

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

***Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary.*** Nick Megoran. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 2017. 368 pp. (ISBN-13: 9780822964421)

Five new states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – emerged in Central Asia from the ashes of the Soviet empire in 1991. In modern times, these five countries have never enjoyed the status of independent actors in the international arena. Consequently, this remarkable increase in independent states at the heart of Eurasia has given rise to a number of convoluted political, legal, economic and ethnic problems. Nick Megoran's *Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary* shows the readers the roadmap to the current awkward and inconvenient boundaries in the region. Within this context, the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan around the Fergana Valley is the primary focus of Megoran's book. *Nationalism in Central Asia* culminates Megoran's two-decade-long ethnographic research in the Uzbek/Kyrgyz borderland areas.

For most of its history, the Fergana Valley prevailed as a unified political entity. Up until the 18th century, ranging from the Persian rule in Transoxiana to the spread of Islam into the region in the 8th century to the conquest of the Mongols in the 13th century or more recently during the Kokand Khanate period, the Fergana Valley had always been administered as a single political unit. Moreover, throughout all this period, it was one of the essential relay points for the historic Silk Road from China to the Middle East and Europe. Even after the Russian conquest of Turkistan, starting in 1865 with the capture of Tashkent and ending in 1884 with the defeat of the Turkmen tribes, the Fergana Valley's political unity remained intact. However, the rise of the Soviet Union in the 1920s created profound changes in the Fergana Valley. The

Soviets installed a national delimitation process that grouped the peoples of Central Asia into distinct nationalities, when in previous eras, identities were primarily based on clan, region or religion. The ethnolinguistic labels of Uzbek or Kyrgyz were not widely used until the early 20th century. Additionally, borders did not exist in a modern sense, since a notable portion of the population was nomadic, while people defined as Uzbek and Tajik were more sedentary. The Soviets vigorously settled the various populations of the region and engineered new demarcations. Although these new borders were mostly designed for administrative aspirations, they also had the aim to prevent any future rise of a single political entity in Central Asia with the potential to challenge Moscow's authority. Consequently, the Fergana Valley, for the first time, was divided among distinct political entities. However, these divisions corresponded neither to the natural geographic features of the Fergana Valley nor the new national identities attributed to the peoples of these new political units. These perplexing borders did not have much functional impact during the Soviet period. The whole region was under the centralized control of Moscow and was fully integrated into the Soviet military-industrial complex, making the borders mostly arbitrary from a political and economic point of view. A political geographer at Newcastle University, Megoran examines how this border was strengthened by ideologies that encouraged Uzbek and Kyrgyz ethnicities to perceive each other as a threat.

The Fergana Valley is approximately 22,000 square kilometers, distinguished by its agricultural fertility due to the Syr Darya River. This valley has long been the agricultural heartland of Central Asia. However, since the disintegration of the USSR, it has also been one of the most politically volatile areas in the region due to several factors such as diverse and interspersed populations, puzzling borders, and diminishing resources. Following independence, the Fergana Valley, which is an ethnically and culturally complex region, witnessed a number of problems ranging from inter-ethnic tensions to border incursions, from security-related complications to some socio-economic difficulties. In addition, this is one of the most densely populated areas in Central Asia – almost a quarter of the region's total population lives in less than 5 percent of Central Asia's total land area. Due to the artificial delineation of the border(s) and territorial engineering during the Soviet era, the Fergana Valley has been subject to the occurrence of various conflicts, especially since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. For instance, in June 2010, events in Osh, located at the Kyrgyz/Uzbek border, what Megoran calls "territorialized nationalism," contributed to an outbreak of interethnic violence.

Similarly, the economy in general and limited natural resources in particular also

play a pivotal role in highlighting the conflict in the region. Megoran, a regular visitor to the region and multilingual in titular languages, provides the framework for interpreting the scope of contemporary events. There is no doubt that Megoran's fluency in the Kyrgyz and Uzbek languages and his immersion into the culture through long-term participant observation allow him to examine the situation thoughtfully. However, Russian has been the lingua franca of the region for a century or so, and there has been some phenomenal scholarly research done on nationalism. Those materials in the Russian language would add more power to the arguments developed by Mergoran. Moreover, the author does not incorporate much about the significance and impact of the violent ethnic conflict that took place between June 4 and June 10, 1990, in Osh and Uzgen in the Fergana Valley. In the late 1980s and after the initiation of Gorbachev's policies of glasnost, and perestroika, there was more room for opposition and dissent. Mergoran's thesis based on the rise of nationalism would have difficulty in explaining the inter-ethnic conflagration of the 1990s.

This book by Megoran is a valuable addition to Central Asian studies and the contextual understanding of nationalism in the region. The extensive bibliography of academic literature and relevant documents provided at the end should allow the keen reader to travel well beyond the intended pages of the book. It would certainly benefit scholars/researchers and advanced graduate students in Central Asian studies greatly.

Cagri Erdem  
*Keimyung University*