



THE EMERGENCE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS OF THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

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Abstract:

The countries of central Asia namely Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and the Caucasian Republic of Azerbaijan formed a part of the Soviet Union till its disintegration in 1991. However, they have been separate countries and nations thereafter until now. This paper seeks to examine the emergence of national consciences in the above-mentioned soviet republics. After their Secession from the Soviet Union.

All the above-mentioned countries, with the exception of Tajikistan, speak Turkey Languages, which are mutually intelligible to different degrees. Consequently, they form a cultural and linguistic bond with each other which Turkey (Turkiye) tried to exploit to promote her influence in the region in the early days of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, by promoting pan Turanism. Tajik Language, being keen to Persian has substantially influenced all the above-mentioned turkeyik languages. As a result, Iran also showed its expansionist intention in the region. China is very active in Central Asia, cultivating friendly relations with the above-mentioned former soviet republics by launching projects of regional cooperation such as the “Tapi Pipeline Project”. This region has rich deposits of petroleum and natural gas consequently many American and European Countries Have opened their branches in these countries. Again, the citizens of these countries being Muslims, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other west Asian countries are active here in the spread of rightist ideas.

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History and Ethno-cultural identity of Central Asia:

Uzbekistan is the most populous country in Central Asia. It has an ancient History, predating tool paleolithic age, as discovered from the unearthed pottery. It formed a part of the Achaemenian Empire, with the present-day city of Samarqand as the headquarters of the Central Asian part of the empire. The famous Silk Route Passes through Uzbekistan, bringing flourishing commerce to the region. Consequently, this region had been a bone of contention among various ancient and medieval empires.

Buddhism penetrated China via Uzbekistan.

Islam spread among the Turks of Central Asia in the 9th Century CE and gave birth to many medieval empires such as Seljuk, Gaznavid, etc. Amir Timur, the predecessor of Babur, The founder of the Mughal Empire in India who brought substantial land under his rule towards the end of the 14th Century had also invaded India. His grandson Ulugh Baig has gone down in the history of Central Asia as an astronomer, who set up an observatory at Samarqand and was despised by the traditional Muslim of his time for his heterodox



views on science. Shaibani Khan, who stripped out Babur from the Farghana Valley of Uzbekistan through prolonged wars, brought about the political unification of Uzbekistan in the 16th Century CE another national figure of Uzbekistan was the poet Ali Sher Navai who wrote poems in Chagatai Turkish in the 15th Century, glorifying Turkish Culture in comparison to Persian Culture. Imam Bukhari was a Sunni religious scholar from the city of Bukhara, who exercising a deep impact on Sunni Theology. All these figures are being used today as icons of Uzbek Nationalism.

There were mainly three powerful states in Central Asia from the 17th to Early 19th Century, together encompassing the landmass, that is today known as Uzbekistan, Kazhakstan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. These three states were Khiwa Bukhara and Kokhand. As mentioned before, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgys, Turkmen, and Azeiris spoke Turkeyik Languages a keen to Turkyei Turkish, while the Tajik Language belongs to Iranian Stock and is close to Persian, Poshto, and Dari. Therefore, Tajiks consider themselves different from the rest of the Turks from Central Asia. There were altogether three medieval versions of Turkyeik languages – Ottoman Turkish spoken in present-day Turkey and the former Ottoman Empire, Medieval Azeiri, current in Azerbaijan and the Safavid empire and Chagatai Turkish (the language of Tuzuk-i-Babari) spread over in Central Asia including Uzbekistan, Kazhakstan, Turkmenistan and Sekihan in China. So much so that, the Bolsheviks used to call the Chagatai language as the predecessor of modern Uzbek, while the Chinese rulers used to address it as the predecessor of the Uighur Language of Chinese Sekihan. Among the Turks of Central Asian steppes, Uzbeks were the most sedentary and had even built empires, while The Turkmens, the Kazakhs and The Kyrgyz were pastoral and nomadic. Among Turkeyik languages, Azeri is the closest to Turkye Turkish in terms of vocabulary and grammar,

next followed by Turkmen, then by Uzbek and Uighur, and last by Kazak and Kyrgyz. There is so much affinity between the Kazak and Kyrgyz languages and cultures that the Tsar could scarcely distinguish between the two and addressed all of them as Kazakhs. All these modern Central Asian Languages were deeply influenced by Chagatai Turkish during their early development.

1720 Tsar Peter the Great began his advances in the heart of central Asia, culminating in the Tsarist conquest of Central Asia from 1740 till 1868. The three above-mentioned Khanates 1the st signed subsidiary alliances with the Tsars Nicholas 1 and Alexander 2, finally extinguishing their political independence completely. Thereafter the newly incorporated Provinces of Central Asia also began to fill the punch of the Tsarist policy of crucification, which is still evident in the form of Russian Suffixes “Ov or Ev” which the Central Asian Turks and Tajiks have to have in their Surnames for eg Karim – Karimov, Gafur- Gafurov, etc. With the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, The new rulers also had to devise their policy towards National Minorities which also included the Tajiks and Turks of Central Asia. As per the resolution of the Baku conference (1928), all the central Asian Turkish Languages such as Azeri, Turkmen, Kazak, and Krygys adopted roman scripts. However, in the 1940s, Stalin directed them to adopt the Cyrillic alphabet to all the above Central Asian Turkeyik languages as well as Tajiks, although with different spelling patterns, changing with each Turkeyik language. According to some scholars, this was a deliberate move to keep the Central Asian Turks away from Turkey which under Mustafa Kamal Pasha had adopted the roman alphabet for the Turkish Language. Different spelling patterns were prescribed for different Turkeyik languages so that, The Turks of Central Asia do not emerge as A strong Unified force within the Soviet Union. Still, one thing is to be admitted that A Soviet Government, with



its emphasis on mass education, can be credited with spreading literacy and modern life, via the Russian language hitherto unreached the remote parts of Central Asia. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, under the weight of its contradictions the central Asian republics, contrary to other republics of the Soviet Union, inhabited by a majority Christian population wanted neither disintegration of the Soviet Union nor their secession from it. Charles Kurzman has aptly pointed out that as history testifies, popular nationalism predates a nation's state. However, in Central Asia Ironically it was a national state which engendered the forces of nationalism in Central Asia.

Post-Soviet Nationalism in Central Asia and The Caucasus:

Like all Central Asian Republics, Uzbekistan did not want to secede from the former Soviet Union and voted by 90% in favor of continuing the Union. However, when the disintegration began evidently, Islam Karimov began to engender and popularize his new brand of Uzbek Nationalism by writing and elucidating his above concept through several books. He projected Amir Timur and his grandson Ulugh Baig as the champions of Uzbek Nationalism. Their statues began to be constructed everywhere and even the railway and metro stations began to be named after them. The famous Sunni Theologian Imam Bukhari and author Ali Sher Navoi are being promoted as the cultural ambassador of Uzbeks. However, scholars point out that Amir Taimur spoke a different Turkiyk Language and not Uzbek and conducted most of his correspondence in Persian. Archaeologist Asgarov has been stating that Amir Taimur was misunderstood as a blood Thirsty Giant. However, he was kind and generous to his Ottoman Adversaries. Scholars further point out that, while Amir Taimur and Babur are promoted so much as the Icons of Uzbek Nationalism, Babur's Adversary Shaibani Khan, as an ethnic Uzbek who politically united Uzbekistan has no place in

Karimov's new Uzbek Nationalism. They argue that what Karimov promoted was more of geographical or territorial "Uzbekistani" Nationalism rather than Ethnic Uzbek Nationalism. Hamiduallah Karamatov an academician is an advocate of Karimov's concept of Uzbek Nationalism.

A corollary to the new cultural Uzbek Nationalism is the obvious revival of Islam, as manifested from the glorification of Imam Bukhari. While under Soviet rule even *Azans* could not be heard, Karimov's rule witnessed the construction of new magnificent Mosques. He also set up the ministry of religious affairs to monitor the jurisdiction of the Mosque and appoint *Kwajas* or Priests. However, Karimov was clear about the role of religion in his politics. He had clarified that, he looked upon Islam merely as a spiritual force and not as an intruder in politics and that he utterly detested religious fundamentalism. Nevertheless, Osama Bin Laden's *AL-Qaeda* in Fargana Valley culminated into a revolt of Religious fundamentalists, which was crushed by Karimov with an Iron hand.

Uzbek was declared the Official Language and all government correspondence was shifted from Russian to Uzbek. As a sign of liberation from Soviet yoke, the Cyrillic script was replaced by the Roman script to write the Uzbek Language, also in order to demonstrate a cultural affinity with Turkey and unity of the Turkiyk people. However, observers have noted that people are more at ease with the Cyrillic alphabet than the new Latin Uzbek alphabet. Uzbek radio broadcast that, Turkistan is the common homeland of all Turks. The question of ethnic minorities also become crucial with the rise of cultural nationalism. The Russians who settled down in Uzbekistan during the Tsarist and Soviet Days refused to accept the ascendancy of the Uzbek Language. Some of them have reported having said that they would prefer improving their English rather than learning Uzbeks. Karakalpakistan, an autonomous province of Uzbekistan created in 1937 by



the Soviet Rulers is inhabited by the Karakalpaks whose language is keen to Kazakh and feel endangered by the new wave of Uzbek Nationalism. Samarqand and Bukhara are inhabited by many Tajiks, while the Kyrgyz are a significant minority at Andijan.

Uzbek Government has set up “Alisher Navoi Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature” to promote the Uzbek language and to hold the Uzbek language competency test for foreigners. The Uzbek flag has a picture of the traditional bird *Semurg*, stretching its wings, symbolizing the rise of the Uzbek nation. 1

In Kyrgyzstan also the Russian minorities feel endangered and raised a hue and cry when Kyrgyz was declared the official language. Unlike other Central Asian Republics, Kyrgyzstan is slower in the replacement of the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin alphabet. According to experts, this might be because the Cyrillic alphabet used for Kyrgyz is simpler than other Turkeik languages. It is a positive point in favor of Central Asian Nationalism that The Central Asian languages, including lesser ones, developed once like Kyrgyz are, employed as a medium of instruction in schools. Necessitated their application in school textbook writing.

United Kyrgyzstan Party led by Adakhan Madumarov champions the rights of Kyrgyz workers in Russia. This party has the rightest leanings and is a pure advocate of protecting Kryrgyz’s identity. 2

Turkmenistan, which was largely a shepherd developed a modern agricultural during the Soviet period.

Turkmen language, mutually intelligible with both Turkish as well as Uzbek had medieval literature written through Arabic script. However, like all other Turkeik languages, Turkmen shifted to the Roman alphabet as a gesture of Turkmen identity after the collapse of Soviet identity established on 16 December 1991 by Ata Serdarov a active spokesman of Turkmen identity. The party was led by former Soviet provincial

party leader Saparmurat Niyazov till 2006, theorizing the party’s ideology of “Turkmen Nationalism” The party has a youth wing called *Magtymguly*. The quest for Kyrgyz identity is also leading to the rise of traditional Islam. The Kyrgyz Ulema have been criticizing the phenomenon like homosexuality 3

One of the biggest countries of Central Asia, Kazakhstan has oil deposits as well as a part of arms in the possession of the former Soviet Union. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union , Kazakh Government adopted the roman alphabet and made the learning of the Kazakh Language mandatory for all government officials. There are Uzbeks, Russians, and even Chinese, inhabiting Kazakhstan, which has further complicated the issue. The Chinese citizens who have purchased agricultural lands in Kazakhstan are viewed with dubiousness. Kazakh Nationalism is not only against Russian suzerainty but is also fearful of Chinese domination, however if Chinese immigration and penetration persist. Like other Central Asian Republics, Nursultan Nazarbaev The President Dictator of Kazakhstan has been promoting his newly-born ideology of Kazakh Nationalism. Kazakhstan is also witnessing the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, which supports traditional values like polygamy, which is manifesting in the form of Kazakh nationalism against western cultural domination, whether that of the Soviet union or the USA. The Kazakh Political party and institution espousing the cause of Islam in Kazakhstan are *Zheltoksan*, *Alash and Azat*. All three are anti-communist, anit-Nazabaev and anti-Russian. The word *Zheltoksan* , meaning December has been used in the nomenclature of the Party to indicate the anti-Russian riots that took place in Kazakhstan in December 1986. Its leader and the poet *Aron Atabek* called for freeing the Kazakh prisoners engaged in the riot and voluntary migration of Russian from Kazakhstan. He called for the ban on the sale of lands to foreigners. Propagating the role of Islam in the new social order of Kazakhstan,



Atabek posed himself as an option to Nazarbaev in 1993 election. He left Kazakhstan and launched a periodical *Khakh* in Russia, where he was arrested. Thereafter, he went to Azerbaijan and championed Azeri side in the conflict, calling for unity of all Turks of Central Asia. The part *Alash* sprung taking the symbolic name of the *Alash Orda Movement* of early 20th Century. Nursultan Nazarbaev had christened the capital city of Astana as NurSultana. However, after the end of three decades of dictatorship of Nazarbaev consequent upon public uprising, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev renamed the Capital NurSultana as Astana. 4

Nationalism manifested itself in Azerbaijan in the late 19th Century, culminating in the establishment of the Azerbaijani Republic in 1918, which was attacked and incorporated by the Soviet Union in 1924. The Soviet Union placed the Armenian-majority region of Nagorno Karabakh in Azerbaijan, which fueled the old struggle between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The fight for the possession of Nagorno Karabakh led to two wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1991 and 2020, in which Azerbaijan was supported and actively helped by Turkey. Azerbaijani historians have always claimed Nagorno Karabakh as their own possession of *Zangezur* and propagated the theory that the region today called Armenia was originally Albania where the Azerbaijanis have been staying from 1st Century CE. Azerbaijani parliament has passed legislation declaring fighting as a *Jihadi* (crusader) in other countries as a punishable offense which speaks volumes about the growth of Fundamentalist Islam in Azerbaijan 5

Tajikistan is the only Central Asian Persian-speaking Republic, identifying itself with the Aryan tradition of Iran. Gafurov the well-known Archaeologist and the head of the Tajik communist Party, through his magnum opus *Tajik* which has become the bible of Tajiks, propounded that the Tajik nation is as old as the 9th Century CE. Tajik Nationalists had sent a letter to

Mikhail Gorbachev, requesting to check the forcible Uzbekisation of the Tajiks in Uzbekistan and return Samarqand and Bukhara to Tajikistan. As a mark of Tajik Nationalism, it became fashionable to quote frequently from classical Persian texts such as Firdausi *Shahname* and *Bustan and Gulistan* by Hafiz. The Tajik Nationalists began to establish the links with Iran and Afghanistan. Islamic fundamentalism also began to penetrate Tajikistan during the 1990s. Islamic Renaissance Party Of Tajikistan began to champion Islamic identity of Tajikistan, Challenging Emom Rehmonov overlordship by contesting parliamentary elections. According to the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan Islam in Tajikistan was got corrupted due to the Soviet Influence. Ethnic civil war destroyed the Tajik economy in the 1990s. 6

Conclusion:

The rise of Nationalism in Central Asia has some distinguishing features. Firstly, as pointed out by Charles Kurzman, it was state-sponsored and did not predate any popular movement. Secondly, it was engendered and promoted by the local dictators to bolster their dictatorship. The dictators selected and promoted cultural icons from History and popular myths which ultimately helped them to perpetuate their rule. For eg Nursultan Nazarbaev even named the Capital after him.

Thirdly, Islam became a source of cultural identity although there were divergent views on its nature. While most of these dictators brought up in the Soviet secular tradition discouraged Islamic fundamentalism and allowed only state-controlled Islam, While some citizens, were influenced by gulf countries. The Jadid (modernist) movement which emerged in the late 19th and Early 20th Century in Central Asia due to liberal western education called for religious reforms and democratization remains forgotten today.

The nationalist of different Central Asian republics not only hailed *The pan Turkestan* identity ideologically



but also actively supported each others Turkish Nationalism against Non-Turks as in the case of Atabek`s support to Azerbaijan in the issue of Nagorno Karabakh Fourthly, Turkey and Iran two neighbors of Central Asia which also influenced Central Asian Cultures are rivals today in the region. In the initial days of Soviet disintegration, Turkey tried to become the leader of Central Asia, even prescribing her own roman script spelling model for Central Asian languages. Turkish companies increasingly entered the region and Turkish clerics founded Islamic Madarsas in Central Asia. Iran was equally active in the region to counteract the growing Turkish presence.

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