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Soviet Central Asia on the Periphery

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Soviet Central Asia on the Periphery

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Translated by Andrew Jenks

The Search for the Center

Soviet Central Asia included 5 of the 15 union republics of the USSR: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. All these republics emerged in place of the former Turkestan and Steppe general-governorships of the Russian Empire, as well as two protectorates: Bukhara and Khiva. The Russian Empire gradually incorporated the northern lands of this region and their nomadic peoples beginning in the 1730s. The intensive annexation of settled lands to the south occurred in the 1860–80s, while the territories of Khiva and Bukhara lost their remaining independence only at the beginning of the 1920s. In 1897, the population of these lands, including the protectorates, constituted about 8 percent of the population of the country, and in 1989—17 percent.¹

Evaluating the significance of this population and territory for academic studies of the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the post-Soviet space is no simple matter. A very basic way to start is to compare the number of publications on this area with the overall quantity of publications about the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the post-Soviet space. The comparison, although rather mechanical, does support the initial thesis regarding the disproportionality of interest in various regions of the country that collapsed in 1991. I took just two popular English-language journals from 2010 to 2014: in *Slavic Review* there were 7 specialized publications about Central Asia out of 126 (separately or as a thematic block), and *Kritika* had 7 out of 107 (although, of course, there were references to the region in a number of other published articles). If one takes Russian journals, the picture is not **[End Page 359]** much different: in *Ab Imperio*, of the 202 publications that I examined for the same five years, 15 were directly focused on Central Asia. The share of publications in these cases is therefore approximately two to three times less than the share of the population in 1989 and about the same, or a bit less, of the share of the population in 1897.²

Of course, the statistics for publications cited above are superficial and warrant further discussion; to make more meaningful statements, one would need a more thorough consideration of all journals, collections

of articles, monographs, and dissertations; more refined criteria for the selection of texts; and an analysis of publication activity over a longer period of time. But the issue is not just one of objective evidence of this sort; there is also a widespread impression among those who study Central Asia that other scholars ignore their region, something that is generally absent in conceptual debates about Russia and socialism.³ The Central Asian perspective is either lacking or mentioned briefly in general discussions about social estates, the reforms of the 19th century, the revolution and civil war, the Stalin period, World War II, the Thaw, the period of “stagnation,” and in post-Soviet memory. For many, it is as if Central Asia occupies not even a secondary but only a tertiary place and plays no role in attempts to understand this or that time period or social order.

Whether real or subjective, the absence of attention toward Central Asia is part of a more general disproportionality in the study of the Russian Empire, the USSR, and post-Soviet affairs. Specialists in other regions (the Caucasus, the Volga region, and Siberia) are probably convinced that their interests are no better represented than is Central Asia, and perhaps even less so. Nonetheless, Central Asian studies have their own specific attributes as well as a clear tendency to form a kind of self-standing region. This probably makes the complaints and grievances of specialists in the region louder and more insistent.

What are these specific attributes of Central Asian studies? There are a number of reasons for insufficient attention being paid to Central Asia in both the imperial and the Soviet periods. In particular, the complications of gaining access to sources have held scholarship back. Studying the region requires a trip to Central Asian countries as well as Russia. Scholars must also **[End Page 360]** overcome various limitations and...

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SERGEY ABASHIN

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¹ *Pervaiia vserossiiskaia perepis' naseleniia Rossiiskoi imperii 1897: Obshchii svod po imperii rezul'tatov nazrabotki dannykh Pervoi vserossiiskoi perepisi naseleniia, proizvedennoi 28 ianvaria 1897 goda*, no. 1 (St. Petersburg: Tsentral'nyi statisticheskii komitet, 1905), 3; I. I. Geier, *Turkistan*, 2nd ed. (Tashkent: A. L. Kirsnet, 1909), 9; V. A. Boldyrev, *Itogi perepisi naseleniia SSSR: Naselenie SSSR po dannym Vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1989 g.* (Moscow: Finansy i statistika, 1990), 8–9.

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