

Clashes of Civilizations and Interests in Central Asia

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REVIEW ESSAY

Clashes of Civilizations and Interests in Central Asia

Hunter, Shireen T. *Central Asia Since Independence*. The Washington Papers/168. Westport, CT and Washington, DC: Praeger with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1996.

Olcott, Martha Brill. *Central Asia's New States: Independence, Foreign Policy, and Regional Security*. Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1996.

Ro'i, Yaacov, ed. *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies*. London: Frank Cass for the Cummings Center for Russian and East European Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1995.

Central Asia, despite its particular geographic and cultural features, presents many questions that concern students of conflict and development anywhere in the world. Indeed, Central Asia can be seen as a test case for many hypotheses rising from recent scholarly writing on war and peace. Is the "clash of civilizations" destined to overshadow ideology and traditional power politics now that the Cold War has abated? Can new states with no prior history of democracy or capitalism become launching pads for political and economic freedom? Will the new states live in peace, since "democracies seldom fight one another?" Or are they sure to conflict, because "new, embryonic democracies are especially bellicose?" Are the new states of Central Asia likely to bandwagon with or balance against the regional hegemony? Or is the answer to all these questions "it all depends?"

Most of the factors on which "it all depends" are elegantly laid out and analyzed in three new books by Shireen Hunter, Martha Brill Olcott, and the essays edited by Yaacov Ro'i. Most readers will find here much of what they wish to know about today's Central Asia. (Environmental issues and local literature and music, however, are given short shrift in these volumes.) Each book bears witness to the ability of scholars to surmount many barriers to study and understand distant cultures different from their own.

Shireen Hunter's *Central Asia Since Independence* is the most wide-ranging of the three books and hence offers the best starting point. It treats broad themes relevant to all five Central Asian states that spun off from the USSR in 1991: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. The monograph by Martha Brill Olcott is more focused, with separate chapters targeted on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The book edited by Yaacov Ro'i is still more specialized, with fifteen chapters by Israeli, Western and Russian scholars.

Hunter begins with chapters on the historic, ethnic and geopolitical setting of Central Asia. Several chapters review the Soviet crucible from which the five new states emerged. The second half of her book is devoted to the external relations of Central Asia:

relations among the five former Soviet republics; their relations with Russia and other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); Central Asia's relations with other neighbors from China to Israel; and finally, relations with the West. Contrary to the "clash of civilizations" hypothesis, Hunter concludes that ethnic and cultural forces have played second or third fiddle to strategic, geographical, economic and other factors of tangible, material power. Her book includes statistical appendices on Central Asia's ethnic composition by country; each country's military and paramilitary forces; and each country's receipts of Official Development Assistance.

Olcott covers much the same ground as Hunter but, as noted, focuses on three of the new states. Olcott's table of contents suggests her views on important issues: A Premature Birth [the new states were ill-prepared for self-rule]; Failed Ethnic Cards [the Turks and Iranians have achieved little influence in the new states despite strong efforts]; False Hopes of Cooperation [general disappointment in the CIS]; Kazakhstan: Living with Hegemon; Kyrgyzstan: Surviving on Foreign Support; Uzbekistan: Central Asia's Instinctive Imperialist. Looking to the future, Olcott regards Russia as a big question mark. But even some states that claim to depend upon Russia, such as Turkmenistan, often listen to their own drummers and may deviate ever further from Moscow's preferences if their oil or gas resources generate more wealth. The region's prospects depend also upon China for now another question mark. There are abundant reasons to expect an unstable future in Central Asia. Since 1991, however, there has been little violence in the region except in Tajikistan where, contrary to the clash of civilizations thesis, faction fought faction despite their shared civilization. There, as in most countries of the region, it is premature to speak even of an "embryonic" democracy.

Unlike the Hunter and Olcott books, some essays in the Ro'i volume omit Kazakhstan from Central Asia a practice favored by Moscow since it emphasizes the role of Slavs in Kazakhstan. Overall, however, the Ro'i book covers more ground than Hunter and Olcott: its essays discuss Islam not just in Central Asia but also in Russia, Azerbaijan, the Northern Caucasus, Crimea and Tatarstan.

Ro'i begins his collection with an essay on the secularization of Islam in the USSR. The very concept explains a great deal about the region. Following on this theme, Nancy Lubin reports on survey research showing what percentage of the population in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan regard themselves as believers in Islam or another faith. These results are tabulated by city and region as well as by age. One finding is that, looking at both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, more than half (52 percent) of persons aged 18-29 regard themselves as non-believers. Despite generations of communist indoctrination, however, older people are more likely to believe than younger.

Muslim Eurasia is a trove of fact and insight on many aspects of Central Asia and adjoining regions. There are essays on "Gains and Losses as a Result of Soviet Language Planning;" "Modernization of Demographic Behavior;" "The Economies of Central Asia: The Socialist Legacy;" and "Unity, Diversity, and Conflict in the Northern Caucasus."

Chapters 14 and 15 by Michael Paul Sacks and by Valery A. Tishkov are especially interesting. Sacks addresses "Ethnic and Gender Differences in [Central Asia's] Work Force;" Tishkov, drawing upon surveys by his colleagues in Russia's Institute of Ethnography, analyzes the opinions of Russians living in Central Asia about politics there, who should protect their interests, and other important issues. Tishkov shows a huge out-migration of those Russians able to find employment elsewhere. Nationalism has its uses but also its liabilities, among them, the risk of a brain drain.

The contributors to the Ro'i volume are diverse and follow no common approach. Still, their shared interest in Islam in the former USSR gives an underlying unity to the book. The result is a solid, rich and stimulating foundation on which other researchers can build. By the time this review is published and read, however, much of the data in these articles will be more than half a decade old, for most of the surveys and documents date from 1992-93.

The reader of all three books will probably see Central Asia as a region whose future has not been set in stone. Each country, each subregion faces serious problems mainly from within. Most have valuable assets, often squandered. Clashes of individuals, clans, nationalisms, financial and trading interests loom as large or larger than any overall clash of civilizations.

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