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Steppe Magazine: A Central Asian Panorama [Report]

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Reports

PUBLICATIONS

Steppe Magazine: A Central Asian Panorama (Nettlebed, Oxfordshire: Steppe International), £10/\$20.

Steppe Magazine is a colour magazine dedicated to Central Asia, its contemporary state of affairs and its history. It is a biannual magazine under the editorship of Summer Coish and Lucy Kelaart. Four issues have been published so far, and each issue has more than 110 pages. Central Asia, as a geographic region, is defined by *Steppe Magazine* as the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, plus Afghanistan and the Chinese province of Xinjiang. No parts of Iran are included in this definition, although at least the Khorasan region of Iran qualifies for being Central Asian because its history and culture is interwoven with that of the rest of Central Asia. In issue 3 a figure depicts the map of the region as a camel (p. 5). In this image, areas of Iran and Russia (the Volga-Tatar region) are shown as being part of Central Asia. Even countries like India and Pakistan are included. Also, Xinjiang and Tibet are demarcated as separate countries next to China. This unorthodox status for Xinjiang is also made obvious in a statement in issue 1: 'Five of the seven countries in *Steppe Magazine*'s focus were formerly part of the Soviet Union' (p. 5). This wording suggests that Xinjiang, too, should be considered a country. Describing Xinjiang as a separate country is indeed not a politically neutral statement, and it may endanger the magazine's relations with China. On the other hand, the deliberate choice of the name of this West Chinese province as Xinjiang is favourable to China. *Steppe Magazine* does not refer to Xinjiang as East Turkistan or Uyghuristan, which are the names preferred by the separatist and Islamist organisations of the Uyghurs, a Sunni Muslim Turkic-speaking people who inhabit this province. Therefore, labelling *Steppe Magazine* as 'anti-Chinese' is not justified.

According to the editors, the five former Soviet republics belonged to 'what looked like an amorphous and indistinguishable mass of Soviet socialist republics' (issue 1: 5). They claim, 'It is historical interludes, not contemporary life, with which the vast majority of people are familiar: the Great Game, the Tatar hordes, Samarkand, Merv, Herat' (p. 5). The first statement is partly true. By an

'amorphous mass', the authors mean either the whole Soviet Union or the Central Asian part of the Soviet Union. The map of the Soviet Union indeed looked like an amorphous mass. However, the map of Soviet Central Asia looked quite concise and 'morphous'. This is true whether we regard Kazakhstan as part of Soviet Central Asia or as a separate region; the Soviets regarded it as a separate economic region. Nevertheless, the internal borders of Central Asia did appear amorphous in the sense that it looked as if pieces of puzzle had been put together, especially the borders in Fergana Valley. Fergana Valley (called Fergana in Kyrgyz and Russian, Farghona in Tajik and Uzbek, and Farghâneh in classical Persian) is an area which was divided between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in a very complex way. Not only were the former republics' territories separated as if they were puzzle pieces, but there also existed small exclaves of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan inside Kyrgyzstan's territory.

Nonetheless, the description 'indistinguishable mass' is not justified. Central Asia is very diverse, in both the geophysical and cultural sense. While the northern part of Central Asia is a vast steppe, its central and south-western parts are very arid and covered with oases and deserts, and its eastern and south-eastern parts are mountainous. The region is also culturally very diverse. Different kinds of Turkic and Iranian languages are spoken, in addition to Russian, Korean, Chinese and German. The vast majority of its population is Sunni (Hanefi sect), while there exist significant numbers of Christians (Russian Orthodox and other denominations) and Shi'a Muslims (both Ismaili and Twelver), plus lesser numbers of other confessions such as Judaism and Buddhism. The population is also diverse with regard to traditional ways of life. While such groups as Russians, Tajiks and Uzbeks (as long as they are descendants of the people who were previously classified as Sarts) are traditionally sedentary agriculturalists, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks and Kyrgyz are traditionally nomadic pastoralists. It is also hard to agree with the second quoted statement above regarding general knowledge of 'historical interludes'. Central Asian history and geography are still largely unknown to the 'vast majority of people'. To state the situation more accurately, the text should be altered to read that the region's history and geography are 'known to only a small number of scholars'.

But it is exactly this relatively unknown character of Central Asia which makes *Steppe Magazine* a valuable source of information. There might be people who are deterred by unfamiliarity. A famous Dutch proverb says: 'De boer eet niet wat hij niet kent [The peasant does not eat something he does not know]'. On the other hand, for a lot of people the 'unknown' places have an exotic and mysterious character that evokes curiosity and interest. This same curiosity and interest have always driven human beings to discover *terrae incognitae*. (There even exists a journal with this name.) *Steppe Magazine* is doing a tremendously good job at informing the reader about many aspects of Central Asia, its natural and social life, its current state of affairs and its history.

Simply put, *Steppe Magazine* is a kind of *National Geographic* that is dedicated to Central Asia. It has, nevertheless, some advantages over the latter: the topics of each issue are more diverse in comparison to *National Geographic*; the articles are shorter, which invites the reader to read with more ease; and, above all, the oversized magazine (27 cm x 23 cm) is suitable for larger and more detailed pictures. The

articles are not only diverse in topic but also in style. Some can better be labelled as pictorials, because although there are textual descriptions, pictures remain their main focus. These pictorials are about diverse subjects such as Turkmenbashi, the former president of Turkmenistan (issue 2), hats (issue 3), paintings (issue 3) and bus stops (issue 1).

In general, the quality of the articles is good. Although there are a few pieces that have ideological underpinnings and try to minimise the legacy of the Iranian civilisation in Central Asia and the Middle East, most articles remain apolitical and neutral. The apolitical character of the magazine is reflected in the fact that it focuses on the cultural life of ordinary people rather than on the big multi-nationals and oil companies.

Finally, it is apt to question whether *Steppe Magazine* is scientific or useful for scholars. The magazine is non-scientific in the strict sense of the word in that it has no analyses and does not impart any theories. There is, however, an abundance of empirical material which is useful for both scholars and non-academics who are interested in the region. Although this magazine would not be classified as scientific in the modern world of 'analytical' science, I myself hesitate to refer to these rich factual descriptions as non-scientific. The study of countries and peoples (*Länder- und Völkerkunde*) has been one of the main fundamentals of the 'scientific' disciplines of human geography and cultural anthropology. As time passes by and the process of globalisation proceeds further, the character of regions changes, along with their physical appearance and cultural make-up. Scientists need to update their factual knowledge about these transformations, and this task can be aided by publications such as *Steppe Magazine*.

– Babak Rezvani