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The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations, and:
Nationenwerdung in Mittelasien (review)

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Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2000. xvii + 222 pp. ISBN 0-8147-7554-3. \$19.95 (paper).

Paul Georg Geiss, *Nationenwerdung in Mittelasien*. European University Studies, series XXXI (Political Science), vol. 269. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995. 213 pp. ISBN 3-631-47911-5. \$37.95 (cloth).

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The idea that nations are “invented” or “constructed” has been taken up with enthusiasm in the last ten years by historians of the Soviet Union, who have shown that the Soviet state was a “maker of nations” among non-Russians in the Soviet periphery.¹ Of all the non-Russian regions of the Soviet Union, Central Asia may be one of the best examples of state-led nation formation. Completely lacking national institutions or consciousness prior to its colonization by the Russians, the region was divided into “national republics” in 1924 under Soviet rule. Nearly 70 years later, the Central Asian republics emerged from the rubble of the Soviet Union as independent states under nationalist regimes. How these republics were transformed into full-fledged nation-states is one of the most important questions in the modern history of Central Asia.

Two recent works by Olivier Roy and Paul Georg Geiss attempt to explain this transformation, analyzing in some detail the process of nation formation in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia. Both authors see the Soviet state as the primary author of Central Asian nationhood, and both seek to explain how national ideas and practices became firmly rooted in the region over nearly seven decades of Soviet rule. These two books are not historical monographs based on archival research. Rather, they are broad, synthetic works that seek to understand both contemporary Central Asian nationhood and its origins in the Soviet past.²

¹ Ronald Grigor Suny was the first to make this argument about the Soviet Union in *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). This idea has been further explored by other scholars; see, for example, Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53 (Summer 1994), 414–52; and Francine Hirsch, “The Soviet Union as a Work-in-Progress: Ethnographers and the Category *Nationality* in the 1926, 1937, and 1939 Censuses,” *Slavic Review* 56 (Summer 1997), 251–78.

² Geiss’s book is based almost entirely on secondary sources. In Roy’s book, the chapters on Soviet history are based on secondary sources (mainly the work of the French scholars Alexandre

I began reading *The New Central Asia* and *Nationenwerdung in Mittelasien* with high hopes that these two works would fill an important gap in the literature on modern Central Asia. Except for a handful of specialized historical monographs, most works on Central Asia published in the last ten years focus on the contemporary states and their “transition” from communism to capitalism. There is no single work that provides an overview of the region’s modern history for the non-specialist and is suitable for use in survey courses on Central Asia.

These two books come close to filling this need. Each provides an excellent introduction to the complexities of identity, ethnicity, and statehood in Central Asia as well as to the peculiarities of nation-making in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. Olivier Roy, an anthropologist whose previous work has focused on Afghanistan, also offers a useful comparative perspective, highlighting the parallels between the Soviet republics’ historical development and the experiences of neighboring Islamic states. Yet the broad scope that makes these works so useful is also a source of weakness in their treatment of Soviet history. Roy and Geiss have written synthetic works based on older secondary sources at a time when new research is rapidly overthrowing the earlier scholarly consensus. In the last ten years, interest has surged in the history of the non-Russian nationalities of the Soviet Union. A new generation of scholars has entered the field, using formerly closed archives to research the workings of the Soviet multinational state. The first dissertations and monographs on Soviet nationality policy and Soviet Central Asia based on archival sources began to appear in the mid-1990s. This new body of research has called into question some of the conclusions of the older works on which Roy and Geiss base their historical analysis. In particular, recent studies have begun to change our understanding of the evolution of identities in the late imperial and early Soviet periods, the process of creating national republics in Central Asia, and the nature of center-periphery relations in the Soviet Union.³

Bennigsen and Hélène Carrère d’Encausse and their students), while the chapters on contemporary Central Asia are based on Roy’s own field work.

³ Examples of the new, archive-based work on Soviet nationality policy include Terry Martin, “An Affirmative Action Empire: Ethnicity and the Soviet State, 1923–38” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1996); Francine Hirsch, “Empire of Nations: Colonial Technologies and the Making of the Soviet Union, 1917–1939” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1998); Peter A. Blitsstein, “Stalin’s Nations: Soviet Nationality Policy between Planning and Primordialism, 1936–1953” (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1999); and Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–23* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999). On Central Asia, recent studies include Shoshana Keller, “The Struggle Against Islam in Uzbekistan, 1921–1941: Policy, Bureaucracy, and Reality” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1995); Paula A. Michaels, “Shamans and Surgeons: The Politics of Health Care in Soviet Kazakhstan, 1928–41” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997); Douglas Northrop, “Uzbek Women and the Veil: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1999); Adrienne Lynn

In *The New Central Asia*, Roy argues that the concept of nationality was unknown in Central Asia before the coming of Soviet rule. Ethnic groups were not identified with a particular territory but lived interspersed and intermixed; states based their legitimacy on dynastic and religious factors rather than on ethnic solidarity. Subethnic forms of solidarity were far more important than the ethnic identities that became the basis for Soviet republics. It was the Soviet regime, a “formidable mechanism for the manufacture of nations in Central Asia” (viii) that was responsible for creating the nations of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Roy argues that these nations were completely artificial, with little or no basis in popular loyalties and desires. Soviet decrees “determined not only their frontiers, but also their names, their reinvented pasts, the definition of the ethnic groups that they were reckoned to embody, and even their language” (vii). Why did the Soviets go to all the trouble of creating nations where none had existed before? Repeating a well-worn idea from the Western literature, Roy maintains that this Soviet policy was strategic and manipulative, designed to divide and rule the region by preventing its inhabitants from uniting in a single pan-Turkist or pan-Islamic entity. The Soviets were the direct heirs of the nationality policy of tsarist Russia, which had also encouraged separate ethnic identities and vernacular languages as a way of countering pan-Islam and pan-Turkism.

Despite the “artificiality” of Central Asian nations, they became deeply rooted in the Soviet period – so much so that by 1991, the nation-state had become the only conceivable form of state structure in the region. How were the Central Asian nations transformed, Pinocchio-like, from artificial nations into real ones? Citing Benedict Anderson’s work on Latin American colonial elites, Roy argues that Soviet institutions in Central Asia gave rise to genuine national consciousness by creating an administrative, cultural, and political habitus of nationhood. As he puts it, “this form ended up creating the life of its object” (ix). The very existence of the new republics contributed to the territorialization and ethnicization of the Central Asian peoples. Over time, Central Asian elites and populations appropriated the institutions and practices of nationhood introduced by the Soviets and inflected them with their own cultural and social norms. The most striking example of this, in Roy’s account, is the continuing domination of Central Asian political and social life by kinship- and region-based solidarity

Edgar, “The Creation of Soviet Turkmenistan, 1924–1938” (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1999); Reinhard Eisener, *Konterrevolution auf dem Lande: Zur inneren Sicherheitslage in Mittelasien 1929–30 aus Sicht der OGPU* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000); Marianne Kamp, “Unveiling Uzbek Women: Liberation, Representation, and Discourse, 1906–1929” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1998); and the 1993 dissertation of Adeeb Khalid, which has since been published as a monograph: Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

groups. Under Soviet rule, solidarity groups became territorialized and were reorganized to correspond to Soviet administrative divisions, while collective farms were structured along the lines of tribal and regional solidarity groups.

Roy identifies several peculiar features of Soviet nation-making in Central Asia. Although the Soviet Union was not the only colonial power to create artificial nations – Western European countries similarly drew administrative borders in the colonized regions of the Arab world and Africa – the Soviets were far more ambitious than their counterparts, creating “not only countries, but also languages and national histories, not to mention folklores and literatures” (61). In Roy’s view, this “concern for totalization” (61) is uniquely Soviet. Another peculiar feature of Central Asian nationhood, Roy argues, is the absence of a nationalist ideology. Nations became rooted in Central Asia through the habitus or practice shaped by national institutions, rather than through the working of a nationalist belief system. The efforts of Central Asian intellectuals to elaborate national cultures were feeble and derivative. Because of the impoverishment of national culture and ideology, Roy argues, there is little overt nationalist symbolism in the new Central Asian nations even today.

Geiss’s arguments about the origins of Central Asian nationhood are generally similar to Roy’s. Contending that these nations are artificial and even ahistorical, he devotes a considerable amount of space to demonstrating that none of the Central Asian nationalities is an ethnically homogeneous group. (In his account, only the Kazakhs deserve to be considered a “real” nation, while the Turkmen are a borderline case and the Tajiks an entirely artificial construction.) Like Roy, Geiss argues that the republics created by the Soviets provided a framework in which national consciousness could emerge. The policy of *korenizatsiia* created national elites who ultimately came to be seen as representatives of the nation, despite their subservience to Moscow. Geiss stresses the importance of state-led social transformation in the building of Central Asian nations. Through education, urbanization, and the growth of the means of mass communication, the citizens of each republic became increasingly linked to their compatriots. Popular consciousness was shaped by daily interactions with republican institutions and native-language schools. Over time, the national structures created by outsiders were appropriated and transformed by the indigenous population. In Geiss’s account, as in Roy’s, traditional tribal and neighborhood social structures were strengthened in the Soviet era and continue to play an important role in the independent Central Asian nation-states.

The works of Geiss and Roy are strikingly similar in scope, focus, and argument. Both stress the alien nature of the national idea in Central Asia and its poor fit with the ethnic complexity of the region. Both stress the crucial Soviet role in the formation of nations in Central Asia and the ways in which national

institutions served to shape national consciousness over time. Both maintain that the institutions created by the Soviets were reappropriated and modified by the indigenous population. Finally, both emphasize the continuing importance of subnational or “tribal” structures in contemporary Central Asian nation-states. Yet there are also important differences between the two authors. While Roy sees a single-minded determination to control the Muslims behind every Soviet move, Geiss emphasizes to a greater extent the improvised nature of Bolshevik tactics, the complexity of Soviet motives, and the interplay between Moscow and local forces. Like Roy, Geiss sees the creation of nations as a strategic response to the prospect of Muslim unity – not the threat of pan-Turkism, which Geiss dismisses, but the challenge posed by the Muslim national communism of Sultan Galiev. Yet Geiss is more willing to acknowledge the divisions within Turkestan – between nomadic and sedentary populations and between different linguistic and ethnic groups – that predated the Soviet arrival on the scene. At the same time, Geiss recognizes that Soviet nationality policy was also driven by non-strategic considerations, such as a desire to promote modernization and development among the non-Russian peoples.

Roy and Geiss are undoubtedly correct to argue that the Soviet state was instrumental in creating nations in Central Asia, and their descriptions of how this transformation came about are generally persuasive. Yet some of their secondary claims seem questionable in light of recent research. One such point is the contention of both authors that Central Asian national identities were artificial and invented by the Soviets. It is not clear why Roy and Geiss place so much emphasis on this point, since scholarly work over the last several decades has shown that *all* nations are in some sense artificial or constructed. Central Asian nations, like other nations, are “imagined communities” that result from a continual process of invention, definition, and negotiation.⁴ The view that Central Asian nations are uniquely “artificial” may be an artifact of a time when Western and émigré scholars believed that nations existed objectively and criticized the Soviet Union for destroying the “real” pan-Turkic (or pan-Turkestanî) nation.

Once we acknowledge that Central Asian national identities were invented, it is still not clear that the Soviets were the inventors. Recent research has shown that some indigenous intellectuals were already beginning to develop an embryonic sense of modern national identity in the late imperial period, based on differences in language and way of life. These intellectuals were influenced not just by the ethnic categorizations of Russian colonizers, but also by the upsurge in nationalism in the Ottoman empire and elsewhere in the Muslim world. Thus, the Central Asian reformers known as *jadids* were not pan-Turkists, as Roy

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

claims, but advocates of a linguistic and territorial Turkestani identity that was essentially proto-Uzbek in the early 20th century.⁵ The Soviets, in other words, did not invent the identities that became the basis for the national republics; they simply built on and institutionalized existing divisions.

The two authors' analysis of the national delimitation of Central Asia is also problematic. Both repeat the old claim that the creation of national republics was part of a deliberate Soviet attempt to destroy Muslim and Turkic unity and establish firmer control over the Central Asian populations. Roy describes the delimitation as an "imposed territorial realignment, the eminently artificial, manipulatory, and strategic nature of which has been well documented" (3). Although he acknowledges that the ethnic complexity of Central Asia was such that no borders could have been completely satisfactory, Roy sees an almost Satanic malevolence in the way the delimitation was carried out. He argues that Soviets "amused themselves" (68) by making the borders unnecessarily complex and assigning bits of territory to the wrong republic, thereby ensuring that the national republics would never be viable as independent states.

The "divide-and-rule" interpretation of the national delimitation was taken for granted for so long that most historians ceased to ask themselves whether it was actually supported by evidence.⁶ In recent years, however, this view has been challenged. In articles and dissertations that began to appear in the mid-1990s, historians have called into question many of the elements of this older narrative and created a more complex picture of Soviet nationality policy in the 1920s. Rather than seeing the creation of national republics as a cynical and manipulative ploy to retain control over non-Russians (a view for which there is little documentary evidence in the archives), these historians have shown that nation-making had a strong ideological rationale and was an essential part of the Soviet project – not just in Central Asia but throughout the Soviet Union. Soviet leaders were convinced that nationhood was an essential stage of development for all "backward" peoples seeking to become modern and Soviet. They also believed that the creation of national republics and regions would win the support of the

⁵ Adeeb Khalid, "The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Tsarist Central Asia" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1993), 243–49, 252–53. Roy's claim that the *jadids* were pan-Turkists is based on studies of the Tatar Muslim reform movement, not the Central Asian *jadids*.

⁶ This claim has been made in numerous Western works that discuss the national delimitation. See, for example, H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse, *The Great Challenge: Nationalities and the Bolshevik State, 1917–1930* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1992), 177–78; Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), chap. 9; Seymour Becker, "National Consciousness and Politics of the Bukharan Conciliar People's Republic," in *The Nationality Question in Soviet Central Asia*, ed. Edward Allworth (New York: Praeger, 1973), 166.

non-Russian populations who had long been oppressed by Russian colonialism and “great-power chauvinism.”⁷ The Soviet leaders were correct in their assumption that this “nationality policy” would be popular in many parts of the Soviet periphery; in fact, indigenous elites often welcomed the creation of national territories.⁸ In Central Asia, nomadic and tribal groups such as the Turkmen and Kazakhs resented “Uzbek” efforts to define and dominate Turkestan and were therefore receptive to the Soviet proposal to create separate national republics and languages. These attitudes had their roots, in many cases, in a long history of communal and ethnic conflict, such as the friction between nomadic Turkmen and sedentary Uzbeks in the Khivan khanate.⁹

Contrary to the assumptions of Geiss and Roy, the creation of national territories was not dictated unilaterally from above; it arose out of the complex interactions among indigenous nationalists and national Communists, local Russian officials, and the Moscow leadership.¹⁰ Committees made up of local elites drew the borders of the new republics, based on ethnographic and economic criteria (subject, of course, to Moscow’s approval). The apparently irrational borders of Central Asian republics arose not from the Soviets’ attempt to “amuse themselves” by making things more difficult for the new republics, as Roy claims. They resulted, rather, from the clash of contradictory imperatives – earnest efforts by local committees and their superiors in Moscow to make the borders correspond to “ethnographic realities,” despite the extreme territorial intermingling of the population; institutional conflict over whether to stress the “national principle” or the “economic principle” in drawing boundaries; and vigorous

⁷ Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment,” 418–21; Martin, “An Affirmative Action Empire,” 19–28; Jeremy Smith, “The Origins of Soviet National Autonomy,” *Revolutionary Russia* 10: 2 (December 1997), 71–73.

⁸ Despite their insistence on the manipulative and imposed nature of the national delimitation, Roy and Geiss do acknowledge that some Central Asians welcomed the move.

⁹ On Turkmen anti-Uzbek sentiment and receptivity to the idea of national delimitation, see Adrienne Lynn Edgar, “Nationality Policy and National Identity: The Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, 1924–29,” *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 1: 2 (Spring–Summer 1997), 2–20. Bashkir elites were similarly concerned about Tatar domination and favored the idea of a separate Bashkir republic. See Daniel E. Schafer, “Origins of the Tatar-Bashkir Border, 1920–1922,” *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 1: 1 (Fall–Winter 1996), 2–15.

¹⁰ Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, chaps. 3–4. For a similar perspective on the creation of the Tatar and Bashkir republics, see Daniel Schafer, “Local Politics and the Birth of Bashkortostan,” in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Ronald G. Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 165–90.

competition over territory by indigenous representatives of the future national republics.¹¹

The belief that delimitation was imposed by Moscow against the will of the Central Asians rests on a view of the Soviet Union that is essentially totalitarian. Both Roy and Geiss seem to assume that *all* policies and reforms in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s were initiated in Moscow and imposed from above; borders were drawn, languages were created, and nations were formed with little involvement on the part of the peoples concerned. Only later, in their account, were local populations able to re-appropriate these institutions for their own purposes. Yet this picture is inaccurate. Work by revisionist historians of the Soviet Union over the last 30 years has shown the many ways in which Soviet citizens participated in shaping Soviet institutions and norms. This was as true in the periphery as in the Russian heartland. Just as the national delimitation was not carried out unilaterally by Moscow, the creation of “national cultures” should not be seen as strictly an alien project imposed by foreign conquerors. Far from being passive recipients of national cultures elaborated in Moscow, Central Asian elites were involved from the very start in creating standardized national languages, producing national literatures, collecting folklore, and generally playing the role of nationalist intellectuals.¹² Thus, Geiss is wrong to assume that the Soviet regime imposed Latinization on Turkic alphabets in the late 1920s as part of a deliberate effort to increase the differences between Central Asian languages – in other words, as yet another way to divide and rule the Muslims. In fact, recent research has shown that the initiative for Latinization actually came from the Turkic republics, particularly Azerbaijan, and was taken up by the central Soviet authorities only after considerable hesitation.¹³

Outdated interpretations like these are probably an unavoidable consequence of writing a synthetic work in a field that is undergoing rapid change. These are relatively minor flaws in what are essentially two very good and useful books; I have dwelt on them at some length simply to convey a sense of how rapidly the study of modern Central Asian history is evolving in today’s more open research environment. Roy and Geiss cannot be blamed for their unfamiliarity with recent research on Central Asia and Soviet nationality policy, since much of this

¹¹ On the conflict between ethnographic and economic imperatives, see Hirsch, “Empire of Nations,” 44–55, and Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 68–69. On local elites’ negotiations over territory and borders, see Edgar, “Creation of Soviet Turkmenistan,” chap. 2.

¹² Many of these indigenous intellectuals, whose work was critical to the formation of Central Asian nations, perished in the purges of the 1930s.

¹³ Martin, “An Affirmative Action Empire,” 792–814. On the activities of Turkmen intellectuals in creating a standardized language and “national culture,” see Edgar, “Creation of Soviet Turkmenistan,” chap. 8.

work was being completed at the same time as their own.¹⁴ Yet they should have demonstrated greater awareness that the study of Soviet and Central Asian history is in flux and that earlier certainties are therefore vulnerable to revision.

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¹⁴ The original French-language version of *The New Central Asia* came out in 1997. Most of the new, archive-based work on Central Asia has appeared since 1995 and was therefore not available to Roy and Geiss. It is surprising, however, that neither author seems to be familiar with Ronald Suny's 1993 book, since Suny's arguments about Soviet nation-making are similar to their own.