


# International Migration in Central Asia: An Analysis of Causes, Historical Stages, And Principal Trends

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**Abstract:** As a result of the colonial policy of the Russian Empire, the active migration of the peoples of Central Asia was observed, but this issue in the history of the peoples of the region has not yet been fully studied by local historians. Research conducted abroad on this topic cannot provide unbiased information for students due to different ideological views. In this article, a historiographical analysis of the study of the migration of Central Asian peoples by Western and local historians is carried out.

**Keywords:** Ideological approach, national interests, cultural identity, national identity, integration, cultural alienation.

**Introduction:** The first third of the 20th century was one of the most tragic and transformative periods in the history of Central Asian peoples. It was a time marked by immense human losses, mass migrations, fatalities, displacement, and forced departures from their homelands. Sacred family ties were disrupted for many Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Turkmens during this era. As a consequence of the 1917 revolution and its aftermath, waves of migration gave rise to the emergence of Central Asian diasporas in neighboring countries.

A diaspora refers to a community that originates from a specific homeland but exists outside its territorial boundaries. Typically, a diaspora is considered a temporary and unstable formation. Over time, its members either integrate into the host society or return to their homeland (reemigration). Integration is usually smoother when the host country's geographical, cultural, and religious environment closely resembles that of the country of origin. For this reason, Tajiks and Turkic-speaking peoples were able to integrate into Afghan and Turkish societies without significant threats to their national and cultural identities.

Although the new lives of Central Asian migrants outside their historical cultural space, with all their

complexities and consequences, have only recently started to attract the attention of regional historians, these processes have long been the subject of extensive research in Western historiography. Numerous comprehensive academic studies have explored these migration phenomena in detail.

## METHODS

This study employs a range of research methods, including the analysis of scholarly and methodological literature, memoirs, and archival materials. The research also draws on the examination and synthesis of advanced practical experiences. Analytical and synthetic methods, induction and deduction, systematic-logical approaches, as well as historical and statistical analysis methods, have been applied throughout the study.

## The State of Research on the Topic

One of the earliest researchers to study Central Asian migrants was Owen Lattimore, who conducted investigations in Xinjiang during the 1920s. He was among the first to identify the unique character of Central Asia, shaped by the region's extraordinary diversity. Other notable works on Central Asian migration include studies by Esserton, Bailey, Malleson, Skrine, and Swedish diplomat and scholar Gunnar

Jarring. Also noteworthy are the accounts of Georgy Agabekov, a participant in Central Asian events of the 1920s; and the research of N. Shahrani and I. Nabi on Afghan Kyrgyz and Uzbeks; as well as G. Lias's works on the Kazakhs.

In 1976, American ethnographer Audrey Shalinsky began studying Afghan Uzbeks, stating that she turned to Afghan ethnography to better understand her "Sovietized" colleagues.

Local scholars began investigating the history of migrants in earnest only in the 1990s. The issue of emigrants who settled abroad has been addressed to varying degrees in the works of Q. Radjabov, R. Shamsiddinov, R. Abdullaev, D. Ziyayeva, S. Shadmanova, A. Mamajonov, A. Ermetov, and others.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the Russian Empire's conquest of Tashkent in 1865 until the Revolution of 1917, the peoples of Central Asia experienced unprecedented transformations. Long-standing traditions of national culture, statehood, values, and religion, sustained for centuries, were either destroyed or subjected to intense pressure. In the wake of these upheavals, a significant portion of the population, unable to resist the changes, began fleeing to neighboring regions. Thus, the people of the region underwent perhaps the first major migration in their history.

During the first two decades following the Russian Revolution of 1917, two major waves of migration occurred in Central Asia. The first of these began in November 1917 with the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in Tashkent and continued through the fall of the Kokand Autonomy in February 1918, culminating in 1920 with the collapse of the Emirate of Bukhara and what came to be known as the "Day of Separation" for the Bukharans—marked by Emir Said Alim Khan's flight from Bukhara. This initial wave of migration concluded around mid-1926 when Ibrahim Bek Chakobay oghli (Laqay), leader of the Eastern Bukhara independence movement (1921–1932), crossed the Soviet-Afghan border.

The Red Army's invasion of the Emirate of Bukhara primarily impacted the inhabitants of the border regions—namely, the nomadic and semi-nomadic Uzbek and Turkmen tribes—who fled their homeland alongside the Emir in a bid to escape the military onslaught of the Bolshevik forces. During this stage, the largest group of migrants was composed of Turkmens and Uzbeks, followed by Tajiks. According to Red Army reports, Tajiks made up 60% of the population in Eastern Bukhara (modern-day central and southern Tajikistan and southeastern Uzbekistan), while Uzbeks comprised 30%. However, the ethnic composition of

the Eastern Bukhara independence groups reflected the opposite: 60% were Uzbeks and 30% were Tajiks. Similarly, the majority of the migrants were also Uzbeks.

This discrepancy appears to have stemmed from differences in the social and political status of the two groups. Uzbeks, possessing greater social status, had historically maintained political dominance over the Tajik majority, who were less militarized. Consequently, Tajiks were more likely to accept the new Soviet regime, which led to the collapse of the existing Uzbek tribal-feudal power structure. Uzbeks and Turkmens, whose livelihoods were based on nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralism, were more inclined to migrate, as they could easily relocate their livestock. In contrast, Tajik peasants, who owned only the land they cultivated, were unable to take it with them.

Nonetheless, following the establishment of Soviet power in Bukhara, a segment of the Tajik population also fled—not only to Afghanistan but also to remote, mountainous Tajik-inhabited areas such as Qaratagin (Garm) and Darvaz. Soviet forces entered these areas only in the summer of 1923 after launching a large-scale military campaign. According to data from the government of the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, by the end of 1926, 44,000 families—approximately 206,800 individuals—had fled Eastern Bukhara, accounting for 25% of the total population and 33% of the Tajik population. Most migrants originated from Qurgonteppa, Kulob, and Hisor regions and were primarily Uzbeks and Tajiks. In Qurgonteppa, only half of the original population remained, and the local government commission documented 49 completely abandoned villages. Houses and other structures had been destroyed.

Moreover, people fled not only from Tajikistan but also from Uzbekistan's Surkhandarya region. In the early 1920s, approximately 40,000 Uzbeks and Tajiks migrated from Surkhandarya to Afghanistan. These groups were joined in the early 1920s by 1,300 Kyrgyz families from Qaratagin and the Vakhsh Valley and more than 1,000 Kyrgyz from Eastern Pamir, who crossed into Afghanistan's Badakhshan and Kataghan regions[3].

The second wave of emigration began in the second half of the 1920s, shortly after the first wave. It reached its peak between 1929 and 1932, during a period of widespread economic, social, political, and cultural transformation, including collectivization, violent anti-Islamic policies, the "cultural revolution," and the forced emancipation of women aimed at dismantling traditional society in the Central Asian region. This new

wave of refugees fled from the constraints, strict legal control, and suppression of dissent characteristic of the Soviet regime. During the second phase of migration, people of various ethnic backgrounds from all parts of the region, including the neighboring mountainous areas of Bukhara, migrated abroad. These migrants became known as individuals who emigrated or fled in order to protect, preserve, and develop their religious identity.

In the early 1920s, hundreds of thousands of Central Asians began pouring into Afghanistan, settling along the northern border from Badakhshan in the east to Herat in the west. Thus, by the second decade of the twentieth century, what is now Central Asia experienced its first migration crisis. By the end of this crisis in 1932, there were close to one million Central Asian refugees in Northern Afghanistan and western China, as well as in Northern India, Iran, and Turkey. The actual number of migrants was likely somewhat higher than reported. Small migrant settlements were also established in Kabul, Peshawar (Pakistan), Mashhad, and other cities in Afghanistan, India, and Iran. According to Soviet statistical surveys conducted in Central Asia in 1922, 1924, and 1926, the conclusion was reached that: "The population decline due to emigration is a phenomenon characteristic of the entire region." [4]

Today, historians interpret this form of mass migration as a form of resistance to the Russian Revolution. Alongside the issue of analyzing the deeper causes of this migration, the question arises: "Why did the majority of Central Asians choose not to migrate?" The negative perception of the Soviet past and the portrayal of Russian rule as despotic are widespread in both Western and contemporary Central Asian historiography. However, this interpretation fails to adequately describe the brutal force of the 1917 revolution and thus cannot fully explain how Soviet power managed to survive from the outset despite significant resistance. Was it due to the weakness of the forces that we have long labeled as "Basmachis," but were independence movements, resulting from poor leadership and a limited social base for resistance? Or was it because the West, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan were unable to support the independence fighters?

Indeed, several factors aided the Bolsheviks in consolidating their position in the region and weakening the strong opposition from independence fighters, notably:

During the conflict between "Reds and Whites" among Russians, which lay at the core of the revolution and civil war, most Central Asians sided with the former, as

the Reds promised land, freedom, and peace to all people regardless of nationality or religion.

By the end of the 1920s, the Soviets presented themselves as the only real and effective—albeit unjust—government. The amirs, khans, and the Provisional Government of Russia had failed and discredited themselves in the eyes of the majority of the population.

Prolonged internal conflicts and disorder gave rise to traditions of political obedience among Central Asians.

The Bolsheviks portrayed themselves not merely as Russophile but also as anti-imperialist, and neighboring Eastern states perceived them as allies in the struggle for independence. While the Bolsheviks partly reasserted Russian dominance in Central Asia, Turkey and Afghanistan viewed them as a bulwark against Western imperialism. Neither Amir Amanullah of Afghanistan nor Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, offered significant support to the independence movements. The international isolation of anti-Soviet resistance bolstered the legitimacy of the new government among the population of Central Asia. These factors contributed to the establishment of relative stability in the region and slowed the outmigration of the population from Central Asia.

The history of these "Bolshevik exiles" came to an end in the mid-1930s when the USSR consolidated its power in the region and established secure and closed borders with Afghanistan and other southern neighbors.<sup>1</sup> The decline of émigrés and mujāhidīn in the second half of the 1930s coincided with significant political changes in Central Asia. In Afghanistan, both the universal religiosity of non-state 'ulamā' and traditional Islamic forces on the one hand, and the idealistic secular reformism of leaders such as Amanullah on the other, gradually lost their influence, creating conditions for further stability.

In Soviet Central Asia, the national delimitation of 1924 represented a disastrous fragmentation; however, improvements in economic development, the success of mass secular education, advances in public health, and the emancipation of women altered the situation.<sup>1</sup> This inevitably required the separation of religion from the political sphere and the disconnection of Qur'an-based concepts held by the émigrés and mujāhidīn from the emerging realpolitik in Central Asia. This ushered in a relatively stable period in which the Muslim community gradually disengaged from direct political participation.<sup>1</sup> The formation of centralized "stans" in Central Asia and the stabilization of Afghanistan in the early 1930s coincided with the gradual strengthening of nationalism, the emergence of formal state religious institutions, and the

incorporation of religious strata into state structures.

When examining the history of Central Asian emigration, a central question arises: why did the majority of exiles relocate to economically underdeveloped Afghanistan? Several explanations exist: geographic proximity, open and unguarded borders, lack of foreign military presence, and shared historical and ethnic affinities. Yet the most compelling factor was the common faith.

The vast majority of those leaving Central Asia were Muslims. Indeed, the concepts of movement and migration are deeply familiar to Muslims and encompass a range of forms: pilgrimage (hajj), educational travel (rihla), visits to sacred sites (ziyāra), and emigration (hijra). These acts are not only physical movements but also spiritual practices—that is, forms of worship. The concept of hijra is present in the Qur'an, and in Arabic, the term means "to leave, to migrate, to abandon."<sup>1</sup> The practice of hijra began in 622 CE with the migration of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his followers from Mecca to Medina.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, hijra—the migration from lands where Islam could not be freely practiced to those where it could—became a core tenet of Muslim religious obligation, particularly in contexts where such restrictions did not exist.

In the 1920s, when the Bolsheviks occupied Bukhara, Muslim preachers advised the peoples of Central Asia: "Now migration is a sacred duty" ("Hijrat fard va vojib ast"). According to Islamic doctrine, a person is obligated to declare their homeland as enemy territory (dar al-harb) if it is no longer governed by Islam, and until it is restored as an Islamic state (dar al-Islam), a sacred war (jihad) must be waged against it. Otherwise, migration (hijra)—leaving the country entirely—is necessary.[5]

Ideally, hijra is a transition from the state of ignorance to a state of spiritual and intellectual purity. The decisive factor of hijra lies in preserving one's religious and cultural identity; pragmatic motives should remain secondary to this aspiration. In an ideal scenario, those in exile or emigrants should migrate to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. During the first half of the 20th century, the religious elites of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan often found refuge in Muslim sanctuaries in these sacred cities.[6]

In his perspective on the adaptable nature of Islam, Dale Eickelman argues: "The motivations for many Muslim social movements, particularly migration or travel, are inevitably sacralized and integrate social, economic, and political interests." [7] From this point of view, hijra may be assessed not only as a mere migration process but also as a form of social

movement functioning within a cultural framework shaped by Islam.

The majority of Central Asians fled to Afghanistan. This was due to the fall of the Ottoman Empire between 1918 and 1923, after which many regarded independent Afghanistan as the only legitimate Islamic state in the region. During the 1920s, the country served as a refuge for Muslims from Central Asia, as well as for nearly 20,000 coreligionists from British India who had organized the Hijrat movement.[8]

Afghanistan offered no economic benefits to the migrants; instead, its value lay in restoring the spiritual equilibrium disturbed by external oppression. In other words, it was a religiously imagined "journey of the mind" across geographical and political borders, an escape from harsh realities, and a reflection of the deeply revered utopia of dar al-Islam—the imagined "golden village," or ideal home. In exile, new bonds of brotherhood (mu'ākhāt) were forged between the migrants and the ansar (hosts, in this case Afghan Muslims).

This supranational, interethnic religious identity transcending political borders persisted despite colonial divisions and the secular concepts of the nation-state and nationalism. It is important to note that the doctrine of hijra contradicts the secular notion of migration and diaspora formation, as it rejects both the nationalist idea of a particular ethnic group and the definition of homeland as a specific territorial entity. Ideally, hijra encouraged Muslims to distinguish themselves from those who refused to leave dar al-harb. Religious doctrine aimed to unite migrants with a new state not based on ethnicity but on religion.

At the same time, secular diasporas tend to cherish the memory of their countries of origin. Unlike migrant groups, diasporas never fully abandon the idea of returning to their historical homeland. Rather than identifying primarily with their host states, diasporas maintain a stronger connection with the homeland they left behind.

Migrants in exile faced numerous hardships, including linguistic, cultural, racial, and national differences that inevitably existed within the broader Muslim community or ummah. They had to come to terms with the reality that every state—even an Islamic one—could not remain entirely immune to wars, revolutions, uprisings, and other violent upheavals.

Nevertheless, the Central Asian mujahideen and emigrants in exile perceived their religion as a source of agency and freedom, as it helped them find haven in Afghanistan and facilitated communication with local Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and other Afghan groups. Islamic faith and piety reinforced their social status and self-



confidence, serving as a symbolic capital among fellow Muslims. Local Afghans treated them both as exiled co-religionists and as outsiders, often referred to as *por-i-darya* ("from across the river"). For the refugees and migrants, belonging to an imagined Muslim brotherhood (*umma*), which rejected political, geographic, and ethno-national boundaries as well as the secular, Uzbek-Tajik (Bukhara or Ferghana) societal divisions, provided a sense of material stability, cultural continuity, and emotional balance. From this perspective, the studied region emerges as a site where new forms of identity were shaped that do not conform to conventional understandings of national and ethnic affiliation.

Today, members of the Central Asian diasporas and irredentists constitute a significant portion of Afghanistan's population. The arrival of half a million Central Asians during the 1920s and 1930s had a considerable impact on the country's historical trajectory. Despite their ethnic diversity, these "minorities" possessed a certain degree of shared group consciousness, distinguishing themselves both from the majority Pashtuns in Afghanistan and from their compatriots "left behind" across the river. This sense of affinity intensified over time. The Islamic and ethnic solidarity in Central Asia, which was not rooted in ethnographic boundaries, became a serious factor in the political instability on both sides of the Amu Darya, where weak centralized authority and declining international oversight played key roles. The potential of Afghanistan as a refuge has long been one of the main structural features of instability in Central Asia, as it was inhabited by Muslims of similar background and remained beyond the effective control of central governments. This situation was present in the early 1920s in the Soviet Union, and in the late 1920s to early 1930s in Afghanistan. A similar pattern re-emerged in the early 1990s in Tajikistan and Afghanistan simultaneously. The border between these two states once again became a site of regional turmoil, as waves of migrants arrived in search of a "state of purity."

Migrants from various regions of Central Asia significantly contributed to the economy, culture, and environment of their host countries. The Bukhara elite in exile, mostly composed of Jadids, supported King Amanullah Khan in his efforts to modernize Afghanistan. Some of them, including the Ferghana *qurbashi* (commander) Shermuhammad (Kurshermat), defended Amanullah against the insurgents in 1928–1929. However, other exiled Bukharan *basmachi* fighters under the leadership of Ibrohimbek sided with the opposing faction—Habibullah Bacha-i Saqao, the new Emir of Afghanistan. The more traditional Persian-speaking (Tajik) Bukharans tended to favor Afghanistan

as their host country, whereas Turkestanis (primarily Uzbeks) chose Turkey. The second generation of Bukharan exiles made significant contributions to Afghanistan's cultural development in the 1960s, laying the foundations for the study of journalism, modern pedagogy, and Persian literary history in Afghanistan.[9] In Turkey, Turkestanis actively participated in the establishment of Ankara University, especially its Faculty of Agriculture.

During the second wave of emigration between 1926 and 1934, many Central Asians who had been in extensive contact with Russians were, in comparison with local Afghans and Xinjiang residents, generally more educated and demonstrated a more modern outlook on life. These migrants contributed to the cultivation of maize and sugar beet, the development of sericulture, the expansion of flocks of the renowned Hisar sheep, and the flourishing of the carpet-weaving industry in Afghanistan. Shortly after the Soviet authorities had established a cotton-growing economy in southern Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, a young Afghan named Abdulaziz from Kataghan Province realized that the region's natural conditions resembled those of the best cotton-growing areas of Central Asia. He purchased land in Kunduz Province, where migrants had settled, and founded the *Spin Zar* ("White Gold" in Pashto) company, which significantly boosted cotton production in Afghanistan.[10]

The activities of these migrants profoundly altered Afghanistan's social, economic, cultural, and ecological landscapes. At the same time, the development of northern Afghanistan facilitated the exiled life of Central Asian migrants, enabling a modernization of their worldview within the framework of a Muslim state. Eventually, many acquired Afghan citizenship and gradually closed the cultural and social gap with the local Uzbek population.

The early Soviet-era international migration brought about significant changes in the demographic and ethnic composition, and later in the political landscape, of the entire Central and South Asian region. A large proportion of those fleeing from Central Asia were semi-nomadic Uzbeks living near the Tajik border, along with others who migrated from various provinces of Soviet Central Asia during the first half of the 1920s and 1930s. In Afghanistan, they joined the local Uzbeks, particularly those from the Kataghan tribe, who had been enslaved by Pashtuns in the 1760s. Together, Afghan Uzbeks emerged as the third largest ethnic group and one of the most potent political and military forces during the Soviet–Afghan War and the Taliban era.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the border, in

southern Tajikistan, the exodus of semi-nomadic Uzbeks—who, before the arrival of the Red Russians in the 1920s, had controlled and even oppressed sedentary Tajik farmers—led to the settlement of impoverished Tajiks from Hisar and other inner provinces in these vacated territories. It is not surprising that these Tajiks viewed the Soviets as liberators and interpreted their arrival as an opportunity for economic advancement. By the mid-1930s, the suppression of the Basmachi movement marked the end of Uzbek control over eastern Bukhara, a region predominantly inhabited by Tajiks. This shift also facilitated the irrigation of the Vakhsh Valley and enabled the cultivation of fine-grade (grey) cotton, which was deemed vital for securing “cotton independence.”

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the large-scale migration processes of Muslims from Bukhara, Russia, and the USSR during the early Soviet era had a decisive impact on the reconfiguration of Muslim society and culture in what we now understand as “modern South Asia” and the “Middle East.” The Red Army’s invasion and subsequent military conflicts led to the displacement of so-called “Bolshevik exiles,” bringing hardship and suffering to the region. Yet, from a translocal research perspective, this migration emerges as a complex phenomenon that challenges the state-centric and static historical narratives that link identity solely to fixed cultural, ethnic, and territorial boundaries.

Rather than rendering its participants helpless refugees or defeated insurgents, this migration endowed them with increased social agency and greater opportunities. It enhanced their capacity to pursue diverse forms of life and social aspirations. People, ideas, symbols, and skills crossed conservative political, “civilizational,” national, regional, and technical boundaries. In this sense, the migration redefined conventional understandings of space, identity, and power in the broader Muslim world.

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