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The Role of Central Asia in History

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Abstract:

Central Asia has played a pivotal role in shaping the course of history due to its strategic location at the crossroads of civilizations, facilitating cultural exchange, trade, and the movement of peoples over millennia. The region's influence spans various periods and facets of history, establishing it as a significant melting pot of culture, politics, and commerce.

Keywords: central asia, silk road, soviet, civilization

Introduction

Silk Road and Trade

Central Asia was integral to the ancient Silk Road, a network of trade routes connecting the East and the West. This facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and technologies between Asia, the Mediterranean, and beyond, enhancing cultural diffusion and economic prosperity.

Birth of Civilizations and Empires

The region witnessed the rise and fall of notable civilizations and empires such as the Persian Empire, Alexander the Great's conquests, the Hellenistic kingdoms, and the various nomadic empires that emerged from the steppes, including the Scythians, Saka, and Hunnic confederations.

Islamic Golden Age

Central Asia was a central hub during the Islamic Golden Age, contributing to advancements in science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and literature. It became a center for learning and scholarship, with cities like Bukhara and Samarkand serving as renowned centers of intellectual exchange and innovation.

Mongol Empire and Timurid Dynasty

The Mongol Empire, under Genghis Khan and his successors, established one of the largest land empires, connecting Central Asia with regions as far as Eastern Europe. Later, the Timurid Dynasty, led by Timur (Tamerlane), flourished, bringing forth a period of cultural and intellectual renaissance.

Russian and Soviet Influence

Central Asia's history also incorporates the impact of Russian expansion and Soviet rule. The region became an integral part of the Soviet Union, shaping its socio-political landscape and contributing significantly to the Soviet economy, primarily through its natural resources and agricultural output.

Independence and Modern Era

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—have been shaping their individual trajectories. They've been focused on economic development, political reforms, regional cooperation, and reviving cultural heritage, marking a new phase in the region's history.

Overall, Central Asia's role in history is characterized by its pivotal position in facilitating cultural exchange, trade, and intellectual development, as well as its experience of varying influences from empires, global powers, and regional dynamics. These historical influences have contributed to the rich and diverse tapestry of the region, shaping its unique identity and significance on the world stage.

In its historical application the term Central Asia designates an area that is considerably larger than the heartland of the Asian continent. Were it not for the awkwardness of the term, it would be better to speak of Central Eurasia, comprising all those parts of the huge Eurasian landmass that did not develop a distinctive sedentary civilization of their own. But the real boundaries of Central Asia are determined at any given time in history by the relationship between the "civilized" and the "barbarian"—the two opposed but complementary. The equation so often propounded—of the civilized with the sedentary and the barbarian with the nomad—is misleading, however. The most significant distinction between the two groups in Eurasia lies probably in the successful attempt of the civilized to alter and command the physical environment, whereas the barbarian simply uses it, often in a masterly fashion, to gain an advantage. In its essence, the history of Central Asia is that of the barbarian, and its dominant feature is the sometimes latent, sometimes open conflict in which the barbarian clashes with the civilized. Two basic patterns of conquest are evident in the history of Central Asia: that of the barbarian, accomplished with arms and ephemeral in its results, and that of the civilized—slow, rather unspectacular, achieved through technological superiority and absorption. The principal difficulty for the historian of Central Asia lies in the paucity and relative lateness of indigenous written sources. The first aboriginal sources—written in a Turkic language—date from the 8th century CE, and source material of similar value does not become available again until the 13th century. Most of the written sources dealing with Central Asia originate in the surrounding sedentary civilizations and are almost always strongly prejudiced against the barbarian; the most important among them are in Chinese, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Persian. Without a sufficient number of indigenous written sources, the language of a given Central Asian people is difficult to determine. It is, however, reasonable to suppose that many of them spoke a Uralic or an Altaic language, and it can be taken for certain that Paleo-Asiatic languages were in wider use in early times than they are now. While it seems likely that the principal languages of many great nomadic empires were Turkic or Mongolian, the attribution of such languages to peoples about whose speech insufficient linguistic evidence exists—as in the case of the Xiongnu or the Avars—is unwarranted; it is wiser to confess ignorance.

Two of the natural vegetation zones of Central Asia have played a prominent part in history: the forest belt, 500 to 1,000 miles (800 to 1,600 km) wide, and, south of it, the steppe, a vast grassland extending eastward from Hungary to Mongolia, facilitating communications and providing grass, the only raw material absolutely essential to the creation of the great nomad empires. The northern frozen marshes and the southern deserts played a minor role in Central Asian history. Within the broad concept of Central Asia as defined above, there is in terms of historical geography a more precisely delineated Central Asian heartland consisting of three adjacent regions, collectively referred to by 19th-century explorers and geographers as Russian and Chinese Turkistan.

The first of these regions, known to the ancient Greeks as Transoxania and to the Arabs as Māwarāʿ al-Nahr ("That Which Lies Beyond the River"), consists of the area between the Amu Darya (the Oxus River of the Greeks and the Jāyḥun of the Arabs) and Syr Darya (the Jaxartes River of the Greeks and the Sāyḥun of the Arabs). It is an arid, semidesert country where, before the development of large-scale irrigation projects in the 20th century, the sedentary population

maintained itself by intensive cultivation of the fertile tracts bordering the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya or by cultivation of the oases, in which were situated the major urban centres such as Bukhara and Samarkand. The second, predominantly steppe, region extends northward from the upper reaches of the Syr Darya to the valley of the Ili River and to the foothills of the ranges lying between the Altai Mountains and the Tien Shan. Bounded on the south by the line of the Tien Shan and to the north by Lake Balkhash, this area was known to the Turks as the Yeti Su, the "Land of the Seven Rivers," hence its Russian name of Semirechye.

The third region, centring on the Takla Makan Desert, is bounded on the north by the Tien Shan, on the west by the Pamirs, on the south by the Kunlun Mountains, and on the northeast by the Junggar Basin. Often referred to as Kashgaria, from its principal urban centre, Kashgar (Kashi), the region is characterized by small oasis settlements lying between the desert and the surrounding ranges, such as Hotan, Yarkand, Kashgar itself, and Aksu (Akosu), which served as way stations on the so-called Silk Road between China and the West.

Prehistory and antiquity

The beginnings of human history in Central Asia date back to the late Pleistocene Epoch, some 25,000 to 35,000 years ago, which includes the last full interglacial period and the last glaciation, the latter being followed by the interglacial period that still persists today. The Aurignacian culture of the Upper Paleolithic coincided with the last glaciation, which was much less severe in northern Asia than in Europe. In a period when ice covered northern France, Siberia below latitude 60° N was ice-free. The Paleolithic Malta site, 28 miles northwest of Irkutsk, is clearly Aurignacian, and it is safe to assume that in this period Siberia and the subarctic areas of Europe belonged to the same civilization. The differentiation between Central Asia and the surrounding civilization did not begin until Neolithic times, marked by tremendous technical progress and a wide diversification of cultures. This article does not discuss the development of these cultures or their contacts with eastern, southern, and western cultures; most of the archaeological results, however important, are controversial and are subject to different interpretations in the light of new finds.

Early western peoples

The first human groups to emerge at the dawn of history that are identifiable by name rather than by their artifacts are the Cimmerians and the Scythians, both located in the western half of Central Asia as reported by the Greeks. The Cimmerians, whose name appears in the *Odyssey* of Homer, occupied the southern Russian steppe from about 1200 BCE. Their civilization, which belongs to the Late Bronze Age, is barely distinguishable from that of other peoples with whom they mingled. From the second half of the 8th century BCE, the Cimmerians were replaced by the Scythians, who used iron implements. The Scythians created the first known typical Central Asian empire. The chief thrust of their expansion was directed against the south rather than the west, where no major power existed and which thus offered little chance for valuable booty. In the late 8th century BCE, Cimmerian and Scythian troops fought against the Assyrian king Sargon II, and, at the end of the 6th century BCE, conflict arose between the Scythians and the Achaemenian king Darius I.

Darius's expedition (516?–513? BCE) against the Scythians in southern Russia was described in great detail by the Greek historian Herodotus, who provided the first and perhaps the most penetrating description of a great nomad empire. In more than one respect, the Scythians appear as the historical prototype of the mounted warrior of the steppe. Yet, in their case, as in others, it would be mistaken to see in them aimlessly roaming tribes. The Scythians, like most nomad empires, had permanent settlements of various sizes, representing various degrees of civilization. The vast fortified settlement of Kamenka on the Dnieper River, settled since the end of the 5th century BCE, became the centre of the Scythian kingdom ruled by Ateas, who lost his life in a battle against Philip II of Macedon in 339 BCE.

The Scythians had a highly developed metallurgy, and in their social structure the agriculturalists (*aroteres*), who grew wheat for sale, constituted a class of their own. The quality of Scythian art, characterized by a highly sophisticated style depicting animals both real and mythical, remained unsurpassed in Central Asia. Although the Scythians had no script, it has been established, nevertheless, that they spoke an Iranian language.

The Scythians appear as Shakas in the Old Iranian rock inscriptions, where three distinct groups are identified, and it is by the latter name that they appear in the history of northwestern India, which they penetrated during the 1st century BCE. On the steppes of Central Asia they were gradually subsumed into the Kushan empire (*see below*), while on the southern Russian steppes they were absorbed by the Sarmatians, another Iranian nomad people whose hegemony lasted until the 4th century CE.

Early eastern peoples

From its earliest history China had to contend with the pressures of invading nomads along its borders. The group of nomads called the Hu played a considerable role in early Chinese history, leading to the introduction of cavalry and the adoption of foreign clothing, more suitable than its traditional Chinese counterpart for new types of warfare. About 200 BCE a new and powerful nomadic people emerged on China's western borders, the Xiongnu. Little is known of Touman, founder of this empire, beyond the fact that he was killed by his son Maodun, under whose long reign (c. 209–174 BCE) the Xiongnu became a major power and a serious menace to China. In many respects the Xiongnu are the eastern counterpart of the Scythians. The Chinese historian Sima Qian (c. 145–c. 87 BCE) described the nomadic tactics and strategy used by the Xiongnu in terms almost identical with those applied by Herodotus to the Scythians: the Xiongnu

The centre of the Xiongnu empire was Mongolia, but it is impossible even to approximate the western limits of the territory under its direct control. For more than two centuries the Xiongnu, more or less constantly warring with China, remained the major force in the eastern regions of Central Asia.

In 48 CE the Xiongnu empire, long plagued by internecine struggles, dissolved. Some of the tribes, known as the southern Xiongnu, recognized Chinese suzerainty and settled in the Ordos region. The other remaining tribes, the northern Xiongnu, maintained themselves in Mongolia until the middle of the 2nd century, when they finally succumbed to the Xianbei, their neighbours. Another group, led by Zhizhi, brother and rival of the northern Xiongnu ruler, moved westward. With the death of Zhizhi in 36 CE, this group disappears from the records, but according to one theory the Huns, who first appeared on the southern Russian steppes about 370 CE, were descendants of these fugitive tribes.

Meanwhile, in the second half of the 2nd century BCE the Xiongnu, at the height of their power, had expelled from their homeland in western Gansu (China) a people probably of Iranian stock, known to the Chinese as the Yuezhi and called Tocharians in Greek sources. While a part of the Yuezhi confederacy, known as the Asi (Asiani), moved as far west as the Caucasus region, the remainder occupied the region between the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya before overrunning Bactria between 141 and 128 BCE. After penetrating Sīstān and the Kābul River valley, they crossed the Indus and established the Kushan empire in northwestern India. In its heyday, under Kujula Kadphises (Qiu Juique) during the 1st century CE, this empire extended from the vicinity of the Aral Sea to Varanasi in the Gangetic Plain and southward as far as Nashik, near modern Mumbai. The Kushan were thus able to control the growing transcontinental caravan trade linking the Chinese empire with that of Rome.

The Turks

In 552 the Juan-juan empire was destroyed by a revolution of considerable consequences for world history. The tribe of the Turks (Tujue in Chinese transcription), living within the Juan-

juan empire and apparently specializing in metallurgy, revolted and seized power. It established an empire that for about two centuries remained a dominant force in Asia. The Turks are the first people in history known to have spoken a Turkic language and the first Central Asian people to have left a written record. Inscribed funerary stelae still standing in Mongolia, mostly near the Orhon River, are invaluable from both a linguistic and a historical point of view. These Orhon inscriptions provide insights into the internal stresses of a pastoral nomad state that, at the height of its power, stretched from the borders of China to those of Byzantium.

Division of the empire

The founder of the Kök Türk (Chinese Tujue) empire, Bumin—who bore the title of *khagan*, or great khan—died shortly after his victory. Soon afterward the empire split into two halves. The eastern part, ruled by Bumin's son Muhan (ruled 553–572), was centred on Mongolia. The seat of the western part, ruled by Bumin's brother Ishtemi (553–573?), lay in Ektagh, an unidentified place, possibly in either the Ili or Chu river valley.

In alliance with the Sasanians, the Kök Türks attacked and destroyed the Hephthalite empire (560), thereby gaining control over an important portion of the Silk Road leading from China to Byzantium. Under Ishtemi's successor, Tardu (573–603), the western Kök Türk empire continued to thrive and, in its westward expansion, reached the borders of Byzantium. By that time the eastern Kök Türk empire was facing grave difficulties caused partly by internal strife and partly by the vigorous Central Asian policies of the Chinese Sui dynasty. While the weakening of the eastern Kök Türks gave preponderance to the western Kök Türks, basic solidarity between the two parts of the Kök Türk empire apparently was maintained. They both fell victim to Chinese attacks. In 630 the Tang emperor Taizong occupied Mongolia, and in 659 Chinese forces under Gaozong, penetrating as far west as Bukhara and Samarkand, subdued the western Turks.

Reunification

In 683 the Kök Türks revolted. The Kök Türk empire was reborn and reunified under the *khagan* Elterish (683–692). Temporary setbacks notwithstanding, the Kök Türk empire was now centred on Mongolia, and it prospered under the rule of Kapghan (Mochuo; c. 692–716) and Bilge (Pijia; 716–734) but disintegrated soon afterward. In spite of the relatively short duration of their state, the historical role of the Kök Türks is considerable. They linked China, Iran, India, and Byzantium and gave their name ("Türk") to all the Turkic-speaking peoples. The solidarity that exists between these peoples to this day goes back to the Kök Türks.

The Uyghurs

The replacement of the Kök Türks by the Uyghurs in 744 was little else than a coup d'état. There was virtually no difference between the Old Turkic and Old Uyghur languages, and the bulk of the Kök Türks, although no longer the ruling stratum, probably remained within the boundaries of the newly formed Uyghur state.

The Uyghur empire

This new empire comprised many tribes and seems to have been headed by a smaller tribal confederation standing under Uyghur leadership. This federation is referred to in Chinese sources as the Nine Clans (Jiuxing), whereas Islamic sources and the Orhon inscriptions call it the Tokuz Oğuz. There are some indications that the Uyghur empire stood under dual leadership, the *khagan* belonging to one tribe and the prime minister, in whose hands much of the effective power rested, to another.

Relations with China were the dominant factor in Uyghur foreign affairs. The Uyghurs proved somewhat less threatening for the Chinese than had the Xiongnu or the Kök Türks. Their help to the Chinese, plagued by the rebellion of An Lushan (755) and by repeated Tibetan incursions, was appreciated and paid for through trade conducted on terms unfavourable to China. In

exchange for Uyghur horses, often of dubious quality, the Chinese were expected to provide the Uyghurs with much-coveted riches. The third Uyghur *khagan*—Mouyu by his Chinese name (759–780)—visited Luoyang in China, where he was converted to an Iranian religion, Manichaeism. Its adoption brought to the Uyghur land many Sogdians, whose growing influence on state affairs was resented by the Turkic Uyghurs and led to Mouyu's assassination.

The Kyrgyz invasion

In 840 another Turkic people, the Kyrgyz, put an abrupt end to Uyghur rule in Mongolia. Coming from the upper reaches of the Yenisey River in north-central Siberia, the Kyrgyz represented a lower degree of civilization than the rather sophisticated Uyghurs. Their political ambitions did not lead them into campaigns against China, and thus virtually no records exist concerning their activities. Content to stay in the backwaters of history, the Kyrgyz were among the very few peoples to survive the Mongol tide that was to come in the 13th century.

The Uyghur kingdom

The Kyrgyz invasion, while putting an end to Uyghur power, did not annihilate the people. Fleeing Uyghur groups settled on the Chinese border in what is now Gansu province and in East Turkistan in the Turfan (Tulufan) region, which had been an Uyghur protectorate since the end of the 8th century. Falling back now on the Turfan oases and setting up their capital city in Kucha (Kuqa), the fugitive Uyghurs created a remarkably stable and prosperous kingdom that lasted four centuries (c. 850–1250). Because of the dry climate of the region, many buildings, wall paintings, and manuscripts written in a variety of languages have been preserved. They reveal a complex, refined civilization in which Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Christianity existed side by side, practiced by Turks as well as by Tocharians, Sogdians, and other Iranian peoples in the region.

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