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National narrative, ethnology, and academia in post-Soviet Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the new states of Central Asia have been obliged to adjust their institutions to new symbolic frontiers and to take into account the independence they achieved in 1991. Both universities and Academies of Sciences have been called to reconsider their research policies and to orient them in order to respond to emerging national issues. The building of national narratives is a particularly relevant object of study in observing the various modes of legitimization of the Central Asian states and the scientific instruments they deem necessary for their political validation. The aim of this paper is to overcome the apparent, albeit actual, character of a number of changes that have taken place in Uzbekistan since 1991, in order to demonstrate the continuity of personal, institutional, and intellectual lines uniting contemporary research to that conducted during Soviet period. The preference accorded to ancient history, the praise of the originality and long heritage of the people, and an obsession with ethnogenesis, all are rooted in the contemporary narrative of the previous regime. They invite a reconsideration of the past two decades in a more nuanced manner and a rereading of the Soviet past in order to understand the process of building the nation-state, which has now been underway for more than half a century.

The call to national consciousness is impossible without implementing projects of collective self-definition, in which managing discourse on the past is a main objective. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the new states of Central Asia have been obliged to adjust their institutions to new symbolic frontiers and to take into account the independence they achieved in 1991. Both universities and Academies of Sciences have been called to reconsider their research policies and to orient them in order to respond to emerging national issues. These reforms put at stake the future of academic elites, their ability to maintain research independent from the political authorities and to integrate into international intellectual and institutional networks. It is questionable whether visual symbols, such as statues of Marx and Lenin, and their replacement by Tamerlane and his successors signify memorial rupture and the evolution of identity issues in Uzbekistan. These various collective references sometimes overlap more than they contradict one another. While some elements seem fairly innovative, such as the cult of Timur, others equally significant but less visible, such as the cult of the historical continuity of the nation, already existed during the Soviet period.

The building of national narratives is a particularly relevant object of study in observing the various modes of legitimization of the Central Asian states and the scientific instruments they deem necessary for their political

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validation. In Uzbekistan, as in all former Soviet republics, the ancient presence of the nation on its territory is a key element of official discourse. Historical analysis of this phenomenon takes on an essentialist tone, in which ethnic groups exist as objective and natural facts that inevitably resulted in contemporary nation-building, retroactively projecting into the past the existence of the Uzbek nation. Autochthonic issues are seen as particularly crucial in Uzbekistan, as there is long-standing competition with the Tajiks for this Turkic people and its deeply Persian-influenced culture. Retracing the genealogy of the contemporary historical analyses therefore invites an equation between the development of academic disciplines and their political environment. Did accession to independence require Uzbekistan to rethink the genesis of the nation and especially of the scholarly disciplines related to it?

The aim of this paper is to overcome the apparent, albeit actual, character of a number of changes that have taken place in Uzbekistan since 1991, in order to demonstrate the continuity of personal, institutional, and intellectual lines uniting contemporary research to that conducted during Soviet period. The preference accorded to ancient history, the praise of the originality and long heritage of the people, and an obsession with ethnogenesis, all are rooted in the contemporary narrative of the previous regime. They invite a reconsideration of the past two decades in a more nuanced manner and a rereading of the Soviet past in order to understand the process of building the nation-state, which has now been underway for more than half a century. On the problematic questions of identity and their scholarly, particularly ethnological, justifications, independence is neither a beginning nor birth, but rather a continuation.

Sciences subjected to political pressure

Post-Soviet changes have profoundly impacted the state of research in Uzbekistan. The disappearance of former Soviet generations, the mass exodus of scholars with the most competitive and "exportable" subjects, the sudden decline of the profession's social prestige, the avoidance of the vocation by young people, the lack of means to publish research, and the difficulty of accessing books in Western languages did not help the creation of academic networks anchored in major fields of contemporary thought. Financial issues have become central to conducting research and the decline in state support is having a disproportionate effect, with the sole and recent exception of Kazakhstan. The interaction between academic spheres, weakened by the deterioration of their symbolic and material status, and the development of a new narrative on the nation cannot be understood without taking into account a third major actor, political power. In societies only somewhat affected by Gorbachev's liberalizations in the 1980s, and whose current leaders have fallen back on increasingly paternalistic and authoritarian methods, political influence on the intellectual realm is crucial. The authorities have indeed assumed the right to write history, creating "places of memory" for the nation-state under construction and calling for the development of a new jargon of political science, focusing on the independence of 1991 as the only relevant object of study, and as a 'natural' end for centuries of history.

In Uzbekistan, control of history by political authorities increased after 1998. That year, President Islam Karimov convened a conference with the Uzbek historians, after which the Cabinet of Ministers issued a decree "on the improvement of the activity of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan" (*O sovershenstvovanii deiatel'nosti Instituta istorii ANRU*). The influence of political authorities on the discipline of history is affirmed in the first point: "The Cabinet of Ministers decrees that the main purpose of the activity of the Institute of History is the study of the authentic history of the Uzbek people and their state" (Decret no. 315, 1998). Every semester, the institute is required to organize a seminar on the history of Uzbek statehood, to collect information on the history of Uzbek people, its government, and its ethnogenesis, and to advance archaeological knowledge and research on local written sources (manuscripts). In addition to these policy directives given to researchers, it should be noted that other national groups were mentioned only once in the decree and that, far from the discourse on an alleged civic Uzbekistani identity, the contemporary state continues to be presented in the text as that of only the Uzbek people.

Apparently dissatisfied with the stagnation at the Institute of History, through the decree the president offered it important material resources, including the creation of the journal *O'zbekiston Tarihi* as well as improved management. In 1998, Dilorom Alimova was appointed deputy director and then, sometime later, the director of the Institute. A specialist during Soviet times on the issue of women's liberation in the Soviet Union, she shifted to the study of Muslim modernist movements of the early 20th-century, a particularly sensitive issue for the authorities. Under her leadership, the institute became more dynamic: Alimova developed contacts with foreign countries, had researchers participate in international conferences, attempted to revive publication, and tried to narrow the lack of specialists in medieval and ancient history, specializing in the recruitment of PhD candidates in these disciplines, which require the mastery of manuscripts.[1]

Within the human sciences, some seem to be more constrained by the political authorities than others. History is obviously one of the most controlled disciplines. During the Soviet period, the study of contemporary times, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was especially marked by Marxist assumptions. Historians wishing to distance themselves from these schemas took refuge in ancient history, even if it too was not free from overtones. Today in Uzbekistan, the situation is little changed. Contemporary history remains most beholden to the wishes of the authorities. Sociology, almost forbidden, is as bothersome because it examines social mechanisms whose practical and symbolic scope may potentially offend those in power. History and sociology are suspected of highlighting political processes, such as the development of new social

[1] Interview with D. Alimova, Institute of History, Tashkent, February 19, 2004.

classes and the deepening of the gap between rich and poor, and foreseeing the rise of popular discontent based on deteriorating standards of living. The political authorities are particularly gripped with these issues. Religious and ethnic issues are particularly sensitive, too, and those in power assume that research on this topic could generate inter-ethnic or inter-religious tensions among the population.

Other areas of study are also strictly controlled. Archeology has become highly strategic, as only it can confirm or deny the presence of ancient Uzbek people on their current territory and attribute to them the brilliant sedentary civilizations that developed in the famed Bactria and Sogdiana. Required to discover tangible physical evidence of the presence of the ancient nation on its contemporary soil, archaeology has found itself at the service of the national goals of the political authorities. Commemorations never seem to stop coming: the 660 years of Tamerlane in 1996, 2500 years of Bukhara and Khiva in 1997, and 2500 years in Tashkent in 2009. Any political or scientific work must comment on the unique ancient lineage of the country. As mentioned in the UNESCO volume on the history of Uzbekistan, "Uzbekistan is a country of ancient and original story, whose peoples have contributed much to world history. The territory of Uzbekistan is one of the sources of development of the original man (Shirinov, Anarbaev, & Buriakov, 1993)."

Ethnology also remains one of the reigning sciences of nationhood. In this time of construction of nation states, governments of Central Asia attach a tetchy pride to the scientific explanation of their unique origins. When historical sources are lacking, only ethnological analysis can identify the arguments justifying national and state continuity. The task is thus to establish indisputable foundations for the preeminence of the Uzbek people over other national groups in their titular state and to justify the continuation of ethnic and linguistic policies. The assertion of the continuity, not only of the Uzbek people, but also of their national consciousness since time immemorial, is scholarly supported by the Soviet tradition of ethnogenesis (*etnogenez*). This discipline was formed in the 1940s and has continued to dominate the discipline of ethnology without ever questioning its very primordialist founding premise: once formed, national identity imposes itself as an immutable phenomenon on the individual, not allowing for multiple affiliations.

Three major constituent features of Soviet ethnology continue to persist in Uzbekistan. First, the ethnologist is only empowered to explain his own culture or, if necessary, that of the "traditional" ethnic minorities of his republic, especially if he actually belongs to one of these communities. The colonial context of the birth of ethnology on the peoples of Central Asia, sought by the Czarist and Soviet regimes, and its close links with "regional science" (*kraevedenie*) are completely ignored and never discussed, bringing in their wake lack of awareness of ethnocentrism. Instead, the tradition according to which all cultures have an internal and natural coherence, its elements held together by a spirit, genius, or a national ideal that an outsider could never grasp except through empathy maintains a strong presence in Central Asia. Only Uzbeks could be able to study Uzbeks. The differential treatment between titular peoples and national minorities is also never explained, as it seems evident that each can only comment on things that are culturally related to his group. Thus, the Central Asian ethnologist would have neither the conceptual means nor the scientific legitimacy to make judgments about otherness or create comparative research.

Next, post-Soviet Uzbek ethnology remains often ignorant of any current situation. The ethnologist is thought of as a historian who works on a particular people, for which he seeks to demonstrate unique specificity in comparison to their neighbors and to explore the most traditional cultural elements without regard to the contemporary period. Almost at no time is it, for example, appropriate to study the impact of social changes introduced by the Soviet system on "Uzbekness". Almost no work focuses on how traditional clans have reinvested in various contemporary professions, transforming old solidarity ties into patronage networks. While Western anthropology grew in the second half of the twentieth century on researching the distant and exotic as well as the ultra-contemporary and modern, no similar pattern has become evident in Uzbekistan. It seems that any social approach has been devalued by the excessive ideological investment during Soviet times around these issues, giving a distorted view today of what could be the study of urban life or kolkhozes.

Finally, ethnology is confined to the study of what is traditionally valued. Often based on solid empirical ground, it focuses on material culture—habitats, costumes, crafts, folklore, rituals, and ceremonies—bypassing more ideological subjects in promoting the study of retraditionalized phenomena. Notwithstanding the discourse on disciplinary renewal and removal from the Soviet-Russian sphere, denounced as condescending virgule the vast majority of Uzbek contemporary work is based on Russian sources from the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Russian ethnography from the last century remains one of the primary sources of inspiration for research on Uzbekness.

The Soviet tradition of ethnogenesis

Developed in the 1930s and 1940s, ethnogenesis is defined as the process of ethnic emergence of a specific people over centuries. One of the fundamental issues that ethnology, whether Soviet or post-Soviet, continuously seeks to address is that of autochthony: how to combine the territory-based, Stalinist precepts defining the nation with a historical reality of significant population migration in the steppe area that was maintained until the sixteenth or seventeenth century. During the Soviet period, the recognition of national administrative status signified recognition of a territory. This equation, at the expense of the Austro-Marxist principle of individual national-cultural autonomy, crystallized the idea of a necessary overlap between the community and territory. The writings of national history have therefore sought to demonstrate at any cost the ancient anchor between a space and its eponymous people (Laruelle, 2008). The post-Soviet period did nothing to seek exceptions to this tradition and instead tried to strengthen it.

In Uzbekistan in 1941, the historian and Orientalist A. Yakubovsky (1886-1953) published a brochure entitled *The Question of the Ethnogenesis of the Uzbek People*. It traces the Uzbek ethnogenesis not to the sixteenth century and the Shaybanids,[2] but to the tenth century, with the arrival of Turkic peoples and their settlement under the Kara-Khanid dynasty, which concluded the brilliant early ethnogenesis of the Uzbeks (Yu. Yakubovskii, 1941). The focus on the idea of a particularly ancient Uzbek ethnogenesis continued in the 1960s through the main figure of Uzbek ethnology, Karim Shaniazov, who established the link between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. He defended his candidate's thesis in 1960, and doctoral dissertation in 1975. Beginning in 1967, or just after the arrival of Yulian Bromley to Miklukho-Maklai Institute in Moscow, Shaniazov was appointed head of the ethnology section of the Institute of History of the Uzbek SSR. From 1990, he led the "scientific study group on ethnic processes and the ethnogenesis of the Uzbeks" and directed all Ph.D. on ethnology at the Institute. He was also the only ethnologist to be a member of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan and until his death in 2000, continued to publish on the issue of national ethnogenesis.[3]

Shaniazov began his scientific career with a monograph, *The Uzbek-Karluks: A Historical-Ethnographic Essay*, which studied the Karluks, an ethnic group constituting of Uzbeks that is particularly present in the Bukhara region. His interest in this group, besides the fact he was a member of it, stemmed from the age of the ethnonym. The first mention of Karluks came in the texts of the Yenisei and ancient Chinese sources. Shaniazov tried to interpret the data in the ancient writings from the Karluk dynasty, then switched to more classic ethnographic description—the economy, material culture, social and familial structure, traditions, and rituals—of the Karluk community, finally commenting on the size of this group according to Czarist and Soviet censuses. He welcomed the arrival in the seventh century of the current Karluks in Uzbekistan, particularly in the Fergana Valley, and their rapid settlement (Shaniiazov, 1964). For these two elements, Shaniazov returned to the central question of the date of the Uzbek ethnogenesis and hoped to prove that it crystallized a few centuries before the date proposed by Yakubovsky. The possible discontinuity between the community called the Karluks in the first centuries of the Common Era and those claiming the label at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is never posited.

Shaniazov continued his research in the 1970s and 1980s with numerous articles and a book. Published in 1974, *For an Ethnic History of the Uzbek People* is still considered a standard reference. The author of its preface, the ethnographer T. A. Zhdanko, quoted Bromley: "It is in the process of ethnogenesis that since ancient and medieval times has formed the majority of ethnic facial features of a people, which in the future will characterize its national specificity and differentiate it from other ethnos (Shaniiazov, 1974)." Once again, Shaniazov presented an ethnic reality that he interpreted as stable over time and that can be objectively described and explained, and suggests that ethnology serves to demonstrate the specificity that makes each people an unique entity. In this work, Shaniazov focused specifically on Kipchaks, which along with the Karluks and Oghuz were traditionally apprehended as ethnic groups made up of future Uzbeks. The value of the Kipchaks lies in the fact that they are mentioned in Arabic sources from the eighth and ninth centuries. By cross-referencing between data sources and ancient philological, etymological, and geographical information, Shaniazov considered the Kipchaks a part of what he called the "indigenous people" of South Siberia (Shaniiazov, 1974). He argued that although medieval sources indicated the arrival of the western Kipchaks on the present-day territory of Uzbekistan only in the fifteenth century, they neglected to mention the existence of eastern Kipchaks, who were present since the tenth century. The fundamentally ethnocentric vision of this narrative then reemerges: the ethnogenesis of Kazakhs and Karakalpaks probably only dates from the fifteenth century, at the time of the arrival of these nomadic Kipchaks (Shaniiazov, 1974), but the "main features of the ethnic Uzbek nationality" would go back to the tenth century (Shaniiazov, 1974). National honor is therefore preserved and the Uzbek specificity among its Central Asian neighbors, reaffirmed.

Uzbekistan's independence did not constitute a rupture in the intellectual *oeuvre* of Shaniazov or its institutional status. The ethnographer pursued his research on ethnic groups and the constituent dynasties of Uzbek identity; his appointment as an academician made known the authorities' validation of his discourse. Even before 1991, Shaniazov incorporated the idea—developed discretely in the 1970s and now regarded as a tenet of the science in Uzbekistan—of a first substrate of Turkic people throughout the Central Asian area dating from the second millennium BC, before the arrival of Indo-Europeans in the area. In a monograph, *The Kang State and People*, (Shaniiazov, 1990) published in 1990 in Uzbek, Shaniazov denied that the Turkic khaganat announced the arrival of Turkic peoples in the region and thus foreshadowed the first national dynasty. According to him, the Uzbeks were born from the merger of two different "roots," the historically attested waves of Turkic peoples and those already on the Central Asian territory. Central Asian populations mentioned in ancient sources, like the Scythians, are therefore retrospectively equated with the Turks; this original national "root" could obviously not be Persian-speaking and must have already been Turkic. Shaniazov put particular emphasis on the Kang dynasty, which arrived in the region from southern Siberia and Jungaria in the fourth millennium BC and founded a state there in the second and first millennia BC.

In a 1998 article, "Some Theoretical Questions about the Ethnogenesis of the Uzbek People," Shaniazov returns to the question of a founding dynasty for the Uzbeks. From the first words of the piece he expresses the idea that

[2] The Uzbek dynasty established in Transoxiana in the early sixteenth century under the leadership of Shaybani Khan (1451–1510). Its leaders originally belonged to a nomadic population from the eastern territory of the Golden Horde, taking its name from Uzbek Khan, who reigned from 1312 to 1342.

[3] For a short obituary biography, see *Obshchestvennye nauki v Uzbekistane*, no. 6, 2000, pp. 69–70.

"everyone has the right to know the ethnogenesis and ethnic history of his people"[4] and that it is natural that these issues have attracted renewed interest after the independence. The argument is openly about identity more than strictly scientific. Even if he retained many references to Soviet scholars, Shaniazov sought to embed in the contemporary rhetoric rejection of the Soviet legacy and affirmation of the sole right of Uzbeks to write their own ethnogenesis. He criticized scholars "from the center [Moscow]" who would have preserved the imperial Russian approach and would not have been able to develop a scientific discourse on the ethnos valid for all peoples of the Soviet Union. Despite this denial, Shaniazov never replaced the Soviet discourse. He took up the Bromley's classic definition of ethnos, which insists on the unity of language, territory, culture, and historical destiny. He also affirmed the classification of all people along a single time line, on which evolution proceeds from tribe, to nationality, to the nation (in Uzbek *kablia*, *èlat*, and *millat*). He began his chronology of the ethnos in exactly the same historical period as those presented during the Soviet period, which speaks of the various stages of slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism (Shaniiazov, 1998).

The arguments advanced by Shaniazov imply an ethnic stability that nothing could disrupt. The two founding elements of the ethnos remain language and territory. According to him, nomadic peoples, who often change location, would not be able to bypass the tribal stage. This serves as a means to disparage the neighboring Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, and Turkmens, emphasizing the specifically sedentary nature of the Uzbek-Tajik space. Thus, the territorial continuity between Karluks, Kara-Khanids, and Uzbeks aims to reveal the early nature of Uzbek ethnogenesis compared to peoples such as the Oghuz, who had not ceased changing territory, giving rise to the Seljuks, the Ottomans, and then the Turkmens. This will to anchor in history the existence of a sedentary Turkicness virtually ignores the presence of Persian-speaking populations, who are only mentioned as allusions and who are stripped of their indigenous status (Shaniiazov, 1998). According to Shaniazov, one of the peculiarities of the Uzbek ethnogenesis is indeed its immutability, which was overshadowed by the late appearance of the Uzbek ethnonym in the sixteenth century (Shaniiazov, 1998, p. 40). He thus tried to justify why the Uzbek nation failed to impose its ethnonym but would have already existed without it. Therein is the essentialist idea that ethnic consciousness is precedent to the state.

Shaniazov built on this reading of history in a book published in 2001, after his death, *The Processes of Formation of the Uzbek Nation* (Shaniiazov, 2001). This book is regarded in the local scholarly community as a standard reference of post-Soviet Uzbek science. Shaniazov's uncontested profile and the fact that he finished this book on his deathbed explains the emotion surrounding the piece, the desire to disseminate widely, and the decision of the Institute of History to translate it into Russian. In an introduction dedicated to President Karimov, the author stresses the need to return to national roots in order to build the future of the new state; by not fairly assessing the significance of the past, one would then take the risk of debasing Uzbek culture and underestimating its age (Shaniiazov, 2001). The book includes an outline of historical discourse that Shaniazov developed throughout his career and seeks to put forward a final summary of the discussion on the history of the nation, with chapters ranging chronologically from ancient times to the nineteenth century.

The historian-ethnologist first reaffirms the presence in Central Asia of Turkic peoples before the arrival of the first Indo-Europeans and interpreted the state of Kang in the first millennium BC as "the first Turkic population in the region (Shaniiazov, 2001, p. 10)." He praises its early culture, and obviously its sedentary nature, endowing it with borders stretching from the Urals to the Syr Darya and a political center in the present day region of Shymkent. The Kang ethnos formed at that time was born of assimilation by the Turkic peoples—always presented as "absorbing" and never "being absorbed"—with other peoples present on the territory, such as Bactrians and Sogdians. Shaniazov subsequently stresses the national affiliation between Karluks and Kara-Khanids, and assumes the transformation of the leaders of Karluks, who called themselves "great khans", into "Kara-Khanids (Shaniiazov, 2001)." The ethnic continuity of Uzbeks and of an Uzbek state seems therefore going from the first century BC until the arrival of Russians in Central Asia.

The continuity of the work of Shaniazov and the official character of his discourse reveals how current research on the ethnogenesis of the Uzbeks has never called into question the founding assumptions developed under Stalin: searching for the oldest possible existence of a national consciousness and affirming its continuity on the territory over time. D.F. Khashimova, who defended in 1997 her doctorate on *The Study of Ethnic History and the Ethnogenesis of the Uzbek People in the National Historiography (second half of the nineteenth to the twentieth century)*, followed the discourse of her thesis advisor, Karim Shaniazov. Her research seeks to prove the perfect overlap of data from various sciences toward a single goal, demonstrating the ancient existence of Uzbeks as a constituted nation. Thus "historians, ethnographers, archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, and numismatists…arrive at similar conclusions on the issue of the indigenous origin (*avtokhtonnoe proiskhozhdenie*) and formation of the Uzbek people (Khashimova, 1997, p. 10)." The references to Soviet science remain unchanged, based on the notoriety of the historians Yakubovsky and S.P. Tolstov, archaeologists A.A. Askarov and B.A. Litvinski, anthropologists L.V. Oshanin, V.N. Zezenkova and T.K. Khodzhaiov.

D.F. Khashimova is content to resume the connections drawn from several decades of Soviet Uzbek scholarship, giving them a character that allows them to fit into the new political situation created by the events of 1991. However, with the exception of reference to independence, the discourse has barely changed. According to her, academic research must demonstrate the falsity of the assumption of

[4] We are extremely grateful to Khudaikul Ibragimov and Ulughbek S. Mansurov for having this text translated from Uzbek into Russian. In any case, the opinions presented here cannot be attributed to them (Shaniiazov, 1998).

an influx of Turkic peoples from the Altai and the Siberian steppes in the early centuries of the Common Era. The conviction that the ethnic consciousness directly and teleologically precedes state formation is never questioned. Thus, "today, historiography and the ethnic history of the Uzbek people give scientific and cognitive, political and practical meaning: the knowledge of multi-century national-ethnic development is the key to understanding the normative (*zakonomernyj*) and gradual character of contemporary processes of national rebirth, the sources of people's faith in the path that was chosen (Khashimova, 1997, p. 5)." The majority of Uzbek researchers have not understood independence to be an invitation to rethink patterns of narrative on the nation. It has not led to new theoretical or methodological questions, instead strengthening previous schools of thought that are always considered to be relevant.

The Karakalpakstan subsidiary of the Academy of Sciences, based in Nukus, also tries to respond to these demands by adapting them to its particular situation. Thus, the collective research project of the Modern History Department focuses on "the formation of the Karakalpak people," concentrating on autochthonous issues. Did the Karakalpaks constitute a people before their arrival on their present territory or during their merger with populations that were already present? Beginning to discuss the issue in 1998, they have held a conference in Nukus (1999) on "the Aralian knot of the ethnogenetic process." The brochure issued by the Karakalpak subsidiary that same year contains two small pieces from local researchers. The first, by S.K. Kamalov, is a review of a Turkish book whose author, Ziya Kurter, affirms that Karakalpaks have possessed a state since the fifth century and that their ethnogenesis dates from the tenth and eleventh centuries; the second, by I.V. Piskunov, focuses more precisely on anthropological aspects of the Karakalpak ethnogenesis and goes as far as to talk of its "racial genesis" (*rasogenez*).

The ethnic atlas of Uzbekistan, a methodological and disciplinary controversy

Published by the Soros Foundation in 2002, *The Ethnic Atlas of Uzbekistan* did not correspond to the prevailing official norms on ethnicity and sought to import a constructivist view on the issue, provoking fierce political and scientific controversy in a country where public intellectual life is sclerotic and academic publications, rare. These debates offer insight into the degree of politicization of the ethnological discipline and the deeply embedded nature of Soviet schemas in academic practices and discourse. Through them one can measure the impact of an increasingly static political environment on the development of science in Uzbekistan, as in neighboring Central Asian republics. *The Ethnic Atlas* was commissioned by the Open Society Institute, which the American businessman George Soros funds. The editor, Alisher Ilkhamov, a sociologist by training specializing in economic issues, particularly agriculture, was the executive director of the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation in Uzbekistan during the writing of the book. It was published in Istanbul, rather than Tashkent, in order to ensure better editing. Although censorship was officially abolished in 2003, the authorities still retain the right to review all forthcoming titles in the country. The book was distributed for free in the capital, like all Soros Foundation publications, and was posted on unofficial websites .

The book, which was edited by Uzbek scholars, seeks to evaluate the nationality situation in Uzbekistan in a descriptive way. Divided into two main parts, the first alphabetically lists about seventy peoples living in the country and the second is devoted solely to the Uzbek people. The book contains almost no suspicion about national minorities and, except for the Tajiks, carefully avoids direct comment on their contemporary situation. The authors presented not only the "traditional," or indigenous, peoples of the country (Dungans, Bukharian Jews, Karakalpaks, Kazakhs, and Uyghurs), but also those from the Soviet world (Russians, Poles, Germans, and Armenians) and Westerners (scholars of the nineteenth century who traveled to the region and contemporary NGO representatives). Contrary to what the title suggests, the book is not an atlas, as it features few maps, but a dictionary of the "nationalities"[5] of Uzbekistan. The use of the term "ethnicity" is equally questionable because it falls under the category of "national minorities" as traditionally defined in Soviet time. However, the fundamental issue of the *Atlas* does not involve the historiographical treatment of the country's national diversity, but its writing on the history of Uzbeks.

After the scandal that emerged, the Soros Foundation, which had been in the country since 1996, failed to earn renewed registration at the Ministry of Justice and was forced to close on March 1, 2004. Its website is no longer accessible from Tashkent, many scholars who participated in various projects of the Soros Foundation were put on black lists, and salaries of foundation employees were blocked by the National Bank of Uzbekistan. The scope of the controversy only becomes understandable if put into a wider political context. In Georgia, the Soros Foundation may have contributed to the fall of President Eduard Shevardnadze during the "color revolution" in the fall of 2003 and the subsequent election of Mikhail Saakashvili. This situation was particularly frowned upon in Uzbekistan, where the ruling elites became concerned about attempts to support the destabilization of Karimov's regime. In a speech read on the main Uzbek television channel on April 30, 2004, President Karimov justified the closure of the Soros Foundation, accusing it of having engaged in illegal activities as well as making discreet mention of the controversy related to the *Atlas*. "There have been very serious attempts [by Soros] to mobilize splinter elements of the population. For example, on the issue of interethnic relations, they began to distribute publications and translations on the issue of interethnic relations. From where are the Uzbeks derived, from where do the Tajiks come, etc. These editions, books, newspapers have no basis and

[5] "Nationalities" recognized in the Soviet census benefited from cultural and linguistic rights via their administrative status, which the central government bestowed on them. The post-Soviet Central Asian states have continued this tradition of officially developing national diversity, proudly boasting of "more than a hundred nationalities."

cannot withstand basic criticism. Our historians have spoken and said that. But their main objective…was to choose representatives of the Uzbek intelligentsia who could support them tomorrow and…go up against the constitutional order."[6]

This debate, hitherto internal within Uzbekistan, has reached Russia. Russian ethnologists are indeed also divided between proponents of a constructivist reading of the discipline and defenders of the Soviet tradition of ethnology centered on a primordial reading of "ethnic processes." Yulian Bromley's successor as the director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow, Valery Tishkov, has tried for several years to change this disciplinary tradition of submission to history, political objectives, and major Soviet-era standard texts. The frontal character of the controversy surrounding the *Ethnic Atlas* enabled him bring into the internal debates in Russia favorable arguments and opportunities to criticize his opponents. Proponents of a constructivist analysis decided to publish the controversial texts in the leading journal of Russian ethnology, *Etnologicheskoe Obozrenie* (successor to the famous *Sovetskaja Etnografija*), in order to contextualize the debates around the *Atlas*.[7] Prohibited in Uzbekistan, the scientific debates continued over the Internet and then in Russia, thanks to the drive of Russian ethnologists to prove the existence of a pluralistic debate on the ethnic issue, recognizing the right of various opinions to equal access to the public.

In Uzbekistan, the discussions took the form of a methodological and political controversy to assert the issue of the Uzbek nationhood. The accusations against the *Ethnic Atlas* came from the Institute of History of Uzbekistan, which has conventionally headed ethnographic research, since the Soviet tradition left no margin for autonomy to ethnology, considered an auxiliary science of history. Since the fall of 2003, important debates on the *Ethnic Atlas* have emerged in the electronic journal *Etno-Zhurnal*, written by Sh. Kamoliddin, an Arabist by training and program manager at the History Institute of the Academy of Sciences. A long article in the very official *Pravda Vostoka* followed on January 14–15, 2004, signed by Dilorom Alimova, director of the Institute of History, Zoia Arifkhanova, head of the Ethnology Department, and Kamoliddin. Members of the Institute of History involved in this controversy, well aware that a critique published in a newspaper as official as *Pravda Vostoka* made their position appear political rather than scholarly, tried to ground the internal debate in academic circles. In April 2004, they republished the same article (with slight changes) in the leading history journal of Uzbekistan, *O'zbekiston Tarihi*. The director of the Soros Foundation in Uzbekistan and main person embroiled in the affair, Alisher Ilkhamov, attempted to address these various criticisms, but *Pravda Vostoka* refused to publish his response.[8] He then defended his own cause in two papers published online in *Etno-Zhurnal* and on the website of the Soros Foundation in Uzbekistan, before its closure.

In "Objectivity and Accountability: That Which Should Not Be the *Ethnic Atlas of Uzbekistan*," Alimova, Arifkhanova, and Kamoliddin organize an ordered refutation of the work. They begin by criticizing the alphabetic nationality entries and the ambiguity of certain terms, such as the use of "ethnic minorities," considered in the Soviet tradition to be derogatory. "Ethnic groups" would be their preferred term of art. They challenge the failure of what they consider the rules governing ethnographic research, which require the systematic description of the ethno-demographic characteristics, specific culture, lifestyle, material culture, and rituals—in that order—of each ethnic group mentioned. The arguments, however, quickly become political. The "Tajik" entry describes the evident throughout the twentieth century process of Uzbekization as forced assimilation of Tajiks. Alimova asserts to the contrary, in accordance with official discourse, that it is a natural process of symbiosis between Tajik and Turkic peoples who existed for centuries, and notes the would-be increasing number of schools, and television and radio programs available in the Tajik language. Once past these criticisms, all modest and some well founded, the actual subject of the controversy appears: the historical discourse on the Uzbeks themselves, not the national minorities.

Ilkhamov, who is the sole author of the sections dealing with the Uzbeks, openly calls into question the mode of writing of national ethnogenesis that has been de rigueur for over half a century. He refers to the theories of constructivism developed in the West, the idea that the nation is a political, intellectual, and state construct, cites the "imagined communities" of Benedict Anderson, and says it would be "naïve to depict the formation of Uzbek nation as a natural and objective historical process (Ilkhamov, 2002)." He devotes an entire chapter to the construction of national identity during the Soviet period, placing special emphasis on the territorial division and establishment of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1924, recalling the edification of a codified literary language based on only one Uzbek dialect, and mentioning three major political forces that had an interest in developing an Uzbek national consciousness (the Jadids, the national Communists of the 1920s and 1930s before their liquidation during the Stalinist purges, and the party apparatus). Ilkhamov does not hide his rejection of official historiography on issues of ethnogenesis, accusing the Soviet classics of contributing to the "canonization of the Uzbek national history" (Ilkhamov, 2002) and turning the story into teleology of the nation. He notes above all that one of the fundamental ambiguities of Soviet ethnology, the confusion between the ethnos and the nation, causes many epistemological errors. When putting the *Atlas* online, Ilkhamov restated his conviction: "The notion of ethnogenesis seems not to fully reflect [reality] as it draws from the arsenal of the biological sciences, representing social processes such as natural historical phenomena, where the will of individuals, institutions, authorities, groups, and especially the elites, in short, social issues remain outside the framework of analysis (Ilkhamov, 2004)."

[6] *Channel One*, April 30, 2004.

[7] *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, no. 1, 2005.

[8] The informant wished to remain anonymous, interview conducted in Tashkent, February 19, 2004.

This iconoclastic reading of national identity raised an outcry from official circles, which the main figures from the Institute of History echoed. In the Soviet tradition, the arguments of their opponent Ilkhamov were not regarded as different, but as "unscientific,"(Alimova, Arifkhanova, & Kamoliddin, 2004) a term that crops up regularly throughout the articles published on the subject. The many references made by Ilkhamov to Western anthropology, discretely implying its theoretic superiority, shocked the Uzbek academic realm, which has limited access to the Western texts in question. As Alimova and her colleagues stated, "[Ilkhamov's] design is based on the theory, widely distributed in Western anthropology, of constructivism, which is far from being recognized as sound by the ethnological community since constructivism denies the existence of ethnic communities as objective realities and recognizes only ethnic characteristics constructed by men as a function of circumstances. As such, the formation of the Uzbek nation is understood not as a natural historical process, but as the result of a political construction (Alimova, Arifkhanova, & Kamoliddin, 2004)."

In the February 2004 article in *Etno-Zhurnal*, Kamoliddin continues these methodological considerations and focuses on accusations related to sociology. It seems to him that ethnogenesis "cannot be understood through popular sociological theories, but primarily by the principle of historicism (Kamoliddin, 2004)." Thus only the historian would have the adequate institutional competence to consider ethnic processes. Sociology could indeed "be useful for communities recently formed or being constituted on the territory of other nations, but cannot explain the history of peoples whose national formation occurred on the basis of an autochthonous population. (Kamoliddin, 2004)" This criticism of sociology is even more powerful as the discipline is almost nonexistent today in Uzbekistan. The Sociology Department of the Institute of History has been suppressed since 1993; Ilkhamov's training as a sociologist is therefore considered politically suspect. Ilkhamov replied to Kamoliddin that the national phenomena must be studied from a multidisciplinary perspective and not be the sole domain of ethnologists. He also criticized the accusation that he did not take into account the classic ethnographic themes and explained that politics, the elites, the authorities, and the state are also relevant for understanding the national consciousness (Ilkhamov, 2003).

This controversy may be interpreted as a disciplinary struggle. The Institute of History refused to see the ethnological field escape from its jurisdiction and be gradually taken over by researchers from sociology. By taking on national issues as research questions, sociologists encroach on territory considered in the Soviet tradition to be the very object of the ethnological discipline, the reason being its object of study and not its specific methods. The director of the Institute of History confirmed this reading, saying that "it is the Institute of History that should have published this *Atlas*"[9] and that it is unacceptable that the Soros Foundation had not consulted with researchers from the Institute or, as in the Soviet scientific tradition, given the manuscript for comments to a group of specialists. The book was not overseen by academics licensed on ethnic issues and the Institute of History was basically boycotted, although several *Atlas* authors were members of it. "No recognized ethnologists of Uzbekistan were aware of the preparation of this publication" (Alimova, Arifkhanova, & Kamoliddin, 2004). Anyway, according to Alimova, the sociologists are not allowed to encroach on a subject not belonging to them, making Ilkhamov a "dilettante" in the subject. The potency of the controversy is due in part to the especially difficult situation of contemporary Uzbek ethnology. The Institute of History is in the paradoxical situation of having in its possession one of the most sensitive areas of local scholarly life, a long and proud tradition of reflection on the subject, and pressure from political authorities in search of intellectual justification, a nearly impossible request due to the lack of positions. A book written by a sociologist supported by Western institutions, namely the Soros Foundation, can then only be seen as a kind of intellectual and disciplinary thief.

One of the main topics of debate is related to the legitimacy of nationhood. Kamoliddin accused Ilkhamov of implying that the Turkic peoples have always been inherently nomadic, whereas precisely the Uzbek historiography is based on the appropriation of a prestigious sedentary past. He thinks that "ancient Turks were the first inhabitants of Central Asia and constitute a part of the indigenous people of the region" (Kamoliddin, 2003). According to him, archeology has proven the existence of a large sedentary culture in this area from the second millennium BC, even before the arrival of Indo-Europeans, and Kamoliddin obviously wants to attribute this first civilization to Turks. "The latest toponymic and linguistic studies allow one to suppose that in the second millennium BC, the Dravidian-speaking peoples lived in close proximity and interaction with the proto-Turkic peoples, and these ties were broken by the flood of Indo-European arrivals" (Kamoliddin, 2003). It is therefore for him quite legitimate to state that "proto-Turks were the first inhabitants of this region and constituted a part of its ancient pre-Indo-European population".

The formation of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924, which Ilkhamov considered the founding event of the titular nation, cannot be understood by his opponents as a fundamental turning point in Uzbek history. They prefer to continue a teleological reading of Soviet discourse by presenting this as a simple and modest "step in the Turkic-Uzbek statehood," which has had many different state entities since antiquity. The Institute of History not only has an explicit negative position on the constructivist school, to which Ilkhamov refers, but updates the old Soviet critics, dating from the 1940s and 1950s, against presenting the Shaybanid dynasty as the rupture in the history of Uzbekistan. This would-be return by Ilkhamov to the sixteenth century is seen as an insult to the nation, whose national consciousness could not be so recent. The main accusation reveals the inherent affective and symbolic character of the attack against the *Atlas*: "By their anti-scientific views and preconceptions, these people [Western scholars and people close to them, like Ilkhamov] try to depict the Uzbeks and

[9] Interview with D. Alimova, Institute of History, Tashkent, February 19, 2004.

other Turkic peoples of Central Asia as uncultured nomads, pastoralists, immigrants and conquerors without any cultural traditions in the region… It is therefore necessary [for carrying out scientific research] to reject certain stereotypes rooted in historical science and misrepresentations of the role of the Turkic peoples in history" (Alimova, Arifkhanova, & Kamoliddin, 2004).

Conclusions

The unexpected scope of the controversy surrounding twenty pages summarizing the construction of the modern Uzbek nation reveals the depth of interactions between the political realm and academic discourse, which already was mainstream when ethnology was thought by the Soviet authorities to be a justification for their nationality policies. The fact that these pages were financed by a Western foundation regarded by the Uzbek authorities as highly politicized has poisoned the scientific debate. The underlying political motives are obvious; the *Ethnic Atlas* was only a pretext for the closure of the Soros Foundation. However, the criticisms orchestrated against it should not only be apprehended as a simple command of the ruling power; infighting among local academics is real. The quasi ban of sociology in contemporary Uzbekistan and condemnation of theories as being constructivist, precisely because they "come from the West," illustrates the maintenance of essentialist schemes that were a part of Soviet humanities.

The issues are also internal to post-Soviet science, now partly divided between an old guard formed in the 1960s and younger generations, some of which are eager to embrace Western views when they are available, which is hardly the case in Uzbekistan. The academics are also split by the financial challenges that contemporary research faces today. Researchers who have managed to join Western institutions or obtain funds find themselves obtaining salaries much higher than those given by the Uzbek state, but are exposed to their colleagues' reactions, which combine material envy and a sense of betrayal towards the national community. The very small number of scientific publications appearing in Uzbekistan exacerbates the problem; the visibility of the *Ethnic Atlas* in an almost non-existent editorial environment then increases it tenfold. These conflicts, however, are not only generational or material, they also divide the researchers according to their perception of the social role they have played or play in the post-Soviet political changes for almost two decades. Some believe that the demise of the Soviet Union does not necessitate a questioning of its intellectual legacy, while others feel they must link these two phenomena and therefore challenge Soviet precepts on the national question.

Whether the perspective given on the issue of collective identity is based on "constructivist" or "primordialist" assumptions, the authors involved in this controversy are well aware of the high degree of politicization of the subject. Both the Institute of History, which felt compelled to offer a scientific argument for political will, and the Soros Foundation, which could go against the official view of national history, are voluntarily and involuntarily committed to issues beyond the humanities and social sciences. Uzbekistan, like its post-Soviet neighbors, has combined political issues and the national question. The difficulty in accepting the failure of a contemporary democratic Central Asia emerging from the Soviet experience seems to be associated with a stiffening of conceptions of nationhood. The discursive inflation suffered by the national theme then reveals how it is perceived by the ruling circles as the only possible ideological escape and is thought, rightly or wrongly, as able to avoid any reconsideration of the political system in place.

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