Osharov on Keller, 'Russia and Central Asia: Coexistence, Conquest, Convergence'

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The study of Central Asia, its history and the contemporary period, is a vibrant academic discipline, especially considering the pioneering research on the region that has appeared in recent years (for example, Maya Peterson's Pipe Dreams: Water and Empire in Central Asia's Aral Sea Basin [2019], Alexander Morrison's The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814–1914 [2020], and Togzhan Kassenova's Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb [2022]). But the discipline remains a niche subject, at least in the Anglophone world, by comparison with the study of other regions of the world. Until recently there were few quality teaching textbooks on Central Asia. Thankfully that is now changing with the emergence of several new textbooks on the topic, such as Shoshana Keller's Russia and Central Asia: Coexistence, Conquest, Convergence. Keller's book fills the gap between growing specialist and nonspecialist knowledge about the region, which is especially important given that Central Asia remains a mystery for many. As Keller puts it, "One of the many reasons why Central Asia tends to be invisible to the rest of the world is that no one is quite sure where it is" (p. 2).

Keller presents a useful book that clearly and concisely covers a huge period in Central Asian history with a focus on the region's centuries-long relationship with Russia, from Kievan Rus' to the present. The book is useful for specialists on Central Asia as well as for those who are just beginning to read about the region. Specialists who study the nitty-gritty details of Central Asia's past and present will find it useful to understand or be reminded of how the discipline they are engaged with is perceived by a wider academic and general audience. And for nonspecialists and students, Keller's book is one of the best introductory readings on Central Asia.

The history of Central Asia cannot be told outside the context of the region's relationship with Russia, yet the book is primarily on Central Asia. Few need an explanation of what and where Russia is, but this does not necessarily apply to Central Asia where nonspecialists may struggle to identify the geographical location and limits of the region. Keller defines Central Asia as consisting of five countries, now popularly referred to as the 'stans': Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. This is needed to distinguish them from other 'stans'—such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, both republics within the Russian Federation, as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan, although all of these have had close ties with Central Asia throughout history.
Keller divides her narrative on Russian and Central Asian history into three major chronological periods—coexistence, conquest, and convergence—which are reflected in the book's title. The three periods are covered chronologically across the nine chapters and each draws on some of the best recent literature on Russian and Central Asian history. This itself provides a useful reading list for anyone wishing to deepen their understanding of Central Asian history in different periods.

The early period of "coexistence" dates back at least to the Mongol rule in the thirteenth century. Keller argues that the Slavs and Turks became “interconnected in a formal way” when they were conquered by the Mongol Empire (p. 23). The conditions under which Russia was able to conquer Central Asia began to take shape only in the seventeenth century.

In the subsequent period, the Russian Empire consolidated its influence in the region through the military conquest of the region and direct rule in Central Asia. By the eighteenth century, the Russian Empire was extending its influence in Central Asia, mainly in the Kazakh steppe. But much of the Russian advance into the region occurred in the nineteenth century when the Russian Empire conquered the Central Asian khanates south of the Kazakh steppe, which became known as Turkestan. In the book, Keller summarizes the stages of the Russian conquest and some of the key themes that emerged during the Russian administration of Central Asia, like education, religion, and trade.

Finally, the period of "convergence" in the history of Russia and Central Asia started with the end of the Russian Empire and the birth of the Soviet Union. The five Central Asian states that Keller's book focuses on were created in the 1920s under Soviet rule. The upheavals brought by transformations initiated under Soviet rule have had an impact on Russians and Central Asians, and both lived through the dramatic breakup of the Soviet Union. Keller argues that Russia and Central Asia returned to coexistence following the demise of the Soviet Union in which the Central Asian states became independent. She provides a nuanced narrative on the trajectories the Central Asian states and their leadership took after the 1990s but warns her readers that the history of the breakup of the Soviet Union, especially in Central Asia, is still little studied by historians.

Keller also covers some of the major debates among historians specializing in Russian and Central Asian relations in different periods. Among the debates she touches on are the reasons for the Russian Empire's conquest of the region, the history of governance in Central Asia, and the nature and legacy of Soviet rule for Central Asian people. This illustrates a variety of viewpoints on the region’s history and the vibrancy of the discipline.

The book is a much-needed teaching resource and is likely to be a first introduction to the history of Central Asia for many students beginning their study of the region. Since the book was published, newer books similar to that of Keller's have appeared, including Adeeb Khalid's Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present (2021) and David W. Montgomery's Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding (2022). All these books provide an introduction to Central Asia, its history, and its current affairs, and contribute to making the region more visible and accessible.
