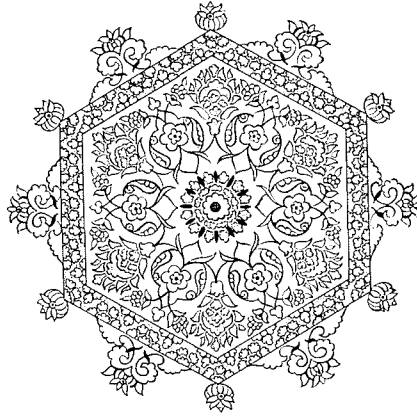




Land of the Great Silk Road

While all eyes have focused on the destinies of Russia and the newly independent nations of Eastern Europe, the five Central Asian states that emerged from the former Soviet Union have received far less scholarly attention. Our contributors here consider the past and future of this important region, land of the Silk Road, seat of empires, a center of Islamic civilization, and sometime-pawn in the world's geopolitical struggles.



CARAVANS AND CONQUESTS

by James Critchlow

Even before the official breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Central Asians began to reclaim their history. In Alma-Ata, capital of Kazakhstan, for example, civic leaders changed the name of one of their major thoroughfares from Gorky Street to Jibek Joly—Kazakh for what English speakers call the “Great Silk Road,” the fabled trade route that ran through Central Asia in ancient times. The renaming was but one of countless symbolic gestures in a process that Uzbek historian Hamid Ziyaev describes as “breaking the bars of the cage.”

The cage was of Russian making. Tsarist armies began to transform Central Asia into a colonial dominion during the 18th and 19th centuries, and efforts to Russify the region grew even more intense under Soviet rule. For roughly seven decades, the peoples of Kazakhstan and its southern neighbors Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, were forced to accept a crude and demeaning version of their past. According to official Soviet histories, Central Asians had long lived in primitive obscurity until brought enlightenment by their Russian “elder brother.”

To Central Asians, mention of the Silk Road evokes memories of a bygone grandeur, when Turkestan, a vast territory half the size of the continental United States, was an affluent center of world trade. For centuries, camel trains laden with silks and spices from China and India stopped in its caravanserais on their way to Asia Minor and Europe, and more than one traveler was struck by the splendors of its art and architecture as well as by the activity of its bazaars. During his late-12th-century journey to Cathay, Marco Polo, that cosmopolitan man of Venice, described Bukhara as a “very great and noble city.”

The attainments of Central Asian civilization were forgotten by many in the West, but not by all. H. G. Wells, in his *Outline of History*, observed that “in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. not merely Persia, but the regions that are now Turkestan and Afghanistan, were far more advanced in civilization than were the French and English of that time.” Wells’s observation came in the middle of his discussion of Manichaeism, a once-important world religion founded by the third-century Persian prophet Mani, who traveled and preached throughout Central Asia. The ancient city of Samarkand (in today’s Uzbekistan) became

the center of Mani's faith, proof, Wells noted, "that Turkestan was no longer a country of dangerous nomads, but a country in which cities were flourishing and men had the education and leisure for theological argument."

Theological argument opened the door to other religions in this era before the birth of Muhammad, giving Zoroastrianism and Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity major followings in the region. A Christian church once stood on the

site of Bukhara's Kalan minaret, since the 12th century a symbol of what has been regarded as one of Islam's holiest cities. Unfortunately, indigenous written records from that early period are almost nonexistent, and historians have had to rely on scant descriptions in Greek, Chinese, Persian, or Arab sources. But a tantalizing fragment of the early native sensibility and culture survives in a mural painted sometime between the fifth and seventh centuries on the wall of a palace excavated near the city of Samarkand. The mural depicts richly dressed nobles in an elegant bridal caravan, a royal reception of foreign ambassadors, and hunting and swimming scenes. Archaeologists at the site say they have reached a stratum showing Samarkand to be at least 2,500 years old, and they believe there are still deeper strata to be found.

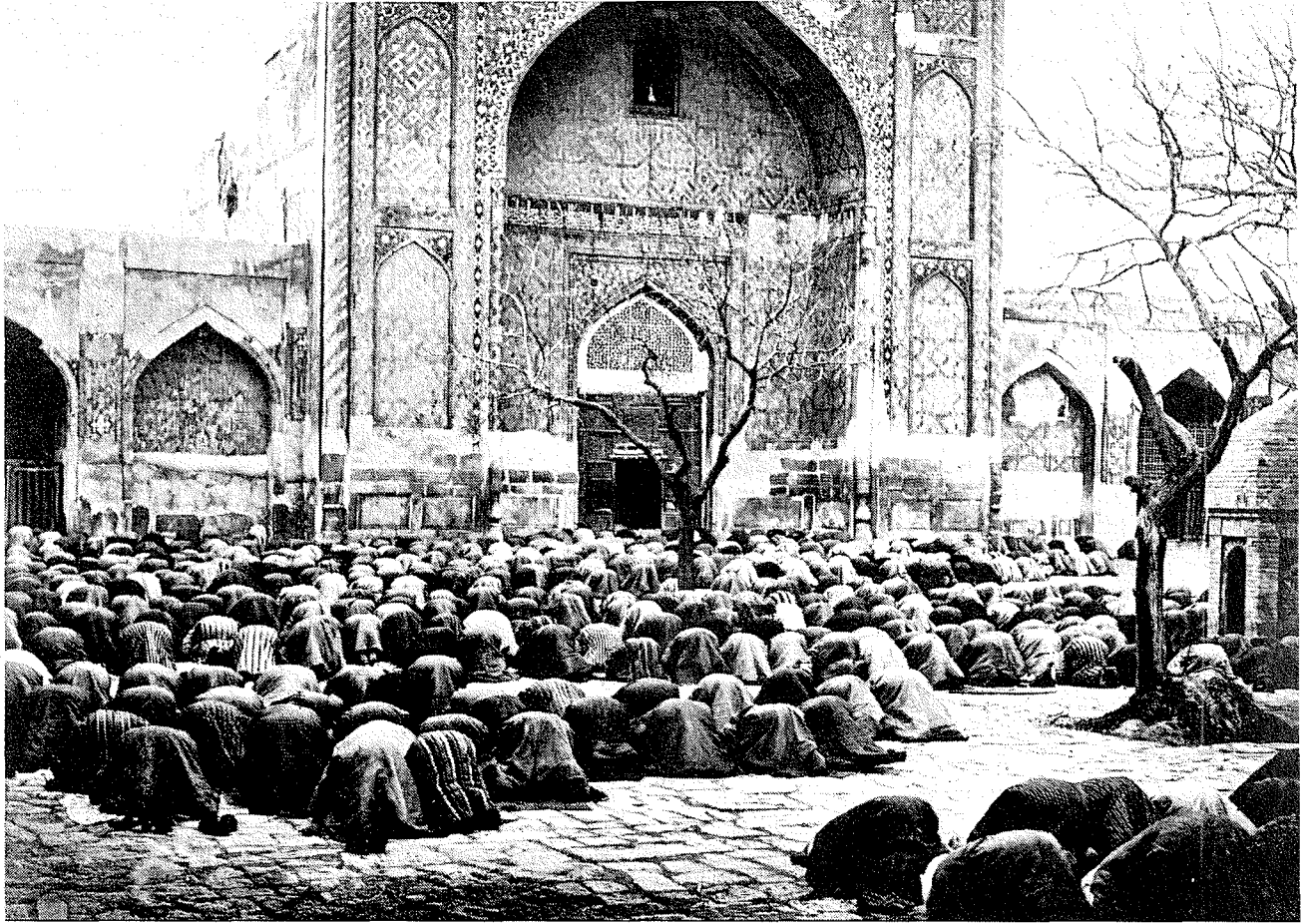
With few natural defense barriers, Central Asia has been a perennial target of invaders. For much of history, parts or all of it have been subject to the hegemony of alien empires: Persian, Greek, Parthian, Chinese, Mongol, Russian. And always (until Russian arms



Depicting two noblemen, this detail from a fifth- or sixth-century mural excavated near the city of Samarkand attests to the high level of culture attained by the early "oasis" civilization.

imposed a new order beginning in the 18th century) stability was threatened by bands of nomad raiders who, weary of their hard life as herdsman and lured by urban booty, swept down off the Eurasian plain from the north or through the mountain passes from the east. As in China, walls were erected against the intruders. The ruins of one are still visible in Bukhara today. Of all the nomadic invaders, the Turks, who came in successive waves, became the most lasting presence. Seduced by the warmth and comfort of the oases, they settled down and created an amalgam of nomadic and sedentary cultures that was to culminate in powerful empires spreading out to make Central Asians, for a time, not the conquered but the conquerors.

Their troubled history has doubtless helped to shape the character of the Central Asians, who are often viewed as wily and secretive masters of pokerfaced reserve. The American diplomat Eugene Schuyler, who made a lengthy visit to the region in 1873 from his post in St. Petersburg, liked the people he met but found them to be untrustworthy, perhaps because they identified him with the Russians who were then



The faithful pray in front of the Tilla Kari madrasah (theological school) in Samarkand's main square, the Registan. Tilla Kari functioned both as a school and as a mosque.

in the process of overrunning them.

The territory included in the five Central Asian republics of today extends southward from the grassy Siberian steppes to the deserts and oases of what ancient writers (and modern ones like Arnold Toynbee) called "Transoxania," the lands north of the Oxus, Central Asia's greatest river (now the Amu Darya). The Arabs referred to the area as "Mawara-an-Nahr" (beyond the river). And the name Turkestan came into use as a geographical concept around the third century, employed by Persians of the Sassanid

period to designate the "land of Turks" on the other side of the Oxus that then formed the border of their empire (and today the boundary between Afghanistan and the republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan). The name was institutionalized by tsarist administrators in the second half of the 19th century, when they set up a Turkestan Government-General to rule their newly acquired colonies in the territory.

Ethnically, however, Turkestan is something of a misnomer, because many of the modern non-Russian inhabitants are Irani-

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ans. These are the Tajiks, who speak a language close to the Farsi of Iran and are descended from the earliest recorded settlers. If today the Tajiks are an Indo-European island in a vast sea of Turks, they can at least take satisfaction in the fact that the Persian civilization of their forebears made a lasting imprint on the Turkic conquerors, especially in the great oasis cities of Samarkand and Bukhara.

Long before the first raids by the Turks and at least a millennium before the birth of Christ, Iranian nomads settled in the fertile river valleys to raise food crops and, in time, cotton. Rice became the staple and remains so today. Water was crucial to life in a region where there is often no rainfall over the entire growing season, and artificial irrigation was introduced in very early times, fed by streams that descended from the high snow-capped mountains to the east and south and then flowed gradually in a northwesterly direction toward the lowlands of the Caspian littoral, on the way forming oases in the desert. Politically, the territory came to be dominated by a land-owning class of agrarian warrior magnates, the *dihqans*, each *dihqan* exercising sway over the surrounding countryside from a fortified redoubt.

At some point during this early period, traders began to traverse the region, among them Chinese merchants, who brought silk in exchange for products of Central Asian artisanry and animal husbandry and for other goods flowing in from Asia Minor and Europe. (The "heavenly" breed of horses raised in the Fergana Valley was much in demand at the Chinese imperial court.) As well as being early traders in the region, the Chinese are credited with teaching water-thirsty Central Asians to dig wells and with providing iron as raw material for an early metalworking (and armaments) industry in the Fergana Valley. From the other direction, the Roman Empire, came knowledge

of glassmaking, and in time Fergana colored glassware was said to surpass that of Western manufacture.

By the sixth century B.C., two power centers had arisen south of the Oxus. One was the empire of the Persian Achaemenid dynasty, founded by Cyrus the Great; the other was the Bactrian kingdom (centered near present-day Balkh in northern Afghanistan), where the stationing of Greek garrisons had left a strong Hellenic influence on the monarchy. Parts of Central Asia were ruled at various times by both powers. When Alexander of Macedonia stopped off with his army on his march to India in the second half of the fourth century B.C., Sogdiana, the ancient name for the area around Samarkand, was a Persian province, as was Margiana (around Merv in today's Turkmenistan). To the northwest, along the lower reaches of the Oxus near the present-day city of Khiva, the state of Khorezm (or Khwarizm) was enjoying a phase of independence.

During his stay in Central Asia, Alexander briefly pushed the outer limit of Greek civilization to the banks of the Jaxartes, Central Asia's second great river (now known as the Syr Darya), which flows north of the Oxus (Amu Darya) and more or less parallel to it. The implosion of Greek power after Alexander's death in 323 B.C. resulted, however, in western Central Asia's coming under the new Parthian Empire, which had filled the vacuum and become wealthy by controlling the east-west caravan routes and using the Oxus to move cargo by ship. The eastern part of the territory was swept by nomads called in Chinese sources the Yüeh-chih, Iranians from western China who invaded Bactria to the south.

Meanwhile, on the northern and eastern periphery, the power of the Turkic nomad tribes, said to be related to the Huns who had struck ter-

TURKS AND TURKISH

As early as the third century B.C., Chinese chroniclers mention Turks as one of several nomadic peoples living in the steppe and forest regions northwest of China. The Chinese called them *Tu-kiu* and *Tu-lu*. By the sixth century A.D. these tribes had formed a Turk empire that encompassed immense territories and persisted some 300 years. Its rulers left inscriptions in a runic alphabet on stone monuments that have been found throughout the region encompassing present-day Mongolia, Tuva, and neighboring parts of Siberia. On his funerary stele Bilge Kaghan, who died in 734, declared:

I did not reign over a people that was rich; I reigned over a people weak and frightened, a people that had no food in their bellies and no cloth on their backs To preserve the reputation achieved by [my] father and uncle, for the sake of the Turk people, I spent nights without sleep and days without rest. When I became kaghan, the people who had dispersed in different countries returned, at the point of death, on foot, naked. To reestablish the nation, I led 22 campaigns. Then, by the grace of Heaven, and because of good fortune and propitious circumstances, I brought back to life the dying people, the naked people I clothed, and I made the few many.

The next great eastern Turkish empire was established in the eighth century by the Uigurs, who were converted first to Buddhism and then to Islam. The ruins of their capital, Karakhoja, cover several square miles not far from Turfan in modern China's Xinjiang-Uigur "autonomous" region and are surrounded by walls that still stand more than 25 feet high. The Uigurs, whose empire

lasted until the 12th century, wrote their Turkish in the classical vertical alphabet that the Mongols still use. While the eastern empires rose and fell, other Turks spread across Asia to the southern Russian steppes, where many were enlisted as mercenaries in the armies of the Byzantine Empire. The Khazars, another Turkic people, created an empire that lasted from the seventh to the 10th century and extended from the North Caucasus to the Volga and beyond into western Central Asia. They converted to Judaism. Arthur Koestler advanced the controversial theory in his *Thirteenth Tribe* that when their empire collapsed, its scattered people became the Ashkenazi Jews.

The Turkish languages belong to the same Altaic family as Mongolian and Manchu. (Some linguists also include Korean and Japanese in this family.) In form but not vocabulary, Turkish is related to Hungarian and Finnish. There are now at least 20 written Turkish languages ranging from Gagauz, used by Christian Turks in Moldova, to Yakut, spoken in the republic of that name in far northeastern Siberia. Modern Turkish languages are written in the Latin, Cyrillic, and Arabic alphabets. The Turkish of modern Turkey has the largest number of speakers (over 50 million), followed by Azeri (perhaps 20 million), Uzbek (17 million), Kazakh (9.5 million), modern Uigur (7.5 million), and Tatar (6.5 million). A speaker of basic Turkish can make himself understood all the way from the Balkans to North China. Ask an Azeri or a Kazakh or an Uzbek for a glass of *su*, and each will give you water.

—Paul B. Henze

ror in Roman hearts, was growing. By the sixth century A.D. the Turks had seized control of the Eurasian plain, and Turkic cavalry were engaged in struggles against three sedentary empires, Byzantine, Persian, and Chinese. Central Asian towns began to fall to the rule of Turkic dynasties.

Although in the modern sense of the word not quite the "barbarians" that the Chinese called them, the Turks were tough

and warlike. At the same time, they shaped a society with elaborate customs and ways that have survived in the nostalgia of Turkic peoples today. Among those ways were modes of clannic and tribal political and social organization that in some forms persist to the present.

In the nomadic days of the steppe, before the Turkic forebears of today's Central Asian nationalities settled down, a tribal

chieftain had to retain popularity among his followers in order to keep them from simply wandering off. This gave rise to a certain democratic tradition according to which the chieftain consulted on important decisions with the *aksakals*, tribal elders. At the same time, ancestry played an even more decisive role than popularity in the selection of the chieftain, and elaborate oral genealogies established the all-important blood lines. (After the death of Chingis [or Genghis] Khan in the early 13th century, the ability to trace one's descent from the Mongol conqueror was especially prized, often mandatory for a ruler.)

As a result of migration and military expeditions, kindred tribal units became widely dispersed, with much intermingling and interaction. The names Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen are derived from tribal confederations, the first three being members of a larger Kipchak conglomerate, sometimes called the "northwest" Turkic group, whose name relates to the *Dasht-i-kipchak*, the steppe to the north of Transoxania. The Turkmen, by contrast, are members of the Oguz or southwestern group, which in terms of their origins puts them closer to the Turks of modern Turkey. The former Soviet republics bearing these names actually have mixed populations, with members of each republic's eponymous nationality scattered in other Central Asian republics.

During the Soviet period allegiance to tribal affiliation was officially proscribed, and could bring severe penal sanctions; only "nationality" was considered the legitimate identity. In consequence, people kept quiet about their tribal or

clannic ties, and research on the subject was taboo. Today, the question of the Central Asians' true identity is shrouded in mystery. When Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov, complains about interference of clannic networks in the work of the state, is he referring to the old tribal identities or merely to family ties and local autarky? How much truth is there in reports that in Kazakhstan there are functioning networks based on the three subdivisions of the Kazakh tribes, the Greater, Lesser and Middle Hordes? Given the years of sedentary living and disruption of the old tribal patterns, are such distinctions merely a kind of romantic nostalgia without basis in social reality? These questions are ripe for study by researchers, now that they have the freedom to investigate.

Testimony about the lifeways of the early Turks survives in the chronicle of a Chinese Buddhist man of learning, Yuan-Chwang, who, in the seventh century, ventured through Central Asia on his way to India. Along the route to Samarkand, he and his party came across a band of 2,000 mounted Turkish robbers di-



In this turn-of-the century photograph, Sarts engage in a fierce game called buzkashi. The game connects the urbanized Sarts with their nomadic Turkic forebears, the great horsemen of the steppes.

viding up booty from a caravan; the Chinese travelers seem to have been saved when the Turks began to fight among themselves over the spoils. But on reaching the city where the "Khan of the Turks" was located, the Chinese party witnessed a scene of a different kind: an entourage of 200 officers dressed in brocade and with braided



The Middle East and Asia seem to blend in this photograph of painted boys performing a dance to the accompaniment of bangles and tambourines.

hair, surrounded by support troops wearing furs and "fine spun hair garments" and mounted on horses and camels. The Khan, resplendent in a robe of green satin and a silken turban, emerged from his tent, "a large pavilion adorned with golden flower ornaments which blind the eye with their glitter." Although the Turks were then still Zoroastrian fire-worshippers, the Khan with courteous ceremony conducted the learned Buddhist visitor inside, where officers "clad in shining garments of embroidered silk" were seated in rows on mats. To musical accompaniment, a feast of mutton and veal was served with wine. For the Buddhist holy man, there were special dishes of rice cakes, cream, and various

sweets. At the Khan's request, Yuan-Chwang explained the principles of his religion and was given an attentive hearing.

The seventh century, the time of Yuan-Chwang's odyssey, was also one of Chinese imperial expansion—at one point extending all the way across Central Asia to the Caspian Sea and frequently bringing the Chinese into military conflicts with the Turks. Around the middle of the same century, however, such warring began to assume far less importance to the settled urban populations of Central Asia. A new power appeared on the scene: the Arabs.

Propelled by a great burst of expansionist energy combined with religious fervor, Arab armies in the decades after Muhammad's death in 632 created an empire that extended from North Africa and Spain in the west to Asia Minor and Persia in the east. Transoxania was on the outer fringes of this vast region, and its conquest by the Arabs was neither rapid nor easy. They occupied the western oasis of Merv in 651, but farther to the east, Bukhara, under a female ruler, and Sogd (Samarkand) held out for decades. Even after initial victories, the Arabs had to reconquer the eastern portion of the territory, which at one point was given up for lost in the face of uprisings and the recalcitrance of native surrogates weakly overseen by their emirs.

Spread thin by the vastness of their empire, the Arabs lacked cadres of their own to administer it. Nor did all people of Transoxania accept the Arabs' Islamic religion. Marco Polo, passing through Samarkand more than five centuries after its subjugation by Arab power, found a sizeable Christian minority still locked in conflict with the Muslim majority. Arabic served as the official language for some three centu-

ries, but in time gave way to Persian for all but religious purposes. This development reflected the declining political power of the caliphate in Baghdad and the rise, in the late ninth century, of the Persian Samanid dynasty, whose second ruler, Ismail, made Bukhara his capital. (His mausoleum there remains in splendid condition, having been preserved beneath sand for centuries.)

The transcendent achievement of Islamization was to make Central Asia an integral and active part of a farflung international civilization. Abu Raihan Muhammad al-Biruni, born in the Khorezm district in 973, has been called by one authority "probably the most comprehensive scholar Islam ever produced." He is known for his writings on science, mathematics, and history, as well as for a description of the India of his day that is still a classic. Had he been born a few hundred years earlier, this man would almost certainly have lived and died in oblivion. Similarly, the talents of his contemporary, al-Khorezmi, who is credited with having invented algebra, or the somewhat later Bukharan Avicenna (ibn-Sina), a philosopher and scientific investigator whose medical treatise in translation was used in Western Europe for centuries, might have been relegated to obscurity.

Central Asians were also to make early contributions to the development of the Islamic religion, founding movements which continue to have significant followings throughout the Muslim world. Among such figures were the 12th-century poet and Sufi philosopher Ahmad Yasavi and the 14th-century Bukharan Bahauddin Naqshband, originator and first sheikh of what is still one of the largest Sufi orders.

If by the year 1000 Persian secular culture was in the ascendancy over that of the Arabs, political power passed definitively from Iranian to Turkic hands. Samanid rule, which at its height embraced almost

all of Transoxania and Persia, was undermined by the intrigues of Turk military commanders in its service. Its end was hastened by a singular irony: Having secured the voluntary conversion to Islam of the Turkic tribes on their borders, the Iranian Samanids, when attacked by those same tribes, could no longer call for *jihād*, holy war. Transoxania was taken over by a succession of Turkic or Turco-Mongol rulers from outside, making "Turkestan" a political reality. In time, however, a new indigenous power arose, the empire of the Khorezm Shahs, a Muslim dynasty originally of Turkic origin centered in the city of that name. For a few decades in the 12th and 13th centuries, its dominion spread through Transoxania and Persia.

But a new invader from the east was not long in coming—the Mongol Chingis Khan. In alliance with Turkic warriors, Chingis began the year 1220 by capturing



A Jewish woman of Samarkand.

and sacking Bukhara and finished it by occupying Samarkand and the other important Transoxanian cities.

Chingis survives in the folk memory of Russians and other Europeans as the very embodiment of ruthless evil, an image that has been encouraged with varying degrees of zeal in later centuries. During the Soviet period, the portrayal of Chingis as a force of darkness became a matter of ideological orthodoxy, with official historians quoting Karl Marx on Mongol misdeeds in refutation of such "bourgeois apologists" as the Yale historian George Vernadsky, himself of Russian origin.

But while Chingis's atrocities appear to have been excessive even by the standards of his day, scholars have certainly been right to point to mitigating circumstances. His reported harshness in Central Asia, compared with relative leniency in other areas, may have been connected with an incident in which one of his trading caravans was murderously attacked on the territory of the reigning Khorezm Shah. And for all his barbarity, Chingis's conquests had the civilizing effect of facilitating the spread of Muslim culture by his Islamized descendants. It is noteworthy, finally, that accounts by foreigners who visited Turkestan not long after Chingis supposedly leveled its cities contained no reports of ruins. However ruthless he was in fact, the popular view of Chingis as bogeyman is essentially Eurocentric. In Turkic lands from Anatolia to Xinjiang, parents proudly name their sons Chingis (or even Attila).

After Chingis's death in 1227, his empire was split among his successors. It took more than a century for a new unifying force to emerge in the person of a Central Asian named Timur from the city of Kish (the old name for Shahrisabz in present-day Uzbekistan). Seizing control of Turkestan, where he made his capital at Samarkand, Timur administered crushing blows to the

nomads and led invading armies into Persia, southern Russia, India, and Asia Minor, defeating and capturing the Ottoman sultan at Ankara in 1402, three years before his death at age 69. Timur's azure-domed mausoleum in Samarkand, the Gur-i Amir, remains one of the great architectural monuments of the world.

The legend of Timur's cruelties captured the imagination of the West, where he became known as Tamerlane. Not quite 200 years after his death Christopher Marlowe's play *Tamburlaine* was being performed for London audiences by the Lord Admiral's company, and the powerful figure of its protagonist "threatening the world with high astounding terms" made it more successful in its own time than even the plays of Marlowe's contemporary, William Shakespeare. Slightly more than two centuries later, the American schoolboy Edgar Allan Poe wrote his poem *Tamerlane* in which Timur appears as a dying and repentant old man musing in Samarkand, "queen of Earth," on a youth spent "striding o'er empires haughtily, a diadem'd outlaw."

Central Asians of today see the Muslim Timur's legacy in a more positive light, especially his role in creating the lasting glory of Samarkand, a city that during his reign reached new commercial prosperity as a trading center through which flowed silks and pearls from China, sugar and spices from India, leather and cloth from Russia and Tatarstan, and rugs woven by the Turkmen tribes in the western desert (pronounced by Marco Polo a century earlier to be "the finest and handsomest carpets in the world"). A Spanish envoy who visited Samarkand shortly before Timur's death described the city's squares as "swarming night and day with people who trade without a moment's pause." From the lands he conquered Timur sent back to Samarkand

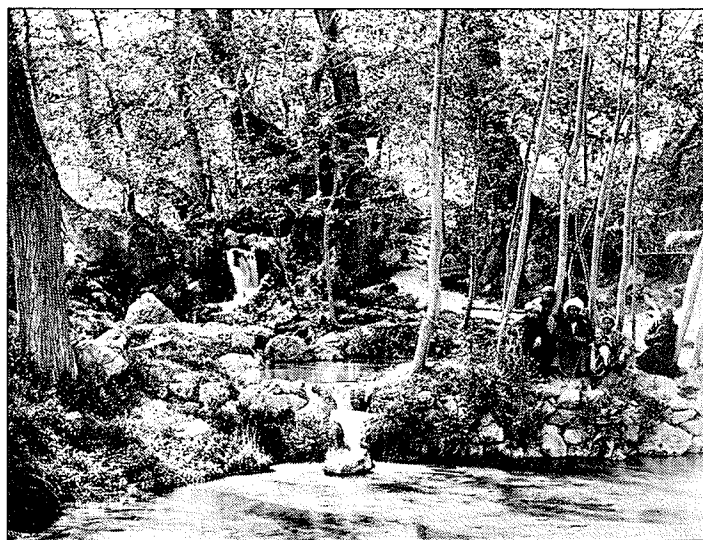
architects, astronomers, theologians, historians, craftsmen, and assorted other scientists and artists estimated by the same Spanish envoy to number "at the very least a hundred thousand." Special guards were installed to keep these unwilling courtiers from escaping the city.

Timur's domain, like Chingis's, did not long survive his death. His demise set in motion an era of fragmented power and internecine feuding lasting until the Pax Russica of the 19th century. The urbanized descendants of this warrior made lasting cultural contributions, but they were handicapped by political weakness. Although Timur's grandson, Ulugh Beg, ruler of Samarkand, has gone down in history for his contributions to astronomy (the observatory which he built there survives), he was a target of political intrigue and fell victim of an assassin. Even the most famous of the Timurids, Zahiruddin Babur, who is revered today by Turks for his *Babur-nameh*, one of the first important literary works in an Eastern Turkic language, was forced—as Arnold Toynbee has pointed out—to pursue his ambitions elsewhere because of his inability to establish a reliable power base at home in Turkestan. To establish such a base, Babur marched his troops through Afghanistan to India, there founding the Mughal Empire.

The vacuum created by the political weakness of the Timurids opened the way to a new incursion of Turkic nomads from the steppes, this time Uzbek tribes led by a chief named Muhammad Shaibani Khan. These Uzbeks were able to seize

power from the remaining Timurids, completing their conquest of Turkestan in the first decade of the 16th century. But they lacked the strength to restore lasting unitary rule. (The coincidence of this tribal name and that of modern-day Uzbekistan should not lead to the assumption that the Shaibanids were the exclusive progenitors of today's Uzbeks, whose ancestry is complex and eclectic. "Uzbek" is at best an ethnic approximation, applied indiscriminately to descendants of the nomadic Uzbek tribes and to the urban Turkic population, known before the 1917 revolution as "Sarts," who had a traditional language and culture that differed greatly from those of the nomads.)

On the heels of the Shaibanid invasion, Central Asia's fragmentation into small, shifting territories ruled by feuding local khans or other aristocrats was exacerbated by two new factors, both of external origin: economic decay and religious isolation. Vasco da Gama's discovery at the end of the 15th century of a seaway from Europe to India and China further undercut the ancient land routes, where caravans were al-



The importance of oases in arid Turkestan is no mystery. Its great cities, including Samarkand and Bukhara, rose around them.

ready hampered by a proliferation of customs barriers erected by greedy petty rulers and by a breakdown of order that left them at the mercy of bandit Turkmen nomads in the Kara Kum Desert. The collapse of trade plunged the cities along the well-worn routes into decline.

Around the same time, Persia's Safavid dynasty embraced the Shi'a branch of Islam as its state religion. Growing intolerance between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims created a zone of hostility extending northward like a wedge from the Persian plateau through Azerbaijan into the Caucasus, severing the Central Asians' traditional ties with Persia and cutting off access to fellow Sunnis in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and other western Muslim countries. Turkestan, which for centuries had been an active contributor to the Islamic renaissance, now entered a long night of history.

As Central Asian power and prosperity declined, a new force was rising in the north. By the mid-16th century, Muscovite Russia had shaken off the effects of three centuries of vassalage to the Tatar-Mongol Golden Horde. In 1552, the troops of Ivan the Terrible captured the Tatar stronghold of Kazan on the Volga, opening the way for a movement of expansion eastward and southward that was to last 400 years. By the end of the 18th century, Russian traders and settlers were moving in strength into the steppelands north of the Central Asian oases, encroaching on the already dwindling pasture lands of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomads. To protect these subjects of the tsar, a line of Russian forts began to stretch across the territory, manned by Cossacks.*

*The Slavic Cossacks, whose Christian society originated near the Turkic marches of southern Russia, and the Turkic Kazakhs, have names that have been attributed to the same Turkic verb, meaning "to roam." The similarity of names has not engendered amity. Even today, the government of Kazakhstan expresses concern over the alleged anti-Kazakh activities of Cossack agitators in the republic.

In time, the Turkic nomads came to accept the Russian presence, seeing it as the lesser of two evils. (The other was pressure from the east, from Buddhist nomads of Mongol origin.) This accommodation was helped by the relative recency and superficiality of the nomads' conversion to Islam, which made them more easygoing about religion than their sedentary neighbors to the south. A truce of sorts between Russians and nomads was concluded. Tribal khans accepted fealty to the tsar, although this did not always keep them from entering into simultaneous treaties of allegiance to Chinese or Central Asian rulers. Nor did it prevent the khans' subjects from attacking Russian settlers who moved onto their grazing lands. Still, tribesmen began to be educated in Russian schools and to serve in the tsarist army, some rising high in officers' ranks.

Following this relatively easy penetration of the nomadic steppes, the Russians paused for a time before moving further south into the more densely populated region of Transoxania. The chief obstacles to their advancement were three Central Asian khanates, known by their capital cities, which had become the political centers of the Transoxanian region: Kokand in the Fergana Valley to the east, Bukhara in the center, and Khiva (near the ancient site of Khorezm) in the west.

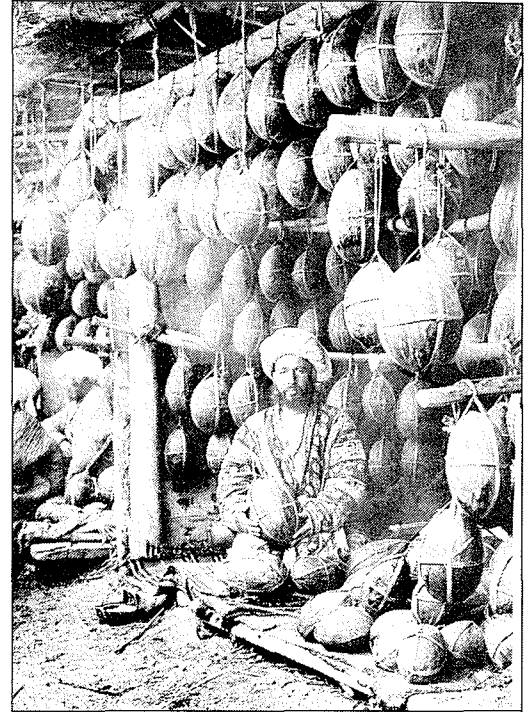
Of these, the largest and most formidable was Bukhara, whose ruling khans had come, under Persian cultural influence, to assume the additional title of "emir." ("Khan," a title of Mongol origin, was supposed to denote the bearer's descent from Chingis Khan, thus reinforcing his claim to legitimacy.) Contemporary accounts portray the Bukharan emirate as a land of poverty and persecution and slavery, of oppressive taxes, of public tortures and drawn-out executions, a place where curious non-Muslim visitors could be (and sometimes

were) clapped into the emir's *siyah chah*, his black hole, and eventually put to death. (Such was the unhappy fate, around 1842, of two British adventurers, Colonel Charles Stoddart and Captain Arthur Conolly.) At the same time, the city maintained its reputation as "holy Bukhara" (*Bukhara-i-sharif*), one of the great centers of learning in the Islamic world.

By the 19th century, this reputation was enhanced by Bukhara's very remoteness and isolation. Many Muslims valued the city because it had in their eyes remained uncorrupted by the aura of infidel Western colonialism affecting such other Islamic centers as Cairo and even Ottoman Constantinople. One paradoxical result was that Bukhara's religious schools attracted Tatar students from the Volga region, young men who brought with them ideas from Russia and the European Enlightenment. Amid the stagnation of the emirate, the Tatar presence exercised a certain modernizing and liberalizing influence.

By the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the rulers of these three khanates had become sufficiently alarmed to begin making overtures to Ottoman sultans in the hope of obtaining their support against Russia. In return, they offered to become their subjects. One such appeal was received during the reign (1808–39) of Sultan Mahmud II. After deliberation with his advisers, who pointed to the remoteness of the khanates and the danger of becoming embroiled again with Russia (whose armies were threatening the Turks), Mahmud declined, defensively citing Islamic law as the authority for his refusal to come to the aid of his fellow Muslim potentates.

Now that they are free to do so, Central Asian historians have adduced evidence to show that when the Russian attack on the land south of the steppes finally came, resistance to it was far stronger than Soviet historiography ever revealed. It is true that ef-



A melon merchant in the ancient market of Bukhara. Melon- and rice-growing date from the earliest days of Central Asian agriculture.

forts by the khanates were disorganized and undercut by internecine feuding among the rulers, but the Russians were hardly welcomed as liberators. In 1853, defenders of the Ak Masjid fortress in the Kokand khanate refused demands to surrender during 22 days of siege marked by fierce fighting. In 1865, the people of Tashkent withstood siege for 42 days without food and water; when Russian troops finally breached the city wall—led by a cheering Orthodox priest—the defenders held out for another two days and nights of bitter hand-to-hand combat. It was not until 1885 that the last organized resistance was overcome with the defeat of the Turkmen tribes in the western desert.

The imperial government let the three khans keep their thrones, even while claiming their lands as tsarist protectorates. Bukhara and Khiva retained this status until

after the 1917 revolution. The khanate of Kokand, on the other hand, was liquidated soon after Russian occupation. Its land, like the rest of the conquered territory not part of the protectorates, was placed under the direct administration of the Turkestan Government-General. (By then, certain areas of what is today Kazakhstan already belonged to the adjacent Government-General of the Steppe, whose headquarters were located in the Siberian city of Orenburg.)

In the new colony the Russians practiced a policy of considerable *laissez-faire*, allowing the Muslim society to be largely self-governing. The French historians Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejey, whose work was seminal in reminding the West of the Muslim character of regions that many people too carelessly called "Russia," summed up Moscow's strategy in these words:

The Russians had no precise long-term policy towards the native population except in the sense that they aimed at keeping them apart, at isolating the country from all outside influence, and at maintaining it in a state of medieval stagnation, thus removing any possibility of conscious and organized national resistance.

The impact of the Russian presence was in fact enormous. Military victory opened the door to Russian settlers who gravitated toward Tashkent (in modern-day Uzbekistan), administrative headquarters of the Turkestan Government-General. New opportunities attracted Russian capital, especially to develop cotton growing. Economic change created a new class of prosperous native businessmen, while at the bottom of society fluctuations in crops and prices caused many peasants to lose their land. This was also a time of revolutionary technological change, as railroads and the telegraph brought the old cities into con-

tact not only with Russia and Europe but also with those parts of the Muslim world from which they had long been cut off.

Under Russian rule, Central Asia remained fairly stable. There were uprisings, some of them massive and bloody, but no organized radical movements. Yet the region acquired a new Islamic vigor. Turkestan intellectuals, exposed to modern currents despite Russian efforts to keep them isolated, came under the spell of Islamic reformers in other Muslim regions of the Empire, and of Young Turks and Young Iranians abroad. Muslims everywhere, humiliated by the ascendancy of European power in their lands, sought to reform their societies and make them able to compete in the modern world, to regain the lost glory that shone from the Islamic renaissance in the days when the West had been the backward neighbor.

In Russian-dominated Turkestan, which centuries earlier had been an active contributor to that renaissance, foreign and domestic newspapers in Turkic languages and in Persian now circulated freely, becoming vehicles of a new ethnic awareness. *Anjumans*, discussion groups, debated the burning issues of the day in homes and tea-houses. As elsewhere, there was a drive to introduce secular subjects into the curricula of Muslim schools, its proponents called *jadids*, from the Arab expression *usul jadid*, "new method."

This rebirth was cut short after 1917, and in the decades that followed Moscow tightened its yoke still further. Along with other repressions, the Soviet regime attempted—in the name of ideology—to eradicate or distort the record of past greatness. Yet despite persecutions and privations, the Central Asians clung privately to the memory of their former place at the pinnacle of world civilization.