

Educational Resources and Developments

The Challenge of Introducing Central Asia to Young Readers

Cherese Cartlidge, Charles Clark, *The Central Asian States*. San Diego, Ca.: Lucent Books, 2001. Former Soviet Republics series. 128 pp., maps, b/w photographs, appendices, annotated bibliography, index. ISBN: 1560067357. \$27.45 hard cover.

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Thanks to the recent surge of interest in Central Eurasia we are increasingly well served by serious scholarship reflecting new methodologies, use of indigenous source material and field work. However, the genres of books for the general reader and for educational purposes are much less well represented. Herein lies a challenge for the members of CESS: to encourage the creation of resources suitable to various educational levels, with the goal of enabling curriculum change that could ensure adequate teaching of Central Eurasia and stimulate a lasting interest in the region. The goal here should be material that has some substance and accuracy but is carefully targeted and edited to appeal to different groups of readers. The book under review ostensibly was intended to meet just such a demand, an aim which, sad to say, it does not achieve.

The avowed purpose of the volume is to provide "information about the people and recent history of the former Soviet republics, with an emphasis on those aspects of their culture, history and current situation that seem most likely to play a role in the future course of each of these new nations emerging from the shadows of the now vanished iron curtain" (p. 6). The substantive chapters cover geography, history, current politics, daily life, culture, and international relations. There is an appended factual summary for each country and a brief chronology.

The authors have acquired a reasonably good idea of the current challenges facing the countries of Central Asia, even if their understanding of history and culture is extremely circumscribed. An explanation for the latter is that, as freelance writers with psychology degrees, the authors have no demonstrable background in Central Asian studies.

In fact their limited preparation for writing the book (judging from their annotated listing of "Works Consulted") is quite disturbing. A significant portion of the book's citations are to journalism and the Lonely Planet travel guide. Their ignorance of any relevant languages is evident in confusion over what is Russian and what Central Asian. Not the least of the consequences is arbitrariness in the rendering of names.

One might argue that the whole undertaking was misconceived. To treat Central Asia under the rubric "Former Soviet Republics" in 2001 is backward-looking. Worse, the emphasis throughout is on the negative. The foreword emphasizes "challenges," political and social "problems," "tensions," "crises," potential for "dictatorship or civil war" (p. 5). There is little genuine interest here in Central Asians except insofar as their political, economic, social or ecological situations are lamentable compared to those in the West. The underlying theme is the question of whether these beleaguered societies will ever make it into the modern world of democracy and capitalism. The dangers of writing a book guided by a shallow vision of contemporary concerns can be seen in the fact that, post-9/11, its discussion of security and foreign policy issues is already dated.

Further, even though library review journals indicate the book's target audience is either grades 6-12 or 9 and up, there is no sensitivity to young readers' needs in vocabulary or concepts. Yet concepts such as "nationality" and "ethnicity" are important and beg for clear explanation. Young readers will never be attracted to "discussions" of culture and history which too frequently are lists of names.

While in various ways the authors attempt to show the diversity of the region, their discussion of its complex religious history is especially disappointing. A page on Jews in Central Asia, based on an impressionistic travelogue, emphasizes their happy integration into the local societies. We do not learn how those Jewish communities may have been important. As is the case in too much of the popular literature on Central Asia, the treatment of Islam here is monodimensional. Representing the Qur'an as simply "dictated" by Muhammad rather than as Divine revelation would surely be perceived by Muslims as offensive.

That there was no editorial oversight can be seen in the treatment of the region's geography. Information on the Aral Sea crisis is scattered and repetitive. Place names on maps generally embody current official usage, but often only the older forms appear in the text. There are some blatant errors: the Chu River as a main source feeding Lake Issyk Kul; the historic Qashghar on the upper reaches of the Amu Darya; and the upper reaches of the Yenisei River labeled the Ob. Most readers would welcome topographic and ethnic or linguistic maps.

History does not fare much better than geography. The expansion of the Sassanians toward Central Asia is dated to the second, not third century; to the Mongol empire is attributed the decline, rather than the greatest flourishing, of the inner Asian trade; and Tamerlane is a Chinggisid and his capital that of the Mongol Empire. The Kyrgyz would undoubtedly be puzzled to learn how the "Persian culture" of their ancestors mixed with that of the Turks. In fact the significance of the Persian cultural legacy in Central Asia never really becomes clear. In the appended chronology, it is not clear why the Mongol conquest of Central Asia

extends to 1295 or why Russian colonization is dated specifically 1785-1820s. That four of the Central Asian countries joined NATO in 1994 surely would have been a newsworthy event had it actually happened!

Now all this may seem to make the book seem laughable, which it is not. A revised version of this hastily contrived volume could meet a need, however shallow (perforce) its compact treatment of the area may be. It would be unfortunate though if by default (and its uncritical endorsement by the *ALA Booklist*) this book were to become *the* source on Central Asia for "young researchers." One can reasonably hope for better. A decade ago Lerner Publications issued a geography series aimed at middle school students entitled "Then and Now" with a volume devoted to each of the then "Newly Independent States." While dated, that series still has much to recommend it, in part because the publisher consulted with content experts at Indiana University and the University of Washington.

It may well be that CESS should look to the example of (perhaps even collaborate with) the Association for Asian Studies in promoting education about our region by an appropriate program of publication. Such an undertaking undoubtedly would want to employ a full range of electronic media, since nowadays images and sounds are an essential supplement to the printed page. We would be making a huge mistake if we confined our mission to the promotion of academic research on the region. We need more of the kind of collaborative effort exemplified in Vika Gardner and R. T. Steponaitis' curriculum unit *Polishing the Mirror* (see *CESR*, 1 (1) 34-35), where one author provided the content expertise and the other the public school teaching experience.