croatian, provided an extra cause to nationalists from the Slavic regions, who worked for the creation of literature in their own vernacular languages.<sup>3</sup>

The regionally based structure of the Austro-Hungarian empire was not like that of most empires; indeed for those of us used to reading non-European history, the Habsburg empire looks peculiar, almost non-imperial. If we are to understand the legacy of identity left by more universalistic

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire, 1516-1918*, Berkeley, 1977, pp. 1-23; Joseph R. Strayer, "The Laicization of French and English Society in the 13th Century," pp. 253-63, and "The Statute of York and the Community of the Realm" pp. 269-83, in Strayer, ed., *Medieval Statecraft and the Perspective of History*, Princeton, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy*, Middlesex, 1948, pp. 23, 28-30, 51-3, 62-6.

empires, then, we should investigate other structures and ideologies. In particular I want to look at two great empires which were central to the history of Central Asia: the Islamic and the Mongol.

### **The Caliphate**

When in 634 the Arabs emerged from their peninsula to conquer half of the Roman lands and all of the Sasanian Persian empire, they were a peripheral, semi-civilized people, but they had a new revelation and a mission to make God's will manifest on earth. As rulers of the Middle East, they fell heir to two imperial traditions and two populations more sophisticated, more complex and richer than their own.

The Arab rulers made little attempt at first to change the societies they took over, but they did formulate for themselves a new and separate legitimation. Their rulers were called Caliphs – deputies (of God, or of his Prophet) – and the stunning success of their conquests provided proof of God's favor. Both the Islamic religion and the Arab Empire were universalistic and absolute, meant for all peoples alike. Within the empire, the Caliphate of the Arabs did not impose uniformity upon its population, but rather preserved and encouraged differences of belief and lifestyle which served to demarcate the structure of society and its relation to the government. Most Arabs were settled in separate garrison cities, and the new regime collected land tax only from its non-Muslim population, on the assumption that conquered peoples would retain their religion and continue to hold most of the land.

Ruling in Damascus and employing sophisticated Greek bureaucrats, the early Arab rulers cultivated a separate identity based on their primitive origins. They justified their status as a ruling class partly through their identity as Arabs: pure, tough soldiers. Emphasizing the nomad aspect of their Arab heritage, they glorified the Bedouin lifestyle, sent their sons to the desert tribes to learn nomad ways, and



collected the pre-Islamic odes of their native lands.<sup>4</sup> Even though the army of conquest had not been tribally organized, Arab tribal structures were now revived and formally enshrined as military and administrative units.<sup>5</sup>

While maintaining the theory of Arab exclusivity, the Caliphs relied heavily on the personnel of the dynasties they had taken over to administer their new lands. They married, or kept, non-Arab women, and these women bore quite a few of their children. The distinction between the Arabs and their subject peoples became increasingly a willed one. The fear that Arabs were becoming too strongly assimilated to a new sophisticated lifestyle was sometimes openly expressed, and Arab commanders called for a return to a starker lifestyle and military virtues.<sup>6</sup>

With the triumph of the `Abbasid dynasty in 750 A.D., the capital of the Islamic state was moved to Baghdad, close to the capital of the former Sasanian dynasty. Iranians were now converting to Islam in larger numbers; they became central to Islamic culture and learning, and the court of the Caliph adopted numerous aspects of Iranian imperial ceremonial and legitimation. However, two trends discouraged the creation of a more uniform society: first the development of literary controversy

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<sup>4</sup> A.F. L. Beeston, T.M. Johstone, R.B. Sergeant, G.R. Smith, eds, *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*. Cambridge, 1983, pp. 389, 393-6; Charles Pellat, *Le milieu basrien et la formation de Ġāhiz*, Paris, 1953, pp. 125-6, 135-41.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 29-32, 41-48; G.R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam*, London, 1986, pp. 36-42.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, Princeton, 1984, pp. 262-3; Pellat, *Milieu basrien*, p. 5 note 2.

between Arab and Persian parties in the cultural sphere, and second, the importation of new nomad manpower from the Eurasian steppes to take the place of Arabs in the army of the Caliphate.

In the literary movement known as the “Shu`ubiyya” some Iranian writers disputed notions of Arab superiority and asserted the equality, if not superiority, of their own traditions. The authors identified with this movement were Muslim and wrote in Arabic; the movement neither promoted the Persian language nor disparaged Islam. What the Shu`ubi party did do was to ridicule Arab ideals connected with nomad Bedouin origins. They pointed out that while the Persians had come from a great and sophisticated civilization, the Arabs had been out in the desert, uneducated and uncouth, living in misery and surviving on dried leather and lizards. The pro-Arab party replied that while the effete Persians married their close relatives and prided themselves on elaborate manners and luxurious fashions, the noble, unspoiled Arab lived out in the desert, uncontaminated by city life, delighted with his diet of dried leather and lizards. What is striking about the Shu`ubiyya is its concentration on the characterization of ideal types and their worth rather than a goal of political change. One major result of the movement was a set of well-defined characteristics for both Iranians and Arabs, contrasting the courtly, sophisticated Iranian with the military, nomad Arab.

By the ninth century, when the traits of Arabs became enshrined in Arabic literature, they were already archaic. The Arabs were now largely a settled people, and the place they had earlier held in the standing armies was being filled by a new source of manpower: Turkic slave soldiers imported from the steppes of Inner Asia. These new soldiers were at once disliked and admired. They were seen as uncouth and foreign, but perfect for soldiers, because of their tough character and their nomadic upbringing.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Pellat, *Life and Works of Jāhiz*, trans., D.M. Hawke, London, 1969, pp. 92-7; Ulrich W. Haarmann, “Ideology and History, Identity and Alterity: the Arab Image of the Turk from the `Abbasids to Modern Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 20 #2 (1988), pp. 175-81.

From the ninth century onwards Arabs, Iranians and Turks coexisted in the Islamic world. Their relationship was not without strife, but it was based on a general assumption that they should live in the same realm, in which each had a place and function. Ethnic groups were organized along lines of function rather than territory. As the populations of the Middle East, including the Turks and Iranians, became increasingly Muslim, the dynasty remained Arab, since it was required that the Caliph be a member of the Prophet's tribe. As central control broke down, the Caliphate retained importance as the central locus of legitimate power, while Arabic kept its preeminence as the language of the Qur'an and of religious scholarship.

When, in 1035, the nomadic Seljukid Turks came out of the steppe and conquered much of the Middle East, they left the Caliph in place, ruling as "sultans" through a patent from the Caliph, and to the Turkic slave army they added additional contingents of tribal Turkic nomads. In this way, they fit themselves into a pattern already largely established. First, regional Muslim leaders acquired legitimacy through a patent from the Caliph, and proclaimed as a major goal of their rule the protection of Islam. Second, further charisma was available from Iranian traditions, sanctioned already by their use in the 'Abbasid court. Third, after the reign of the Seljukids, Turkic dynastic principles were at least informally accepted; membership Seljukid house and Turkic Oghuz provenance were major advantages for aspiring rulers. Fourth, it was expected that the standing army of the ruler would be troops of steppe origin, whether slave troops or newly arrived Turkic nomads.

One striking element of these principles of rule is the relative unimportance of territorial legitimation. We should not take this to imply the absence of meaningful local boundaries, loyalties and politics. Large territorial entities created under the pre-Islamic Iranian Sasanian Empire remained visible and important throughout the Islamic period, and the provinces of the Caliphate retained their boundaries

through many centuries of increasing decentralization.<sup>8</sup> As the Caliphate declined in power, it was not infrequent for a governor to make himself independent in a provincial capital.

What differentiated Islamic regions from those of Europe was their lack of connection with political legitimation. City and regional elites did not hold legally inherited positions and rights, and the reciprocal ties between them and local rulers were never formalized, as they were in the European diets. Local dynasties ruled as part of a larger, imperial system. If they needed additional legitimation, they sought it in relation to imperial traditions, notably the Iranian. In the regions which had made up the Sasanian empire we often find rulers reviving the old titles and claims of the pre-Islamic Persian monarchy. These pretensions however were largely divorced from territorial claims or dynastic descent. We find therefore that in the Islamic imperial traditions, the most strongly expressed identities – Arab, Iranian, Turk – brought with them no specific territorial claims.

Within this system, it was not expected that the ruler would be of the same ethnic group as the bulk of the population – indeed, the contrary expectation held sway. It came to be an understood principle of politics that the ruler and military should be above and separate from society, able to balance the needs of competing groups. The early Arabs had emphasized their distance and difference from the major populations they controlled, and later Caliphs, though less distinct from their increasingly Islamic and Arabized subjects, ruled through a foreign military force. After the arrival of the Seljukids in the eleventh century, most dynasties in the Middle East and Central Asia were of Turkic or other tribal origin.

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<sup>8</sup> Bert G. Fragner, *Die 'Persiphonie': Regionalität, Identität und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens*, Halle: Berlin, 1999 (ANOR 5), pp. 13-16.

## **The Mongol empire**

The Arab caliphate lasted as a system of power for about three hundred years, and as a system of legitimation and social order for a further three hundred. What destroyed it was the rise of another great universal empire, that of the Mongols. The dynasty founded by Chinggis Khan lasted from 1206 through the eighteenth century, and Mongol rule left a strong mark on the regions it covered. Like the Arabs, the Mongols came from the periphery and with lightning speed conquered a series of populations far richer and more developed than their own. Though they brought no new religion, they claimed to rule through God's favor, which was demonstrated by the success of their conquests.

One would think the Islamic and the Mongol empires inimical and incompatible. Both were universal, one based on the settled and agricultural regions, the other the nomad steppes, one founded on strict monotheism, and the other on a combination of paganism and superstitious respect for other religions. Yet as it happened, the two empires combined over a large extent: the Middle East, longer than almost any other region, remained under Mongol influence, and the Mongols of all but the eastern empire accepted Islam, expanding the Islamic sphere to include much of the Eurasian steppe. The Mongol world order thus influenced all the Muslim Turkic people of the Russian and Soviet lands.

The primary legitimation for Mongol rule lay in two things: first the charisma and universal pretensions of the descendants of Chinggis Khan, and second, the promotion of Mongol and Chinggisid law and custom. Within the Muslim regions, a third principle was added: the role of the ruler as protector and promoter of Islamic religion and law. We find once more under the Mongols a deliberately plural society, in which different cultures and languages were intertwined. The Mongol courts patronized high culture primarily in the languages of their subjects, celebrating the history and culture of these people along with their own. In the Mongol Middle East and Central Asia, Iranians made up both the peasant subject class and the educated elite. The Mongols, like their predecessors, made free use of Iranian legitimation. As in the Caliphate, peoples and cultures lived together, ruled by an interdependent

though heterogeneous elite which preserved disparate cultural, historical and linguistic traditions.

We can see in the Mongol Empire a reenactment of some of the processes found in the early Islamic period. Once again, subjects and rulers influenced each other and tried to resist assimilation. Each group saw itself as superior and did not hesitate to criticize the others. The Persians, guardians of high culture and now also of religion, considered the Turco-Mongolian elite uncultured, overbearing, and threatening even to the religion which they claimed to espouse, since they remained faithful to the un-Islamic customs of the Mongol Empire. The nomad elite, in its turn, considered Arabs, and in particular Persians, as inferior in military skill and bravery, duplicitous and untrustworthy. This did not prevent the different groups from working together and learning each other's languages, but it produced a kind of ritualized conflict expressed in literature and in administrative in-fighting.<sup>9</sup>

The distance between populations was further reinforced by the revivalist streak found in both Islamic and steppe societies. All students of medieval and modern Islamic history are familiar with periodic Islamic revival, and with criticism of ruler and society for failing to adhere to appropriate standards of Islamic behavior. On the nomad side, a similar tradition exists, dating back to the sixth century. The Turk Mahmud al-Kashghari, writing in the Middle East during the Seljukid period, repeats the need to maintain purity within Turkic traditions. Such calls to revival, Islamic and nomad, were constantly repeated in the Mongol period.

From the end of the thirteenth century through the fourteenth, the ruling class of the western Mongol Empire, stretching from the Altai and Turkestan to the Black Sea steppe, adopted Islam and began to speak Turkic. All retained loyalty to the Mongol political system, and accepted the exclusive

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<sup>9</sup> B.F. Manz, "Temür and the Problem of a Conqueror's Legacy," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3d series, vol. 8, part 1 (1998), pp. 36-8.

right of descendants of Chinggis Khan to the sovereign titles of Khan and Khaghan. From this time on, they are best characterized as Turco-Mongolian. The need to preserve difference between the Turco-Mongolian rulers and their subjects came not simply from personal – or communal – dislike, but also because accepted ideas of legitimation, on both sides, made sharp distinctions desirable. The Mongols and Turks believed that supreme rule belonged to the house of Chinggis Khan, and that the military should remain in the hands of the descendants of his armies. These should remain nomadic and faithful to the traditions of the Mongol Empire. The Iranians, on their side, were used to having foreign rulers and military, and sought, above all, efficient protection for agriculture, trade and religion, best achieved through strong armies. Through long experience and tradition, they believed that the best armies were those of nomadic origin.

On both sides therefore, the difference between nomad rulers and settled subjects was not only tolerated but required. High office in the court and military were reserved for the Turco-Mongolian population, while bureaucrats in financial administration and the chancery were mostly Persian. Arabic remained the language of the religious sciences, and Persian that of administration, literature and history, while Turkic, spoken by the ruling class, only gradually gained status as a literary language. The system established at this time remained intact in the later Uzbek khanates of Central Asia into the nineteenth century.

### **The creation of new identities in the 15th century**

The fifteenth century witnessed a further subdivision of the Mongol world into new states, and groupings, many of which had lasting political and ethnographic impact. It is at this time that we find the appearance of new names such as Uzbek and Kazakh, which were attached not to dynasties, but to the people making up different polities. The major ideological motivation for differentiation within the ruling class of the empire appears to have been the issue of adaptation to settled society, and different

levels of attachment to Mongol heritage. The different choices made on this issue caused several splits within the Turco-Mongolian ruling class.

The first of these was the split between eastern and western Central Asia. The descendants of Chinggis Khan's second son, Chaghatay, held Central Asia, including both eastern and western Turkestan, up to the Altai. This state, known as the Chaghatayid Khanate, broke up in the fourteenth century, apparently over the question of adherence to conservative Mongol custom; the eastern sections adhered to older ways, to the Chaghadayid khans, and, for one generation, to Mongol shamanism, while the western section chose Islam. The western region, now known as the Ulus Chaghatay, was centered in the agricultural sections of the former khanate, and while the Mongol aristocracy remained largely nomadic, they lived in close contact with settled people. The great Turco-Mongolian conqueror Tamerlane (r. 1370-1405) rose to power here and conquered Iran and Afghanistan, which his descendants ruled for about a century. Adopting the name of the region, their nomadic followers came to be known as "Chaghatay."

Within the Middle East and Central Asia, the Turco-Mongolian population differentiated itself clearly from other populations. The largest foreign group was the Iranian settled population, referred to consistently and often pejoratively as "Tajik." These were the theoretically civilian subjects, making up most of the population, including the religious classes and much of the bureaucracy. In some cases, we find the term "Turk and Tajik" used simply to designate the population of the realm as a whole; in others, it bears a more specific cultural connotation, suggesting lack of skill in warfare, or a certain treacherous sliminess of disposition.<sup>10</sup>

Within the nomad world the Turco-Mongolian ruling class made further distinctions of identity. The strongest was that between themselves and the Turkmen, a term applied to the western (Oghuz)

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<sup>10</sup> Maria Subtelny, "The Symbiosis of Turk and Tajik," in B.F. Manz, *Central Asia in Historical Perspective*, Boulder, CO, 1994, pp. 48-49.



Turks, who had come into the Middle East before the Mongol invasion, and had remained outside the Mongol tradition. This is the group after which modern Turkmenistan is named. In the fifteenth century, the Timurids and their Chaghatay followers began also to distinguish themselves from other Turco-Mongolian peoples. The people of the eastern Chaghadayids khanate, from whom they had split a century before, were called either by the neutral term "Moghul", or by the pejorative word "Chete" or robber, a term which referred clearly to their lack of discipline and order.<sup>11</sup> The Chaghatay were also differentiated from the Uzbek, both those outside the Timurid realm, and those serving in the Timurid armies. The use of the term Uzbek is hard to characterize precisely. The Timurid sources use it most often to denote the dynasties and tribesmen of the eastern steppe regions.<sup>12</sup> At times the term had a broader and pejorative meaning, suggesting uncouth nomads, inferior in respect to sedentary culture.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, it could be applied as well to any nomad or semi-nomadic people.

### **The differentiation of Uzbek and Kazakh**

In the early fifteenth-century a new leader appeared in what is now Kazakhstan. Abu'l Khayr, a descendant of Chinggis Khan, gathered a large number tribes, proclaimed himself Khan in 1428 and, for a period, controlled the region from the Ural to the northern Syr Darya. It is here that we see the beginning of the political entity later known as Uzbek. In the 1450s, Abu'l Khayr suffered a serious defeat at the hands of another Mongol confederation and a number of his tribal followers deserted him.

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<sup>11</sup> B.F. Manz, "The Development and Meaning of Chaghatay Identity," in Jo-Ann Gross, ed., *Muslims in Central Asia: Expressions of Identity and Change*, Durham; London, 1992, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Nizam al-Din Shami, ed. F. Tauer, *Histoire des conquêtes de Tamerlan, intitulée Zafarnama, par Nizāmmudīn Šāmī*, vol. I, Prague, 1937, p. 140, *Mu'izz al-ansab*, Bibliothèque National ms. 67, ff. 129b, 133a, 134a, 142b, Hafiz-i Abru, *Majma' al-tawarikh*, ms. Istanbul, Fatih 4371/1, ff. 464a, 466a, 474b.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Subtelny, "Art and Politics in Early 16th Century Central Asia," *Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. 27 #1-2 (1983) p. 133.

led by two Chinggisids of a different lineage. The desertion of tribes from Abu'l Khayr seems to have originated partly in protest against the level of authority he exerted, and from the desire to retain tribal autonomy.<sup>14</sup> The deserters came to be known as renegades – in Turkic *Qazaqs*.<sup>15</sup> Abu'l Khayr attacked them but he was defeated and killed in 1468. The Kazakh khans then returned with their followers to the north, and took over much of the region held by Abu'l Khayr Khan, bringing with them the new name they had acquired. After the death of Abu'l Khayr, his nominal position was inherited by his grandson, Muhammad Shibani who, about 1500, gathered a large force and took Transoxiana from the descendants of Tamerlane, proclaiming a new and more legitimate Chinggisid state.<sup>16</sup> This was the beginning of the Uzbek Khanates which lasted up and into the Russian conquest of Central Asia.

It does not appear that the followers of either Abu'l Khayr Khan or Muhammad Shibani used the name Uzbek for themselves or their followers. It was apparently only in the late 17th century that the Turco-Mongolian population of the Uzbek khanates did use this name for the tribal population, though even then it was not applied to the dynasty.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, outside writers used this name

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<sup>14</sup> T. I. Sultanov, "Osnovnye voprosy istorii kazakhskogo naroda v xv-xvii vv. po persidsko-tadzhikskim i tiurkskim istochnikam." aftoreferat. Leningrad, 1971.

<sup>15</sup> The same Turkic word is the origin of the term "Cossack" – the Cossacks of the Ukraine also originated as renegades, living outside the law in the borderlands.

<sup>16</sup> T.I. Sultanov, *Kochevye plemena Priaral'ia v xv-xvii vv.*, Moscow, 1982, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> R. McChesney, *Waqf in Central Asia*. Princeton, 1991, pp. 49-50.

consistently for the khanates and their population.

Meanwhile, the Kazakh khans and their followers remained in the northern steppe, designated not by dynastic name, but still as Kazakhs. The order they upheld was both Chinggisid and deliberately, conservatively, nomadic. The border between the Kazakh and Uzbek khanates lay approximately along the Jaxartes, or Syr Darya, River.

When we look for a pattern in the splits creating new polities and identities within the Mongol lands, we thus see similar patterns in the Middle East and the steppe. The split between Uzbeks and Kazakhs began probably as a protest against the imposition of strong central control, but as the Uzbeks became increasingly involved with the politics of Transoxiana, turned also into a distinction between more and less nomadic “conservative” lifestyles. This was similar to the earlier split within the Chaghatayid khanate of Eastern and Western Turkistan, resulting in the distinction between the cultured Turco-Mongolian ruling class of the Middle East and western Central Asia, and the more tribal nomads of Eastern Turkestan and the Ili region.

The political importance of distinguishing between nomadic and sedentary populations is indicated by the care with which distinctions were preserved, and the tendency to present an exaggerated picture of difference. We find that Mongol commanders resented Iranian pretensions to military prowess, and although Iranians were active in the military, the dynastic histories pass over their activities. In the case of the Kazakhs, likewise, there seems to have been a deliberate and conscious effort to emphasize, even overstate, their nomadism, in relation to other Mongol peoples. We find in the *Tarikh-i Rashidi*, of the early sixteenth century, a quotation from the Kazakh Khan Kasim:

We are men of the desert, and here there is nothing in the way of riches or formalities. Our most costly possessions are our horses, our favourite food their flesh, our most enjoyable drink their milk and the products of it. In our country

are no gardens or buildings.<sup>18</sup>

Separate Mongol identities arose then within a common tradition, and defined themselves on the stage of Mongol history, taking shape in response to the tensions inherent within the Mongol system. The issues of central versus dispersed power, and of coexistence with the settled population lay at the base of the political splits within the ruling class. When we look at the formation of new identities, we find them defined by differences in levels of nomadism and adherence to “pure” Mongol customs.

The common markers of European and modern identity on the other hand -- language, origin and place – played a subordinate role. It is notable that the tribal origins of different groups are similar, and the histories written for and about them make no attempt to obscure that fact. The Turco-Mongolian ruling class of the Middle East had a number of a number of tribal names in common with both Uzbeks and Moghuls. Among the Kazakhs and Uzbeks, this confluence is striking. These two people derived from a common place and background; when they split, it was not along tribal lines, but apparently through divisions within tribes. Territory and language likewise played a secondary role. The Uzbeks and Kazakhs expanded their holdings and moved out of their original lands without losing their separate name and identity. The written Turkic language was common among many states, and dialects were not taken into consideration. In the hierarchy assigned to languages in the late Mongol and Islamic world we see another stark contrast to the European imperial experience. Here the language of high culture was that of the subject people, and it was members of the ruling group who fought to win recognition for their own language.

Through most of their history, the new states and groups of the Islamic Mongol world continued

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<sup>18</sup> E. Denison Ross, ed. and N. Elias, trans., *A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia, the Tarikh-I Rashidi, of Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat*, London, 1895 p. 276.

to use the system of legitimation worked out in the Caliphate and the Mongol Empire, based on broad imperial ideals. If we compare the titles accorded to rulers in the Mongol and Islamic worlds to those of the Habsburgs, we will get an idea of the differences we are discussing. In the late Mongol world we find rulers using titles from different traditions, each of them suggesting universal rule: the Arab titles “Protector of the Caliphate”, “Sultan of Sultans”, the Iranian title “Padshah”, meaning sovereign, and the Mongol title “Khaghan”, meaning supreme Khan. There was no hindrance to using all of these titles for the same person.

The Austro-Hungarian empire took an almost opposite approach. The army and navy ordinances of 1912 contain a list of the titles of the Austro-Hungarian emperor Franz Joseph I: “His Imperial and Kingly Apostolic Majesty, Franz Joseph I. by God’s grace Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary and Bohemia, of Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galizia, Lodomeria and Illyria; King of Jerusalem, etc.; Archduke of Austria, Grand Duke of Tuscany and Krakow, Duke of Lothringen and Salzburg, ...”, and so on for about twenty more regions, followed by lesser titles and regions in equal number.

When we compare imperial systems then, we find the differences in the formation and structure of empires mirrored in the way that their rulers and populations defined the character of their realm and its component groups. The connections made between the variables of language, territory, lifestyle and history, and the relative importance given to each in the Turco-Mongolian Islamic world contrast clearly with those in the Habsburg Empire.

### **Imperial traditions in the Russian and Soviet states**

The Russian lands stretched from Europe to Asia, and were heir to a variety of traditions. The Muscovite state rose to prominence within the Golden Horde, the westernmost section of the Mongol Empire. As the Tsars pushed their territories east, they incorporated the lands of the western Mongol empire, to which they owed many elements of their political structure and ideology. They replaced the

highest levels of government and incorporated the military classes into the Muscovite army. The elites of the newly conquered regions retained their land, their noble status, and their local positions within the Muscovite state.<sup>19</sup>

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725) and his successors began to remake the Russian empire in a more European mold. Peter instituted Christianizing policies: those Mongol, or Tatar, nobles who became Christian retained their status, while the ones who refused forfeited theirs. Catharine II, while adopting religious tolerance, sharply differentiated the civilized agricultural populations from nomadic and hunter-gatherer societies, which were classed as fundamentally foreign peoples, called *inorodtsy*. In Catharine's administration, the nomadic societies, because of their mobility and their military abilities, were considered particularly backwards and dangerous. In the eastward expansion of the nineteenth century, the Russians presented themselves as a civilizing race, ruling from outside. In this empire the Muslim regions, in particular Central Asia and Kazakhstan, held especially low status, and there was no question of their peoples entering the elite class of the empire.<sup>20</sup>

In the twentieth century the lands of the Russian Empire became those of the Soviet Union, and within this new framework the legacy of several past empires – Austro-Hungarian, Islamic, Mongol and Russian – remained alive. The most overt influence was that of the Austro-Hungarian empire, which left its imprint clear on Soviet nationality policy. It was natural for Lenin and Stalin to look to the writings of their fellow socialists in eastern Europe, and the concepts they took from them clearly mirrored the

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<sup>19</sup> Andreas Kappeler, *Russland als Vielvölkerreich*, Munich, 1992, pp. 30-34, 54-5.

<sup>20</sup> Kappeler, pp. 35, 139-40, 159, 166.

experience of Austria-Hungary. Peoples were to be defined as nations on the assumption that language, national history and ethnic loyalties should converge and would shape the political aspirations of legitimate autonomous national units. Above all, it was assumed that separate ethnic or national groups sought at least autonomy, if not independence. Although the Bolsheviks disagreed with Austro-Hungarian Marxist thinkers on several issues concerning nationality, the positions they took were based on a similar understanding of what constituted a nation. While Austro-Hungarian socialists attempted to solve the problem of dispersed populations through the program of non-territorial cultural autonomy, the Bolsheviks insisted on the convergence of territory with other national characteristics.

In the European regions of the USSR, the Soviet system was applied to peoples who had formed their identities within the same mold as those of central and southern Europe. Further east, Soviet nationality policies met populations with totally different ideas of identity, regionalism, and legitimation. Nonetheless, throughout the Soviet period, nationality policy adhered to the criteria and concerns with which it began. National republics were created with the help of ethnographers, and once formed, were encouraged to create for themselves identities that would fit at once their languages, their histories and their borders. Language policy likewise followed the Central European model: in republics or regions where no written language existed one was quickly developed, and much of nationality politics revolved, as in the Austro-Hungarian empire, around questions of education and administration in republican languages.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See for example: Gerhard Simon, trans., K. Forster and O. Forster, *Nationalism and Policy towards the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, Boulder; San Francisco, Oxford, 1991, pp. 31-63; Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or how a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," in G. Eley and R. G. Suny, eds., *Becoming National*, New York; Oxford, 1996, pp. 202-30.

The Soviets also retained practices and habits of thought from the Russian Empire. In Central Asia, the Soviets preserved the same distance and the same belief in their superiority and civilizing mission that the Russians of the nineteenth century had held. Thus the distinction between eastern and western non-Russian regions, begun under the Tsars, remained intact through the Soviet period. Like the Tsars, the Soviets considered nomadism an important factor in the classification of peoples. For a brief period in the 1920s, nomad societies were idealized as a classless society, but in the early thirties they came to be characterized as feudal, thus pre-modern and regressive.

While in the formation of policy, Austro-Hungarian and Russian influences predominated, among the populations of the eastern regions of the Soviet Union elements of the Islamic and Mongolian heritage continued to exist. Here Soviet rule left intact a number of structures and ideas. Indeed, in certain ways, Soviet administration fit into the pattern set by earlier empires. Once again, a foreign ruling class held power, basing its identity and legitimacy on its outside origin, its separate culture and language. Where earlier the administrative and cultural elite had been bi-lingual in Turkic and Persian, now they spoke Russian and Turkic or Tajik. The Soviet government promoted culture in both Russian and republican languages. The settled, Persian population had often expressed its irritation with the Turco-Mongolian ruling class, now Turks and Tajiks resented Russians. Like earlier nomad rulers, Russians felt themselves superior, and made no attempt to hide the fact.

Paradoxically, even while trying to promote new cohesive republican loyalties, the Soviets kept alive some old ideas of identity. The Soviet promotion of separate republican characters and histories served as a reminder of the commonality of experience, as scholars and educators of different republics tried to parcel out the rulers and intellectual luminaries of the past. Struggling to define what had belonged to each, they could not forget that Tajiks and Uzbeks had lived together and shared both rulers and scholars, while Uzbeks and Kazakhs were reminded of historical and linguistic bonds. Kept intact through the Tsarist period, the Mongol differentiation of identity through the distinction between nomad



and non-nomad peoples likewise remained alive. In writing their histories, the peoples of Central Asia had to deal with the question of their nomad origins and their relation to Chinggis Khan, now a brand of shame rather than a source of glory. Thus we find in the Soviet period an echo of the literary contests of earlier times.

Let us look finally at events since the breakup of the USSR, and see whether traces of the patterns created by earlier multi-ethnic empires still exist. I maintain that they do, and that the differing heritages cause divergences in behavior and expectations. In the last years European nationalism has not been the only force at work, and other ideas of identity and its meaning, other ideals of legitimacy still exist. Among peoples formed in different empires, identities which are similarly expressed may still lead to very different behavior.

In the 1980s many observers regarded Soviet Central Asia as the soft underbelly of the Soviet beast. It was clear that the Soviet presence was resented, with reason, since forced cotton specialization had led to widespread ecological damage. Anti-Russian feeling was clearly displayed. Both Soviet and Western scholars noted the persistence of Islamic observance and the reluctance of Central Asians either to intermarry with Russians or to work outside their region. Nonetheless, when the Soviet Union broke up, the Muslim Central Asian republics were among the last regions to declare independence. If our expectations are geared to European models, this behavior seems odd, but I suggest that in the context of the Islamic and Mongol legacies it is expectable. A foreign, non-Muslim ruling class might be resented, but it had precedents, and the expression of feeling against its members need not lead to a movement towards separatism.<sup>22</sup>

Another concern of Western scholars has been the republic boundaries drawn in the 1920s, portrayed by some writers as arbitrary, designed to create new divisions. In particular, the distinctions

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<sup>22</sup> Part of their reluctance to separate themselves may have come from a recognition of strong economic ties to the center, but ideology was an additional factor.

made between different Turkic peoples and the creation of separate written languages for Uzbeks, Turkmen, Kazakhs and Kirghiz, has sometimes been seen as an imposition of artificial boundaries.<sup>23</sup> The denial of national identities in pre-modern Central Asia has led some writers to state that identity was based primarily on tribe, village or confessional community, and that identities comparable in size to the modern nation did not exist.<sup>24</sup> With the development of free speech, the revival of Islam, and the resumption of pan-Turkic ideals, scholars and journalists speculated about the creation of a Muslim Turkic coalition, and the possibility of serious disagreement over borders. So far, little has happened on this front, and here again, one sees the survival of other ideas about the relationships of territory and identity. Turks, sharing closely related languages, origin and consciousness, have almost always lived in separate and often warring states. The current borders between the Turkic states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are not very different from earlier borders between the Kirghiz and Kazakh nomads of the steppe, and between the Uzbek khanates of Bukhara and Khiva. Thus while some activists have suggested a unitary Turkic state, both the past and the present are against them.

The one current Central Asian republic whose territory is a constant source of dispute is the one most solidly founded on linguistic and cultural difference, namely Tajikistan. Following Austro-Hungarian ideas of legitimacy and nation building, the Soviets chose for the Tajiks the one region of Central Asia which had not only been inhabited, but even largely ruled by Iranians: the relatively poor and inaccessible mountainous borderlands where Turkic nomads never settled or ruled directly. Yet the Tajiks, under Islamic, Mongol and Uzbek rule, had been the bearers of high culture, and the historic strongholds of Tajik language and population were at the opposite end of the spectrum of civilization,

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<sup>23</sup> Steven Sabol, "The Creation of Soviet Central Asia: the 1924 National Delimitation", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 14 #2 (1995), pp. 225, 236-7; A. Bennigsen, C. Lemerrier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, New York; Washington, 1967, pp. 130-34.

<sup>24</sup> Adeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, Berkeley; Los Angeles, 1998, pp. 184-90.

namely the two major ancient cities of the region: Samarqand and Bukhara. It was in these cities that the cultural heroes of Persian civilization, assigned to the Tajiks, had written their masterpieces. The exclusion of these cities from their republic continues to be a sore point for the Tajiks.<sup>25</sup>

The identities of Central Asia – Islamic, Turkic, Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Turkmen – are all real, and all powerful, but they do not always lead to the expectations and actions which western nationalism would demand of them. If we are to understand the post-Soviet societies of Central Asia, or the post-colonial societies of other regions, we should look back beyond the history of the last century, dominated by European ideas and by European nationalism, and be prepared to see the legacy of other imperial structures and of the ideas which they imposed on the peoples within them. I have tried to show in the example of Central Asia the variety of ideologies and loyalties still active, and to caution against the imposition of European expectations onto identities formed in other molds.

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<sup>25</sup> See for example Reinhard Eisener, *Auf den Spuren des tadschikischen Nationalismus, Ethnizität und Gesellschaft, Occasional Papers*, 30, for expressions of this sentiment during Perestroika, and for a fuller exposition at the time of the breakup of the USSR, Rakhim Masov, *Istoriia topornogo razdeleniia*, Dushanbe, 1991.