

It should also be mentioned here that two of the individuals on these lists, Vlastislav Chalupa and Vladimír Škutina, were communist secret police agents, the former a very prominent one.

The author claims that the “critical step in the 1989 changes in Eastern Europe took place in Prague when East German and Czechoslovak officials decided to permit East German refugees [...] to leave for West Germany.” (45) In fact, the unraveling of the block started several months earlier, with the forming of the non-communist government in Poland (August 1989) led by Tadeusz Mazowiecki.

For the sake of disambiguation and to prevent unfair identification with the German Nazis, the Národní socialisté (members and supporters of Česká strana národně sociální) should not be called National Socialists in English but “members of the Czech National Social Party.” It needs to be emphasized that the party had a liberal democratic, center-left ideology.

A final correction is that the top-ranking Czechoslovak communists did not use the Orlický castle as their weekend retreat (80); their retreat was a secret luxurious facility built for the Party at Vystrkov, about 3 miles north of the historical castle.

In conclusion: Francis D. Raška’s new book is based on very meticulous research, numerous interviews and extensive literature. The generally descriptive character of the book may be attributed to the fact that it represents, thankfully, the first attempt to map the subject area in a broader context. Raška should be credited for interviewing many of the surviving exiles who were trying to keep the vision of free Czechoslovakia alive in the difficult conditions of the period.

*Miloš Calda*

Sally N. Cummings, **Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations**. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012, 240 pages. ISBN 978-0-415-29703-5

Central Asia is a region that has gained in importance rapidly since the demise of the Soviet Union due to the complex political, economic and security challenges. Despite its importance, it is quite difficult to portray this rather remote region in academia, partly due to the fact that not many high-quality introductory publications exist. Sally N. Cummings with her latest work, *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations*, is striving to reverse this trend and open the academic treatment of Central Asia to a broader public. This is why it is worth to pay this textbook close attention.

Sally N. Cummings is a professor in the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews where she also serves as the Founding Director of the Institute of Middle Eastern, Central Asian and Caucasus Studies. Her principal research fields are security, politics of identity, nation- and state-building, and international politics with geographic

focus on Central Asia. She is especially well known for editing the Routledge Central Asian Studies book series.

The book is divided into eight chapters including Introduction and Conclusion that deal respectively with the definition of Central Asia; the region's modern history; authoritarian regimes; Islam, national and multiple identities; economics and political transformations; and the security in Central Asia. In addition, the book is supplemented with two appendices featuring further tables and maps, a bibliography and index. Whenever possible, the author synthesizes what Central Asian states have in common in the respective chapter's field. In the rest of the cases she rather picks the states one by one and tries to describe its peculiarities in respect to the topic.

Following a more general introduction, in Chapter 2, *The region of Central Asia: What's in a name*, Cummings deals with the question of what constitutes Central Asia and examines the broad variety of reasons that led to the coining of the term. This chapter discusses two main subjects. First, the terminological debate is expounded with a focus on geographical, etymological, historical-cultural and political and geostrategic definitions. Next, Cummings discusses the leitmotifs that played a role in the creation of the region's unique identity; she looks at the region as an intersection of nomadic and sedentary societies, and as a unity in diversity caused by its history of overlapping influences stemming from different empires, cultures, and religions. Elaborating on these characteristics, Cummings points out that the definition of the region is not steady and it evolves over time and space, a process which she demonstrates also by tracing how the term changed in the specific environment of Russian historiography over the course of the twentieth century.

Following the spatial definition, Cummings continues in the next chapter titled *Empires, Soviet rule and sovereignty with the historical development of the region* beginning with its transfer from the Russian to the Soviet Empire. Here she provides a detailed description of the fixing of the borders during the early years of the Soviet empire, investigates the Soviet rule and reviews a number of theories about the relations between Central Asia and Moscow. Against this backdrop, Cummings probes how tradition, modernization and Soviet legacy interacted in the specific processes of transformation after gaining independence from the Soviet Union.

Taking this as her starting point, the author next proceeds in her historical excursion into the post-Soviet era. In the chapter *Authoritarian alternatives* Cummings examines these countries' recently attained independence and looks into Central Asia's new quest to uphold its sovereignty in a post-Cold War environment. She describes the authoritarian nature of the new regimes largely as a natural continuation of the previous developments and the new nations' ambiguous identities. Special attention is dedicated to conflicting scenarios that unfolded in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, namely the Tulip Revolution, the Andijan uprising, and the Tajik civil war. Utilizing these examples, she explains how democratization and authoritarianism compete and how easy it is to fall into a vicious circle of rotating between descent into violence and the restoration of order.

In Chapter 5, Islam, nation and multiple identities in Central Asia, Cummings studies the linkage between nation and religion, mainly but not exclusively Islam. As the author puts it, identities of Islam in Central Asia have become fragmented over time. To better comprehend this, Cummings interrogates such concepts as the nation, tribe, clan, kinship and secularism. The author also explains how the ruling regimes throughout the region use Islam as one of the cornerstones of nation-building, but at the same time they suppress any kind of civic movements driven by Islam for fear of destabilizing their position.

Both the macro and micro economics of Central Asia are outlined in Chapter 6 titled Economics and political transformations. At the center of this part of the book is the relationship between political and economic transformation. The author explores two main models the new independent states have adopted regarding post-Soviet transition and liberalization of centrally-planned economies: the shock therapy and the gradualist approach. Regardless of which model of transition was applied and despite the abundance of natural resources, first of all oil and gas, Central Asia remains one of the poorest regions in the world. Due to corruption and nepotism, the poor are getting poorer while the richest are profiting from the status quo. In the following parts Cummings deals with the international political economy and asks the question of whether a “New Great Game” between major world powers is actually taking place in the region. The author concludes by arguing that according to statistics Russia has upheld its position as the biggest trading partner of Central Asia. However, Russian preponderant influence competes with the ever-growing presence of China and its hunger for the region’s vast natural resources. The roles of the West, namely the EU and the USA, in the region are, according to Cummings, often exaggerated and once their military forces withdraw from Afghanistan, for these powers the region will once again become a peripheral one.

Finally, Chapter 7, Securing Central Asia, focuses on the most serious security threats the region has to face, namely terrorism, drug trafficking and transnational crime, and environmental challenges, and provides the reader with a theoretical basis to better understand the security issues present in the region. One by one, the author clarifies the constructivist, realist and liberalist approach towards Security Studies in order to supply the reader with a multifaceted picture of the region’s evolving security setting.

In her conclusion, Sally N. Cummings sums up the peculiarities of the region that contribute to its unique identity. She specifically points to the dual legacies of the Soviet Union, where internationalism interfered with nationalism, the region being an intersection of various influences, and the chief goal of the regimes being self-preservation. She maintains that since their independence the five states of the region changed considerably, but the question remains about their directions. In the end Cummings warns against the danger of applying Western values and principles to this unique region and points out the perils of attempts trying to implement democracy from the outside.

Thanks to the various approaches mentioned and the many themes discussed in the book, one gets a very complex picture of the region, which I consider the greatest benefit of

the entire publication. It is remarkable how the author is able to survey such a vast amount of information and how she fits it all into a limited space of an introductory book to Central Asia Studies. Of special value are the book's early chapter concerning the definition of the region, and the chapter titled Economics and political transformations where Cummings has done a wonderful job in surveying scholarship in a simple but specific language.

In her attempt to depict the reality of Central Asia in a way as complex and unbiased as possible, however, the author often slides into lengthy, and sometimes unnecessary, explanations of theories in Political Science. Even though it was apparently the author's purest intention to introduce the student to the context of the region through presenting basic terminology, some parts amount to a rather incomprehensible exposition of different political theories. This primarily applies to the chapter regarding security and partly to the chapter dealing with identities in Central Asia. In both of these chapters much space is used to define basic terms and concepts (e.g. nation, tribe, clan, kinship) at the expense of devoting more attention to how they interact in the special settings of Central Asia. In addition, compared to the attention Cummings pays to the other countries of the region, I believe that some more space could have been devoted to Turkmenistan, which the book somewhat overlooked.

In summary, it is important to approach this publication as a work of a political scientist. One should not expect merely an account of dates and events related toward the region, but a textbook that instead of outright answers presents various problems from the field of Political Theory. Terms such as statehood, power, democracy, opposition, civil society and many others are examined within the various approaches, then evaluated and eventually applied to the region of Central Asia. All this makes *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations* a valuable introductory book for an interested reader as it tries to at least touch upon all of the topics related to Central Asia, and thus serving as a good starting point for further study of this neglected region.

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