

## Central Asia and Great Silk Road

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### **Abstract**

In the lecture will be discussed the changing processes of such terminology as "Central Asia", "Middle Asia", "Turkestan", "Kazakhstan and Middle Asia", "Inner Asia" during the beginning of the 19-21 centuries. At the same time Central Asia was a zone of transcontinental trade land routes where the Great Silk Road served a mission of unifying line of Asian nations, a meeting place for nomadic and settled agricultural civilization.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Kazakh steppe, the interaction of nomadic and settled agricultural civilizations, the way of unification and unity of the Asian peoples

Lecture presented by the project 'Asian community course' has two objectives

1. How was the content of the term "Central Asia" being changed during the 19th and the beginning of 21c.?
2. The role of Silk Road on the territory of Central Asia in the Middle Ages and today

I. The content of the term "Central Asia" was being changed depending on the historical time, political situations, the position of the authors to the geographical and historical phenomena. For this reason appeared different names of the region ("Central Asia", "Turkestan", "Inner Asia", "Kazakhstan and Central Asia") and differences in the determination of the Central Asian borders.

The term "Central Asia" first became a part of geographical and historical scholarship in the 19th century, thanks to the German natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt (1843).<sup>1</sup> According to scientific work of German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1886) the territory of "Central Asia" encompassed the space from Tibet in the south to the Altai in the north, and from the Pamir Mountains in the west to the Khingan range in the east. Richthofen described the lowlands between the Aral and Caspian Seas—which in the 18th and 19th centuries were dominated economically and culturally by Kazakhs of the tribal

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<sup>1</sup> A. Gumbol'd, Tsentral'naia Aziia: Issledovaniia o tseliakh gor i po sravnitel'noi klimatologii (Moscow: Tipo-litografiya I.N.Kushnereva, 1915).

confederation of the Alim-uli of the little Horde—as a transitional zone. The intermediate space of the Kazakh steppe that Richthofen identified reveals a distinct geopolitical feature of Kazakhstan, performed a linking role in the Central Asian system<sup>2</sup>.

Russian researchers of the first half of the 19th century characterized the territories of the little and Middle Hordes (the northern, western, and central parts of Kazakhstan) as the “Kirgiz-Kazak hordes and steppes” [*kirgiz-kaisatskie ordy i stepi*] but regarded the southern portions of the Kazakh steppe, controlled by the khanates of Kokand and Khiva and the emirate of Bukhara, as part of “Middle Asia.” This kind of territorial division used in Russian literature reflected the fact of transboundary position of Kazakh steppe. At the same time, the appearance of the term “Middle Asia” generated confusion in definition of boundaries such terms as Central Asia, Middle Asia. Evidence of this was the second edition of the Brockhaus and Efron *Small Encyclopedic Dictionary* of 1909, where there was a mixed term “Central Central Asia.”

One consequence of this terminological confusion was the appearance of the term “Turkestan” in Russian historical literature in the second half of the 19th century. Thus the renowned geographer V. P. Semenov-Tianshanskii in the term “Turkestan region” included the territories of the Transcaspian, Samarkand, Syr-dar’ia, Fergana, and Semirech’e regions and the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara—that is, the oasis parts of Middle Asia and the south of Kazakhstan.<sup>3</sup>

The division of Kazakhstan’s territory continued by inertia into the first years of Soviet power. On 30 April 1918, Soviet authorities created the Turkestan ASSR, with its capital at Tashkent, incorporating the southern part of Kazakhstan and the Middle Asian khanates. Some two years later, on 26 August 1920, the Kirgiz ASSR appeared. With its capital at Orenburg, it included the northern, western, and central parts of Kazakhstan. In essence, the Soviet government simply adopted the administrative-territorial division in the region that had existed in the Russian Empire (from 1882 to 1918)—that is, the Steppe general-governorship (for the central, northern, and western steppe) and the Turkestan general-governorship (for southern Kazakhstan). During the process of national delimitation of the Turkestan region in 1924–25 appeared new realities that have become basement for creation of new union republics within the USSR and the process of reunification of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand von Richthofen *Führer für Forschungsreisende: Anleitung zu Beobachtungen über Gegenstände der physischen Geographie und Geologie* (Berlin: R. Oppenheim, 1886), 745.

<sup>3</sup> I. V. Mushketov, *Turkestan. Geologicheskoe i orfograficheskoe opisanie po dannym, sobrannym vo vremia putestvii s 1874 po 1880*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia M. M. Stasiulevicha, 1886–1906).

southern part of Kazakhstan with the main territory of the Kazakh ASSR and capital from the southern Ural region (Orenburg) was moved to the city of Kyzylorda (previously Akmechet' and Perovsk) on the right bank of the Syr darya River. Simultaneously, the concept of "Turkestan," which Soviet authorities had previously associated with the separatist ideas of pan-Turkism, was excluded from Soviet scholarly literature and replaced by the term "Middle Asia."

A distinction between the terms "Central Asia" and "Middle Asia" reappeared later in Soviet scholarly literature. *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (1976) defined "Central Asia" as the territory of the People's Republic of Mongolia and a large part of China. During that time the term Middle Asia was defined as the territory occupied by the Uzbek, Kirgiz, Tajik, and Turkmen SSRs<sup>4</sup>.

Meanwhile the territory of Kazakhstan was not included to the concept Central Asia and Middle Asia. In order to get out of this situation in the Soviet historical science was introduced the concept of Middle Asia and Kazakhstan. On the one hand, this combination of the "Middle Asia and Kazakhstan" emphasized the interconnectedness of the region, but also reflected an existing distinction between them in terms of both space and history. At the same time in western literature the Soviet combination of the term "Middle Asia and Kazakhstan" had the meaning as Central Asia. Moreover, in 1980 in the framework of international educational project under the aegis of UNESCO a scholarly collective produced a six-volume work titled *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, where Central Asian region was presented as a historical - cultural and geographical space distinguished by a relative internal unity, shared high culture and linguistic similarities.<sup>5</sup> Along with the concept of Central Asia in literature, more in foreign studies, commonly used term "Inner Asia". Also famous researcher I.V. Mushketov had proposed that "Inner" and "Central" Asia were not synonyms. This term, introduced into scientific circulation by geographers at the beginning of the twentieth century reflected continental, comparatively closed character of the territory, the absence of an outlet to the sea, the difficulties of connecting it to worldwide communication networks and thus to broader processes of modernization.

Western scholars, the term Inner Asia understand the territory of Mongolia, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, Inner Mongolia, Tuva, Buryatia. It is symptomatic that today in modern research appeared a new name of Central Eurasia, whose supporters

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<sup>4</sup> Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia, vol. 24, book 1 (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1976), 377

<sup>5</sup> L. I. Miroshnikov "A Note on the Meaning of the Term 'Central Asia' as Used in this Book," *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 1 (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1992), 470.

consider it necessary to attach to the Central Asian Turkic-speaking regions of the Caspian, Volga, Ural and Southern Siberia.

Thus, the name of the Central, Middle, Inner Asia, Turkestan indicate on the cross-border position of the region, which is almost two thousand years stood at the crossroads of the great trade routes of the world civilizations and cultures connecting Europe with Asia. In fact, Central Asia before the era of great geographical discoveries justified its name, not only in geographical position, but also by a place in the global trading system. Renowned scientist Andre Frank, founder of the world-system analysis, suggested that the peoples of Central Asia for a long time played a central role in world history<sup>6</sup>. His point of this was first justified by Kazakh scientists Sanjar Asfendiyarov (1889-1938), who hypothesized that before the great geographical discoveries nomadic peoples had a major impact on the socio-political and cultural-historical processes in Europe and Asia. This idea responds to a question that Central Asia was a zone of transcontinental trade land routes and on the second question which was risen before.

2. Review of the role of the Silk Road as unifying highway for people of Central South-East Asia as meeting place for nomadic and settled agricultural civilization corresponds to the idea of the second question. This space between civilizations, cultures caused the specifics, a special development of Central Asia, through which the history of this territory became part of different civilizations and cultures, as a nomadic and settled. The Great Silk Road as a trade route was not something frozen and permanent.

Throughout the centuries some parts of the route became important some disappear, leading to the decline of city and centers. The choice of the route was depended largely on the political and economic balance of power on the Eurasian continent.

Special flourishing of Silk Road<sup>7</sup>, which took place on the territory of Central Asia reached in VIII-XII centuries. Most major cities on the caravan route that went along the Syr Darya, were Otrar-Farab and Shavgar. The name of the first city is still preserved in the name of a large settlement located not far from the confluence of Aral the Syr Darya rivers. Otrar was a knot of many caravan routes. From here one road led to Shavgar, and the other – to the ferriage through Syr Darya, than went up along the Syr Darya through Oguz city Syutkent in Shash

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<sup>6</sup> Andre Gunder Frank. *The Centrality of Central Asia* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1992), 52

<sup>7</sup> K. Baipakov Veliky shelkovyi put': na territorii Kazakhstana. Almaty: Adamar.2007

and down - in Jenda<sup>8</sup>. Also from this through the Kyzyl-Kum was laid track in Khorezm, Urgench, and then - in the Volga region and the Caucasus.

From the main road of the Silk Road, passing through southern Kazakhstan and the Semirechye, began roads to the north and east, which led to areas of the regions of the Central and Eastern Kazakhstan to Steppe Desht'-Kipchak, later known as Sary-Arka, to the banks of the Irtysh river, to Altai and Mongolia. Here was the steppe road. Wealthy with cattle, wool, leather, metal parts of Central Kazakhstan were involved in trade relations, embracing international, and were included to the system of the Silk Road by many caravan routes. The main subject of trade remained silk. Along with gold, it was an international currency, it was used as gift to kings and ambassadors, as a salary to mercenary troops and paid as government debt.

Silk and part of the goods (the spread of cultivated plants: grapes, peaches and melons, spices, sugar, fruits and vegetables, herbs), transported along the Silk Road were settled in the cities of Central Asia. Among the rare discoveries that are important for the study of international trade refers to silver treasure from Otrar. The composition of the coin treasure is unique: it presents mints of west Turkestan, Europe, Minor Asia cities. Time of coinage dated to the second half of the 60s. of XIII century. The treasure contains a kind of "business card" of cities, which were located on the Silk Road.

The idea of the world's religions was also spread on the Silk Road.<sup>9</sup> In the early Middle Ages the role of the main Buddhist missionaries took the Sogdians - people living on the territory of Sogdiana, that was located in the Zarafshan River Valley - from modern Bukhara (Uzbekistan) to Khujand (Tajikistan). According to the Soviet orientalist Vasily Bartold Sogdians in their commercial and cultural contribution to the region can be called "Central Asia Phoenicians" For a long time the Sogdian language was the international language of the Caspian Sea to Tibet. It writing became the basis for the Uigur, Mongolian and Manchurian letters. They played an important role in the spread of Buddhism in Central Asia. An analysis of the terms of the Turkic Buddhist texts of East Turkestan suggests that they were adopted under the interposition of the Sogdians. Buddhist monuments are found in a number of cities on the route of the Great Silk Road.

According to the Orientalists in the first half of VII century some rulers of the Western Turks became Buddhists or patronized Buddhism.

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<sup>8</sup> Baipakov K. Srednevekovye goroda Kazakhstana na velikom Shelkovom puti. Almaty, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> See: Baipakov K. <http://www.kazpravda.kz/articles/view/u-religioznoi-tolerantnosti-drevnie-korni/>

This was due to their transition to a settled way of life and the city life. Buddhist Monuments discovered in the sites of Chu Valley Ak-Beshim, Red River, Novopokrovskiy, Novopavlovsk: churches, monasteries, chapels and statues and steles with Buddhist characters and scenes.

Along with Buddhism on the Silk Road, coming from the West to the East the Christianity was spread, which came from Syria.

Kairaks are related to the religious symbolism of the Central Asian Christians - Nestorian tombstones with inscriptions and symbols.

The evidence about the existence of Christian communities in the Seven Rivers are known not only because of the Syrian gravestones inscriptions, but also due to the Sogdian inscriptions on ceramics.

On the Silk Road Manichaeism was spread, which arose in the III century in Iran, and quickly gained a large number of devotees from Italy to China. It represented the whole synthesis of Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Sogdians played the leading role in the spread of Manichaeism too. Early in VIII century the supreme head of the Manichaeans had residence in Samarkand. Manichaeism coexisted with Buddhism in Central Asia for a long time, and Buddhism had a strong influence on the pantheon, the terminology and even the concept of Manichaeism.

In discovered in the Turfan oasis ancient uigur manuscript of Manichean writings "Sacred book of the two foundations," states that this book was written in the city "Argu-Talas Altyn Argu Talas-Ulush, Talas-Ulush", "to awaken (faith) in the country ten arrows ". Here was written about the famous city Taraz. Among the inhabitants of the medieval cities of Central Asia were the representatives and Zoroastrianism emerged in the VII-VI centuries BC. on the territory of ancient Iran. Monuments of Zoroastrianism can be traced in Sughd in Syrdarya cities and Semirechye. They were preserved in the topography of settlements Kostobe and the Red River. For example, in Otrar homes of XII century archaeologists discovered the fireplace-altars fixed in floor.

Sources telling about the events of late VIII-IX centuries., gives evidence about e Islamization of the population of Central Asia. Spread Islam gradually supplanted Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and local cults. New religion was established in many cities on the Silk Road.

Karluks who captured from 766 year the political dominance in Semirechye, and in the south of Kazakhstan, underwent the greatest influence of Muslim culture. At the beginning of the tenth century. Islam was accepted by the ancestor founder of the dynasty Karahaind Satuq, and his son Bogra-Khan Harun Musa in 960 year declared Islam the state religion.

Contemporaries of those distant events wrote not only about the success of their countries, but also about the assimilation of the values of

foreign cultures, and this was the main content of one of the real forms of global culture.

Along with the distribution of the goods, cultural samples in the applied arts, and architecture there was also the process of spreading art of music and dance, spectacular performances. The Great Silk Road ceased to exist at the end of the XVI century. This period in Central Asia has been marked by wars and the collapse of the Mongol Empire and the Golden Horde. "After the disappearance of the" Great Silk Road "with the beginning of sailing on the territory of Central Asia great states were not existed any more. Our countries have turned to the regions, which have remained for a long time on the margins of world politics. On the revival of the historic route started talking seriously only at the end of the XX century, when the new technologies and transport made it possible for big transcontinental transportation in difficult weather conditions, while maintaining their profitability.

So, in the early 1990s was actively discussed the project of Trans-Eurasian combined highway, which is partly repeated the route of the Great Silk Road, passing through the territory of China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Turkey and Georgia. As a result of 3 May 1993 on conference of trade and transport minister in Brussels was signed a declaration on the establishment of the route TRASESA - Transport Corridor Europe - Caucasus - Asia<sup>10</sup>.

Creating of individual transport corridors was finally formulated as a revival of the route of the Silk Road in 2012. Then on the 25th session of the Foreign Investors Council, President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev announced the launch of a large-scale project "New Silk Road". This integrated mega-project for the construction of transport infrastructure will link China and other countries in Southeast Asia, Europe, Africa and the Arab world. Its main areas will lay (some already exist) through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan. Output to Europe will be organized through Iran or Turkey. The passage of transport corridors through the region of Central Asia makes it a center of transit and logistics processes, which allows to obtain high socio-economic results.

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<sup>10</sup> See: Ospanov G.M. Sovremennyy etap rasvitiya Velikogo Shelkovogo puti //Veasnik Kargu.2011; <http://articlekz.com/article/5557>