AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF CENTRAL ASIAN VIEWS OF GOVERNMENT AND LEGITIMACY

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Executive summary

  If we are to understand the varieties of political legitimation adopted by current Central Asian leaders and opposition groups, we must look to the traditions of the past. The relationship between government and society in Central Asia is the result of many centuries of development within four major empires: the Islamic, Mongol, Russian and Soviet. This paper examines the ideas about political legitimation that developed in each of these empires. It then identifies how legitimating strategies employed by political actors in the present – in Uzbekistan, specifically – show the influence of this historical experience

If we are to understand the varieties of political legitimation adopted by current Central Asian leaders and their opposition – the development of nationalism, the glorification of Amir Timur or movements towards Islamic governance – we must look to the traditions of the past from which present people make their choices. The relationship between government and society in Central Asia is the result of many centuries of development within four major empires: the Islamic, Mongol, Russian and Soviet. Although at the edge of the Russian and Soviet states, the region was central to both the Islamic and the Mongol realms, and it is these civilizations which have most profoundly shaped political traditions. The population of Central Asia is now largely Turkic, but in the southern regions – Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan – a strong Iranian cultural heritage remains. The traditions of these peoples thus also retain meaning for Central Asians. In the first section of this paper I shall examine the medieval developments which shaped Central Asians systems of legitimacy – Islamic and Mongol. In the second, I shall discuss the impact of modern systems of thought on Central Asia, most particularly during the times of Russian Imperial and Soviet rule.

Development of legitimation within the Islamic realm

The Islamic tradition is the most central and longest lasting one in Central Asia. Here the oldest and most honored legitimation is religious. Three institutions lie at the base of Islamic political thinking: the religious community of all Muslims, known as the *umma,* the Caliphate, providing central leadership to that community, and the religious classes, the *ulama.*

The Umma

The Prophet Muhammad was the conduit for God's message to mankind and the political leader of a community whose ultimate leader was God. The community of all believing Muslims was called the *umma*; at the time of Muhammad and his first successors this was a limited group under the rule of one man, and it was the God-given responsibility of the ruler to see that it prospered and grew. The *umma*

soon expanded to comprise an extensive realm including Central Asia, which was from early on an integral part of the Islamic empire. Within a few centuries the *umma* had become too large and too far-flung to be ruled by one person, but the concept was never abandoned, and has remained important up to the present.

The Caliphate

After the Prophet Muhammad's death, his followers chose a successor to him by consensus of those present; the title chosen for him was *Khalifat Allah*, or Deputy of God.[1] We cannot say for certain what the religious powers of Muhammad's first successors were, but it appears that they combined doctrinal and political authority. After one or two generations from Muhammad's death, the caliphs began to lose their religious authority. This was due in part to disagreements within the community and the needs and rewards of a rapidly growing empire. The first dynasty of Islam, the Umayyads (661-750), came to power by force, after defeating Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, `Ali, one of the earliest and most revered of Muslims, and they moved the capital from Muhammad's adopted city of Medina to Damascus, where they developed a court suitable for the empire they now ruled. The decision by the majority of the Muslim community to accept the Umayyad caliphs was one that recognized the need to compromise purity of principle for the sake of cohesion. The caliph continued to be the head of the whole of the Muslim community, the *umma*, and as he was leader of communal prayers in the capital, he had to be a member of Muhammad's tribe, the Qur'aysh,, and at least theoretically, pious and knowledgeable about religion. However, while the caliph and his court had considerable authority to create administrative law and practice, the formulation of Islamic doctrine and law fell outside their domain.

The second dynasty of Islam, the `Abbasids, came to power on a religious platform, and several of the early `Abbasids tried to restore the religious power of the caliphate. This action however brought a

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[1] Patricia Crone, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam,* Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 1-24.

negative reaction and the doctrinal power of the caliph continued to decline, while the `Abbasid court became as secular as the Umayyad had been.[2]   In 1258 the Mongol invaders brought the central caliphate to an end but the idea of the caliphate remained alive. Particularly in the eastern regions, including Central Asia, it was believed that just rulers, who promoted religion and protected the *shari`a*, could adopt some of the titles associated with the caliphate. The claim to the actual title of caliph was less frequent, but we do find it used by the medieval Mamluk rulers of Egypt and Syria and, much later, in the Pan-Islamic movement of the nineteenth century, as a defense against the power of non-Muslims.[3]

The Ulama

The people who came to formulate Islamic law, doctrine and practice were the *ulama*, those who were learned in religious matters. One of the earliest acts of the caliphs after Muhammad's death had been the creation of a definitive and approved edition of his revelation, the Qur'an, including instructions on how it was to be read aloud. As time went on the authority of this text, along with the memory of the Prophet and reverence for his example, began to challenge the religious authority of the caliphs. The religion of Islam is exceptionally strongly based on text, and this trait promoted the power and independence of the religious classes, since it was the people equipped to interpret texts who came to control religious thought. Starting with the text of the Qur'an, and adding to this reports about the deeds and utterances of the Prophet (*hadith),* the scholarly class over several centuries developed a large corpus of religious and legal knowledge.[4]

What made it impossible for the government to control the religious classes was their lack of hierarchy, due in part to their method of training. Education in early Islam was almost entirely personal – students sought out scholars on their own, and received from each scholar permission to teach a specific

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[2] Ira Lapidus, "The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society," *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* 1975, pp. 370-85.

[3] H.A.R. Gibb, "Some Considerations on the Sunni Theory of the Caliphate," in *Studies in the Civilization of Islam,* Boston, 1962, pp. 141-50; Jacob Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam,* Oxford, 1994, pp. 10-11, 36-9.

[4] P. Crone, *God's Caliph,* pp. 58-96.

set of texts. It was understood, until very recent times, that texts, although written, should be learned from an individual, often through recitation. This was particularly true of the traditions about the Prophet, the *hadith.* The individual scholar or believer therefore received his knowledge not through a contemporary institution, like a seminary or university, which might be controlled from above, but rather through a personal chain of transmission leading back to the Prophet himself.[5]

Correctness of doctrine or interpretation was decided through consensus. This had been the method used in the choice of Muhammad's first successor and from then on the concept of consensus was central to Islam, as the correct way for the community to resolve issues of politics and religion. In the case of doctrinal questions, consensus came to be understood as the general agreement of the scholarly religious community over time. What this meant was that the most fully authoritative individuals were not those in high positions at the present time but rather those who had died a long while before. Under these circumstances there could be no one central living authority in questions of law and doctrine. There were more and less influential scholars, a recognized religious community, but nothing one could define as "church" in the sense that one finds in Christianity.

Relation between religious and state power

The relationship between *ulama* and the court was one of tension and mutual cooperation. The *ulama* were crucial to the legitimacy of the caliphate and to the continuance of the *umma.* The caliph was the head of a community defined by religion, and was the official leader of prayers at the cathedral mosque in the capital city. He was also in need of the services of the *ulama* as judges, jurisconsults and prayer leaders in mosques. On the other hand, the *ulama* depended for much of their status on their standing in the community, and their prestige could be compromised if they were considered willing to sacrifice the purity of their principles for the sake of worldly gain.

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[5] William A. Graham, "Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* XXIII:3 (1993), pp. 495-522.

The most central achievement of the *ulama* was the formulation of Islamic religious law, the *shari`a.* While the *shari`a* is formally derived from the text of the Qur'an and the traditions about the Prophet (*hadith)*, it incorporated regional legal traditions of the lands the Muslims took over. Much of it was developed by scholars living at a distance from the court, who often observed and disapproved of what the caliphal government was doing. This was the creation of an ideal of law and social conduct defined in contradistinction to the reality of the present, particularly to imperial practice. Theoretically, the *shari`a* was the law of God, supreme over all other codes, and it was incumbent on imperial law and customary law not to deviate from it. Since it was administered by *ulama* without a set hierarchy, and without coercive force, however, the *shari`a* remained a somewhat scholarly corpus, sticking to religious ideals, and able to avoid adjustment to contemporary expediency. As a result, for the ulama, as keepers of the *shari`a,* to keep a distance from the court and to refuse positions granted by the ruler was considered praiseworthy, and some of the most respected and influential religious scholars chose this course. Even for those who accepted office, some show of independence was desirable.

What we see then, within the first century and a half of the Islamic state, is the separation of religious and secular authority, but the continuance of religious legitimation. While the caliphate remained central to both religious and political life, the caliph himself wielded almost exclusively secular power. To remain in power – at least to remain authoritative – he required the acquiescence of the *ulama*, and they in their turn required the institution of the *umma*, the whole Muslim community, whose cohesion was symbolized by the figure of the caliph. Furthermore, the protection of the *shari`a* – the law of God – required the rule of a Muslim ruler over as large a territory as possible.

Because the separation of religious and political authority in Islam occurred early, naturally and *de facto*, it was never fully formalized. This contrasts with developments in Europe where an increasingly close alliance between centralized states and a centralized church led to a formal, and often violent divorce. In the Islamic world, religious legitimation, though modified, could and did remain in force.

Imperial legitimation

When the Arabs conquered the Middle East, they took over territory from two great empires: the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, and the Iranian Sassanian empire. Both of these exerted strong influence over the Islamic state. The second dynasty of Islam, the `Abbasids, came to power on a religious program, but established their capital at Baghdad, near the former Sassanian capital, and hired many Iranians as bureaucrats. Under the influence of their servitors, the caliphs began to adopt elements of old Persian ceremonial to their court, and even designed their capital city as a circle, in imitation of the Sassanian capital.

With the elaboration of court ritual and imperial legitimation, the caliph became a distant and magnificent figure, and those around him likewise were raised above the level of ordinary citizens. This hierarchical structure fit the earlier patterns of Rome and the Persian empire, but went against the Arab and Islamic ideal of an egalitarian society.

This then emerged as another source of tension within the Islamic state. Pious Muslims and members of the *ulama* mourned the passing of the old religious ideal and the close connection of early Islam to social justice.[6] The caliphs followed earlier tradition in becoming major cultural patrons, sponsoring both literature and scholarship, and in particular, the translation of many of the major works of earlier Greek and Persian culture. In magnificence, power and sophistication of culture, the caliphate was now the equal of the great empires of its own and other periods. The patronage of culture remained from this time on an important aspect of political legitimation, expected from rulers with serious pretensions to power. Rulers patronized not only the culture of the people from whom they themselves sprang, but also that of their subjects. This did not entail simply the creation of a court culture, but rather the promotion of scholarship, both religious and secular, and the sponsorship of numerous public works and monuments –

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[6] Louise Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought,* Cambridge University Press, 1997.

mosques, hospitals, cisterns, baths, and educational establishments. It was largely through these works that a ruler hoped to be remembered after his death.

Sultanate and Caliphate

From the tenth century, as an increasing number of outlying regions came under the rule of insubordinate governors or independent tribal rulers, Muslim jurists began to redefine the meaning of the caliphate, allowing for legitimate regional rulers, who bore the title "Sultan". A Sultan could have any origin and could come to power by force, but to become fully legitimate he had to obtain a patent to rule from the caliph. In return for the caliph's approval the Sultan would mention the caliph's name in the Friday congregational prayer, and would put it on his coinage. He would also, in theory, pay tribute to the caliph. Central Asia was one of the first regions to be ruled by an independent dynasty bearing the title of sultan; this was the Samanid dynasty (874-999), which has figured prominently in all histories of Central Asia since the beginning of the Soviet period.

The title of Sultan remained important. This was the standard title for Muslim rulers who claimed sovereign power within an Islamic region; it signified both supreme authority and the assumption of responsibility for the protection of religious life. The Sultan was to promote the rule of the *shari`a,* and regional sultans also imitated the caliphal court on a smaller scale, patronizing cultural activity and good works. This was a rule however acquired and maintained by military power, and the office was in no sense a religious one.

The Mongol Empire and its impact

The Mongol empire did not mold the peoples under it as strongly as did the caliphate, but it did leave a strong and lasting legacy, particularly in Central and Inner Asia. In the field of political legitimacy probably its strongest contribution was the immense charisma of Chinggis Khan and the dynasty he founded. From the beginning of Chinggis Khan's rule in 1206 until the early sixteenth century, only his descendants were legally entitled to claim sovereign power over areas within the Mongol realms. The Mongol titles of Khan and Khaghan were reserved for this family, and in Islamic Central Asia, the title Sultan as well, since this title implied independent power. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the last of Chinggis Khan's descendants lost power. Even now, in the central lands of the Mongol Empire, particularly in Mongolia, the figure of Chinggis Khan is revered, and invoked as an exemplar of military and political virtues.

For the Mongols, the most fundamental legitimation was the favor of God, demonstrated by the fabulous success of their campaigns. This was very well expressed by the Mongol Khaghan Guyug, writing to Pope Innocent in IV in 1246:

> ..you wonder at so great a slaughter of men, especially of Christians..., we reply likewise that this also we do not understand. However, lest we may seem to pass it over in silence altogether, we give you this for our answer.
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> Because they did not obey the word of God and the command of Chingis Chan and the Chan, but took council to slay our envoys, therefore God ordered us to destroy them and gave them up into our hands. For otherwise if God had not done this, what could man do to man? But you men of the West believe that you alone are Christians and despise others. But how can you know to whom God deigns to confer his grace? But we worshipping God have destroyed the whole earth from the East to the West in the power of God. And if this were not the power of God, what could men have done?[7]

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[7] "Narrative of Brother Benedict the Pole," in Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission,* London, New York, 1955, p. 83.

This sentiment, though more baldly expressed by the Mongols, was not distant from Islamic doctrine embodied in the verse of the Qur'an, "God gives sovereignty to whom He will," which was very often quoted to justify the rule of Muslim sultans who had seized power. For the Mongols and the peoples of the steppe, the rule of Chinggis Khan and his immediate successors was a golden age, and the precepts of these great khans, particularly Chinggis Khan, were thought to be preserved in the Mongol *yasa*, a code which may or may not have existed in writing, but was considered binding on all those loyal to the Mongol tradition. Even though the Islamic *shari`a* and the Mongol *yasa* appear to have been incompatible on a number of points, the Mongols of the western empire – from the northern Black Sea region through eastern Turkistan – all converted to Islam, and the Mongol and Islamic traditions both remained in force over this region for many centuries. The two imperial systems, despite their differences, did share some basic precepts; I have mentioned the use of God's favor above. In addition, we find in the Mongol tradition, as in Islam, the belief that the supreme ruler must belong to a specific charismatic dynasty and must also be chosen by election or consensus among the eligible candidates. Once in power furthermore, both Muslim and Mongol rulers were encouraged to rule through consultation. In modern times these precepts have been quoted in both the Middle East and Central Asia. For those basing their identity on Islamic origins, it is possible to claim that the political practices enjoined by Islam are consonant with democracy, while regions with a more fully nomad and tribal background can likewise lay claim to early democratic practices.

Historical legitimation

Some appeal to history is central to almost any governmental legitimacy, but in the Islamic and Central Asian world the power of historical reference has always been particularly strong. The revelation of Islam and the founding of the Islamic community took place in fully historical times, and the drama of the event has been vividly preserved in the Qur'an. The very early period of Muhammad and his first four successors, the Rashidun, remained as the golden age of correct Islamic rule and practice, when

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rulers lived a modest and pious lifestyle. For the individual it was possible to attempt an imitation of this lifestyle, but for the Muslim community as a whole, the virtue of the pre-imperial period was clearly unattainable.

The imperial glory of the first centuries after the great conquests, a time during which the classical Islamic scholarship took its shape, provides a second golden age of a very different character. The very glory of this period however brought with it the decline of the earlier and more admirable Muslim virtues, and of the egalitarian ideals of Islam. There is here an inherent tension; the breathtaking success of Muslim armies and the glory of the imperial caliphate were signs of God's favor, and thus of the legitimacy of the Islamic enterprise, but they also brought about an inevitable moral decay. The ambivalence towards powerful rulers, seen as connected to God, and in some way graced with supernatural power, and at the same time as potentially corrupt and tyrannous, remained strong throughout Islamic history. For the descendants of the Mongols, the rule of Chinggis Khan provided yet another golden age to refer to; here again later rulers had slipped from the ideal, in much the same way.

The history of earlier times and the lives of the greatest rulers were not merely the subjects of writings possessed by the learned. The great dramas of both Islamic and Mongol history quickly entered into popular culture and legend, becoming part of the folklore of the people, preserved in shrines and popular tales. It is a testament to the power of historical memory that rulers invoked the images of earlier figures not only in writing, but through their insignia, ritual and the names they gave their children. The actions of a ruler might also imitate those of famous monarchs of the past, suggesting a similarity and a sharing of charisma. The actions of Chinggis Khan in particular seemed worthy of imitation by those who came later.[8]

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[8] For a discussion of legitimation through the imitation of great Mongol rulers, see B.A.F. Manz, "Mongol History, Rewritten and Relived," forthcoming in *Revue du monde musulman et de la Mediterranée.*

Government and society

In addition to the relatively formal structures and ideologies I have discussed above, numerous accepted practices grew up in Central Asia and the Islamic world that structured the relationship between government and society. One of the most central of these was the concept that government should maintain a distance from society, in order to stand outside of the factional disputes and individual interests of subject populations. Because of the numerous invasions by outside nomads – Arabs, Turks and Mongols – the Middle East came to be ruled by dynasties of foreign, nomad origin, and it was expected that the core of the army would be of outside provenance. The kernel of this system originated early in Islam, with the development of separate functions and traits for Iranians and Arabs. The imperial ideal, formulated in the eighth century, included an Arab caliph, a foreign Turkic servile military class, a bureaucratic class associated strongly with Iranian traditions, and a strong, relatively independent urban society, whose ideals were elaborated and preserved by the *ulama*, which was a class of Arab culture, though of mixed ethnic origin. This system was preserved particularly strongly in southern Central Asia, where rulers of Mongol descent remained in power into the nineteenth century, controlling a population of originally Iranian origin.

The separation of government and society and the ideal of foreign rule were made possible by the existence of independent governing classes in the city and countryside. Much of the responsibility for political order and social welfare in the cities lay with local notables, a class that included wealthy landowners, major merchants, and most importantly, distinguished members of the *ulama*. The leading person among the notables of a city was very often the city judge, the *qadi,* who was trained in religious law. Notables held power largely through networks of local patronage, and they also provided the interface between the local people and the government, which they might serve in a variety of ways. In times of crisis, it was their deliberations which determined whether or not a city would submit to an outside conqueror, and they could also organize the defense of the city by its own population.

11

The importance of the *ulama* in local affairs added a significant element to their political significance. While affairs of the central government lay in the hands of a ruler with largely secular power, in the daily affairs of cities, the *ulama* played a significant administrative role, and this was accepted as a matter of course. In addition, several government religious posts held importance for city and village life, perhaps most notably the post of market inspector (*muhtasib*) held by a functionary trained in religious law. The office of *muhtasib,* though it declined in the modern Middle East, retained its importance in Central Asia into the nineteenth century.

What we see therefore is two complementary systems of governance. One rose from below, based on local power achieved through patronage and consensus, and was organized informally; within this system members of the *ulama* played an active and visible role. Indeed the religious judge often held the leading position in decision-making, and was most often the person who organized the military defense of a city. The central government, on the other hand, was based on the premise that power was granted by God to the ruler, and then delegated to lower officials; this government was led by the Sultan, who was a secular ruler, but depended on religious legitimation. Formally the crucial obligation of the sultan was to uphold and enforce the *shari`a*, and it was for failure to fulfill this duty that he could be criticized, and potentially overthrown. To retain the loyalty of individual cities however, the sultan had to provide value for money; for the taxes he collected, he had to be able to provide reasonable security. Rulers who demanded too much in tax, or who provided too little protection, sometimes found the city gates locked against them or their governors. Thus religious legitimation was attached to secular power, while the role of religious figures emerged from local power networks.

By the time of the Russian conquest of Central Asia in the nineteenth century, the Muslim *umma* had lost all vestige of political unity. Islam had by this time spread to East and West Africa, China and Indonesia, among other places, and there could be no question of unitary rule. What connected Muslim societies, particularly those of the central Islamic lands, was their common history and a complex of accepted practices, institutions and beliefs. In this they were and are similar to the Europeans, who

likewise have defined themselves by a shared past and a set of common practices. In both cases, one

religion has played a central role in the development of culture, but transcends the boundaries of the core

region. In the case of the Islamic lands however, the name of the religion has remained attached to

collective identity, and this has had important symbolic results.

The Russian Empire

In the last third of the nineteenth century, Russia conquered the Central Asian regions; the

northern and eastern sections became part of the Empire, while two protectorates were formed in Khiva

and Bukhara, which remained under their former khans. At the time of the Russian conquest, Central

Asia could still be considered part of the Central Islamic region, but it had become a peripheral region, a

center for Islam in the eastern regions, but less important to the western Islamic lands. For Muslims from

the Volga region, the steppes, Eastern Turkistan and China, and to some extent those of India, the city of

Bukhara served as a center for religious authority and education. Up to the eighteenth century, the eastern

regions of the Islamic world, including Central Asia, were still closely involved with general intellectual

and religious movements in the Middle East, and indeed contributed to them.[9]

With the conquest by the Russians in the 1860s and 1870s, the eastern and northern orientation of

Central Asia increased. This had important repercussions in the intellectual life of the region. What it

meant, most importantly, was that Central Asia participated only marginally in most of the ideological

movements that engaged the Middle East in the nineteenth century. Elsewhere in the Middle East,

governments were attempting westernizing and modernizing reforms from above, and intellectuals began

to discuss the merits of constitutional monarchy and European ideas of state, society and science. In

Central Asia, the Russian government offered little encouragement towards reform to the rulers of its

protectorates in Khiva and Bukhara, and made almost no attempt to change the society they found in the

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[9] John Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change in the Modern World,* Boulder, CO, 1982, pp. 34-9, Joseph Fletcher, "The Naqshbandiyya in northwest China, in *Studies on Chinese and Islamic Inner Asia,* Variorum Reprint, Norfolk, 1995, pp. 20-33.

regions of Samarqand and Kokand, which they ruled directly. The doctrines of pan-Islam, of nationalism, and of *jadidism*, the movement towards a renewal of education and religion, all arrived late in Central Asia, and had less impact there than in other regions.[10] The *jadid* movement, which combined elements of pan-Islam, westernizing reform and nationalism into a movement to renew and modernize Islamic education, was begun by the Tatars and eagerly adopted by Azarbaijani intellectuals. It was not until the turn of the twentieth century that *Jadid* intellectuals became active in the major cities of Central Asia.[11] Central Asia in this respect differed markedly also from the more western Muslim regions of the Russian Empire, the Volga, Crimea, and Azarbaijan, which had been incorporated earlier and more closely into the Russian Empire. There, intellectuals were closely in touch both with the nearby Ottoman Empire, whose capital, Istanbul was a center for Muslim thought, and with the Russian intelligentsia.   When we look at the Islamic heritage which the Central Asians brought with them into the Soviet Union, we must recognize that, while the foundations were shared with more western Muslim regions, much of the more recent Islamic experience had not been shared.

The Soviet experience

The Soviet period worked a transformation on Central Asia that should in no way be underestimated; however this was not only an introduction of new ideas, but also a reshaping of numerous pre-existing ideas and institutions. Like the earlier Russian Empire, the Soviet regime was cautious in its approach to Central Asia, fearing that a hasty attempt to destroy local social and religious structures could bring violence in its wake. Certain characteristics of Central Asia, combined with Russian and Soviet policies, helped to preserve earlier attitudes. One was the tradition of a foreign ruling class, which made Russian colonial rule more acceptable to Central Asians than one might have expected. Another was the

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[10] Jacob Landau, *Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation*, London, 1995, pp. 7-21.

[11] Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform,* Berkeley; Los Angeles; London, 1998, pp. 80-113.

strong informal local political structure that had operated separately from the government, and was not fully destroyed in the twentieth century. At the end of the Soviet period the intellectuals of many republics greeted liberation by reacting immediately against Soviet ideals, and returning to the ideologies and debates in which they were enmeshed at the turn of the century.

The Soviet state imposed two new legitimating ideologies on Central Asia: the Communist ideal, and nationalism, which came in three forms – Soviet, Russian and local. The Soviet idea of nationalism was based on a primordialist conception of identity: ethnic groups and nations had evolved gradually and naturally, over a long period, and they combined historical experience, language, psychology and historical experience. When organizing autonomous regions and Soviet Republics, the Soviet administration attempted to apply these criteria to each new group, and in supervising later republic and local scholarship, they imposed a similar approach.

For the Soviets, as for Central Asians, history was of central political importance, and while the Soviet government imposed a new set of interpretations, Soviet emphasis on the historical past kept it as a subject of common concern. Particularly from the period of the 1940s, when World War II caused an upsurge of nationalism, the investigation of ethnogenesis was popular and officially encouraged. Approved studies emphasized the connection of contemporary populations to the earliest peoples of the region they inhabited, and the historical continuity of language and culture.[12] This approach brought significant problems to the peoples of Central Asia, many of whose identities descended from the nomadic Mongol Empire.

A further complicating factor was the strongly negative attitude the Soviets held towards the Mongols, particularly after the resurgence of Great Russian nationalism in World War II. The Mongols, and the state they formed in Russia, the Golden Horde, were seen as primitive, destructive and tyrannous, in fact, one of the major negative forces in history. Several of the peoples of the Soviet Union, most

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[12] Victor A. Shnirelman, *Who Gets the Past? Competition for Ancestors among Non-Russian Intellectuals in Russia,* Washington; Baltimore; London, 1996, pp. 1-2, 8-12.

notably the Tatars, Kazakhs and Uzbeks, derived their identities directly from the Mongols, and had

earlier used this fact as a source of both ethnic pride and dynastic legitimation. In the Soviet period this

had to be changed, and alternative identities unearthed, preferably from the ancient population of the

region. For the Volga Tatars the solution was to attach themselves to the Volga Bulghar state of the

eighth century, while the Uzbeks chose to downplay the importance of the Mongol Uzbek invasion of the

16th century and attach themselves ethnically to the earlier Iranian and sedentary Turkic population of

their region, and culturally to the Timurid dynasty (1370-1507).[13]

In all these cases, the insistence of the Soviet government on a particular form of history along

with shifts in government policy, had the effect of focusing attention on certain issues, among others, the

importance of the Mongol Empire. In one other way, Soviet policy fit well into the earlier traditions of

the region, and that was in its emphasis on cultural production as a legitimating factor. The new republics

could not glorify military heroes of the past, but they were free to remember and commemorate the great

cultural patrons of past centuries, and this became a major focus of republican intellectual activity.

One major change in the Soviet period affected both social and intellectual activity: the Soviet

attitude towards religion and particularly Islam. Here the Soviet regime followed a double policy,

attempting both to eradicate and to control religion. Most mosques were closed, schools secularized,

shrines and Sufi orders suppressed where possible. At the same time, like the Russian Imperial

administration, the Soviets tried to control what they could not destroy, and thus set up several formal

Muslim hierarchies, each with one or two educational establishments. The form of Islam promulgated by

these boards had to be at least marginally acceptable to the Soviet regime, and their personnel have been

accused of catering to Soviet ideology in their presentation of their religious doctrine and institutions.

However, the interpretations offered in Soviet publications did not in fact differ greatly from modernist

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[13] Shnirelman, pp. 22-25, Maria Subtelny, "The Symbiosis of Turk and Tajik," in Beatrice F. Manz, ed., *Central Asia in Historical Perspective,* Boulder, CO, 1994, pp. 52-3.

and progressive formulations freely presented in the Middle East.[14] In the Soviet Union, as elsewhere, early Muslim use of consultation and consensus were recalled to show that Islam had always been consistent with democracy. The strong advocacy of social justice found in Islamic scripture and teaching was also brought forward. Thus, for those who attempted to keep Islam alive in the Soviet Union, it was not impossible to show some level of compatibility with a modern egalitarian state.

Contemporary Central Asian legitimation

The long history of Central Asia offers its contemporary politicians a plethora of legitimizing principles, and we see quite a number of them in use. Probably the strongest legacy of the Soviet period, and of the twentieth century in general, is nationalism, which appears to be active in Central Asia as in the other regions of the former Soviet Union. However the contents of that nationalism and the way it is used in government ideology depend on the way that new nations formulate their identity and their place in the modern world. Here we see the results of historical traditions and their relation to Soviet ideological policies. An interesting example is the historical legitimation of contemporary Uzbekistan.

For their founding father, the Uzbeks have chosen the great Turco-Mongolian conqueror Tamerlane (r. 1370-1405). This has elicited considerable commentary, and some surprise, since Tamerlane is remembered primarily for his extensive and brutal conquests. In fact, however, he is a thoroughly logical choice. Tamerlane's memory had acquired considerable stature within the Islamic world for several reasons: he was descended from the Mongols, but not from Chinggis Khan himself; he conquered and ruled a truly enormous realm, echoing the Mongol Empire in his style and court etiquette, but he was also a Muslim, and thus acceptable as a model within the Islamic world. Furthermore, Tamerlane and his descendants were remembered as outstanding cultural patrons, and left behind them a rich heritage in calligraphy, painting, architecture, literature and scholarship. Under Soviet rule, the

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[14] Muriel Atkin, *The Subtlest Battle: Islam in Soviet Tajikistan,* Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1989, pp. 16-20, John Voll, "Central Asia as Part of the Modern Islamic World," in Beatrice F. Manz, *Central Asia in Historical Perspective,* pp. 68-71.

Uzbek elite had found in Tamerlane's dynasty a safe collection of cultural icons, and a way to avoid close identification with the Mongol Uzbeks. In the late 1940s even Tamerlane himself had enjoyed a brief period of acceptability as a great centralizer and statesman.[15] Later however, Tamerlane was conspicuously denounced as a feudal despot.

Taken altogether, the historiography concerning Tamerlane and his descendants made him the ideal figure for the current Uzbek government. Although he is connected indirectly with the glory of the Mongol Empire, he can still be separated as a Turk and a Muslim, and thus need not be held responsible for Mongol crimes. Indeed, since at one point he did help to expel a Chinggisid khan from his region, he can be credited with helping to defeat the Mongols, while the Mongols can used indirectly to recall Russian aggression.[16] At the same time, the conspicuous cultural patronage of Tamerlane's dynasty continues to be useful, and helps to highlight Uzbekistan's history as a region of high culture. As the ruler of the whole of Central Asia, and part of Kazakhstan, Tamerlane's figure helps to promote Uzbekistan's leading role in the area, and since he is a recognized figure of world history, he can be used to bolster Uzbekistan's visibility in the world at large. Finally, since Tamerlane was conspicuously criticized by the central historical establishment of the Soviet Union, his present cult can be regarded as part of the recovery of true Uzbek history.

For opposition figures who wish to maintain a strong Central Asian identity and tradition, the banner of Islam is one of the obvious choices. Since doctrinal control was early separated from the state, it has never been necessary, as we have seen, formally to separate church and state. Thus the concept of Islam as a unifying social force has remained largely intact, as has the idea that a state with a largely Muslim population should afford patronage for the practice of religion. In this way we can regard Islam as an ideology with a legitimizing function similar to that of constitutionalism, or more widely,

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[15] A. Iakubovskii, "Timur (Opyt kratkoi kharakeristiki)", *Voprosy Istorii*, 1946, #8-9.

[16] John Hay has remarked on this parallelism in his article, "A New Hero for Uzbekistan," *South Magazine*, December, 1996, p. 52.

democracy. It is an ideal too widespread to oppose openly, and one a leader can call upon when mobilizing the population for a major effort such as war. Therefore, Islam has been frequently evoked as a legitimating principle throughout the Muslim world, by politicians and activists of varied political programs. The radical appeal for governments to impose religion, however, is one that has flourished largely in the twentieth century Islamic world. It is interesting therefore to note that Islamist activity, though not absent in post-Soviet Central Asia, has not been the most active platform for political activity, despite the proximity of Iran and Afghanistan. Here, probably, we see the results of Central Asia's separation from Muslim intellectual currents of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during which Islamic activism was developed.

Examining legitimating strategies in contemporary Uzbekistan, therefore, we see both the continuing traditions of the past and the impact of Russian and Soviet rule. The traditional Central Asian concern with history, cultural patronage and the Islamic and Mongol heritage were kept alive – indeed strengthened – by Soviet policies, and emerged after the fall of the USSR to provide the basis for the official state identity promoted by President Karimov. Central Asia's isolation from the ideological movements underlying contemporary radical Islam, due to its conquest by the Russians and its place within the Russia Empire, is also still discernable, in the relatively undeveloped Islamic movements of the area.