John Schoeberlein
Central Asian Culture and Society (Islamic Civilizations 124)
Syllabus for the course offered in Spring 2000
Harvard University
Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

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Islamic Civilizations 124.

Central Asian Culture and Society

Spring term, Wednesdays, 2:00 - 4:00 plus an additional meeting time to be arranged. Coolidge Hall, Room 215.

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The course explores the diversity and continuity in contemporary Central Asian culture and society and their historical roots. After building a basis of knowledge of the pre- and early-modern history of the region and of its contemporary political context and institutions, the course will approach Central Asian culture, social structure and everyday life from a variety of angles. These will include perspectives available in various types of literature on the region, including the travel accounts of travelers to the region from pre-modern to recent time, indigenous literary folklore traditions, 19th-century Orientalist scholarship, and contemporary scholarly approaches. The course will draw on ethnographic accounts to develop a rich picture of the social meaning and cultural context of ways of life (from the historical caravan trade and pastoral nomadism to contemporary collective farm and urban life), community rituals, social institutions, religious practices, moral sensibilities and aesthetic traditions.

Note: The course is intended primarily for advanced undergraduates and graduate students; some background in the Islamic world and/or the former Soviet Union is desirable. Enrollment may be limited.

Themes and Objectives of the Course

The objective of this course is to undertake two key projects:

1) To understand the society and culture of a part of the world utterly different from the West;
2) To explore the problems associated with coming to this understanding.

We will do this in the context of former Soviet Central Asia, a region which is separated from the West by a number of circumstances, including:

1) Historical isolation from Europe due to its physical remoteness in the middle of Asia, and the European imperialists’ marginal interest in this area.
2) “The Iron Curtain” which severely limited the flow of information and ideas across a line far to the west of Central Asia, and isolated the region from other parts of the Islamic world.
3) Central Asia’s marginal position within the Soviet empire, which resulted in only limited integration into the social-political system centered in Moscow—the core system which was relatively familiar to Westerners.
4) The Christianity/Islam divide which looms large in Western consciousness, confusing people about what they see across these lines.

5) The haze of romanticism which hangs over Western experience of these parts, with their oases, turbans, dervishes, and veils.

The first meetings of the class will be devoted to ensuring that all students have a basic background knowledge about Central Asia and its historical and current regional context. Then we will proceed to an exploration of a variety of important themes in the life of Central Asia. These encompass the social, political and cultural systems which determine how Central Asians experience and act in their world. These themes will include:

1) Kinship, genealogy, and the social relationships on which people base their approach to everything from day-to-day family life and their understandings of the past to career development and political allegiances.

2) Political domination and cultural clashes resulting from Central Asia’s position in the Russian/Soviet empire, and the selective adoption of “modern”, “Western” culture.

3) Women’s roles and other issues of autonomy and social order in a society where fundamentally incompatible concepts coexist which govern these things.

4) How people have survived and flourished economically before Soviet domination, under socialism, and following the break-up of the Soviet system.

5) How people interact with the state in the framework of all-encompassing bureaucracy and changing ideologies.

6) Names, identity, and the diverse concepts of group commonalty which govern people’s lives.

7) Language as a medium of expression and communication as well as an arena for political manipulation of identities.

8) The role of history in contemporary self-conceptualization in this part of the world where history “runs very deep.”

9) Islam in its various dimensions—as a system of religious convictions, as a set of defining principles of social order, as a cause for political mobilization, and so on.

10) The rhythm of daily life, the physical structure of rural and urban existence, and the rituals and events that mark life-courses and structure experience (pastoralism, caravan trade, madrasa training, war, etc.).

11) Modes of expression—ranging from the arts, public festivals and games to political discourse—aesthetic traditions and moral sensibilities, and the influences on these from all sides—especially from Europe via Russia and from the Islamic world at large.

This list is not final and may be added to depending on the interests of the class, which will determine how much attention we give to a particular theme. We will approach these subjects through sources of a variety of different types, potentially including:

1) Accounts of travelers to the region from pre-modern to recent times.

2) Indigenous literary and folklore traditions.
3) Nineteenth century Orientalist scholarship.
4) Ethnographic literature of Imperial Russian, Soviet and other scholars.
5) Western scholarly approaches, including “Sovietology” and the “Transition” literature.
6) Journalism and fiction.

Each of these types of sources presents us with problems of interpretation—what implications do the authors’ selectivity and perspective have for the picture we get from them? We will also draw on “live sources”—the various people around the Harvard area who either are from the region themselves, or have conducted research there.

**Requirements**

This course is predicated on an active role on the part of the participants. Lectures will be minimal—only providing “chunks” of background or introductory information to introduce a new theme, where necessary. The majority of class time will be devoted to discussion. The students will each define for themselves what particular areas and themes they personally wish to explore in greatest depth. There will be limited regular assigned readings on a given theme, but students will also be expected to explore the sources more deeply depending on the particular topics on which they have chosen to focus. Those who can make use of sources in Russian, Central Asian, or other languages will be have the chance to do so. Students will alternate in taking responsibility for the course topics. Those responsible for the given topic will explore the sources in greater depth, give careful thought to how the topic should be explored, and lead class discussion.

Evaluation of the student’s performance in the course will be based on the following:

1) **Presentation/discussion leading**: Several times in the course of the semester, each student will have responsibility for preparation and presentation of comments and discussion points on a given topic.

2) **Participation**: Each student is expected to keep current on the readings and to make regular, constructive contributions to discussions.

3) **Two short papers**: These will not be exhaustive studies, but rather thematic explorations. A “short” paper is in the neighborhood of 15-20 pages, though the length should be determined by what is appropriate for the chosen topic. Topics are selected in consultation with the instructor (it is your responsibility to begin early enough so you find the subject and materials which are suitable). The first paper will be due on **Friday, March 24** (which is just before Spring Break; if you don’t mind spoiling your break with it, you may submit it on Monday, April 3). The second paper is due on **May 17** (the last day of reading period; no exceptions).

**Readings**

Assigned readings will generally be made available as photocopies (they may be picked up in the Central Asian Studies Program Office: Coolidge Hall, room 224A). The weekly plan of
readings will be made available after we learn of the specific interests and level of experience of the students in the class. In addition to weekly readings, students may find it useful to read and/or buy the following three books:

Allworth, Edward A., ed.

Bacon, Elizabeth Emaline

Eickelman, Dale F.

**Course Schedule**

**Week of February 7**

**What is Central Asia?**

Bacon, Elizabeth Emaline

Auerbach, Jon

**Week of February 14**

**Contested Identity**

Schoeberlein-Engel, John

Schoeberlein-Engel, John
Week of February 21

History Written onto the Present

Caroe, Olaf Kirkpatrick [Sir]  

Golden, Peter  

Porkhomovsky, Victor Ya.  

Also, refer back to your previous reading:

Bacon, Elizabeth E.  

Week of February 28

Tribes and Names: Changing Concepts over Time

Allworth, Edward  

Barfield, Thomas Jefferson  

Manz, Beatrice  

Week of March 7

How to Think about Islam?

Bennigsen, Alexandre, and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay  
Halbach, Uwe

Tapper, Richard

Togan, İsenbike

**Week of March 14**

**Sub-National Identities: Regions, Elites, Clans**

Alimov, Kadir Z.

Edgar, Adrienne

Collins, Kathleen A.

**Week of March 21**

**Perspectives on Perspectives**

Shnirelman, Victor A.

Khalid, Adee
Harris, Colette  

Martin, Virginia  

*Week of March 28 - Spring Break*

*Week of April 3*

**New Approaches? Gender and Religion**

Alimova, Dilarom A.  

Tett, Gillian  

Fathi, Habiba  

Tyson, David  

*Week of April 10*

**Forming Nationalities**

Slezkine, Yuri  
1994 “The USSR as a communal apartment, or How a Socialist state promoted ethnic particularism,” *Slavic review*, 53(2) 414-452.

Edgar, Adrienne  

Smith, Graham, et al  
Suny, Ronald Grigor

**Week of April 17**

**Language and Politics**

Kreindler, Isabelle T.

Schlyter, Birgit N.

Dave, Bhavna

**Week of April 24**

**Modernity and Post-Colonialism**

Black, Cyril Edwin, Louis Benjamin Dupree, Elizabeth Endicott-West, Daniel C. Matuszewski, Eden Naby and Arthur N. Waldron

Lyons, Shawn T.

Michaels, Paula A.

Slezkine, Yuri
2000 “Imperialism as the highest stage of Socialism,” *Russian review*, 59:227-234.

**Week of May 1**

**What Determines Central Asia’s Future?**

Pipes, Daniel
1992 “The politics of the ‘Rip Van Winkle’ states: The southern tier states of the ex-Soviet Union have moved the borders of the Middle East north,” *Middle East Insight*, 1992(3)30-44.
Ochs, Michael
Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press.

Horsman, Stuart

Lubin, Nancy, et al
1999 Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and dialogue in the heart of Central Asia.