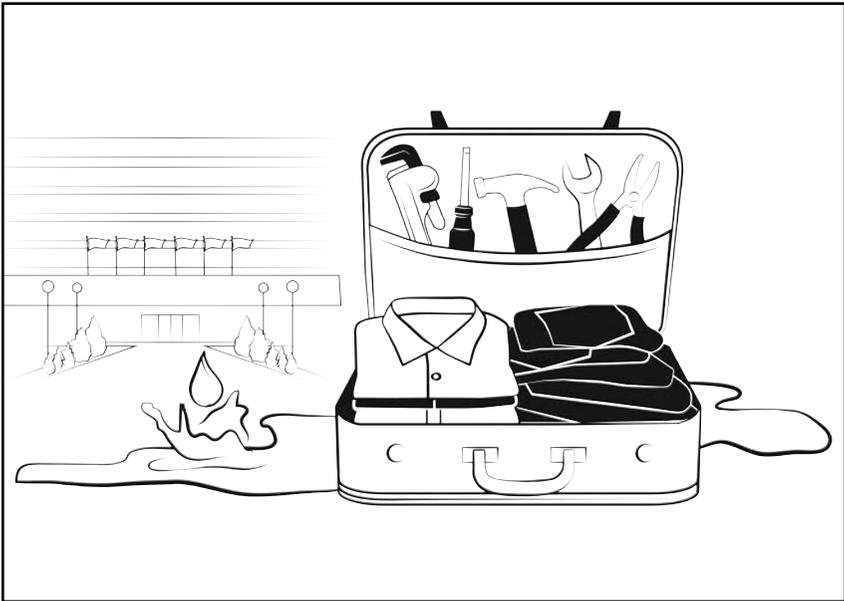


Postcards from Stanland

Journeys in Central Asia

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one



Travels in "Kyrzakhstan"



From the Osh Bazaar to Maryland Malls

On Christmas Eve 1995, my wife, Stephanie, picked me up at Washington's Dulles airport. I had been traveling for almost two days and was exhausted. I had arrived at Almaty airport in southeastern Kazakhstan at 11 p.m. after a six-hour drive on icy roads across the border from Kyr-gyzstan. Although my flight to Frankfurt did not leave until 4:30 a.m., the US embassy advised me to allow enough time to navigate the Soviet-era airport bureaucracy and, if necessary, pay a small bribe. It was good advice. The journey through the airport was almost as stress-ful as the road trip, and I barely made my flight.

Stephanie and I planned to spend the holidays with her sister and family at their home on the Maryland shore before driving home to Ohio. After almost a month in Central Asia, I looked forward to returning to the United States. Instead I experienced, for the first time in my life, reverse culture shock. We drove past brightly lit suburban malls, crowded with shoppers

buying last-minute presents and stocking up on holiday food and alcohol. Billboards and neon signs were already advertising the postholiday sales.

One of the blessings—but also one of the curses—of international air travel is that in the space of a few hours (or, in my case, about forty hours) you are transported from one world to another. The place you leave and the place where you arrive differ not only in the predictable ways—the skin color and features of the people, the landscape, architecture, language, food, and money. More fundamentally, the everyday concerns of people are usually completely different.

In the malls, people were making standard American consumer choices. “What should I buy for your mother? She’s *so* difficult!” “Which video game do the children want?” “How large a turkey?” “Will anyone notice if we serve boxed Chardonnay?”

It was a stark contrast to the world I had just left. In suburban Maryland, the shops were open, and open late. In Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, where I’d spent most of the past month, almost all the shops were closed, and had been closed for several years; what was left of the retail economy had moved to the bazaar and street corners.

In suburban Maryland, lights blazed from malls, streetlamps, and Christmas house and lawn displays. In Osh, the lights were off for at least several hours each day. No one was sure why there were power outages in a country with enough hydroelectric capacity to be a net exporter, but the usual culprits were named—corrupt government ministers, incompetent local officials, the mafia, the International Monetary Fund, or some cabal of all of the above.

In suburban Maryland, the restaurants were crowded; in Osh, the few restaurants that were still open had only the occasional customer and most of the items on the menu were not available.

In suburban Maryland, people were spending their Christmas bonuses and maxing out their credit cards. In Osh, teachers, civil service workers, and others who had not been paid for months were wondering when (or if) they would ever get a paycheck again.

In suburban Maryland, people were buying gifts for the holidays. In Osh, some people were selling all they had to buy food; in subzero temperatures, they squatted on the broken concrete sidewalks, their possessions—kitchen utensils, auto parts, school textbooks, old clothes, Soviet memorabilia—spread out on blankets. I don’t know who was buying because most passersby were just as poor as the sellers.

In suburban Maryland and throughout the United States on Christmas Eve 1995, people were looking forward to the new year with hope. In Osh and throughout Central Asia, people were simply hoping that 1996 would not be as bad as 1995.

Not in the Holiday Spirit

When we arrived at Stephanie's sister's home, the party was in full swing. I was not in the party mood but could not explain why I felt depressed. "It's the holidays," guests said. "You're supposed to be happy." I tried talking about what I had seen in Osh, but they soon changed the topic. I excused myself, saying I was tired, and went to bed early. On Christmas Day, I put on a brave face as the children opened their presents and the family kitchen crew swung into action. It was a sumptuous spread. Social conditions in southern Kyrgyzstan were not a talking point over dinner.

I have no one to blame but myself for not working harder to make relatives and friends, all of them good and sincere people, think or care about what I had seen and learned. About shattered families where husbands, robbed of their jobs and the dignity of work by the collapse of the Soviet economy, turned to the vodka bottle. About *babushkas* and children, begging at the bazaar. About declining social and medical services, schools without heating or textbooks. About ethnic unrest, and the breakdown of the rule of law. But also about the resilience, spirit, and hospitality of people who, after many years of Soviet certainty, had suddenly seen their world turned upside down.

After years of media coverage of famine and conflict, the problems of the developing world can seem relentlessly wearying. Poverty, suffering, and conflict are comfortably encapsulated in five-paragraph or ninety-second narrative chunks, with the requisite quotes or sound bites. You could not understand southern Kyrgyzstan in 1995 from the occasional media coverage or even from my photos and stories. You simply had to be there.

I was there, and then I left. That was perhaps what disturbed me most. I had the freedom to travel, to move between the worlds of southern Kyrgyzstan and suburban Maryland. Most people in Central Asia were simply stuck, trying to survive. That Christmas Eve made me see my own world, career, and life in a new way.

Come Again, Mr. Secretary?

As a US citizen and taxpayer, it's my duty not only to criticize government officials but to recognize when they do something useful. I happily acknowledge the contribution of US Secretary of State John Kerry to this introduction.

Kerry is probably unaware of my debt, because it was unintentional. On the eve of his first foreign trip as Secretary of State in February 2013, Kerry, in a speech at the University of Virginia, praised the staff of the State Department and US Agency for International Development (USAID) for their work in the "most dangerous places on Earth."

They fight corruption in Nigeria. They support the rule of law in Burma. They support democratic institutions in Kyrzakhstan and Georgia.¹

Come again, Mr. Secretary? *Kyrzakhstan*? Aren't you confusing volatile Kyrgyzstan, where popular protests overthrew two authoritarian leaders in less than five years, with its stable neighbor Kazakhstan, where President Nursultan Nazarbayev has ruled almost unchallenged since independence in 1991?

The State Department transcript of the speech helpfully clarified matters, replacing "Kyrzakhstan" with "Kyrgyzstan." But not before reporters picked up on the gaffe. Kerry was teased for "creating a new country." The flub was "all the more awkward," said the British newspaper *The Telegraph*, "because Kyrgyzstan is a key ally in the US-led war in Afghanistan and a major recipient of US aid."²

Russians poked fun in online forums. Among the comments: "I think we need to restore the USSR, so that the American Secretary does not confuse the names." "Well, if the USA decided so . . . Let there be Kyrzakhstan." "So what? Kyrzakhstan is a regular country. It's to the east of Ukrarussia and south-east of Litonia. Not far from Uzkmnia. You should learn geography." A cartoon depicted Kerry, cell phone to his ear, looking intently at a globe. "Where is that Kyrzakhstan? I've been trying to call there for three days."

The gaffe was fodder for TV talk shows and the late-night comics. Stephen Colbert picked up on a comment Kerry made the next day in a lecture on freedom of speech to students in Berlin: "In America, you have the right to be stupid if you want to be."

“Yes, in this country we are endowed with the inalienable right to be stupid,” said Colbert. “It’s right there in the Constitution between the peanut doodle and the ranch dressing stain. Folks, John Kerry doesn’t just talk the dumb talk, he walks the dumb walk. Here’s what he said last week [excerpt from speech at University of Virginia].”

Yes, Kyrzakhstan. And there’s just one thing about Kyrzakhstan. It does not exist. Of course, he’s got some ribbing in the press for making up a new country. And folks, it is well deserved. I mean, how could anyone ever confuse Kazakhstan [shows map] with its neighbor when everyone knows that in Kyrgyzstan [shows picture of yurts, the traditional tent-like dwellings] they play a fretless stringed instrument called the *komuz* which is nothing like Kazakhstan’s *dombyra*, also a fretless stringed instrument with a slightly thinner neck. And what are you going to do, Kerry? Go to downtown Bishkek and use a bunch of tenge to buy a new *kolpak* [shows picture of kolpak, traditional Kyrgyz men’s felt hat, and Kazakh tenge bills]. Not without first exchanging into soms [shows Kyrgyz currency], you’re not. Quit embarrassing yourself, John Kerry.³

Of course, Kerry was not the first US official to be, as the *Telegraph* put it, “tongue-tied by post-Soviet geography.” “Stan-who?” President George W. Bush is reputed to have asked when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice briefed him about Uzbekistan. In August 2008, he mixed up Russia and Georgia, which at that time were at war, when he warned against possible efforts to depose “Russia’s duly elected government.”

I’m prepared to forgive Kerry’s gaffe, but I can also use it to make a point. The confusion is symptomatic of a more general geographical malaise, caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the proliferation of countries whose names end in -stan. Kerry is not the first and will not be the last public official to become lost in Stanland.

Lost in Stanland

So where is “Stanland?”

The imprecise reference is to a vast swath of Asia, stretching from Turkey to the western border of China, populated by a bewildering assortment of ethnic groups that give their names to an equally

bewildering collection of provinces, autonomous republics, and countries. Remembering them all—not to mention finding them on a map—is a challenge, even for people who are supposed to know these things, such as diplomats and international relations experts.

I don't claim to be an expert, but, after traveling to Central Asia many times since the mid-1990s, I have a sense of place. I pity those world leaders doing the airport tarmac press conferences on the ten-Asian-countries-in-ten-days tours. It's Tuesday, so this must be Tajikistan.

It's similar to the geographical confusion brought on by the end of European colonialism in Africa a half century ago. It wasn't enough for the imperial powers to surrender their political and economic dominance. They also had to learn postcolonial geographical vocabulary. It's not Upper Volta any more. It's Burkina Faso, and its capital is—get ready to roll those vowels—Ouagadougou.

“As a generality,” writes the Central Asia scholar Karl E. Meyer, “Americans think of the world in terms of seaports and airports, whereas Central Asians and their neighbors look inwardly to a vast realm tied together by caravan routes, rails, mountain passes, rivers and nowadays oil pipelines. Americans commonly dwell in a perpetual present, while inhabitants of the Asian heartland and their imperial former masters inhabit a gallery where whispering voices never cease recalling past triumphs or prior humiliations.”⁴ To travel writer Colin Thubron, one of the first Westerners to travel in the region after the breakup of the Soviet Union, it was intangible, a historical and geographical paradox:

Even on the map it was ill-defined, and in history only vaguely named: ‘Turkestan’, ‘Central Asia’, ‘The Land Beyond the River’. Somewhere north of Iran and Afghanistan, west of the Chinese deserts, east of the Caspian Sea ... this enormous secret country had turned on itself. Its glacier-fed rivers ... never reached the ocean, but vanished in landlocked seas or died across the desert. The Himalaya cut off its mountains from any life-giving monsoon where the Pamirs rose in a naked glitter of plateau, so high, wrote Marco Polo, that no bird flew there and fire burnt with a pale flame in which you could rest your hand.⁵

We all construct mental maps of essential information, and our maps are shaped as much by culture and pragmatism as by physical features and political boundaries. Of course, we all know about other places,

but they don't appear in our mental maps, not even on the fringes, unless they seem relevant. Even though Afghanistan has been embroiled in conflict since the Soviet invasion of 1979—or, to take a longer historical perspective, since the first Anglo-Afghan War of 1839–42—it was not on most Americans' mental maps before September 11, 2001.

As long as Afghanistan and Pakistan were the only “stans” we had to remember, the map was reasonably manageable. Then Mikhail Gorbachev came along. The collapse of the Soviet Union gave us fourteen new countries (plus Russia) including the five “stans” of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. We can be grateful the Soviet Union did not break up any further, or we would have to deal with Bashkortostan, Dagestan, and Tatarstan (now Russian republics). Or that Armenia did not adopt its native name, Hayastan. Or that the Central Asian republics themselves did not splinter, with Karakalpakstan breaking away from Uzbekistan.

If we struggle to remember the “stans,” is it more helpful to think about “Central Asia”? It depends. In terms of geopolitics, it's a more elastic region, partly because it is (apart from the Caspian Sea)



MAP 1.1 Central Asian republics (map by Brian Edward Balsley, GISP)

landlocked, so has no coastline for demarcation. Since September 11, Afghanistan has often been classified as Central Asia. The north of the country, bordering Uzbekistan, has a large ethnic Uzbek population; in the east, Tajiks are a significant minority. By religion, culture, and language, the Uighurs of China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region have more in common with the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz than with the rest of China, and Uighur nationalists dream of reuniting with their neighbors in a Greater Turkestan region. The Caspian Sea clearly divides the Caucasus republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, and the Russian republics of Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia, from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, although some policy experts lump them together as "Central Asia and the Caucasus." What about Mongolia? Ethnically, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are Mongols. Unlike other regions that can be neatly subdivided, Central Asia is amorphous, expanding and contracting as it is viewed through different political, social, economic, and cultural lenses.

In this book, I use the narrow political definition of Central Asia to refer to these five former Soviet republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Since 1995, I have faced the challenge of trying to explain the region to colleagues, students, and friends. After one trip to Kyrgyzstan, a colleague insisted I had been in Kurdistan (which does not yet exist, except in Northern Iraq and in the maps of Kurdish separatist movements).

"No, K-oe-rg-oe-zstan," I replied, trying to wrap my tongue around the challenging Russian vowel "Ы" in the first and second syllables. I gave the ten-second profile. "Poor country, former Soviet Union, borders China, beautiful mountains and lakes, nomadic herders with sheep and horses, lots of meat in the diet, bad hotels, slow Internet, very hospitable people."

You would have thought the conflict in Afghanistan would have focused the attention of Westerners on the countries next door, but unfortunately it hasn't. Just as medieval European maps tagged vast regions of Africa, Asia, and America as *terra incognita*, the five Central Asian republics are a geographical blank between Afghanistan and Pakistan to the west and China to the east. To many Westerners, my travels in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan might as well have been on another planet. I had simply been in "Stanland."

It's difficult to know why we have so much trouble with the "stans." The suffix, derived from a Persian word meaning "place of," is similar in

meaning to “land” in English, German, or Dutch. We have no problem distinguishing England, Scotland, Ireland, Iceland, Finland, Poland, and Switzerland, and maybe even Greenland, Friesland, Rhineland, and Lapland. So why can’t we find Turkmenistan, let alone Balochistan, the largest of Pakistan’s four provinces?

Maybe it’s because we’re not as globally minded as we suppose. American ignorance—or perhaps ignore-ance better describes it—of the geography of Central Asia was famously lampooned on the cover of the December 10, 2001, edition of the *New Yorker* magazine, three months after September 11 (see page 10). The “New Yorkistan” cover satirically depicted the five boroughs and individual neighborhoods, mixing local and Yiddish names with suffixes common in Central Asia and the Middle East. Starting from their original idea, Bronxistan, the creators Maira Kalman and Rick Meyerowitz took readers on a stroll in Manhattan’s Central Parkistan, hailed a cab at Taxistan (LaGuardia Airport), speculated in real estate at (Donald) Trumpistan, celebrated cultural diversity in Lubavistan (named for a branch of the Hasidic Jews) and Gaymenistan, and then ventured to the outer suburbs of Coldturkeystan and Extra Stan (traveling through Hiphopabad, passing by the Flatbushtuns and the district of Khandibar).⁶

Why are the “stans” important? In a 1904 paper, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” delivered at Britain’s Royal Geographical Society, the Oxford geographer Sir Halford Mackinder, now recognized as one of the doyens of geopolitics, argued that interior Asia and Eastern Europe, the so-called Eurasian heartland, was the strategic center of the “World Island.” For more than a century, imperial Britannia had ruled the waves, but Mackinder, despite his imperialist views, warned of the decline of sea power in the twentieth century. As the heartland rose, Britain would become part of the subordinate “maritime lands.” Since the first millennium BCE, the landlocked steppes of Eurasia have provided the staging ground for horse-borne invasions. Shielded by the Arctic Ocean to the north and mountain ranges to the south, armies from the heartland could strike east to China, west to Europe, and southwest to the Middle East.⁷

Developing his theory after World War I and drawing on his experiences trying to unite White Russian forces in the civil war that followed the Bolshevik Revolution, Mackinder warned of the dangers of German or Russian domination, and foresaw the NATO alliance by calling on North America and Western Europe to offset the power of the Eurasian

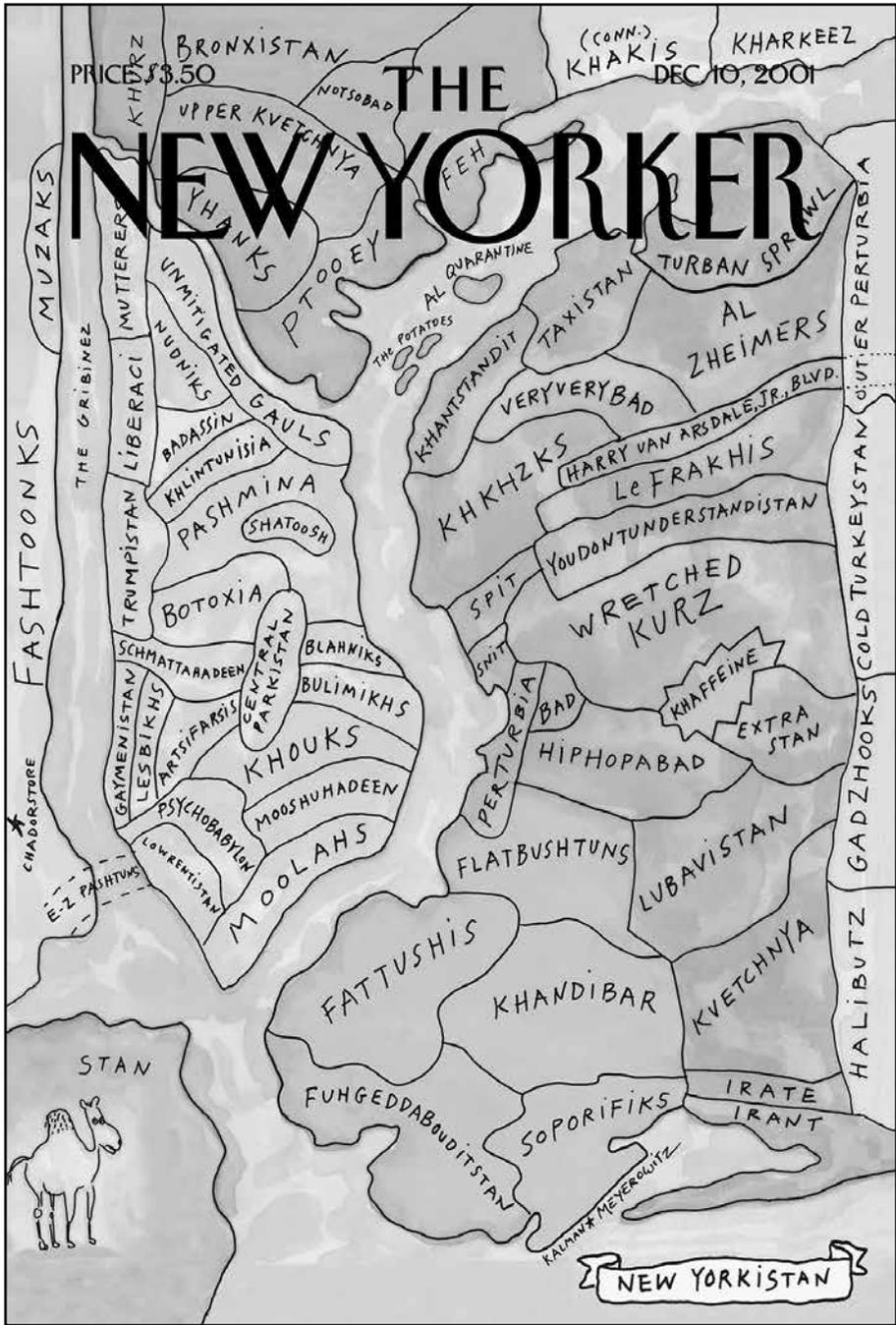


FIGURE 1.1 "New Yorkistan," *New Yorker* cover, December 10, 2001, Maira Kalman and Rick Meyerowitz (Condé Nast collection)

heartland. Although the “geographical pivot” theory is well known to academics and policy wonks, it has not percolated into popular understanding. Many Westerners are still lost in Stanland.

So are some of the citizens of these republics, which, more than a quarter of a century after independence, are still struggling to establish national identities. The problem is that, despite recent nationalist revisionist historiography, the five republics, each named for an ethnic group, are new countries created by Soviet cartographers in the mid-1920s. Stalin’s policy of divide and rule, intended to suppress ethnic unrest and militant Islam, created a crazy-quilt pattern of borders between ethnically mixed Soviet Socialist Republics. These became de facto political borders in 1991.

Those who still yearn for the social and ideological certainties of the Soviet Union and curse Gorbachev for messing up their lives may never accept their “stan.” But for those born after independence the Soviet era is now just a heavily edited chapter in the school history textbook. The new generation that will dominate politics, business, and intellectual life has a stronger sense of national identity and history.

That means that the West needs to better understand the “stans.” I still have much to understand myself. Despite traveling and working in the region for many years, I can never expect to have the same understanding, particularly on cultural issues, as those who were born, brought up, and live in Central Asia. By the same token, I may be better prepared than they are to explain the “stans” to Westerners precisely because I *am* an outsider. What seems normal or unexceptional to people in Central Asia often strikes me as interesting and worth noting. It goes both ways. For twenty years, Stephanie and I lived in a nineteenth-century farmhouse in the rolling hills south of Athens, Ohio. Academic colleagues from Central Asia who visited were puzzled. “Is this your home or your dacha?” they asked. Most Central Asians live in apartments, and some have a modest dacha where they grow fruit and vegetables. But you don’t *live* at the dacha. Our visitors also wondered why we spent several hours a week mowing the grass. What seemed normal to us surprised them.

A Map Is Worth a Thousand Words

That cultural conundrum—how we look at other people and their cultures, and how they look at us—has always fascinated me. In elementary

school in the mid-1950s, I innocently asked my teacher why so much of the map of the world was colored pink. The question surprised him. “It’s the British Empire, of course,” he said, stiffening his back (and maybe also his upper lip) as if he were going to salute and break into “God Save the Queen.” Instead, he told me I should be proud to be a subject of an empire on which the sun never set. I soon began to doubt his faith. The BBC was reporting trouble on the Malay peninsula, the Mau Mau insurrection in Kenya, civil war in Cyprus. Obviously, not everyone was proud to be a subject of the empire. The sun set more quickly on the Soviet than on the British empire, but for more than seventy years Soviet citizens were also told—by teachers, politicians, and the media—that they should be happy to live in a country free of the evils of Western capitalism.

On my first trip to Kyrgyzstan in 1995, I bought several Soviet-era maps, the heavy-duty glossy cloth-backed versions used in schools, at a bookstore in Bishkek. One is a historical map of the United States from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. Its most prominent features are red flags scattered across the northern United States. I didn’t know much Russian at the time, so could not read the scale, but I figured out the significance of the flags from the dates beside them. Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Louisville, St. Louis, Chicago, and other cities in 1877—the great railroad workers’ strike. Chicago in 1886—the Haymarket Affair. Near Pittsburgh in 1892—the Homestead steelworkers’ strike. Colorado in 1913—the miners’ strike and the Ludlow Massacre. And so on.

US history and geography were presented to Soviet schoolchildren as a series of bloody labor disputes, the proletariat rising against the oppressive mine and factory owners. An inset map depicts “Imperialist Aggression, late 19th to early 20th Centuries,” a cluster of black arrows in the Caribbean thrusting toward Mexico, Cuba, Guatemala, Panama, Puerto Rico, and Colombia, in the Pacific toward Hawaii, Western Samoa, Guam, and the Philippines.

The history of the United States told through red flags and black arrows. I imagined that the Cold War period was similarly depicted with black arrows targeting Cuba, Chile, Venezuela, and Nicaragua and red flags marking the racial conflicts of the civil rights era—Montgomery, Selma, Watts. No wonder many Soviet citizens feared and loathed the West, even as they bartered for Levis and listened to the Rolling Stones.

And then, almost abruptly in 1991, it was all over. The Soviet Union collapsed, and the republics of Central Asia were now numbered among the so-called Newly Independent States. It was a convenient, if misleading, label because they lacked both economic independence and political institutions. The ideology of Marxist-Leninism was replaced by a new civil religion whose creed included “democracy,” “the free market,” “structural reform,” and “civil society.” The old school maps came off the walls to be replaced by more positive cartography, courtesy of “democracy building” NGOs funded by the United States and other foreign governments.

Changing the name of a country, the maps, and school textbooks does not change culture, even with heavy doses of foreign aid, the privatization of property, and an army of foreign consultants with advice on elections, the rule of law, and capital markets. It takes many years for people who grew up, lived, and worked in a system to start looking at the world and themselves in new ways. In many respects, Kyrgyzstan in December 1995 still seemed stuck in a Soviet time warp, cut adrift from Moscow’s economic and social safety net yet not willing to embrace an uncertain future.

Although some people in Central Asia continue to cling to the past, it’s been clear for many years that change is the new norm. The Soviet Union, or anything like it, is not coming back, and the certainties that underpinned its society have disappeared. This book is about this process of change.

My relationship with Central Asia is a personal one. And, like any relationship, it’s complicated. There is much that I love and admire about the region and its peoples, and, at the same time, much that I find troubling. It’s that tension between the positive and negative that makes Central Asia worth writing about. My goal is to add the “stans” in all their complexity to the mental maps of readers. This has been my personal mission since December 1995. And it all began on the fabled Silk Road in the medieval city of Osh.