

Islam in Central Eurasia

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Course Description

This course traces the history of Islam in one of the lesser known but critical parts of the Muslim-inhabited territories of the world—Central Eurasia—from the spread of Islam in the region until the present day. We will use a rich collection of primary sources that range from medieval accounts of the eighth-century Arab conquests or the formation of the Chingissid Empire to the memoirs of Taliban’s spokesperson in the 1990s. You will also have a chance to read state-of-the-art historiographic analyses or see interesting and telling multimedia material. These sources will help us in studying the Islamization of the peoples of Central Eurasia, the evolution of their cultural and political institutions under the suzerainty of several empires that ruled the region, the encounter of Central Eurasian Muslims with modernity (defined as the ever increasing cultural and economic influence of Europe), the Communists’ efforts to eradicate or weaken religion, the survival and transformation of Islam under hostile Soviet and Chinese communist regimes, and the peculiarities of present-day Muslim societies in Central Eurasia that are often overlooked in the midst of an ill-informed discourse about Islam and terrorism. This course aims to challenge the public perception of Central Eurasia as the backyard of al-Qaeda terrorism and to present the diversity and cultural vivacity of the region’s Muslims.

Assignments

- *Weekly Readings*
- *Class Participation*: 20 % of the final grade
- *Weekly Responses to the Reading*: 20 % of the final grade
- *Take Home Midterm Exam*: 25 % of the final grade
- *Final Exam*: 35 % of the final grade
- *Map Quiz*

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Week 1: Central Eurasia

- Where is Central Eurasia?
- Who lives in Central Eurasia?
- What is Islam?
- Why is Islam a significant factor of Central Eurasian history and culture?

Week 2: Beginnings of Islam in Central Eurasia

- How did the peoples of Central Eurasia learn about Islam?
- What accounts for the spread of Islam in Central Eurasia?
- Which parts of Central Eurasia were incorporated into the “World of Islam” first and how?

- How would you describe the first Central Eurasian peoples who encountered Islam?
- What characterized the relations between the nomadic peoples in the northern tier of Central Eurasia and the sedentary ones in its southern tier?

Week 3: From Nile to Oxus: the Golden Ages of Islam, 8th-13th cc

- How would you evaluate the contributions of Arabic, Turkic, and Persian cultures to the emergence of an Islamic civilization in the lands from Nile to Oxus in the 8th through 12th cc.?
- Can you identify some central Islamic institutions that came into being in the 8th through 12th cc. and that you think might have influenced Muslims' lives in the following centuries?
- How central was the southern tier of Central Eurasia in the golden ages of Islam?
- Can you identify scholars and statesmen from the southern tier of Central Eurasia who contributed to the global Islamic civilization and to world civilization in general?
- What were the main political formations or institutions that dominated the Muslim world in the 8th through 12th cc.?

Week 4: Chingissid Empire: Exchange across Eurasia

- How did a small tribe in the northeast steppes of Asia organize one of history's most efficient mechanisms of conquest and administration, the Chingissid Empire?
- How far did the borders of the Mongol Empire stretch? What is the significance of the Mongol expansion?
- What were the major contributions of the Chingissid Empire in the evolution of the cultures of Central Eurasian peoples?

Week 5: The Mongol Legacy: Spread of Islam across Eurasia

- How would you evaluate the Mongol conquests from the point of view of Muslim history?
- How would you characterize the Mongols' approach to religion and religious policies?
- How did Islam spread among the peoples living in the northern tier of Eurasia?

Week 6: Central Asia, 15th – 19th cc: Khans, Amirs, and Sufis

- Who was Tamerlane? Why did he have to have a puppet khan?
- Was the Timurid Empire a world power?
- How would you evaluate the sources of legitimacy and authority in Central Asia in the post-Timurid period until the Russian invasions? Religion, lineage, charisma, skill...

- How would you evaluate the significance of Sufism and Sufi orders in Central Asian history in the post-Timurid period?
- Was Central Asia isolated from the rest of the world after Tamerlane?

Week 7: From Golden Horde to Imperial Russia

- How did a small city-state to the north of the Black Sea, Muscovy, grow into an empire that ruled over the lands of the Golden Horde and even more?
- Ulugh Beg, Tamerlane's grandson, had remarkable achievements in science in the fifteenth century. How would you compare these achievements to those of Western Europe after the fifteenth century?
- How did Russia relate to the achievements of Western Europe? What was the significance of these achievements?
- How did the Russian empire rule its Muslims? Was conversion to Orthodoxy a viable option for the Muslims of the Russian empire or for the imperial Russian state?
- What was the significance of the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly?
- What did Russian administration change and not change in the lives of Russia's Muslims in the Volga-Ural region, Kazakh Steppes, Siberia, and the Crimea?

Week 8: Russian Colonialism: Caucasus and Central Asia

- Do you see differences in Russia's expansion into Muslim-inhabited lands before and after the turn of the nineteenth century?
- How would you evaluate Russia's incentives, goals, and achievements in expanding into the Caucasus and Central Asia?
- How could two distant forces, Russia and Britain, lock horns on the high lands of Central Asia?
- What did Russian administration change and not change in the lives of Russia's Muslims in the Caucasus and Central Asia?
- How would the lives of Central Asian and Caucasian Muslims have unfolded had it not been for the Russian conquests?

Week 9: Chinese Colonialism: Eastern Turkestan

- Are Muslims a significant element of Chinese history, culture, and demographics?
- How did Islam arrive in China? How did Muslims become Chinese subjects?
- What does "Xinjiang" mean? How did Eastern Turkestan become Xinjiang?
- How would you evaluate the relations between the Muslims of Eastern Turkestan and those of Central Asia?
- How would the lives of Eastern Turkestani Muslims have unfolded had it not been for the Chinese conquest of Eastern Turkestan?
- What is the role of Sufism in the Eastern Turkestani context?

Week 10: A Smaller World: Globalization and Modernity

- How did the global connections of Central Eurasian Muslims change in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries? Why?
- Was it possible to imagine a global Muslim community at the turn of the twentieth century?
- If you were a Muslim in Kazan, Bukhara, or Kashgar in the late 1800s, what kinds of transformations in your social, cultural, and economic environment would attract your attention most?
- How would you like to guide your co-religionists through those transformations?
- What kinds of instruments or institutions do you think would help you in influencing your co-religionists?

Week 11: Central Eurasian Muslims under Communist Regimes

- What is socialism? How did it become a part of the Central Eurasian Muslims' lives?
- How did the Soviet state attempt to introduce socialism in Central Asia? Why women?
- The Soviet state was an anti-religious institution and so was the Chinese state at least for a few decades following the Communist takeover in China. How did Muslims survive under these hostile regimes?
- Can you identify some institutions that helped Muslims maintain their Islamic identity, if not religious practices, during these hostile regimes?

Week 12: Post-Soviet Independence

- How powerful was the Soviet experience?
- Did the Soviet experience transform Muslim communities of Central Eurasia? In what ways?
- How would you evaluate the independent Muslim states of Central Eurasia today?
- How important is nationalism in these states? How important is religion? How important is the state?
- Can you identify certain long-lived Central Eurasian Islamic institutions that have survived the Soviet experience and that have not?
- What outside influences can you identify that influence the religious imaginations of Central Eurasian Muslims since the 1990s?

Week 13: In the Russian Federation

- Have you thought of Russia as a Muslim state before?
- If you were a Muslim living in the Russian Federation, how would you like to guide your co-religionists?
- How important is Islam for Russia's Muslims today? How important is ethnicity? How important is language?

- What are the possible paths that you can identify or imagine for the future of Muslims in Russia?
- What about terrorism? Should Russia have its “war on (Muslim) terror” too?

Week 14: Islam and the American Venture into Central Eurasia

- Was the disintegration of the Soviet Union a peaceful process?
- Why do Muslims tend to be at the center of violent conflict in Central Eurasia?
- To what extent should America be involved in these conflicts?
- American or international involvement in the affairs of the Muslims of Central Eurasia is heavily limited to “the war on terror.” Can you think of other issues or fields of interest in which American or international involvement can be useful or productive?
- Is Islam the correct lens to observe and understand the Muslims of Central Eurasia? To what extent and how should one use this lens?