JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF HISTORIANS
ISSN: 3105-0042. eISSN: 3105-0050

DOMESTIC HISTORY – ОТАН ТАРИХЫ – ОТЕЧЕСТВЕННАЯ ИСТОРИЯ

Research Article / Ғылыми мақала
IRSTI 03.01.09

https://doi.org/10.65076/3105-0042.2025.4.35.48.

Merged Agencies: State, Ethnography, and Native Intelligentsia in the Early Soviet Central Asian Nation-Building

R. Zholdybalin✉
Research Institute for Jochi Ulus Studies, Astana, Kazakhstan
✉*rustemktl@gmail.com*

Abstract. This paper offers a tribute to and a critical review of three seminal works on early Soviet nation-building: Terry Martin's The Affirmative Action Empire (2001), Francine Hirsch's Empire of Nations (2005), and Adeeb Khalid's Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform (1998) and Making Uzbekistan (2015). The question of the origins of nations as modern collective identities remains especially sensitive in the post-Soviet context, where imperial, postcolonial, nationalist, and decolonial discourses compete to establish a dominant historical narrative. Originally conceived as a series of argumentative reviews written during graduate coursework in Eurasian Studies at Nazarbayev University in 2022, the article situates these historiographic debates within the institutional development of the field in Kazakhstan and asks why these three readings have become core to understanding early Soviet nation-building. The paper reconstructs Martin's model of the state as the principal architect of indigenization and its later reversal under the Great Retreat; Hirsch's account of ethnographers as indispensable experts who translated imperial knowledge into Bolshevik categories of nationality; and Khalid's portrait of native Jadid intellectuals as active co-authors, rather than passive objects, of the Uzbek national project. Rather than treating the state, the ethnographic community, and the native intelligentsia as competing explanatory frameworks, the article argues that these three focuses describe interchangeable and often overlapping agencies within a single, merged process of Soviet nation-building. A brief comparison between the Jadid intelligentsia of Uzbekistan and the Alash intelligentsia of Kazakhstan illustrates how the weight of these agencies shifted depending on regional configurations of colonization and local elite formation. The paper concludes by reflecting on its own historiographical position: written by a beginner decolonial-minded scholar in a formative year for Eurasian Studies as a discipline, it is best read today as an "archaeography" of the field circa 2022, at a moment when questions of national identity felt almost existential. Revisited now, amid a broader turn toward skepticism about decolonial frameworks, the article invites reconsideration of the reading lists and theoretical commitments shaping the study of Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia.

Keywords: nation-building; history of Kazakhstan; ethnography; history; Kazakhstan; historiography; Russian Empire; Soviet history; Central Asian history; indigenisation

For citation: Zholdybalin R. Merged Agencies: State, Ethnography, and Native Intelligentsia in the Early Soviet Central Asian Nation-Building. *Journal of the National Congress of Historians.* 2025. Vol.4, no.4, pp.35-48. https://doi.org/10.65076/3105-0042.2025.4.35.48.

Funding. This work was supported by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan under Grant BR24993173 "Writing an illustrated biographical encyclopedia on the history of Kazakhstan."

© R. Zholdybalin, 2026

Біріккен акторлар: Орталық Азиядағы ерте кеңестік ұлт қалыптастыру үдерісіндегі мемлекет, этнография және ұлттық зиялы қауым

Р. Жолдыбалин
Жошы Ұлысын зерделеу ғылыми институты, Астана, Қазақстан

Аңдатпа. Бұл мақала ерте кеңестік ұлт қалыптастыру мәселесіне арналған үш іргелі еңбекке – Терри Мартиннің «Позитивті іс-әрекеттер империясы» (2001), Франсин Хирштің «Ұлттар империясы» (2005) және Адиб Халидтың «Мұсылман мәдени реформасының саясаты» (1998) және «Өзбекстанды жасау» (2015) кітаптарына – арналған құрмет пен сыни талдау болып табылады. Ұлттардың заманауи ұжымдық бірегейлік ретінде қалыптасу мәселесі посткеңестік кеңістікте ерекше өзекті болып қалуда, өйткені мұнда үстем тарихи нарративті орнату жолында империялық, постколониялық, ұлтшылдық және деколониялық дискурстар өзара бәсекелеседі. Бастапқыда 2022 жылы Назарбаев Университетінде Еуразиятану бағдарламасының магистратура курсы аясында жазылған сыни рецензиялар топтамасы ретінде ойластырылған бұл мақала аталған историографиялық пікірталастарды Қазақстандағы осы пәннің институционалдық қалыптасу контекстіне орналастырады және неге дәл осы үш еңбек ерте кеңестік ұлт қалыптастыруды түсінуде негізгі оқылым болып саналатынын түсіндіреді. Мақалада мемлекетті коренизация саясатының және оның кейінгі «үлкен кейінге шегіну» кезеңіндегі тежелуінің басты сәулетшісі ретінде қарастыратын Мартиннің моделі; империялық білімді большевиктік ұлт санаттарына аударған алмастырылмас сарапшылар ретінде этнографтарды сипаттайтын Хирштің тұжырымдамасы; және жергілікті жәдидшіл зиялы қауымды өзбек ұлттық жобасының пассивті объектісі емес, белсенді авторы ретінде бейнелейтін Халидтың көзқарасы дәйекті түрде талданады. Мемлекетті, этнографиялық қоғамдастықты және жергілікті зиялы қауымды бір-біріне қарсы қоятын бәсекелес түсіндіру модельдері ретінде қарастырудың орнына, автор бұл үш фокус кеңестік ұлт қалыптастырудың бірыңғай, біріккен үдерісі шеңберінде өзара алмасатын, жиі қабаттасатын акторлықтарды сипаттайды деп тұжырымдайды. Өзбекстанның жәдидшіл зиялы қауымы мен Қазақстанның алашшыл зиялы қауымын қысқаша салыстыру осы акторлықтардың салмағы отарлаудың аймақтық ерекшеліктеріне және жергілікті элиталардың қалыптасуына байланысты қалай өзгергенін көрсетеді. Қорытындыда автор мақаланың өзінің историографиялық орнын пайымдайды: Еуразиятану пәні үшін бетбұрысты жылда жазылған бастаушы декольникологиялық зерттеушінің еңбегі ретінде, ол бүгінде ұлттық бірегейлік мәселелері дерлік экзистенциалды қабылданған 2022 жылдың айналасындағы саланың «археографиясы» ретінде оқылғаны жөн. Деколониялық тұғырларға деген күмәннің өсіп келе жатқан жағдайында қайта қаралған бұл мақала посткеңестік және кеңестік Орталық Азияны зерттеуді айқындайтын оқылым тізімдері мен теориялық ұстанымдарды қайта пайымдауға шақырады.

Түйін сөздер: ұлттық құрылыс; Қазақстан тарихы; этнография; тарих; Қазақстан; тарихнама; Ресей империясы; Кеңестік тарихы; Орталық Азия тарихы; коренизация

Сілтеме жасау үшін: Жолдыбалин Р. Біріккен акторлар: Орталық Азиядағы ерте кеңестік ұлт қалыптастыру үдерісіндегі мемлекет, этнография және ұлттық зиялы қауым. *Journal of the National Congress of Historians.* 2025. Vol.3, no.3, pp.35-48.https://doi.org/10.65076/3105-0042.2025.4.35.48.

Слияние агентности: государство, этнография и туземная интеллигенция в раннесоветском национальном строительстве

Р. Жолдыбалин
Научный институт изучения Улуса Джучи, Астана, Казахстан

Аннотация. Данная статья представляет собой посвящение и критический обзор трёх ключевых работ по раннесоветскому нациестроительству: книги Терри Мартина «Империя позитивных действий» (2001), монографии Франсин Хирш «Империя наций» (2005) и книг Адиба Халида «Политика мусульманской культурной реформы» (1998) и «Создавая Узбекистан» (2015). Вопрос о происхождении наций как современных форм коллективной идентичности остаётся особенно чувствительным в постсоветском контексте, где в борьбе за доминирующий исторический нарратив сталкиваются имперские, постколониальные, националистические и деколониальные дискурсы. Изначально задуманная как серия аргументированных рецензий, написанных в рамках магистерского курса по евразийским исследованиям в Назарбаев Университете в 2022 году, статья помещает эти историографические дебаты в контекст институционального становления данной дисциплины в Казахстане и объясняет, почему указанные три работы стали основополагающими для понимания раннесоветского нациестроительства. В статье последовательно разбираются модель Мартина, рассматривающая государство как главного архитектора политики коренизации и её последующего свёртывания в период «великого отступления»; концепция Хирш, представляющая этнографов незаменимыми экспертами, переводившими имперское знание в большевистские категории национальности; и трактовка Халида, изображающая туземную джадидскую интеллигенцию не пассивным объектом, а активным соавтором узбекского национального проекта. Вместо того чтобы противопоставлять государство, этнографическое сообщество и туземную интеллигенцию как конкурирующие объяснительные модели, автор утверждает, что эти три фокуса описывают взаимозаменяемые и часто пересекающиеся агентности внутри единого, слитного процесса советского нациестроительства. Краткое сравнение джадидской интеллигенции Узбекистана и алашской интеллигенции Казахстана показывает, как значимость этих агентностей менялась в зависимости от региональной специфики колонизации и формирования местных элит. В заключение автор рефлексирует над историографической позицией самой статьи: написанная начинающим исследователем-декольнологом в переломный для евразийских исследований год, она видится сегодня скорее как «археография» состояния поля около 2022 года, когда вопросы национальной идентичности воспринимались почти экзистенциально. Пересмотренная сейчас, на фоне растущего скептицизма в отношении деколониальных рамок, статья призывает переосмыслить читательские списки и теоретические установки, определяющие изучение советской и постсоветской Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: национальное строительство; история Казахстана; этнография, история; Казахстан; историография; Российская империя; советская история; история Центральной Азии; коренизация

Introduction

Eurasian Studies is rapidly becoming an internationally recognized and institutionalized field of knowledge encompassing a large literature on Humanities and Social Sciences, in which

the early Soviet history is one of the cornerstone topics. Historians pay a great deal of attention to the processes of nation-building, secularization, and internalization of related discourses within the developing modern societies representing current independent nations. International scholarship, centered around Anglophone academia, became the main focus of the modern Eurasian historiography, and the newly promoted Nazarbayev University, launching the graduate program of Eurasian Studies, made an implicit focus on this literature as well. As a freshman student of such a program, back in 2022 (a fate-deciding year for Eurasian Studies in becoming decolonial and anti-imperial-centered), I delved into reading the books that shaped me into the current state as a historian of the Kazakh national movement. Our directing guide was Prof. Alima Bissenova, whose course of Introduction to Eurasian Studies was subsequently a weekly literary discussion club and a course for developing scholarly argumentation skills, workloaded us with writing essays on the books we were reading. These essays had to be more than merely (not a stone on the genre of) literature reviews; they had to be nuanced virtual argumentative dialogue with the authors.

Of the two dozens of authors we'd encounter during the course, three I've found influential in shaping my future dissertation topic. What bound them together was the issue of the early nation-building policy in the USSR. This issue is a sensitive one for the history of Kazakhstan: there is a heavy, menacing echo of the imperial past, using calling names as a factor in the modern policy of Russia toward its former subjects in Central Asia. When President Putin called Nursultan Nazarbayev a creator of modern, hitherto unknown, statehood in Kazakhstan, sometime in 2014, this reeked of the wider colonial narratives of Russian revanchism, using the claims of "unhistoricity" of the modern Asian nations not only to diminish the neighbours, but to reinforce its older territorial claims. (Reading much about the inconsistency of the Russian Federation's geopolitical decisions, I'd rather argue that these narratives are intended rather to annoy people on social media). What's important about the topic, though, is the penultimate question coming as an encounter with Putin's remarks: if Central Asian nations are not products of Lenin (or Trotsky) or their followers from the Party, who founded these nations?

I find three different answers from the most renowned scholars of nationality policies in the early USSR. Adeeb Khalid draws attention to the ideas of local intellectuals in forging new nations (Khalid 1998; Khalid 2015). Terry Martin focuses on the government's actions as an "affirmative action" model (Martin 2001). Francine Hirsch provides a review of the complicated relationship between ethnographic expertise and state-driven policies (Hirsch 2005). I've written three argumentative reviews on Khalid's and Hirsch's works and made a presentation on Martin's book; since my latter review is significantly shorter, it'll be briefly explained in the Introduction. Together with the remaining reviews, it presents those three scholarly focuses (the state, the ethnographic community, and the native intelligentsia) not only as competing actors, but also as cooperating agencies merging into one field of the Soviet nation-building policy, where both the subjective and discursive boundaries become indistinguishably blurred.

Martin defined four principles of nationalities policy. First is a Marxist premise: nationalism is a masking ideology with class-based grievances in a national form – a national statehood should be granted to split the above-class national alliances. Next, a Modernization premise: the nation is a developmental phase on the road to internationalism. Then, a Colonial premise: nationalism as a result of centennial distrust of Russians – with the 1920s policy aimed at eliminating distrust and preventing the rise of Russian chauvinism. Finally, a Foreign policy aspect is a projection of influence abroad. Indigenization (korenizatsiia) policy resulted in

ISSN: 3105-0042. e-ISSN: 3105-0050

a paradox: nations were built and destroyed by the same actor, the state, in a (at first sight) inconsistent policy of the Party (Martin 2001).

Martin explains the shift of the nationalities policy from indigenization to the Great Retreat to the support of the Russian culture as a core foundation of the Soviet people by three factors. First is the Soviet xenophobia, which was ideological, not ethnic, but gained national focus. Under the control of the GPU (from 1923), there was a rise in the framework of marked borders of ethnicities, with high-security border strips. Finally, yet importantly, the established immigration policy never supported extradition, but raised fears of espionage paranoia. Altogether, this led to mass deportations, abandonment of the Piedmont Principle, ethnic cleansings of "disloyal" diasporas, rehabilitation of "chauvinist" Russian culture, and the ironic success of Soviet aspirations for the equality of nations, characterized by the equality of oppression. Initially viewed as a greater danger by Lenin, Russian chauvinism was replaced in this category by local nationalisms, which marked making diasporas the main targets of the subsequent Great Terror.

Materials and Methods

The works examined in this paper largely challenge Martin's idea of the affirmative action state as the main actor in forging the national boundaries, yet as the questioning of these ideas reveals, the corps of these actors constituted a complex merged agency. This paper is a comparative historiographical essay rather than an archival study. Close, argumentative readings of three monographs (Hirsch 2005; Khalid 1998; Khalid 2015), originally drafted as critical reviews for a graduate seminar, and re-synthesizes them through a thematic lens rather than a chronological or biographical one. Claims are triangulated against secondary scholarship and reviews of each work (Hosking 2007; Keller 2006; Baberowski 2010; Morrison 2017) to surface points of scholarly disagreement. A brief structured comparison of the Jadid intelligentsia in Uzbekistan and the Alash intelligentsia in Kazakhstan is used as a secondary case to test the transferability of the three-agency framework across regional contexts. The essay is explicitly reflexive, situating its own arguments within the intellectual environment of Nazarbayev University's Eurasian Studies program circa 2022 and revisiting them from a 2025 vantage point.

Before the search for the label – who were the real Jadids? Even the initial Jadid (Renewal) term was a label, given to Ismail Gasprinsky's followers by their counterparts, with Ismail Bey himself preferring the term *muntazam*, "the Modernist" (Lazzerini 1992). The idea of Gasprinsky was to revive the "backward" society of Russian Turkic Muslims via a new method of primary education, but the goal was to modernize the society overall (Baldauf 2001). Gasprinskiy was not a renewalist of faith *(mujaddid),* even if some of his followers claimed him to be, but a creator of the new method *(usul-I jadid)* in education. Thus, neither he nor his followers called for reform of the religion, but wanted to modernize the society, also sharing pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic ideas. This makes the so-called real Jadids the modernizers of society and not reformists.

Literature Review

Ethnographers as agents of the state

Francine Hirsch took on the ambitious task of defining the role of ethnographers in the process of early Soviet nation-building as crucial. She first attempted to introduce that idea in an article

(Hirsch 2000), where she called on former servants of the Tsar – researchers of ethnography, geography, and statistics in Russia – to have key roles in the Bolshevik national categorization of population, being major consultants. The article is also remarkable for the introduction of the state-sponsored evolutionism concept, one of the key concepts in the monograph to come in 5 years. It is a "civilizing mission of building socialism"; the author argues that this policy fitted the undeveloped periphery of the Empire, such as Turkestan (Hirsch 2005: 86).

In the 2005 book, Hirsch explores the ways that Bolsheviks were changing the identities of the people and communities of the former Russian Empire, with the main claim that ethnographic knowledge had a crucial role in this shaping. The author continues the trend of the most recent colonialism concepts, with the idea that the USSR was an empire too, but of the modernizing type – a presumption that is commonly accepted in modern scientific society (Khalid 2015). That idea developed from the author's challenge of the concept of the Soviet empire as a divide et impera type (Hirsch 2005: 164), widening the post-colonial discourse on the former Soviet nations with the caution of the modernization role of the USSR (Adams 2006). In the meantime, Hirsch opposes Martin's political approach with the ideological-cultural perspective of nationalities policy, tending to overlook the ethnoterritorial transformation in its complexity. She denies Martin's concept of The Great Retreat, which explains the process of enlarging the major nations with the incorporation of the smaller ones as a dramatic change in nationality policy, and states that it was the continuation of the Soviet nation-state building (Hirsch 2005: 9). Later, Geoffrey Hosking criticized that approach, stating that Hirsch lacked the perspective of cultural and educational policy, and completely overlooked the phenomenon of indigenization (Hosking 2007).

The author assembled a major study of Russian archives, mainly the St. Petersburg branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences and its funds of the Commission for the Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of the Borderlands of Russia (KIPS). Vast volumes were studied in the archives of Moscow and the USA, as well as Russian museums and American libraries (using the whole corpus of the secondary literature on the topic). At the same time, knowing no indigenous language other than Russian, Hirsch has not approached sources of non-Russian origin, which is a major blow to what is assumed to be a nationalities policy study.

The study is constructed chronologically, marking three major periods in the relations between the ethnographers and the state. The preliminary period (pre-1924) is remarkable for the conflict between nationalities policy and the economic purposes of the Bolsheviks, and with debates based on the future demarcation heating, the ethnographers were given the freedom to constitute the definitions of the "nation" (Hirsch 2005: 11), and the nations were created due to their vision. This is the transformation of the Empire based on their knowledge (1924-1934), with the compromise between nation-building and economic policies being reached in the project of creating major nation-states, serving as economic complexes, thus resulting in the delimitation of nations and the creation of the administrative system of the USSR. And finally, academic knowledge become suppressed under political circumstances, such as 1) the rise of the Nazis (response to whom was dictated by the need of washing out the previous ties with German Academia); 2) Stalin's announcement of the nations number decline (1926), putting the academicians in a panic rush to redefine the nations; 3) the establishment of passport system (1938), which proclaimed the identity not self-defined, but an inherited one. The last two factors proclaimed ethnogenesis the heart of the nationality project, and instant categorization led to the appearance of suspect outsiders and the emergence (Hirsch 2005: 292), dividing nations

into "potentially hostile" and friendly ones. With the conclusion of nations' determination, old academicians gave place to the newer generation, fully committed to Bolshevism and, most notably, administrative directives.

The story emphasizes not only the influence of academicians on nationality policy but the reverse effect too: the policy transformed the views of ethnographers, at least on paper. The construction of Soviet ethnography summed up the ideas of its creators, but never opposed the purposes of the Bolshevik policy. While the Soviets intended to build the nations out of undetermined and lacking formal identity "backward" peoples, this process went in line with their ideological cliché of nationalism as a sign of capitalist society. Moreover, this step needed to be done only to achieve the final destination of internationalism, which included the idea of becoming an "ethnoterritorial union" (Hirsch 2005: 63) and a "multinational socialist state" (Hirsch 2005: 101). The author views the turn in the nationalities policy of the 1930s as the natural continuation of radical social transformation, which is known nowadays as Stalin's revolution from above (Breslauer 2021). But this change of identities of the masses led to ironic results after 1991, when the nations that emerged out of imperial ambitions gained independence from the Empire.

Hirsch called for rethinking the theoretical basis of the presumption of early Soviet history and started a major discussion in the field. While the book became a classical work in the Soviet state-building issue and was generally honored for the amount of work done, criticism was presented too. Her argument that the "new historical narrative was not a glorification of the imperial Russian past" (Hirsch 2005: 268) is claimed to be deniable by the changes in textbooks, where the incorporation of the peoples into Russia was now viewed as positive (Hosking 2007). Hosking also criticizes the fact that Hirsch ignores the creation of the administrative hierarchy of the Soviet national periphery. Shoshanna Keller (Keller 2006) argued that the author overcriticized her colleagues (deliberate fouling of the ethos) and that she used the works she presumably had not read (Keller 2006). Her claim that Martin's "reverse discrimination against Russians" thesis is not reliable because they kept being dominant in the population and never abandoned the culture (Hirsch 2005: 69), in my opinion, is another signal that she misunderstood Martin in particular. Khalid criticizes her idea of the national delimitation being "primarily a political process" controlled fully by Moscow, emphasizing the role of local elites and intellectuals (Khalid 2015). Baberowski proposed conducting more local studies to concretize the author's claim that academic decisions become "internalized patterns of self-perception" (Baberowski 2010).

Despite the criticism, I tend to agree with the author in her general message. While assuming the role of ethnographers in building nations is arguable, Hirsch does not deny the role of administration and nationalist intellectuals, stating that the Bolsheviks took into account both ethnographers and local leaders. This is born by the nature of Bolshevik intellectualism, which is closer to the colonial thought of Western powers than they would like to think: Soviets were Europe-centric and shared the Western beliefs in planning and scientific approaches to problems, i.e., self-determination of peoples. And with a positivist view toward the power of science, they were convenient for giving decisive power to academicians, who in the West would be called anthropologists, due to the ethnography sharing the same colonial approach. Paul Stronski called such experts orientalists, receiving the right to constitute what the national cultural characteristics are, "and using the same methodology as Western empires provided in colonies

(Stronski 2010). Martin, for example, almost ignores the expertise of ethnographers in forging the USSR. Thus, from what I have read as of today, I accept the idea that the nation-building in the Soviet Union has a comparably valuable contribution from three sides – the Communist State, the ethnographers, and the local intellectuals, none of which should be overlooked. Francine Hirsch had a justified attempt to portray the academicians as of high importance in this process.

Native intellectuals as the challenging agency

Adeeb Khalid is a pioneering Western scholar in Central Asian intellectual history, being the first to access Soviet archives on the topic, previously unavailable to international scientists. The study is characterized by the usage of a large number of primary sources, in Russian and native languages; some archival materials are extremely rare and even inaccessible to later researchers. While the Soviet researchers either neglected Muslim modernism or criticized it, and Western scholars reviewed the regional history from the point of colonizer-local confrontation, Khalid rethinks the issue from the perspective of a Muslim scholar, where the observer is familiar with the local culture and has the advantage of a closer acquaintance and intuitive understanding of the topic.

The author based his study on the phenomenology of cultural change – the latest sociological concepts adapted to intellectual history. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Khalid 1998: 5) creates the issue of the study – the contest between modernist *(Jadid)* and traditionalist *(Qadim)* intellectual movements for the legitimacy of this capital, which implied a competition for the moral leadership in the region (Khalid 1998: 6). This is a study of the intellectual transition of Jadids from modernizing the education and living of the community toward nationalism, ending in cooperation with the Bolsheviks in their nation-building project. Later interaction relates Jadids to reformist movements in other colonial regions. More generally, the author aims to explore the nature of Muslim modernism as an intellectual phenomenon. Studying the roots of Jadidism, the author surprisingly finds that the colonization process initiated the reformist movement, anti-colonial in essence (Khalid 1998: 14), by destabilizing the traditional social structure, opening the area to world trade, creating a new local bourgeoisie and an intellectual gap, suddenly filled by European ideas.

Results

To call Qadimis an intellectual movement is, by the way, an exaggeration: the Khalid himself labels them as local elites, including both spiritual and secular powers of the pre-colonial regime, surviving during the Russian colonization of Turkestan. Qadimis claimed the cultural capital based on obtaining control of Muslim education, ritual, and clerical authority, and viewed Jadids' new method of education as a threat to their authority (Khalid 1998: 156). They accused the Jadids of being the innovators of faith – *ahl-i bid'ah,* to which Munawwar Qari replied that the culture of Islam includes not only religious laws but also the cultural heritage and the values of Islamic culture, which was propagated in a link to progressive innovations in education, culture, and technologies (Khalid 1998: 177). Jadids criticized the backwardness of their culture, pointing out that its weak composition would lead to destruction and the loss of cultural capital.

Suddenly, Jadids turned their back on the smooth educational enthusiasm, radicalizing toward Europe-like romantic nationalism and centralized on creating a nation of Muslim Turkestan at the beginning, and then a separate nation of sedentary Turkic Muslims of Turkestan at the end. The revolutionary turn of the ideology happened due to two major reflections of Jadids:

ISSN: 3105-0042. e-ISSN: 3105-0050

first, on the rapacious policies of European powers toward their Turkish brethren after WWI, which resulted in Jadids becoming a decolonial movement; second, on realizing the fact that the majority of local people supported the traditionalist movement, Basmachi, on their claims of power upon post-revolutionary Turkestan. These two factors led to the surprising alliance of Jadids with Bolsheviks, based on both movements' anti-colonial, nationalist, and modernist approaches, before they became competitors in modernizing the region (Khalid 2015: 2).

The book is structured both chronologically and problematically. The first two chapters give a historical background; the next three contextualize the topic in the theoretical discussions of sociological concepts; the final three chapters give insights on the nation-building projects in Central Asia, actualizing the study via opening the discussion on the contemporary identity of the regional peoples. The book became a significant event in the scientific landscape, turning the author into the leading scholar of Central Asian history. He established the myth of Jadids as one core movement, enlightening the local population via education, and promoting secularism and nationalism in the region: ironically, that appreciation implies that the Eurocentric Orientalists have seen no issue in the author's attempt to decolonize the image of "backward" Central Asian intellectual and cultural life. Unfortunately, the author neglects to picture the worldview of the ideological opponents of Jadidism, the Qadimis, as well as to locate the Jadid movement among other Muslim reformists of the era. Maybe the author just left this task to cultural studies with a more comparative nature of research.

The main problem with the author's approach is labeling the movements. There probably was no *Qadim-Jadid* dichotomy among Muslim intellectuals of the Russian Empire: not all Jadids participated in implementing the *usul-i jadid* in education, and not all Qadimis were resistant to everything innovative, i.e., newspapers, science, theatres, even music. There was no political alienation before the Revolution. In the example of Tatar scholar Marjani, we view the intersection of two ideologies in one person (Schamiloglu 1990). Since our understanding of the Jadid ideology is broadened by the deeper specification of the book, now it is time to switch our focus from the author's labeling of them as one movement to his characterization of the Jadid movement as secularist.

The author claims that Jadids attempted to become a locomotive of the Muslim liberation movement (Khalid 2015: 57), and this statement applies not only to the decolonization intent but also to tackling the backwardness of the society. On the other hand, the author states that Jadids viewed the term Islam not as a religion only, but more as a tradition, with the cult being only a part of the cultural tradition. Thus, Jadids applied not to the revival *(tajdid)* of Islam as a religion, but to society, community, and cultural tradition. It had to be enriched by the tech progress, the implementation of the print press, the broadening of the curriculum in maktabs and madrassahs, etc.: nothing of it applies to the term secularization. "Islamic secularism is a movement seeking to limit the scope of religious authority… it may be experiential, as in the encroachment by consumerism and mass media on activities previously regulated by religious authority" (Kurzman 2016). Jadids had not called for abandoning any religious practices, nor did they call for accepting what is forbidden by religious prescriptions, such as consuming alcohol. Of course, we might suspect them of being less fanatical in practice than their traditionalist opponents, and some of them, like Fitrat, become agnostic or even atheist later during Soviet rule. The focus of Jadids was on modernizing the reality of Muslim society, not reforming the religion itself. We may call them secularists, in the sense that they opposed the rule of the

symbiosis of clergy and local elites, as it happened in Bukhara; Basmachi viewed pan-Turkists as a bigger threat than Bolsheviks, which resulted in the captivity of the Jadid inspirator, Enver-pasha, by the former (Fromkin 1989: 487-488). Nevertheless, the fact of political struggle between supporters and opponents of fundamentalism does not indicate secularism as the case of this struggle: the contemporary meaning of the secularism term underlies its experiential measurement, but not a political one.

To be a secularist nowadays means being hesitant to give religion any significant place in modernity, and while the Jadids were modernists, they did not specify their view of religious practices' place in the life of the community. Thereby, we should be aware of labeling Jadids secularists, because the definition of this term has strong practical measurement in contemporary science, or we could do it only with the specification of the term in its political meaning. However, the political attitude of Jadids toward the separation of secular and spiritual rule remains unclear: it is difficult to situate the political profile of the movement concisely because of the decentralized nature of Jadidism. What is clearer is that Jadids had no intention to reform Islamic practices, and it is controversial to call them reformists: at least, their intellectual evolution and its manifestation in the studies are yet to signal such intent.

Discussion

Intelligentsia and the state

Although the story of Jadids was short and tragic (Khalid 2015: 363-389), the author states that they played a key role in creating the modern Uzbek nation. Initially, Jadids wanted to create a national identity of Turkestan, based on religious unity (Khalid 2015: 27-55). As soon as the Bolsheviks established hegemony over Central Asia, it became impossible to embrace this project (with the Bolsheviks being radical secularists and anti-theists). Instead, Jadids found another way of establishing identity, based on Chaghatay literature and the legacy of the Timurid Empire, as opposed to the Persianate culture of the region. This opposition led to the creation of Uzbek identity, which surpassed plural definitions of the local people. Thus, the author views the policy of national demarcation as a victory for the Jadids.

How could they succeed in circumstances of enforcing a totalitarian system? As the author states, the making of Uzbekistan is a product of the union of Jadids with Bolsheviks, which had a common interest in the nationalist and anticolonial movements. Nationalism here is a way to establish the power of the state through the demarcation of the once-united Muslim community, while anticolonialist interest lies in liquidating customs of the Tsarist period, which would embrace Soviet power as liberators. Khalid opposes the idea of simplifying the national demarcation policy as just a divide et impera by the Soviets (Khalid 2015: 13): he insists on the cooperation of both parties through a common objective of modernization. While the USSR remained an empire, it differed from other empires in its emphasis on "modernization and political mobilization of the periphery" (Adams 2008). The main difference between the two parties, though, was in the final goal of state creation: while Bolsheviks intended to build a revolutionary state through class struggle, Jadids wanted a national transformation. Even with the elimination of Jadidism, Uzbekistan became the "most national" state in Central Asia: Uzbeks had the most powerful Communist Party with the highest ratio of indigenous members, producing the "golden age" of the local culture and state foundations. That is why the author

decides that the Jadid project prevailed over its counterparts: while declaring loyalty to Communism, Uzbeks successfully built a national state to the extent that "the other republics were all defined against Uzbekistan", contesting its territory and even identity (Khalid 2015: 5).

The author used a wide range of archival sources, both local and in the Center, most prominently, the party archive (RGASPI) and state archive (GARF) of Moscow. The periodic press was observed, too. Last but not least – the author's extraordinary linguistic skills helped him to analyze the Jadid literature, which remains a vast layer of Uzbek literature. The author thus developed a poorly studied topic of the Cultural Revolution in Central Asia.

The methodology of Khalid derives from the imperial turn, in which he is known as a pioneer scholar in Russian history (Morrison 2017), to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, which appears to be the source of the author's inspiration (Khalid 2015: 12). Known as a Marxist, Bourdieu prioritized strategies over rules in knowledge and cultures, developing the author's understanding of cultural change. Bourdieu's theory states that every class has its habitus; we may observe a statement of the habitus of Jadids in this book. The author criticizes the national narrative of modern Uzbekistan historiography (Khalid 2015: 4), as well as the divide et impera understanding of national demarcation policy, because it obscures the role of Jadids. Khalid opposes two interpretations – that insight into USSR Muslim life is solely achievable through the eyes of "ordinary people" (Crews 2006), or only by analysis of narratives by religious scholars and the folklore tradition (DeWeese 1994) because they both seek authenticity - which is, the author states, is impossible since culture is "historically contingent, contested, and constantly emergent" (Khalid 2015: 12). He interacts in dialogue with Douglas T. Northrop's (Northrop 2004) *Veiled Empire* (Khalid 2015, 361) and Francine Hirsch's (Hirsch 2005) *Empire of Nations* (Khalid 2015: 288), criticizing them for being focused too much on the hujum policy rather than on observing the creation of national identity as a whole. Thus, it is possible to say that Khalid works in the flow with other orientalist researchers of the XXI century beginning, sharing approaches of postcolonial theory, imperial turn, theories of empire, and nationalism, but on the other hand, is not reluctant to work with the Marxist approach, which is believed by many to be outdated.

The most arguable point may be the labeling of "Jadids" by the wide range of intellectuals in Central Asia. The author does not insist that they called themselves so. Not even all of them were under the significant influence of *Tarjiman,* the main inspiration of Jadidism: we account Avloniy as an influenced reader (Khalid 2015: 50), but surely was read by the majority of future intellectuals (Khalid 2015: 35-36). Another source of Jadid propaganda was the madrassah, and many thinkers attended them, but it remains unclear in the text whether these thinkers attended the New Method madrassah or not. When we see statements that Niyoziy went to madrassah in Bukhara (Khalid 2015: 50), we learn nothing: Bukhara is well known for its madrassahs long before the Jadid movement. Of all the mentioned Central Asian thinkers, only Behbudiy is explicitly called the Jadid (Khalid 2015: 193), but he died in 1919, leaving little to do with the whirlwind of events to come. So, the author does not argue that all the intellectuals of Bukhara were Jadids, but it may not be the purpose of his study.

The dual nature of Muslim intellectuals' division in the early XX century (a *Jadid/Qadim* dichotomy) is something overrated in Academia. Some reformist Muslim thinkers were conservative '*ulama,* and some liberal Muslims, like Fitrat in his later poetry (Khalid 2015: 240-253), were not devoted to Islam at all. Fitrat's disloyalty to the customs and beliefs of Islam is not unique among reformists; we can compare it to that of prominent leaders of the Young Turks

(also a reformist Muslim movement), who supported Western ideas such as materialism and even atheism (Olmez 2012). So, can we still call someone who does not support Muslim beliefs (or even calls himself an atheist, like Abdullah Cevdet) a Muslim thinker? Maybe, it would be better to find another label for them, since the structuralism approach (basic in postcolonial theory) requires one for some social group.

The Jadids, in the author's view, are modernizers, too. In addition, they were under the influence of the real Jadids, and some of them even followed their ideas. But as we see after the establishment of Soviet rule, they could easily change their agenda from developing a Muslim society to the creation of the nation. What remains constant is the will for modernization, which is vital in their efforts. Firstly, they shared the idea of the *Usul-i Jadid school*, and in the Soviet era, the national project. Thus, these intellectuals can be called Jadids via sharing the common value of modernization, but on the other hand, they are not Jadids after the big social change. We may say they were Jadids or influenced by them in the period pre-1920s.

If real Jadids are not reformists, and the mentioned intellectuals are not Jadids, does it make them reformists? Simple logic tells us that this equation is not correct. Whether they were reformists of religion or not is a separate issue, and since the "reformist" label can often be misused when we talk about "backward" Muslim society, we should be aware of using this term. However, since the modernization effort prevails in both real Jadids and the book's Jadids, we may surely call both groups the modernizers of Muslim society, not the Muslim modernizers, which may refer to the religion of Islam. And since it was these intellectuals that provoked the division of the united Muslim society of Turkestan into Uzbeks and Tajiks, we may label them the modernizers of the Muslim society only for the pre-demarcation era. As they were the main authors of Uzbekness as a national idea, we may as well call them early Uzbek intellectuals, but it suddenly does not apply to Behbudiy (due to his death preceding the creation of the nation), whose ideas are too important for the study to be ignored. So, the only remaining option is "the modernizers of Muslim society in Turkestan", with their switch to "national intelligentsia" around 1925.

In conclusion, I would like to make a comparison of Uzbekistan's intellectual creators with their contemporaries with the closest background. *Jon Turkler* also propagated modernization but was dismissed from public policy with the creation of the Turkish Republic, with the winning party being nationalists, too. After this downfall, some of them joined the pan-Turkic movement of Central Asia (Enver-pasha), and some adopted the new government's nationalist agenda. On the other hand, there is the Kazakh intelligentsia, which is also voluntarily labeled as Alash. They followed the same path as the modernizers of Uzbekistan, with the majority entering the work for the socialist government, trying to transform the Kazakh society into a nation via creating a new alphabet, working on demarcation, etc. And since the Bolsheviks were mainly viewed as outsiders, it was the local intelligentsia who were the best option (with the alternative being Orientalists from the Center) to construct the Kazakh identity, but their impact may seem lesser, as Kazakhstan was already experiencing the huge impact of Slavic colonization.

Conclusion

A decolonial-oriented beginner scholar of the history of Central Asia initially wrote this paper. A few years later, it was an intriguing experience to look at my earlier ideas about the corpus of literature commonly appreciated today as core readings on Eurasia. The decolonial

ISSN: 3105-0042. e-ISSN: 3105-0050

choices in the critique are especially entertaining today, when the field is rapidly changing as well as the author myself, with a turn toward skepticism on the decolonial thought in the field, articulated in the latest Khalid's article (Khalid 2025). This paper should be considered merely as a archaeography of the Eurasian Studies as a field sometime around 2022, when the issues of national identity and nation-building policies became extremely relevant and (apologies for pathetique), probably, existential. Now, when the highest alarms past, the field should move on toward reconsideration and remoderation, as should the readings list in the field.

Acknowledgements.

The authors express their gratitude for the scholarly and editorial support provided during the preparation of this article

References

Adams L. "Can we apply a postcolonial theory to Central Asia?" *Central Eurasian Studies Review.* Vol. 7, no. 1 (2008): 2-7.

Baberowski J. "Review of 'Empire of nations: ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union by Francine Hirsch'." *Journal of Contemporary History*. Vol. 45, no. 2 (2010): 490-492.

Baldauf I. "Jadidism in Central Asia within reformism and modernism in the Muslim world." *Die Welt des Islams.* Vol. 41 no. 1 (2001): 72-88.

Breslauer G. *The rise and demise of world Communism.* Oxford University Press. 2021. 368 p.

Crews R. *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia.* Harvard University Press. 2006. 480 p.

DeWeese D. *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition.* Pennsylvania State University Press. 1994. 656 p.

Fromkin D. A *Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. 1989. 567 p.

Hirsch F. "Towards an empire of nations: border-making and the formation of Soviet national identities." *Russian Review.* Vol. 59, no. 2 (2000): 201-226.

Hirsch F. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2005. 367+xxi p.

Hosking, G. "Review of 'Empire of nations: ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union by Francine Hirsch'." *Journal of Modern History.* Vol. 79, no. 2 (2007): 491-492.

Keller S. "Review of 'Empire of nations: ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union by Francine Hirsch'." *Russian Review.* Vol. 65, no. 2 (2006): 341-342.

Khalid A. *The politics of Muslim cultural reform. Jadidism in Central Asia.* University of California Press. 1998. 335+xxiii p.

Khalid A. *Making Uzbekistan: nation, empire, and revolution in the early USSR*. Cornell University Press. 2015. 415+xxii p.

Khalid A. "The Historiography of Modern Central Asia Today." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History.* Vol. 26, no. 1 (2025): 91-108. https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2025.a953438.

Kurzman C. "Secularism." In R. C. *Martin (Ed.). Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim world*. Pp. 614-615. Gale. 2016. 874 p.

Lazzerini E. “Beyond renewal. The Jadid response to pressure for change in the Modern age.” In J.-A. Gross (Ed.). *Muslims in Central Asia: Expressions of identity and change.* Pp. 151-166. Durham: Duke University Press. 1992. 224+xiv p.

Martin T. *The affirmative action empire: nations and nationalism in the Soviet Union*. 1923-1939. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2001. 498+xx p.

Morrison A. “Review of Making Uzbekistan. Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR by Adeeb Khalid.” *Journal of Islamic Studies.* Vol.28, no. 3 (2017): 411-417.

Northrop D. *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia.* Cornell University Press. 2004. 392 p.

Olmez N. “*Jon Türklerin Türk ve Batı kültürüne bakış* [Young Turks’ views toward Turkish and Western cultures].” Diss. Konya: Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi. 2012. 150 p.

Schamiloglu U. “The formation of a Tatar historical consciousness: Sihabaddin Marcani and the image of the Golden Horde.” *Central Asian Survey.* Vol. 9, no. 2 (2016): 39-49.

Stronski P. *Tashkent: forging a Soviet city, 1930-1966*. University of Pittsburgh Press. 2010. 370 p.

Information about authors

Rustem Zholdybalin – PhD student of Eurasian Studies of the Nazarbayev University, Research Institute for Jochi Ulus Studies of the Science Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Turkestan 2/1, Astana, Kazakhstan, https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2473-6925, rustemktl@gmail.com

Авторлар туралы мәліметтер

Рустем Жолдыбалин – Nazarbayev University еуразиялық зерттеулер бойынша PhD докторанты, Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігі Ғылым комитетінің «Жошы Ұлысын зерделеу ғылыми институты», Түркістан көш., 2/1, Астана, Қазақстан, https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2473-6925, rustemktl@gmail.com

Сведения об авторах

Рустем Жолдыбалин – докторант PhD Евразийских исследований Nazarbayev University, Научный институт изучения Улуса Джучи Комитета науки Министерства науки и высшего образования Республики Казахстан, ул. Туркестан, 2/1, Астана, Казахстан, https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2473-6925, rustemktl@gmail.com

Information about the article / Мақала туралы ақпарат / Информация о статье

Entered the editorial office / Редакцияға түсті / Поступила в редакцию: 01.09.2025
Approved by reviewers / Рецензенттер мақұлдаған / Одобрена рецензентами: 02.11.2025.
Accepted for publication / Жариялауға қабылданды / Принята к публикации: 19.12.2025