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# Book Discussion

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

## Chronicle of a Death Foretold

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It is a pleasure to read this book—but it is also painful. It is a pleasure because *Nationalism in Central Asia*, the result of a remarkable long-term project, is such a fine piece of scholarship, of passionate and compassionate research across two countries and languages. It is painful because the book is a "chronicle of a death foretold." Dedicated to "Chek, Osh, and other extraordinary places along the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Ferghana Valley boundary that no longer exist" (p. v), the opening pages leave no doubt about the fate of the two settlements that are at the heart of *Nationalism in Central Asia*. While Osh still stands as a city and the Kyrgyzstani part of Chek continues to exist as a village, it is their former lives as noticeably multiethnic communities that have come to an end.

What happened to the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary? Why did it happen? And how did the varying incarnations of the boundary affect the people living across or close to it? It is these questions that Nick Megoran addresses in *Nationalism in Central Asia*, linking his research with previous studies from geography, social anthropology, political science, critical geopolitics, peace studies, and political theology.

The Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary, a legacy of the early Soviet era, transformed from intrastate to international divide with independence in 1991. In the late 1990s, an uneven process of delimitations by a joint border commission saw it increasingly become a visible border marked by controls, checkpoints, fences, visas, and uninhabited boundary zones. The research for this book spans more than 20 years (1995–2016), with two temporal foci: first, the years 1999–2000, when in the wake of the bomb attacks in Tashkent and the IMU incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the boundary for the first

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time ranked high on the political agenda in both states and started to materialize as a border; and second, spring/summer 2010, when Chek and Osh experienced violence and destruction of varying sorts and on varying scales.

Nick Megoran terms his approach to narrating the history of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary a "biography," one that draws on recent studies in geography which "explore how specific international boundaries (and the borders that they produce) appear, reappear/change, and disappear/become less significant in different ways and in different spatial and discursive sites over time…how boundaries *materalize*, *rematerialize*, and *dematerialize*" (p. 19; emphasis original).

In relating this biography, he differentiates between the perspectives of elites, who imagine and manage the boundary mainly from the capital cities, and of non-elites or borderlanders, who live along the boundary and experience its (non)materiality on a daily basis. Besides being of interest in itself, the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary is used as a vantage point from which to explore the political strategies, territorial logics, and everyday processes of nationalism in the two adjacent states. At the same time, Nick Megoran insists—and throughout the book convincingly proves—that processes on the boundary cannot be understood without understanding the ideologies of nationalism in the two states.

Beyond being a scholarly endeavor, *Nationalism in Central Asia* has explicitly ethical concerns. If, as Nick Megoran emphasizes, states as well as their boundaries and borders are made and nationalism is not a given, there is nothing natural about boundaries, borders, and the events unfolding there. Dismissing common determinisms about the Ferghana Valley borderland, he stresses that what happened could have happened differently had different choices been made. He also reflects on how this particular borderland could be turned into a "good place" for its inhabitants.

*Nationalism in Central Asia* is structured into four chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. Chapters 1 and 2 are devoted to the Ferghana Valley boundary as a topic of elite discourses and an object of geopolitical policies and nationalist statebuilding in the two republics between 1999 and 2010. Chapters 3 and 4 look at the borderland communities of the village of Chek and the city of Osh, exploring how they have been affected by the transformation of the boundary into a border from 1999/2000 onwards.

Chapter 1 explores how the Uzbekistani government under Islam Karimov used its international boundaries as discursive divides for the construction of evaluative binaries in line with its ideology of national independence. In this neat geopolitical imaginary, which did not allow for contesting perspectives, Uzbekistan was presented as an island of peace, progress, order, wealth, and

happiness surrounded by a sea of violence, backwardness, chaos, poverty, and sorrow. The boundary with Kyrgyzstan, in particular, came to be perceived as a shore of danger where threats such as religious extremism, drugs, and terrorism could leak in and the country's wealth could wash out. By mapping quality of life and morality onto the territory of Uzbekistan, this vision of the endangered nation state (more implicitly than explicitly) included ethnic minorities, but excluded Uzbek minorities abroad. It also served to securitize the border, militarize society, extra-territorialize dissent (as opposition was consistently imagined as emanating from beyond the country's borders)—and legitimize Karimov's authoritarian rule as a necessary defense of the state, seemingly following the example of Amir Timur.

Kyrgyzstan's brand of nationalism in this period, as analyzed in chapter 2, likewise referenced a legendary historical figure, Manas, and employed the trope of danger, but it produced a different geopolitical vision. In this "post-nomadic political imaginary" (p. 87), notions of "unity" among the Kyrgyz tribes and "concordance"/"harmony" played a key role. While president Askar Akaev had long balanced the former with the latter by championing interethnic harmony under the slogan "Kyrgyzstan is our common home," during the 1999/2000 events, he increasingly sought support through the notion of intra-Kyrgyz unity. The opposition also promoted this mono-ethnic version of unity, presenting it as endangered. Here, the danger associated with the border was that of aggressive neighboring states seizing Kyrgyz territory and threatening the Kyrgyz nation's existence with the support of their minority populations, but also of Akaev's poor performance as protector of territory and nation. After the 1999/2000 events, boundary issues continued to affect Kyrgyzstani politics under Akaev and later Kurmanbek Bakiev. They became the focal point for internal power struggles, a yardstick for presidential successes or failures—and they fueled antiminority racism as part of a "politics of paranoia" (p. 133).

Chapter 3 presents the biography of the village of Chek, which not only straddled Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan until 2010, but also included a stretch of disputed territory. In its pre-1999 state, Chek was a community whose daily routines, life trajectories and kinship ties criss-crossed an essentially unnoticeable boundary and whose senses of citizenship, belonging, and even ethnicity were fluid. The materialization of the border after 1999 was experienced as a traumatic event by many of the village's inhabitants. It began to hinder people's movement and the flow of goods, making them foreigners where they had always felt at home. Most dramatic for many people was the threat the border posed to the fulfillment of kinship obligations and ancestral duties, severely curbing their ability to lead socially meaningful lives: "The border regimes were instigated in the name of the nation; but they were seen essentially

as violence against authentic ways of being Uzbek and Kyrgyz" (p. 159). Various forms of circumventing border regimes developed, often in cooperation with border personnel, causing the boundary to dematerialize, rematerialize, and sometimes even shift. Chek's biography as a transborder community ended with the demolition of houses on the village's disputed territory in July 2010.

A few weeks earlier, the city of Osh, located in Kyrgyzstan just across the border from Uzbekistan, had been the site of bloody interethnic violence, with its Uzbek inhabitants constituting the majority of victims. In chapter 4, Nick Megoran once again reads this event through the territorializing practices of nationalism. He recounts the diverging narratives of Osh's Kyrgyz and Uzbek inhabitants about the city as rightfully belonging to their respective ethnic group, with the other group figuring as a wrongful pretender to ownership. Revealing a sense of ontological insecurity among both groups, these narratives fanned various fears linked to the nearby border before 2010. And while the violence was not inevitable, Nick Megoran writes, these narratives and fears came into play after conflict prevention mechanisms failed due to political instability following Bakiev's overthrow earlier that year. Despite widespread Kyrgyzstani expectations to the contrary, Islam Karimov's essentially territorial take on nationalism manifested itself clearly during the Osh violence: he opened the country's borders to fleeing Uzbeks and protected Kyrgyz villages in Uzbekistan from retaliatory attacks but abstained from interventionist measures on Kyrgyzstani soil. In the wake of the violence, Osh became less multiethnic and more Kyrgyz—due in part to Uzbek emigration and in part to concerted policies aimed at reducing the Uzbekness of the city.

*Nationalism in Central Asia* is exemplary in various respects: in combining dense ethnography with meticulous discourse analysis; in dealing with two nationalisms at the same time, thus evading the trap of scholarly nationalist reification; in providing multiple and complex answers, but conceding blanks; in letting the narrative breathe by giving space to details in certain places and rigorously tightening the argument in others; and in merging solid scholarship with an ethical agenda. Scholars who read the book in its entirety may stumble over a number of unmarked quotes of facts and phrases from earlier sections of text in later parts—but these repetitions may be at least partially intentional, allowing chapters to stand on their own. At the end of the book, I was left with one question: How does the course of Karimov-era minority politics in Uzbekistan (before and beyond the Osh violence) fit into all this? After all, Karimov also championed the "our common home" metaphor—even verbatim—while simultaneously furthering the Uzbekization of society by, for example, reducing spaces and opportunities for living out Tajikness. Without doubt, his brand of nationalism followed a territorial logic, particularly in foreign relations,

but there were clearly hierarchies within the imagined bounded nation. This, however, is probably a topic for another research project—around yet another border.

## Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Border Complex: Perspectives of Elites and Ordinary Citizens

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Nick Megoran's *Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary* is an impressive book that investigates the statebuilding and international border materialization processes of two young states, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. He explores how the new international boundary "has materialized, rematerialized, and dematerialized since 1991" (p. 4). The book is exemplary in its richness: Megoran draws on twenty years of extensive fieldwork that allows him to contribute to our understanding of international border management between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from the perspective of both elites and ordinary citizens. The research employs a combination of approaches/perspectives, not only ethnographic (via interviews with elite and non-elite actors and participant observation), but also geographical, historical, and political (critical geopolitics, analysis of domestic power struggles, historical biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary). In addition, he conducted a discourse analysis of texts produced by newspapers and other government and non-government actors in both republics.

Megoran argues that nationalism is the best lens through which to understand and analyze the interaction of elites/center political processes with the lives of borderlanders in Central Asia, particularly when nationalism is analyzed in a combination of political anthropological perspectives. This approach enriches Megoran's research and findings, making them interesting for scholars from different academic disciplines (area studies, political sciences, anthropology, geography, and history).

Megoran is right to emphasize that the border management processes in both states that caused physical and social destruction in the everyday lives of their citizens were not inevitable choices. He argues that they were part of a "series of choices" motived by the "logic of nationalism" (p. 244). Moreover, the author is eager to show the "human face of borderland destruction," starting the book with the story of Gulya, who had to cross the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan

border at night, risking either being shot by border guards or drowning while crossing the surging cold water of the canal. Megoran informs the reader that Gulya had to leave her home, located in a "place that no longer existed" in the "dangerous" zone near the border, and move secretly to the other side of the border to reunite with her family and find a new home (p. 3). He emphasizes that one of the main purposes of the book was to capture the biography and history of the materialization of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, in an attempt to honor a promise that he made to a borderlander who used to live in Turkabad village on the boundary between Andijon oblast in Uzbekistan and Jalalabad oblast in Kyrgyzstan. That man's home and community have been destroyed, as have many other homes and communities along the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border.

Readers will be satisfied with Megoran's excellent explication of how historical and political developments in Central Asia contributed to the materialization of the current Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border, an analysis in which he captures pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet developments and changes. By employing this historical framing, Megoran tries to explain how territorial policies and regimes were manifested, were constructed, and defined borders before the two states gained independence. For example, he suggests to the reader that the pre-Soviet period (the Khanate of Kokand and its fluid, non-national designations of "Uzbek" and "Kyrgyz"; the Kashgar Protocol of 1882 between China and the Russian Empire, which later defined the boundary between China and Kyrgyzstan) and Soviet processes (nation politics; the process of National Territorial Delimitation that divided Central Asia in the 1920s) contributed to the later disputes over land and materialization of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary based on developments of Soviet geography.

In the first and second chapters, "Uzbekistan: Building the Nation, Defending the Border" and "Kyrgyzstan: Contested Vision of the Nation," Megoran compares developments in border management in the two states. He shows how, in Uzbekistan, illiberal and suppressive nation-building and border politics were strengthened by an ideology of national independence. Megoran suggests that danger discourses and Karimov's closed-border policy were a result of increased internal tensions and violence within the country (attacks and bombs in Tashkent in 1999 and Bukhara in 2004 and the Andijon events in 2005). These internal insecurities and violence deformed the landscape of the country's border. Megoran presents an interesting analysis of classification of the danger discourses in Karimov's public speeches as well as state-controlled media that related state security threats to external enemies, with an emphasis on extremism and terrorism emanating from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or ethnic and religious intolerance from outside Uzbekistan as the

main dangers. Such discourses relied primarily on binary dualistic narratives in which Uzbekistan was pictured as a heaven where people could enjoy prosperity, peace, happiness, and stability, whereas the neighboring states were portrayed as spaces where people were living disparate and unhappy lives. Thus, Tajikistan was reduced to civil war, Afghanistan framed as chaotic due to Islamization and wars, and Kyrgyzstan painted as a poor, weak state that lacked order (as evidenced by the fact that it could not defend its border from the Taliban in 1999—Batken events). Meanwhile, border politics in Uzbekistan was framed as a battle against terrorism and extremism (religious and ethnic) in an effort to protect "heaven" from "hell," defending Uzbekistan's citizens against chaos. In promoting his ideology of national independence, Karimov promoted the process of the materialization of Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border by strengthening militaristic politics of increased border control through propagating ideals of diligence and vigilance (especially among border villagers), establishing community watch centers, and calling on village activists and citizens to take responsibility for protecting their homeland-border.

During the same period, Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, was ruled by Askar Akaev, whose semi-liberal regime popularized an open-door policy under the famous slogan "Kyrgyzstan—Our Common Home." Megoran takes an interesting angle on Kyrgyzstan in his second chapter, arguing that the populist opposition and the press promoted nationalistic politics that ran counter to Akaev's policies and popularized racism and intolerance. Akaev's open-door policy was later blamed for weak border management (foreign militants crossed the border in 1999 and 2006), creeping migration, and contested border negotiations with China (delimitation treaties; Aksy protest in 2002 against these treaties) and Uzbekistan, all of which were presented as a threat to the territorial integrity of Kyrgyzstan, leading to the "Tulip revolution" and Akaev fleeing the country. Megoran suggests that nationalistic politics was strengthened under the next president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, when nationalist discourses and claims ethnicized the border and one of the largest minority groups, Uzbeks, were claimed to be "tenants" or "fifth columnists" who threated Kyrgyzstan's integrity. Thus, according to Megoran, the elites' nationalist border discourses spread among non-elite actors, leading to murderous anti-Uzbek hatred that erupted in June 2010.

Megoran's contention that border issues were one of the main drivers escalating internal political struggles in Kyrgyzstan that mobilized violent movements such as color revolutions and bloody ethnic clashes in Osh leaves the reader wondering why the author did not take into account other crucial variables and factors, such as economic factors, corruption, patronage, and criminal groups. The book would have been strengthened considerably had it

provided a more sophisticated basis for understanding these violent phenomena in the recent history of Kyrgyzstan.

Megoran's rich fieldwork well captures the non-elite prism of ordinary people in Chek village, the Ferghana Valley borderlanders who, from the pre-tsarist era, had never experienced the visible presence of the border. The territories of the two Soviet republics were unmarked; it was easy to pass back and forth between the two, and such movement required "neither visas nor vigilance" (p. 241). Transborder practices and relations such as intermarriage, trade, cross-border education, and employment were typical experiences across generations. This continued even into the early years of independence, with the leaders of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan signing the Treaty of Eternal Friendship in 1996. But the new border regime imposed by Uzbekistan following violent events in 1999, 2004 and 2005 drastically changed the border landscape in the second decade of independence: uniformed and armed official border guards, barbed-wire fences, ditches, checkpoints, passport regimes, military surveillance and patrols, and bulldozers appeared, dividing or destroying whole communities and increasing insecurity for residents, for whom this border regime was unnatural and violent.

The field research data presented in the third and fourth chapters on the resistance and coping strategies of both border guards and borderlanders illustrate how Chek villagers and Osh inhabitants learned how to deal with insecurities and creatively responded to the developments of border management politics. Even though the decisions of elites at the center had drastically affected their daily lives, ordinary borderlanders survived. They learned how to become foreigners, obtain different citizenships, and adjust to fixed identities as Uzbek and Kyrgyz. This learning, however, came at the cost of ethnic fluidity, language mixture, and transboundary family networks that had existed in the region for generations; transborder communities like Chek have been destroyed and no longer exist in their former form.

Megoran is very persuasive in his contention that Osh city, like other border zones in the Ferghana Valley, is a contested space. However, his argument that interethnic violence in 2010 in Osh was an outcome of border management changes and processes leaves in the shadow other variables that contributed to the destruction of the Ferghana Valley's identity as a multicultural transnational space.

Overall, both cases (Chek village and Osh city) help to explain how border regimes not only caused physical destruction by demolishing infrastructure (bridges, roads, homes on the borders), sealing borders, and causing lethal violence (borderlanders being shot by border guards), but also caused social destruction that restricted and isolated entire communities by deforming

the landscape and life of mixed borderland communities and disconnecting kinship networks. In so doing, border politics made statehood and nation-building in post-Soviet Central Asia a violent and exclusionary practice that raised ethnic and political issues and—through border violence and border management politics—destroyed the social fabric of the Ferghana Valley.

## Political Geographies, Ethics of Bordering, and Ethnography along the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary

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In this book, Nick Megoran tracks the evolving politico-territorial ideals enacted and imagined in the states of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Through a complex set of events occurring in and around their shared border that includes the riots in 1990, border securitization in 1999, the massacre of 2005, and the riots of 2010, the author situates this longitudinal study in global and regional context. At its core, the book seeks to reveal why these events occurred and how the Ferghana Valley has changed as a result. Megoran deploys the "biography" method of researching borders to emphasize the interplay of various factors of domestic and international politics, culture, and economics at various scales. As part of this method, the study uses ethnography, interviews, media review, and participant observation—approaching both elites and ordinary border-dwelling citizens—to make the book's core argument.

This argument at times refutes and at other times gives nuance to commonly held beliefs: that the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border tensions resulted from long-suppressed ethnic antagonisms that exploded once Soviet control of the region dissipated; that conflict between these two states relates wholly to territory, water, and natural resources; and that the tensions were the inevitable legacy of poorly drawn boundaries dating from the Soviet period. Each of the above theses is given careful consideration and then dissected to reveal its shortcomings. This is a clear contribution to the field made even more significant by the book's argument that "politics"—and particularly territorial imaginaries resulting from nationalist projects—in both states are the core drivers of tensions.

In short, Megoran powerfully argues that border issues are best understood as a product of the interaction of domestic power struggles in Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic and that the discursive terrain of the post-Soviet Central

Asian geopolitical space was a key site of these struggles. He brings to bear on these issues a uniquely focused political geographic lens that gives the book great poignancy. More than adequate evidence is provided for the argument that border disputes formed vehicles for rival political factions to frame their geopolitical visions of Central Asia and to assert control over national space through a variety of textual, cartographic, security, and governmental strategies.

Elites in both countries are shown to employ the border in efforts to spatialize ethnicities and inscribe their geopolitical visions onto the landscape. But rather than leave this work as a commentary on elites and the role of "top-down" power, as many other scholarly works on this region (and others) have done, Megoran deploys years of active fieldwork to reveal how the border is also the site at which identity and authority projects are contested and reworked by borderland dwellers.

As stated in the first chapter, this book explores "in equal detail the interplays and disjunctures between state practices/discourses and the everyday lives of the borderland citizenries of two states. It sees borders not as ephemeral shadows cast by states, but as being particularly illuminating of their core processes." The value of such an effort is significant, and this book will take its place among the essential reads in Border Studies, Central Asian Studies, Political Geography, and International Relations.

As a member of what may be termed the first post-Soviet generation of Central Asianists, Nick Megoran engages with fieldwork carried out in the region during the 1990s and 2000s. This is invaluable, as there are comparatively few scholars today who can do so. Such experiential breadth is fruitfully applied to show changes occurring from the early, to mid-, to late 1990s and then through the first decade and a half of the 2000s.

Having existed under comparable conditions in the Soviet period, Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic—formerly the Uzbek SSR and Kyrgyz SSR—offer excellent comparative cases of political development and territorial ideology since independence. Whereas the Kyrgyz Republic has liberalized its economy and seen the emergence of elite-driven challenges to the varied regimes that have come to power, Uzbekistan has maintained an autocracy in which a high level of state economic and political control backed by an entrenched security apparatus curtails mobilization against the regime. Such a comparison is of great value not only to Central Asianists, but also to students/scholars and practitioners of geopolitics, nationalism, citizenship, and state formation writ large.

Central Asia's global profile has experienced profound ups and downs over the course of the last 27 years. Tragically, it seems that events like the 2005

massacre at Andijon and the 2010 riots in southern Kyrgyzstan are required to put it on the broader public radar. This book fruitfully leverages the well-known events in the region to reveal their complex and little-understood backgrounds, ultimately making a valuable academic contribution as well as broader moral/ethical statements too often lacking in the realm of "objective" scholarship.

This is not to say that this book reads as an overt effort of "advocacy scholarship." Megoran goes to great pains to set his arguments in context, engaging with alternative perspectives and scholarship that deviate from his foundational approach and beliefs. This adds to the book's value. It is an unequivocal contribution to the area studies literature, but also stands as an important work in political geography/political sociology. This is so because of its expert use of theory and methods, but also because it makes powerful points on a moral/ethical level. One may hope that this will inspire further such efforts.

The chapters make excellent use of "scale" as an organizing principle. While the author enacts a measure of temporal flexibility (moving forward and backward), this scalar structure ultimately makes for an extraordinarily cogent read.

Chapters one and two are well-researched studies of the nation-building processes and state ideologies of the case countries. Elites are the core subjects of these chapters, and the discourses they produce are shown to affect the borderland. These chapters bring new perspectives that will be particularly interesting for a reader wishing to understand and explain Uzbekistan's and the Kyrgyz Republic's political trajectories from 1991 to 2010.

As noted by the author, chapter three is the core of the book. It reverses the scale, telling the same story over the same time period but from the perspective of people living near or on the boundary. The story of the village of Chek is used to show how alternative geopolitical visions of this borderland are negotiated with official imaginaries.

Chapter four engages with the cataclysmic inter-communal urban violence that devastated the Ferghana Valley's quintessential border city, Osh, in 2010. It demonstrates how this violence may be viewed as an outcome of the processes outlined in previous chapters. The Ferghana Valley's borderlands are shown to be *made* by a series of choices in which nationalist politics play a central role.

Throughout the book, Megoran grapples with competing views on major topics such as Nationalism, State Citizenship, and the Ethics of Bordering. In doing so, he poignantly sets forth his ideas and ideals relating thereto. In an effort to compel exposition on these beliefs, I would point to the section entitled "Reopen the Borders?", in which Megoran outlines the scholarly debate on

borders as inherently "good" or "bad." What might a borderless Central Asia or revived Turkestan look like? What might the fallout of such de-territorialization entail, were it even a possibility?

While the title clearly asserts the book's focus on the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, the extensive borders that Uzbekistan shares with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and even Afghanistan are given rather limited discussion in this book. These would likely require their own books/biographies, but would the dynamics of these borders not play into those of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, just as China's and Tajikistan's shared borders with Kyrgyzstan affect its politics?

The author's openness regarding the lack of Russian sources in this book speaks to the integrity of the scholarship, but one wonders how the lack of Russian sources might affect this study. Given that the Russian language remains relevant and widely used in varied communities within Central Asia, might the biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border be altered by inclusion of such sources? Might they not offer unique perspectives on social issues that evade the research as it stands?

Finally, the use of the term "violence," rather popular today, is broadly deployed in this book and in other contemporary scholarship through ideas such as "Slow Violence." Given that this book deals directly with a circumstance of brutality against the bodies of human beings, might one question the use of the term "violence" when making reference to delays at the border, kinship network disruption, changing patterns of daily life, and extraction of bribes? Does such broad application of the word risk watering down its meaning and leaning rather heavily into the field of "grievance studies"?

In the end, *Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary* leaves one with a sense of having been taken on a journey through time and space in the Ferghana Valley. On this journey, one has been led by an expert to meet elites, officials, and common border-dwellers. One encounters border guards, customs officials, and international NGO workers. Megoran's guidance compels readers to notice things they might not otherwise. It also compels the reader not to look away from things that might be distasteful but should nevertheless be seen. The treatment of the various actors and agents of power is eminently fair, and the author is keen to point out shortcomings of this work as a means of directing future researchers to fruitful topics.

*Nationalism in Central Asia* is an intense read. It is to the author's credit that it engages with theory throughout. So many academic works place the theory chapter at the beginning and only revisit its ideas during the conclusion. This is not the case with this book. Theory is brought up and mulled over in the context of the cases in every chapter.

Moreover, this book offers a unique perspective on the Uzbekistani state during the 2010 crisis. Such a view is a departure from most of the writing on the subject and is a substantive contribution. This said, the author's treatment remains balanced in its assessment of the agents of border tension and violence along this border. Megoran makes it clear that no single and simple villain exists.

The conclusion chapter is particularly engaging, as Megoran directs readers to future avenues of research. Reasons for his chosen approach are also emphasized, making a convincing case for further use of the "biography" method. The region's extensive borders between Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Russia, and China beg for similar consideration and research.

The core take-away of this book is broader in scope than a commentary on nationalism's ills and the manner in which they manifest at boundaries. The author suggests that borders and states, like all "places," are *made*. Rather than being "natural" or the product of forces beyond our comprehension, places are constructed by decisions of human beings. The influences of history, geography, culture, etc., are well documented and presented as worthy of consideration—but if places are made by human choice, then an ethical and moral dynamic is clearly at play.

This leads to the author's hope that borderlands can be remade to create good places. Megoran presents the borders that have come to exist specifically between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan since 1999 as examples of how bad places are made. He appropriately points to examples of other borders to demonstrate the generalizability of the argument. The latter point is key, in that Border Studies is a booming field with unique cases emerging across the globe. This book should inform the way people think about such borders, borderlands, and broader territorial practices for decades to come.

## Toward a Critical Central Asian Studies

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I am very grateful to my three interlocutors for taking the time to read my book and for commenting on it so insightfully and generously (possibly more generously than it deserves). I begin my response to them with the simple observation that they work in departments of geography, psychology, and musicology.

I draw this to attention because it demonstrates that Central Asian studies is an inherently inter-disciplinary enterprise. Myrzabekova writes here that my book is of relevance to "scholars from different academic disciplines," and this is something that is also true of the work of all three of my reviewers. Instead of replying point-by-point to their observations and criticisms, I want to use this response to my interlocutors to reflect briefly on this inter-disciplinarity of Central Asian studies and the ways that it can contribute to a broader "critical area studies." I do this by engaging with their positive and negative appraisals of my book, and, to begin with, by locating the discussion within wider debates about area studies.

## Area Studies and Central Asia

In his review of my book, Diener argues that it is an "unequivocal contribution to area studies." Although I think he intends the remark as praise, this is not necessarily so, because the entanglements of area studies in Central Asia have historically been problematic (not least in the discipline to which Diener and I belong, geography).

Sidaway *et al.* argue that there have been three main phases of area studies: imperial regional knowledge; the social-scientific studies of the Cold War; and those under globalization, which, being "more conscious of the politics of representation" and "questioning of putative boundaries around areas and attendant to transnationalism," seek to critique the earlier phases.[1] These phases can readily be identified in the history of Central Asian studies. "Imperial" studies facilitated the absorption of Central Asia into European empires,[2] viewing the region as a site for European and North American exploration,[3] or as Mackinder's infamous pivot of global imperial competition.[4] Cold War-era studies envisioned the region in terms of the extent of its subjugation to Soviet authority and issues of actual or potential resistance to Moscow.[5] Third,

1 J. Sidaway, E. Ho, J. Rigg, and C. Woon, "Area Studies and Geography: Trajectories and Manifesto," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space,* 34, no. 5 (2016): 777–790.

2 H. Sodiqov, P. Shamsutdinov, Q. Ravhshanov, and Q. Usmonov, *Turkiston Chor Rossiyasi Mustamlakamchiligi Davrida* (Tashkent: Sharq, 2000), 53–60.

3 E. Huntington, "Problems in Exploration–Central Asia," *The Geographical Journal,* 35, no. 4 (1910): 395–419.

4 N. Megoran and S. Sharapova (eds.), *Central Asia in International Relations: The Legacies of Halford Mackinder* (London: Hurst and Co, 2013).

5 A. Bennigsen and M. Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (London: Croom Helm, 1983); S. Poliakov, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1992).

as Lemon's retrospective shows,[6] we have seen in our field the emergence of what Koch (based on her studies of nationalism in Kazakhstan) describes as a critical, globally-minded, emancipatory area studies.[7] This is one that questions taken-for-granted constructions of the region and is ethical at heart by investigating how the political effects of these constructions deform or enhance human wellbeing. However, this form of area studies cannot ignore or do away with the concept of regions even as it critiques them, simply because of the continuing importance of the idea of regions for making sense of the world.

That enduring importance, and thus the need for such an area studies, is demonstrated well by the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan in 2000. She began her press briefing *en route* back to the US by saying:

> The most basic thing in my mind is, it took us a very long time to get there and a very long time to get back and there are the ten time zones, that's what we've been going over, and there is no question about the fact that this region of the world is very isolated and very far away.[8]

This is strikingly ethnocentric: after all, Central Asia is far closer to much of the world than is the distant US. The speech continued by listing the issues the Central Asian republics have to deal with, including "cross-border problems, narco-trafficking, drugs, and then be also surrounded by very important powers, China and Russia and the problems of Afghanistan and Iraq." However, all was not, she suggested, hopeless:

> The most interesting thing is the people. In many ways I'm sorry that you weren't with me at the University of Kyrgyzstan, the American University, because they were young students. They're the future. They were very smart, spoke perfect English, understood various concepts.

It is particularly significant that she characterizes Central Asia as an isolated, distant, and dangerous region whose future hope is found in elite young people's ability to speak English and identify with America (which seemingly

6 E. Lemon, *Critical Approaches to Security in Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2018).

7 N. Koch, "Is a 'Critical' Area Studies Possible?" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space,* 34, no. 5 (2016): 807–814.

8 M. Albright, "Press Briefing by Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright on Plane En Route Washington, D.C. from Tashkent, Uzbekistan," *Turkistan Newsletter - Turkistan Bulteni*, April 26, 2000.

indexes their intelligence). Because such a view of the region has often informed misguided and counterproductive policy interventions, the need for a critical Central Asian studies should be obvious.[9]

## Elements of a Critical Central Asian Studies

Four elements of my book that my reviewers find praiseworthy can point us toward what a critical Central Asian Studies should look like. These I understand not as unique to my book, but rather as illustrative of the emerging field.

Firstly, all reviewers draw attention to the extended time I have spent in the region studying the same question and observing change over two decades—and the resultant detail of material—as a strength of the book. I am far from alone in this, although the format of this piece prevents my referencing the work of numerous colleagues. With regard to extended fieldwork, it is worth comparing Central Asian studies with African studies. Over his career-long engagement with the latter field, Duffield observes a significant retreat from fieldwork and the demise of the sustained engagement with place that, he holds, used to characterize the field.[10] In contrast to the state of the field three or four decades ago, Central Asian studies, meanwhile, is increasingly marked by sustained engagement that allows for detailed empirical work.

Secondly, our field is marked by particular attention to theory. Diener comments on the way my book engages with multiple theories, woven throughout rather than introduced in the beginning and then forgotten until the end. Again, I will draw a contrast with wider discussions about area studies. Jazeel contends that an "alarming drift from Area Studies" is a product of "authoritarian" theorization.[11] By this, he means that the imperative to produce theories that are transferable between contexts and thus have greater citational value in metrics exercises has "led to the devaluation of sustained engagement with places." From this does not follow that theory should be rejected; rather, he calls

9 J. Heathershaw and N. Megoran, "Contesting Danger: A New Agenda for Policy and Scholarship on Central Asia," *International Affairs,* 87, no. 3 (2011): 589–612.

10 M. Duffield, "From Immersion to Simulation: Remote Methodologies and the Decline of Area Studies," *Review of African Political Economy,* 41, Supplement 1 (2014): S75–S94.

11 T. Jazeel, "Geography, Area Studies and the Imperative of Singularity," *Political Geography,* 57, no. 1 (2017): 96–97, 96.

for a focused and patient "attunement" to places.[12] Much of the contemporary field of Central Asian studies demonstrates just this type of engagement.

Thirdly, all three reviewers approvingly note the mixture of methods that the book employs, including ethnography, interviews, and analysis of government discourse. The emerging inter-disciplinary field of Central Asian studies enables this, not only by facilitating acceptance and cross-exchange of ideas and methods, but also by enabling critique of their use. For example, as a geographer using ethnography, I find that few colleagues at our annual disciplinary conferences are well equipped to evaluate my use of what is to many an unfamiliar method—but when I present to my colleagues in Central Asian studies, or when they review my journal submissions, I find anthropologists able to engage much more critically with my approach. That, hopefully, makes the work we produce more rigorous.

Finally, Klenke's praise of my book for "merging scholarship with an ethical agenda" points to the necessity of a *critical* Central Asian studies. Fairclough writes that, "Critical analysis aims to produce interpretations and explanations of areas of social life which both identify the causes of social wrongs and produce knowledge which could (in the right conditions) contribute to righting or mitigating them."[13] Thus, a critical Central Asian studies is one that questions taken-for-granted constructions of the region (by local or foreign governments, NGOs, international organizations, film-makers, and any other producer of knowledge) and has an ethical imperative to investigate how the political effects of these constructions deform or enhance human wellbeing. This is in marked contrast to imperial and Cold War studies of the region that were too often harnessed for state power and geopolitical advantage.

## Shortcomings and Ways Forward

I now turn to some of the criticisms of the book, using them to think about the further work that needs doing to support the emergence of a critical Central Asian studies. Myrzabekova takes issue with my analysis of the 2010 violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, wondering why I did not take account of "other crucial variables and factors," including economics, corruption, patronage, and criminal groups. I fully accept her argument that these elements—and

12 T. Jazeel, "Between Area and Discipline: Progress, Knowledge Production and the Geographies of Geography," *Progress in Human Geography,* 40, no. 5 (2016): 649–667.

13 N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis,* 2nd ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2010), 8.

others—are important; indeed, I do so explicitly in the book, admitting the importance of "the political economy of patronage networks" and "organized crime" (pp. 190–191). I indicated at the outset that the aim of the book was not "to provide a new account of what happened," but rather to show the importance of "territorialized nationalism" as one—thus far largely overlooked—element in understanding the violence. The book's core argument is that nationalism is an inherently spatial project, but that most studies of Central Asia have taken space as merely the inert stage on which the real political and economic dramas unfold. In making this argument, I tried hard in the text to avoid the other extreme: that is, the risk of geographical determinism (the argument that geography determines politics, society and culture). Indeed, Klenke, in her review, notes that I dismiss "common determinisms." It may be, however, that either I was not sufficiently clear on this or the account I presented actually failed to achieve this. I think that thus far we have only a patchy understanding of what happened in 2010, and the interdisciplinary study of our region should contribute to a fuller understanding. Much of that empirical work still needs doing, and needs doing from different disciplinary backgrounds, before a fuller inter-disciplinary synthesis can take place. It is my opinion, however, that the political climate in Kyrgyzstan post-2010 remains an obstacle to the pursuit of a fuller picture of the truth of those dark events of June 2010.

Diener queries my use of the term "violence" to refer both to brutality against bodies at the border (including lethal violence) and to effects of the border such as disruption to kinship networks and the inconvenience caused by things like delays at the border. This is located with taxonomies and discussions of violence in the field of peace studies that can be broadly traced back to the influence of Martin Luther King, via Galtung. I wanted to show the interconnections between these different types of negative effect of new border regimes and emphasize that I did not regard them as separate or distinct from each other, but on the same spectrum of cartographic violence. However, such usage may lead, as he worries, to a change in the meaning of "violence."

A final set of questions is about the scope of the book. Although I discuss minority Kyrgyz issues in Uzbekistan, Diener wonders about the parallel stories of the Tajik minority in the republic and the gradual reduction of public space for Tajikness. Similarly, he observes that Uzbekistan's boundaries with Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan are largely ignored in the book, but that the dynamics of these border relationships would surely play into processes along the Uzbekistan-Tajikistan border. I accept these critiques, with the obvious caveat that such studies would be beyond the scope of the book due to being beyond my capacity in terms of time, expertise, and linguistic competence. Indeed, I wonder whether it is possible for anyone to claim

to be an expert on "Central Asia" rather than a few societies in a few places at a few times within it. And it is here that I would welcome the contribution of other geographers, political scientists, historians, economists, lawyers, sociologists, criminologists, and anthropologists to the study of boundary and border issues in the region. Indeed, as my book describes in its opening chapter, just such a field is emerging. And it is therefore that I am hopeful about the development of a critical Central Asian studies. I noted above Duffield's lament over the decline of African studies. In contrast, over the past three decades, we have seen the emergence of a far more international and inter-disciplinary field of Central Asian studies than existed previously. Much more work needs to be done, and the threat presented by authoritarian regimes to academic freedom (not least in the Chinese Eastern Turkestani part of Central Asia) should not be underestimated as an obstacle to this. Nonetheless, as evidenced by this exchange, such a field is emerging. I thank my reviewers once more for helping me reflect on this.