



Rasulov, A. (2017) Central Asia as an object of Orientalist narratives in the Age of Bandung. In: Eslava, L., Fakhri, M. and Nesiha, V. (eds.) *Bandung, Global History and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, pp. 215-231. ISBN 9781107123991 (doi:[10.1017/9781316414880.015](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316414880.015))

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Deposited on: 30 May 2018

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Central Asia As An Object of Orientalist Narratives in the Age of Bandung

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Introduction

What was Central Asia's relationship to Bandung? The easiest way to begin answering this question would probably be to turn to the Bandung conference itself, by examining the various paper trails left in its wake, consulting its record of proceedings, analysing the preparatory *travaux* behind its final communique, sifting through the personal archives left behind by its main figures and participants. But the easiest way isn't always the best way, especially when it comes to the treacherous business of history-writing.

From today's point of view, one of the most significant but also in many ways ideologically ambivalent legacies of the Bandung conference, undoubtedly, was the great critical impetus it gave to the concerted reformulation that followed in its wake of the hitherto prevalent theories of colonialism – both those rooted in the old liberal tradition which construed colonialism as a form of benevolent international “guardianship” and a vehicle for the *mission civilisatrice* and its Marxist-Leninist counterpart that sought to reduce it to a geopolitical emanation of the predatory logic of capitalist production and exploitation. The fundamental reorganisation that the Bandung generation brought to the post-1960 understanding of colonialism began in part as a principled rejection of both of these models.

On its surface, the new vision seemed to share quite a lot in common with the traditional Marxist-Leninist approach: an openly anti-colonialist political orientation, a fundamental refusal to separate the question of colonialism's economic foundations from its political forms and legal instruments, a highly hostile attitude towards any version of the benevolent guardianship thesis, etc. At the level of its basic philosophical organisation, however, it marked an unmistakably radical departure from the classical tenets of Marxism-Leninism. In lieu of the latter's firmly classocentric ontology it sought to put in place a much more complex and eclectic analytical framework which at times seemed to accord far less importance to the global division of labour and economic exploitation than to what in the eyes of the Marxist-Leninist approach would have been normally categorised as purely cultural – and thus historically non-primary – forces and phenomena.

For most ideologists of the Bandung project, the essence of colonialism's greatest crime against the colonial peoples lay as much in its fateful contribution to the proliferation of the discourses of racial supremacism and the idea of the ‘white man's burden’ – the thesis, as Edward Said put it, “that certain territories and people [actually] *require* and beseech domination”¹ – as in its facilitation of the various invasions, oppression, and dispossession which it inspired and legitimised. What precisely may have been the underlying connections between these different phenomena – which was first, the chicken of the white man's burden or the egg of colonial conquest? – had been for the most part left unaddressed and unexplored, most likely due to the lack of sufficient political consensus and intellectual homogeneity: the Bandung movement was, after all, a broad church. But one inevitable consequence of the emergence of this new kind of theoretical indeterminacy – and the point where the Bandung approach departed from the Soviet Marxist model most decisively – was the tremendous impetus it gave to the soon to be inaugurated concepts of neo-colonialism and internal colonialism.

¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 9 (1993).

The workings of this process, in retrospect, could be said to resemble the operation of what the Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky called the uncle-nephew principle. In literary genealogy, argued Shklovsky, the lineage of a tradition tends never to be direct: “the legacy that is passed from one generation to the next moves not from father to son, but from uncle to nephew.”² By all logic, given their fundamentally economic structures, the concepts of neo-colonialism and internal colonialism *should* have been developed by the inheritors of the traditional Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. It just seemed so fitting and “neat”, both in theoretical and ideological terms. The fact that it took the Bandungian “deviation” for the necessary critical shifts to occur raises against this background an interesting conundrum. What was that causal dynamics which both enabled and necessitated this particular turn of events? What was the structural connection that linked the Bandung enterprise with the articulation of these new critical concepts? Why did the intellectual breakthrough they brought to the discourse on colonialism take place in that particular theoretical milieu in which it did? The answer, seen from today’s perspective, seems no clearer than it was at the time this pattern first started to take shape, but the most likely explanation is probably that it has something to do with Bandung’s essentially open-textured ideological climate, or what to extend Shklovsky’s metaphor one might call the liberating effect of not being bound by any code of filial loyalty.

Free from the burden of having to stay within the strict boundaries inherited from any set of founding fathers, the Bandung theorists enjoyed a kind of imaginal freedom their Soviet and East European contemporaries could never afford. The inevitable price they paid for this, as one would imagine, was a certain culture of pervasive self-contradictoriness: the great intellectual flexibility that comes in the wake of a newly inaugurated regime of theoretical openness always brings with itself a healthy dose of cacophony. But sometimes it is precisely out of the most cacophonous chaos that the most ingenious visions emerge. By partially displacing the traditional vocabulary of Marxist political economy in favour of a new set of culture-centric readings of the colonial enterprise, the Bandung generation managed to create a series of epistemological openings that allowed the critical thought which entered them to process the rapidly shifting geopolitical realities of the time in a way that proved at once both far more inventive and far more insightful than anything that could have been achieved under the conditions of classical *diamat*. And nowhere was this fact made more visible than when it came to registering the mechanics of the new forms of domination and exploitation.

From the point of view of its formal structure, at the centre of this epistemological breakthrough lay a very simple but powerful idea: there had emerged in recent times a fundamentally new kind of governance dynamics, one that had become so ideologically refined and juridically sophisticated in terms of its external organisation that its essentially *colonialist* character could no longer be detected through any traditional means of analytically rigorous theoretical examination. The only way to uncover this elusive colonialist kernel, at this point, was to go intellectually eclectic: to suspend the rigid principle of the hierarchical importance of the economic in favour of a far more impressionistic and loose approach that focused on mobilizing a more diverse range of critical arguments and perspectives.

Most of what is typically filed today under the rubric of postcolonial studies still unfolds in the shadow of this great analytical loosening. Even if the Bandung conference had left behind it no other trace, this fact alone would have been enough to earn it a central place in the history of the 20th century political thought, even more so if one looks at it from the point of view of those parts of the Soviet landmass which its traditionally Eurocentric

² Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose* 190 (trans. by Benjamin Sher; 1990).

histories have otherwise tended to leave out of the frame of their discussion. For, indeed, one of the most important legacies of the Bandung project – for the Third World peoples as well as for the citizens of the then Second World – was the possibility it had created of finally being able to start a serious *left-leaning* conversation not only about the USSR’s great historical struggle against all forms of Western colonialism around the world but also its own highly ambivalent relationship with the colonial enterprise within its own territory. And in no context did the historical pressure to begin that conversation as soon as possible appear more urgent than in the Soviet Central Asia.

The Contingency of Central Asia

In the contemporary global consciousness the *idea* of Central Asia is most commonly associated with three main themes: Islamic fundamentalism, political authoritarianism, and oil. It has not always been this way. As recently as the mid-twentieth century, most foreign scholarship about Central Asia had “all but ignored [any] religious issues,”³ and the concept of the region’s considerable oil resources did not generally appear on the international radar until well into the 1990s. Still, one only needs to look at the titles of some of the more popular volumes published about Central Asia in recent years to get a general sense of just how deeply ingrained this pattern of associations has become.⁴ But what, if anything, could that tell us about the ultimate meaning of “Central Asia”? How much certainty could it bring to our understanding of it?

For, indeed, it seems there is not much really one could say about Central Asia today other than that it is a category that seems to be most frequently used to describe that contiguous land-locked area which is comprised of the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.⁵ Anything more than that and one immediately enters the territory of open speculation. To be sure, the term itself seems like a fairly stable discursive construct: dozens of documents, articles, and books are published every year about “Central Asia.” Its apparent geographical etymology, however, is rather obviously a ruse: modern usage has no knowledge of “Northern Asia” and only very little of “Western Asia”;⁶ Russia, the region’s immediate neighbour to the north, is traditionally classed as part of “Eastern Europe”; Iran, one of its two main neighbours to the south, is categorised as “Middle East.” Whatever is usually included under the rubric of “East Asia” seems to start so far away to the east, it would be difficult to see how that region could be said to have any common boundaries with what is typically identified as Central Asia—unless, of course, one decides to extend the category of East Asia to the whole of mainland China, in which case the westernmost segment of East Asia would actually be found directly to the *south* of Central Asia and, thus, only slightly to the south of Eastern Europe.

Even more crucially, it does not take any significant effort to determine that outside the plane of Western scholarly discourses there has never been historically such a thing as a distinctly *Central Asian* cultural, geographic, or political space, let alone a distinctly *Central*

³ Will Myer, *Islam and Colonialism: Western Perspectives on Soviet Asia* 101 (2002).

⁴ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil And Fundamentalism In Central Asia* (2001); Rob Johnson, *Oil, Islam And Conflict: Central Asia Since 1945* (2007); David Lewis, *The Temptations Of Tyranny In Central Asia* (2008); Eric Mcglinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (2011); Wojciech Ostrowski, *Politics and Oil in Kazakhstan* (2011); Martha Brill Olcott, *In The Whirlwind of Jihad* (2012).

⁵ See, Eg, Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules* 4 (2012); Eric Sievers, *The Post-Soviet Decline Of Central Asia* 207, n.1 (2003).

⁶ Outside the United Nations reporting system, one would be hard pressed to identify any context in which the term “Western Asia” is used today with any degree of consistency. See *United Nations Statistics Division*, <http://Millenniumindicators.Un.Org/Unsd/Methods/M49/M49regin.Htm>.

Asian ideological project, however far in the past one goes. There was certainly nothing of the kind when Alisher Nawaii first began to discard Farsi in favour of Turki (old Uzbek) as the language of choice for Central Asian classical poetry; nor when Munis Khorazmi started compiling *Firdavs-ul-iqbol*, the literary chronicle of Khorezm's history.⁷ Nor could one find, however hard one might look, any signs of centralasianism during the period when Tamerlane's armies marched on Isfahan and Ankara; nor when Shaybani Khan's army drove out Tamerlane's descendants, the soon-to-be great Mughals, from Samarkand and into India.⁸ Indeed, as far as the history of the region's indigenous cultural and ideological dynamics is concerned, the one category that absolutely seems to have never been part of any local lived cultural-ideological realities is that which corresponds to the present-day conception of Central Asia. It is not only true, thus, that the idea of Central Asia "does not carry any [determinate] cultural or historical meaning for the people in the region"⁹ today—it has never done that in the past either. And so the speculations inevitably have to start: if it has no traceable indigenous roots or precursors, where *does* the idea of Central Asia then come from? Or, in other words, if the entire concept of Central Asia is an "invented tradition,"¹⁰ who was it invented by and to what end?

For most of the last two centuries preceding the Russian arrival in the region, the territory presently regarded as Central Asia would have been typically viewed by its inhabitants as being split between two fundamentally distinct cultural-political domains: that populated mainly by the sedentary peoples of the Bukharan Emirate and the Khivan and Kokand Khanates and that traditionally controlled by the nomadic Turkic tribes, the so-called country of *Dasht-i-Kipchak*.¹¹ After the first half-century of the Russian rule, the dominant trend of identitarian practices assumed an even more fragmented pattern: in addition to the two ancient dichotomies between the sedentary and the nomadic "countries" and between the Persophones and the Turkic speakers history now added a whole new range of cultural and geopolitical divisions created as the result of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent civil war. Thus, by the early 1920s, the early Soviet policy would see the region divided into four main geopolitical units. On the one hand, there were the two Moscow-controlled ASSRs (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics): the Turkestan ASSR, which after the 1924 *natsional'noe razmezhevanie* was mostly absorbed into the newly formed Uzbekistan, and the Kirghiz ASSR. On the other hand, there were the two still formally independent Moscow-unaffiliated states of the Bukharan People's Soviet Republic (BPSR) and the Khorezmian People's Soviet Republic (KPSR).¹² By the 1930s, this structure changed yet again: the BPSR had been absorbed into the newly formed Uzbekistan, with its southern Persophone regions later carved out into a separate ASSR (future Tajikistan); the Turkestan ASSR and the KPSR, redistributed between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; and the Kirghiz ASSR, renamed Kazakhstan. A decade later the new formal configuration that developed out of this

⁷ See G. A. Rasulova, *Istoriia Uzbekskoi Klassicheskoi Literatury* 66, 138 (2nd Edn.; 2009).

⁸ See R.G. Mukminova, "The Timurid States In The Fifteenth And Sixteenth Centuries," in M. S. Asimov and C. E. Bosworth (eds.), *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. IV 347 (1998); R. G. Mukminova, "The Shaybanids," in Chahryar Adle et al. (eds.), *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. V 33 (2003).

⁹ Sally Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations* 31 (2012) (quoting Gul Ozcan).

¹⁰ See Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* 1 (1983).

¹¹ As traditionally defined, *Dasht-i-Kipchak* included the "steppes extending East and North of the Sea of Aral, a part of modern Siberia, the land North of the Caspian, and both sides of the Lower Volga." F. H. Skrine and E. D. Ross, *The Heart Of Asia: A History Of Russian Turkestan and the Central Asian Khanates from the Earliest Times* 182 (1899). For further background on this period, see also Adle, *supra* n.8.

¹² See Kh. Sh. Inoyatov et al. (eds.), *Istoriia Bukharskoi Narodnoi Sovetskoi Respubliki* (1976); Kh. Sh. Inoyatov et al. (eds.), *Istoriia Khorezmskoi Narodnoi Sovetskoi Respubliki* (1976).

period saw the region divided into four federal-level republics of Soviet “Middle Asia” (*Sredniaia Aziya*)—the Kirghiz SSR, the Tajik SSR, the Turkmen SSR, and the Uzbek SSR—with the Kazakh SSR now being formally excluded from the *sredneaziatskii* region as a standalone SSR.¹³

What sort of identitarian shifts may have accompanied these transformations in the region’s collective consciousness is hard to surmise. What is clear, nevertheless, is that at no point during this period did anything approaching the contemporary category of Central Asia make even a brief fleeting appearance within the region’s internal ideological-identitarian landscape. Unlike South America, which in the wake of its colonial and post-colonial struggles in the late 19th century had had its moment of *latinamericanismo*, Central Asia never experienced any kind of regionally focused ideological “awakening.” Even at the height of the tsarist oppression, the vast majority of anti-colonial and oppositional political movements in Central Asia articulated their politics either in terms of pan-Islamic or pan-Turkist identitarian projects.¹⁴

Looking at things from this angle, to propose that the concept of Central Asia should be regarded as an essentially foreign imposition¹⁵ and a “highly contingent construct”¹⁶ seems fairly self-evident. There is no objective “content” of any kind behind the idea of Central Asia, no fixed meaning, no in-built essence. Beyond the manifestly arbitrary linguistic convention which has limited its usage to the five-strong regional grouping comprised of the former Soviet Eastern republics, the term “Central Asia” has no stable conceptual definition. What stands behind it, in other words, is nothing more than a constantly changing stream of speculative imagination, myths, fantasies, and desires. The only question that is left to ask for us at this point, therefore, is: *which* particular myths, fantasies, and desires have been injected into this stream of imagination at the time of Bandung?

Central Asia’s Place in Soviet Foreign Policy in the 1950s

Most students of international relations today will know nothing of the remarkable record of economic and social development achieved by the Soviet government in Central Asia between the late 1920s and the mid-1960s. And yet the fierce ideological battles that it had triggered during the middle phase of the Cold War was one of the most important determining factors in the evolution of the Soviet foreign policy towards the newly decolonised regions of Asia and Africa—and the West’s various responses to it—and no account of the colossal struggles waged by the two camps throughout this period would have been complete without recognising this fact.

The collapse of the Stalinist regime in the mid-1950s did not only signal the beginning of a radical new era in Soviet domestic politics. It also marked a new chapter in the development of Soviet socialism *as a doctrine of foreign policy*.

The opening note on which everything started, however, did not sound very cheerful: by the end of the 1950s, the earlier Soviet-Yugoslav split, triggered it seems as much by

¹³ For further background, see Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia* (2003); O. I. Chistiakov, *Istoriia Otechestvennogo Gosudarstva i Prava*, Vol. II 175-8 (2007).

¹⁴ For further background on the Jadid movement, see Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics Of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (1998).

¹⁵ See Myer, *supra* n.3, 1 (noting that it was in the non-Russian West that the tradition of referring to “the USSR’s Asian territories outside Siberia” as Central Asia finds its root). See also *ibid.*, 19 (“the 1950s can be said to represent the birth of modern Central Asian studies”). For further background on the various taxonomic transformations (and the accompanying terminological changes) in the Western discourses about Central Asia, see Cummings, *supra* n.9, 11-5.

¹⁶ Cummings, *supra* n.9, 31.

Tito's personal falling-out with Stalin as by Belgrade's growing geopolitical ambitions, had been overtaken by a much more significant ideological rift with China.¹⁷ In the face of a continuously progressing intensification of the Cold War arms race, such a multiplication of internal divisions within the global socialist camp was hardly a welcome development.

The rapid disintegration of Europe's old colonial empires added a further complication to the situation. On the one hand, it seemed obvious that, once started, the process of decolonization was inevitably going to work out for the benefit of global socialism by weakening the position of the Western bloc. At the same time, the gradual deepening of the doctrinal dispute with China also meant that Beijing was now increasingly starting to position itself as Moscow's direct rival and competitor not only in the internal struggle for the hearts and minds of the international socialist movement but also in the projection of the socialist creed across the newly liberated regions of Asia and Africa.¹⁸ To either side the USSR faced difficult competition, and the challenges this posed could not be underestimated. Just as it had finally begun to get over the fact that its former allies in London and Washington had treacherously turned against it, it suddenly now found itself catapulted into a situation it could have never imagined would happen: for the first time in its history the Soviet state was faced with the task of having to articulate in public a fully developed doctrine of foreign policy that would have to incorporate simultaneously the idea of the international balance of power and the traditional Marxist aspirations for the worldwide victory of socialism. And thanks to the entrenchment of the Yugoslav and Chinese "rebellions" resorting to the old Marxist slogans—"the proletarians of all countries should unite" and "the communists everywhere must support every revolutionary movement against the existing order of things"—no longer seemed a viable solution.

How could this situation be resolved—ideologically as well as theoretically? The answer which the Soviet government eventually worked out proved as ingenious as it was radical. The single most important principle of the Soviet foreign policy doctrine from the mid-1950s onwards became the idea of reconceptualising the entire business of international politics as a form of commercial entrepreneurship. The road to the Soviet victory in the Cold War—and with it to the worldwide triumph of socialist globalisation—was to begin with a mass-scale *marketing campaign*.

Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* provided the basic blueprint for how this campaign was to be conducted when targeting the First World audiences. In 1954, a group of Bolshoi dancers were sent on their first month-long tour of Britain.¹⁹ In 1955 David Oistrakh delivered the first foreign premiere of the Shostakovich violin concerto to a rapturous reception in Carnegie Hall.²⁰ November 1959 saw the same feat from Mstislav Rostropovich, who led the first US performance of the Shostakovich cello concerto, having premiered it in Moscow less than a month earlier.²¹ In the summer of 1957, the largest-to-date World Festival of Youth and Students was brought to Moscow to publicise the remarkable achievements of Soviet culture, art, and socio-economic development.²² The same autumn the first manmade satellite

¹⁷ Robert Legvold, *Soviet Policy in West Africa* 62 (1970).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62-3.

¹⁹ See Lorraine Nicholas, "Fellow Travellers: Dance And British Cold War Politics In The Early 1950s," 19 *Dance Research* 83 (2002).

²⁰ "Liner Notes," Shostakovich: *Violin Concerto*, Violin Concerto, Op. 99 (David Oistrakh; New York Philharmonic, Mitropoulos Dir.), Columbia, ML5077, 1956.

²¹ "Liner Notes," *Shostakovich: Cello Concerto*, Op. 107 (Mstislav Rostropovich; Philadelphia Orchestra, Ormandy Dir.), Columbia, MS6124, 1960.

²² On the historical significance of this event in the context of the Khrushchevite ideological offensive, see Margaret Peacock, "The Perils Of Building Cold War Consensus At The 1957 Moscow World Festival Of Youth And Students," 12 *Cold War History* 515 (2012).

was launched into the orbit from western Kazakhstan, its official name coming from the old Russian word for fellow-traveller (*sputnik*).²³

Between classical music, space exploration, and ballet exports, the Khrushchev regime gradually discovered the first building blocks of its great marketing strategy for popularising the achievements of Soviet socialism. Its most important component, however, had nothing to do with any of these high culture moments. It was *the idea of postcolonial development* on which the Soviet government placed its main bet in its dealings with the newly formed Third World, and the chief marketing exhibit it used in this context were its five Central Asian republics.

The Narrative Constructions of Central Asia in Soviet and Western Discourses

The gamble was calculated perfectly. Having achieved a pattern of sustained growth throughout the 1930s, when the whole of the Western world had descended into a prolonged depression, and then successfully rebuilt its entire economy after the colossal devastation it suffered during World War II throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, the Soviet Union of the early Khrushchev era was all but assured to capture the imagination of anyone interested in the subject of development economics, all the more so if one came to it from the background of anti-colonial struggles.

To [the] newly independent countries [of Asia and Africa] the Soviet experience [seemed especially attractive]. *The gist of the Soviet “message” [was] that a developing country can convert itself reasonably rapidly into a developed industrial one ... with minimal dependence on Western capital*, little or no abatement of political hostility to the West, without the introduction of a fully-fledged capitalist system, and with concomitant advancement of education and the social services.²⁴

Officially, the most important part of this “message” was the thesis that “the Soviet Union ... achieved what most Asian and African countries aspire[d] to without becoming reliant on a private business sector.”²⁵ In practice, however, what helped it to be delivered most effectively was, of course, the fact that the Soviet developmental miracle had worked not only in European Russia but also in the distinctly post-colonial region of Central Asia.

Brutally conquered and ruthlessly exploited for its unique geopolitical and economic potential by the tsarist Russia,²⁶ Central Asia not only boasted a nearly exemplary history of colonial trauma that was all but guaranteed to resonate with the shared collective experiences of the newly decolonized Asian and African states. It was also very visibly *not a part of*

²³ On the historical significance of this episode and the general background to the political implications of the US-Soviet space race in the early Cold War period, see Matthew Brzezinski, *Red Moon Rising: Sputnik And The Hidden Rivalries That Ignited The Space Age* (2007).

²⁴ Geoffrey Jukes, *The Soviet Union in Asia* 64 (1973).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ On Russia’s conquest and rule of Central Asia, see generally Alexander Morrison, *Russian Rule In Samarkand 1868-1910* (2008); Daniel Brower, *Turkestan And The Fate Of The Russian Empire* (2003); Khalid, *supra* n.14, 45-79; Seymour Becker, “The Russian Conquest Of Central Asia And Kazakhstan: Motives, Methods, Consequences,” in Hafeez Malik (ed.), *Central Asia: Its Strategic Importance And Future Prospects* 21 (1994); George Demko, *The Russian Colonization Of Kazakhstan (1896-1916)* (1969); Kh. Z. Ziyayev et al. (eds.), *Istoriya Uzbekskoy SSR, Vol. II* 9-121 (1968); N. A. Khalfin, *Prisoedinenie Sredney Azii k Rossii* (1965). See Also Alexander Morrison, “Killing The Cotton Canard And Getting Rid Of The Great Game: Rewriting The Russian Conquest Of Central Asia, 1814-1895,” *33 Cent. Asian Survey* 131 (2014).

Europe by any standard of appreciation. Inhabited by a population that looked *completely different* from the rest of the Soviet population,

[i]t was the only part of the Soviet Union with an indigenous non-European majority, which was largely racially homogeneous[,] and the only non-European area of the USSR to have had a sophisticated urban civilisation prior to absorption in the Russian sphere that could be set against that of Russia.²⁷

To be sure, the colonial settlement process started in the late 19th century by the Tsarist government²⁸ accelerated even faster during the Soviet rule: according to the 1959 census, the Slav population in Central Asia (primarily Russians and Ukrainians) outnumbered even the most numerous of the “native” ethnic groups (Uzbeks) by a factor of almost 4 to 3.²⁹ And yet the fact of the matter remained: however one looked at it, compared to the rest of the Soviet Union, Central Asia was still very recognisably non-white, non-Slavic, and non-Christian. And still its economy continued to grow at a neck-breaking speed.

Populated primarily by Turkic-speaking Muslims, devoid of any extensive local traditions of Marxist political movements or European-style cultural secularism, Central Asia, one might argue, provided an ideal real-life illustration of the unquestionable superiority of Soviet developmental science. Not only had the Soviet experience in Central Asia clearly proved that the Soviet socialist model did not have any in-built Eurocentric bias in its underlying theoretical foundations; it had also conclusively demonstrated that a socialist developmental miracle could be achieved under precisely that kind of starting conditions which were typically characteristic of ex-European non-white-settler colonial countries.

And what an impressive record of success this model could boast of: while at the end of the Tsarist period the scale of local industrial capacity in Central Asia had been virtually non-existent, by the late 1950s the regional infrastructure included numerous hydroelectric plants, large textile mills, factories producing agricultural machinery, chemical plants, oil refineries—even an aircraft-building factory in Tashkent. Thousands of miles of roads and railway communications had been laid, airports built, canals irrigated. Only in the Kyrgyz SSR alone, by the early 1950s the volume of total industrial output compared to the 1913 benchmark had increased by a factor of 21.3; the same ratio for large-scale industrial production had risen to the staggering 354!³⁰

Naturally, economic growth was not the only part of the story: while in 1917 the general rate of literacy among Central Asia’s adult native population hovered somewhere around 2%, by 1959, even by the most conservative estimates, it had risen well above 50%. By the early 1970s, the region enjoyed nearly universal literacy rates.³¹ Importantly, the literacy rates for women would be consistently as high as they were for men.³² An equally impressive record was also accumulated in the field of public health: while at the end of the tsarist period the ratio of medical doctors per capita in Central Asia remained at an abysmal 1:20,000, by 1960 in Tajikistan there were 11 doctors per every 10,000 inhabitants, while in Turkmenistan, the respective figure rose even higher, to 17 doctors per each 10,000.³³

²⁷ Myer, *supra* n.3, 1-2.

²⁸ For further background, see Demko, *supra* n.26.

²⁹ Geoffrey Wheeler, *Racial Problems in Soviet Muslim Asia* 29 (2nd Edn.; 1962).

³⁰ S. T. Tavyshaliev, *Kirgizii v Period Zaversheniia Stroitel'stva Sotsializma* 29 (1965).

³¹ Sievers, *supra* n.5, 53.

³² See Alex Stringer, *Soviet Development In Central Asia*, in Tom Everett-Heath (ed.), *Central Asia: Aspects Of Transition* 146, 156 (2003).

³³ *Ibid.*, 157.

However sceptical one might feel about the reliability of these figures, the general message behind them was impossible to contradict: the introduction of Soviet-style socialism into Central Asia had led the region to break out of all those “interlocking vicious circles” that plague traditional development projects.³⁴

Although intended to be broadcast equally energetically across all newly decolonized countries, this message seemed to travel especially well in Asia, above all those parts of its which had sizeable Muslim populations. Considering the wide-scale retreat suffered by the Western powers in the Middle East around the same time, this trend certainly did not take too long to attract the attention of Western observers. Geoffrey Wheeler, a retired British diplomat and intelligence officer, captured the general tone of the ensuing reactions particularly well:

There is another innovation in the methods which the Soviet Government is using to implement its policy towards Asian countries. This is the greatly increased *use of the eastern, and largely Muslim, republics of the USSR as a shop window with which to impress the outside eastern world* with Soviet achievements in areas which have many affinities with underdeveloped countries in the Middle East and South Asia. ... [H]ardly a day goes by [without] some delegation from the Arab countries, from Pakistan and from Indonesia, [being] present in Central Asia ... These delegations are composed of journalists, authors, agriculturalists, and technicians, from every field, in fact, in which there is some impressive Soviet achievement to be shown. And it would be foolish to suppose that the delegations are not impressed. ... [Against] the western emphasis on military force [which] has played no small part in antagonising the Middle East[,] *the Russians [have shown] skill and aplomb ... over and over again ... They can show the East some tangible proof of the material benefits which derive from Soviet methods and ... say “Here are Muslims with very much the same standard of culture as yourselves. What were they a few years ago? Look what they are now.”*³⁵

Notice the contemptuous undertones feeding the first part of Wheeler’s comment: what is Central Asia other than a “shop window” created by Moscow to impress the gullible Muslim foreigners?

Notice also the unmistakable combination of indignation and anxiety behind the rest of the narrative: whatever might be the actual truth behind all those claims about the unprecedented developmental successes achieved in the region, it is the Machiavellian skill and aplomb with which “the Russians” have manipulated the story of these successes and used their Muslim subjects as part of their ideological games that is the most scandalous element in this situation.

And it is this deviousness, of course, far more than anything else which deserves the West’s attention in its study of Central Asia. For, indeed, what ultimately stands behind it is obviously

Russia’s new drive to set herself up as the cultural mentor of the East[. This drive] is only just beginning but two important landmarks have already emerged—the All-Union Congress of Orientalists of 1957 and the

³⁴ Alec Nove, *The Soviet Economy: An Introduction* 343 (3rd Edn; 1968).

³⁵ Geoffrey Wheeler, “Russia And The Middle East,” 44 *J. Royal Cent. Asian Soc.* 193, 198 (1957) (italics added).

Congress of African and Asian Writers of 1958. Both these congresses were held in Tashkent and were accompanied by carefully organized publicity.³⁶

Anxieties about the Machiavellian deviousness shown by Moscow in converting the inert material that was its Central Asian populations to its nefarious ideological ends certainly did not remain the sole preserve of retired British intelligence officers. Before too long, it had become a standard pattern across the whole of the newly created field of Sovietology³⁷ that by far the most important thing one could say about the five Central Asian republics was how useful they had proved to their Moscow masters in their dark arts of wooing and impressing those gullible Muslim foreigners:

Let us not, out of complacency or smugness or any feeling of “cultural” or “technical” superiority, underestimate the impact that these developments in Soviet Central Asia are having on Asia at large. Since making this trip ..., I have visited the Middle East, Africa, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan. Already the impact of the new Soviet Central Asia ... is making itself very much felt in those vital peripheral areas. In some places ... it is quite remarkable how many people one meets who have been taken—and I say this without disrespect—on the Red Cook’s Tour of Tashkent cotton mills and the opera house and to see the irrigation system in Tadjikistan and so on. *It is significant how impressed these people have been ... Asian ears, eyes and minds and hearts are certainly far more attuned [now] to the message from Tashkent than perhaps we are ready to admit.*³⁸

Naturally, the usefulness of Central Asia to Moscow’s designs was not limited to hosting foreign delegations. The idea that the Soviet Union used its southern republics as a shop window³⁹ was only one of the several themes in the newly emerging Western discourse about Central Asia. Another theme revolved around the idea of a decidedly pro-Central Asian affirmative action policy in Soviet foreign service:

the Soviet leadership ... intend[s] ... to develop a unique and inexhaustible supply of Soviet Muslim experts, linguists, propagandists, and political and technical cadres for supporting Soviet initiatives in Middle Eastern countries. [The reason for this is that *t*] *hese cadres would appear more as “one of us,” as Muslims, than [is] possible for similarly trained Russian cadres.*⁴⁰

That there was very little factual basis behind this narrative—in fact, the dominant trend throughout the history of the Soviet foreign service was that of resolute discrimination against ethnic Central Asians—was, of course, ultimately ignored. What mattered, rather, was the notion that one of the main elements which had enabled Moscow’s continuous ideological

³⁶ Geoffrey Wheeler, *Racial Problems In Soviet Muslim Asia* 59 (2nd edn.; 1962).

³⁷ The Theme of Soviet Machiavellianism remained a standard feature in Western discourses about Central Asia well into the 1980s. For a typical illustration, see Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay, “The USSR And The Middle East,” 1(1) *Cent. Asian Survey* 43 (1982).

³⁸ Eric Downton, “Soviet Central Asia,” 42 *J. Royal Cent. Asian Soc.* 128, 130 (1955) (italics added).

³⁹ Lemerrier-Quelquejay, *supra* n. 37, 47.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 48 (italics added).

offensive in the Third World was Central Asia's *convenient inertness* even at the level of its national intelligentsia and local governing elites. The only reason a Soviet diplomatic mission would ever include a Tajik or an Uzbek specialist, went the commonly shared assumption, was because of their non-white skin colour or the convenient Asianness of their names. (Because, of course, it was these factors which motivated those easily impressionable Third Worlders most effectively, and not the massive amounts of financial and technical aid the USSR provided to them.)

The narrative about Moscow's cynical deployment of its Central Asians to boost its "Islamic credentials" in the Muslim world also played another important ideological role. It gave support to the idea that, taken on its own terms, Soviet socialism had very little purchase outside the traditional heartlands of East European Marxism. The Arabs, for all their distrust of free-market individualism, were not buying the Soviet developmental model, which is why Moscow had to rely so much on its Central Asian puppets:

Except in rare instances, Marxism as such did not prove to be a useful vehicle for furthering Soviet influence among Arabs and others Muslims. [As a result of this] Soviet Muslims found themselves [increasingly] drawn into Soviet operations in the Middle East. ... Educated Uzbeks, Tajiks and others were recruited into the Soviet foreign service and began appearing in Soviet embassies abroad, in military and economic aid missions and even occasionally among KGB teams in the Third World[,] since [their inclusion] was [expected] to serve overall Soviet foreign policy aims.⁴¹

And since the USSR's ambitions were ultimately as unreasonable as they were sinister, even the diplomatic and trading missions it sent to non-Muslim countries, it followed, were formed according to the same logic.⁴² The first official contact between the USSR and the new government of Congo, a typical claim would go, "was provided by [a] delegation" whose main defining feature came from the fact that it was built around a visibly Central Asian figure: "the leader of the delegation [was] M. R. Rachmatov, vice-president of the presidium of the supreme soviet of Tadzhikistan."⁴³

The affirmative action programme adopted by the Soviet foreign service was only one side of the larger plan by which the Soviets were meant to "make judicious use of "their" Asians" in their dealings with the Third World.⁴⁴ Since the earliest days of the Cold War, Moscow, it was repeatedly stressed, also actively practised there its dark arts of "cultural diplomacy," constantly deploying high-ranking Central Asian Muslim clerics alongside the regular diplomatic corps to serve as the de facto propagandists for the Soviet regime. By

present[ing] the USSR as a better partner than the West for the world of Islam, [these clerics help Moscow] penetrate the conservative, pro-Western states, such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt, which are otherwise closed to the Soviets. ... Soviet religious leaders are constantly touring the Muslim countries ... and seldom miss an Islamic conference or international gathering. [T]heir praise of the Soviet government ... may appear to be no less crude than that of the official ...

⁴¹ Paul Henze, "The Central Asian Muslims And Their Brethren Abroad—Marxist Solidarity Or Muslim Brotherhood?," 3(3) *Cent. Asian Survey* 51, 56-8 (1984).

⁴² Jukes, *supra* n.24, 64.

⁴³ Christopher Stevens, *The Soviet Union And Black Africa* 12 (1976).

⁴⁴ Jukes, *supra* n.24, 64.

Agitprop. But regurgitated by authentic ulamas, it is infinitely more effective.⁴⁵

Notice again the same general pattern of narrative organisation: whatever aspect of Central Asia's "contribution" to international affairs one looks at, any notion of agency or merit is made entirely absent. The postcolonial world may be populated by utterly annoying, unwise, or incompetent political leaders, but at least it seems to have some kind of a say in choosing the course of its destiny. Central Asia, on the other hand, is only ever present in the Western discourse in the form of an inanimate platform or an enabling condition: a background stage for Moscow to stage its ostentatious shows upon, an ideological resource for its Machiavellian politics, a handy tool, a practical proof of its deviousness and ingenuity.

Conclusion

What was the *common international meaning* encoded into the concept of Central Asia in the age of Bandung? What did the idea of Central Asia represent to the two main Cold War antagonists? The ones saw in it the promise of a great historic redemption, the key to winning "the peoples of the Muslim East" over to the cause of Soviet socialism. The others viewed it as one of the principal proofs of why the Great Game could never be stopped and the "domino theory" needed to be taken seriously.

The ones sought to narrativise it into a perfect case-study that would give flesh to the newly concocted, export-ready fantasy of a "socialism with an Asian face": a shiny utopia that promised to its intended target audiences in the Third World a failure-proof roadmap to economic growth and mass literacy without any of the Maoist excesses, and to its Moscow-based sponsors the possibility of articulating a much less aggressive formula for the achievement of Marxist globalisation than Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.

The others sought to use it to build a new platform from which then to re-launch the old tradition of depicting the whole of Asia as one monolithic bloc and to explore at the same time the possibility of adapting the classical Orientalist apparatus to the new Cold War context. After all, was the communist East not East all the same? Inserting the story about the predictably listless Asian puppets who inertly allowed their countries to be turned into Potemkinite traps into an imaginal context structured around the ideas of a deadly communist peril and devious Russian Machiavellianism guaranteed the simultaneous advancement of both of these objectives.

Half a century later, this two-pronged project of Central Asia's mass-scale orientalisation is still going strong. The idea of using the region as the proving ground for Russia's alternative version of modernity may have temporarily receded. But the only thing this has done for the Russian production of Central Asia as a concept is that it has shifted the broader discursive-ideological matrix surrounding it all that much closer to that traditionally used in the West.⁴⁶ They may still write about it only in Russian and draw for the most part only on Russian sources, but increasingly now whenever Russian-based commentators today express their visions of Central Asia and its history they do so by drawing on the same basic set of narrational strategies and representational devices as their Western-based colleagues. The only significant difference seems to be that in the main they seem to do it a lot less elegantly for now: the idea that the language of the civilizing mission and ethnic

⁴⁵ Lemercier-Quelquejay, *supra* n.37, 48-9.

⁴⁶ On the remarkable durability of the Orientalist sensibility in the Russian discourses about Central Asia, see more generally Bakhtiyar Babajanov, 'How Will We Appear in the Eyes of *Inovertsy* and *Inorodtsy*? Nikolai Ostroumov on the Image and Function of Russian Power', 33 *Cent. Asian Survey* 270 (2014); Adeeb Khalid, 'Russian History and the Debate about Orientalism', 1 *Kritika* 691 (2000).

essentialisms is not normally associated with sober, measured analysis has not yet seeped quite as deeply into the Russian public mind.⁴⁷

A similar pattern of ideological regression can also be observed in the West. The Berlin Wall may have long since been torn down, but the Fukuyamian end of history, it seems, has not yet reached whatever place might have been assigned to the idea of Central Asia in Western popular imagination. In fact, one might argue, the movement of history has more or less been fully reversed on this particular front. With very few exceptions,⁴⁸ the great majority of the Western discourses about Central Asia today appear to be animated by a combination of concepts, desires, and fantasies that seem far more representative of the old-school “rabid” Orientalisms of the late-nineteenth century than the mid-twentieth-century Orientalism of the Sovietological variety.⁴⁹

Looking at things from this angle, it seems quite unlikely that the project of Central Asia’s concerted orientalisation by its past and aspiring colonial masters is a trend that is coming anywhere near its historical endpoint.

The fact that this state of affairs can be openly acknowledged and recognised offers, of course, no practical consolation to those who find themselves today on the receiving end of these orientalisation processes. But it hints at least at a certain hope, however abstract or tenuous.

Every act of liberation, wrote Herbert Marcuse once, requires that the oppressed subjects first become conscious of the basic fact of their oppression.⁵⁰ The ability to recognise the orientalisating production of Central Asia and all the sinister consequences which this leads to is premised, inevitably, on the prior acquisition of the respective analytical and conceptual apparatuses. Given the pioneering contribution made to the development of these apparatuses by the Bandung generation, perhaps it is here then that the ultimate answer to the question of Bandung’s legacy’s meaning for Central Asia today has to be sought.

⁴⁷ Cf. Morrison, *Killing the Cotton Canard*, supra n.26, 132: “Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, much modern Russian writing on the history of the conquest has regressed into unapologetic jingoism, with no fewer than four hagiographies of the brutal general Mikhail Dmitrievich Skobelev having appeared since 2000, together with celebrations of Russian victories in the region which are often indistinguishable from the triumphalism of the tsarist period.”

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Morrison, *Russian Rule*, supra n.26; Brower, supra n.26; Khalid, supra n. 14.

⁴⁹ For typical illustrations, see, e.g., supra n.4.

⁵⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* 9(2002) [1964].