

## **CENTRAL ASIANS UNDER RUSSIAN RULE: A Study in Culture Change**

Elizabeth E. Bacon, 1966, 1980, Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, ISBN: 0801492114, Pp. 273.

Book Reviewer: **Sevket AKYILDIZ**<sup>1</sup>

### ***Central Asians Under Russian Rule: A Study in Culture Change***

Elizabeth Bacon's book *Central Asians Under Russian Rule: A Study in Culture Change* (1966, 1980) is a historical and anthropological study of cultural change in Central Asia from Russia's nineteenth-century conquest of the territory to 1980. The book is not based on extensive anthropological fieldwork or the use of archival sources (from Moscow). Instead, the author creatively and thoughtfully uses Western and Soviet secondary sources. The study is both a general reader and an academic work. It is accessible and comprehensive.

The people under review are the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Karakalpaks. The nomadic areas studied include dwellings, food, dress, culture, animals, trade, and religion. Bacon's study emphasises the impact of modernity, be it enforced by an outside power, on nomadic and sedentary societies, and what the picture looked like circa 1965. The creation of the five Central Asian republics included the standardisation and codification of national languages (and, with it, the raising of national consciousness). The success of the emancipation of Central Asian women under the guidance of the progressive-minded Communist Party (CPSU) is addressed. The author argues that elements of tradition and mainstream Islam have survived for over 45 years and coexist with the Marxist-Leninist policies, norms, attitudes and values. (The 1980 version of the book contains an updated *Introduction*.)

Cultural anthropologist and researcher Bacon travelled to Soviet-era Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan, from 1933 to 1934 as a guest of Yale University (United States) and the Soviet

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This book review is dedicated to the industrious, creative, and diverse peoples of Central Asia.

Academy of Sciences. In later years, she visited Iran and Afghanistan, undertaking ethnographic research.<sup>2</sup>

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Bacon's general impression of the region was similar to that held by scholars of Central Asia; indeed, the Central Asians had balanced their indigenous past, pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions, with the imposition of Soviet modernity (in terms of architecture, dress, education, industry, and sport and leisure) and lived within a hybrid society, balancing the demands of the Communist leaders in Moscow, regional CPSU leaders, with local forms of pre-Tsarist and pre-Soviet self-identification. Despite the serious problems involving the Soviet Union (i.e., cotton monoculture, the shrinkage of the Aral Sea, authoritarian government, and restricted human rights), in terms of healthcare, literacy, urban planning, modern transport, and education, the Central Asians saw the benefits; few locals desired to return to the old ways. Rather, in 1991, Central Asians wished to own their past, present and future and not have them governed by external powers.

Bacon's book contains eight chapters (maps, photographs, endnotes, a detailed bibliography and an index). Chapter One ('The Land and the People') provides a general introduction to the subject and offers valuable background information for readers, particularly students or researchers new to the field. Chapter Two examines Central Asian pastoral (nomadic) culture before the Imperial Russian conquest. Equally, Chapter Three traces Central Asian oasis (sedentary) societies before the coming of the Tsar's armies. Chapter Four investigates cultural change for both communities under Tsarist rule. Chapters Five (nomadic) and Six (sedentary) describe the impact on society of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the implementation of Lenin's and Stalin's socio-cultural transformation policies—Chapter Seven details Russian influence on the regional Turkic and Persian languages. Chapter Eight discusses the lived reality of Central Asian societies as of 1965.

The book's strength lies in its emphasis on the Central Asian people and their lived experiences under Soviet communism. Bacon's anthropology and history are informative. The author's explanation accounts for the impact of Soviet modernity on Central Asian nomadic and sedentary societies, assisting our understanding of cultural change from the arrival of Imperial Russia in 1853 to 1885, and from 1917 (under Soviet rule) to 1965; a ninety-year history. The CPSU, notably under Stalin, was more concerned with radical cultural transformation than cultural change per se. Shared secular civic values and norms were a cornerstone of the Soviet identification model. While the CPSU tolerated and accepted ethnic differences, it intended that an adult Russian could resettle in Uzbekistan and continue his socialist way of life; similarly, an adult Uzbek could resettle in Moscow and integrate into the daily life of the socialist metropolis.

The book's weakness is its 1966 publication date. It cannot, therefore, discuss the policies of Soviet leaders Brezhnev and Gorbachev and their social and cultural impact on

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<sup>2</sup> D. M. Lang, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1968), pp. 92-94.

Central Asian societies. So, the complete picture of the Soviet legacy in the region, its people, and their mentalities is limited to the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-1960s. Nonetheless, later academic books would have filled this intellectual gap. A comparison with Western European (settler-)colonial policies in the Americas would have been interesting.

*Central Asians Under Russian Rule* is a clearly written work suitable for the general reader, university students researching Soviet history and culture, the Cold War, and anthropology and ethnography in Eurasia and Muslim-majority Central Asia. Likewise, the book is suitable for researchers interested in the effects of Western modernity on traditional societies. The book is very much a Cold War primary source, as much as a secondary source; it highlights the perceptions and thoughts of one Western writer about the Soviet Union. Overall, such a book is helpful because the Soviet Union was not only about territorial expansion, heavy industry, space technology, and a military stand-off with the United States, but a megaproject to change and influence human culture and mentalities, especially among Central Asian people who, until 1924, had no idea about Karl Marx or Lenin, communist economics, dialectical and historical materialism, or class struggle.

**Source:**

Elizabeth E. Bacon, *Central Asians Under Russian Rule: A Study in Culture Change*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, (1980).

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Review's word total: 910.

Sevket Akyildiz wrote this book review **without** plagiarism. November 2025.

Ethical Statement: No ethical issues to report.

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