

## **TURKMENBASHI FORGES A NEW, OLD NATION IN TURKMENISTAN**

**A EurasiaNet Commentary by Taras Kuzio: 2/13/02**

Turkmenistan was one of the last countries to declare independence from the Soviet Union, waiting until October 27, 1991 to hold a referendum on the issue. Like most of the Central Asian states, Turkmenistan was forced to confront independence unexpectedly, with the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union. Turkmen independence did not have local political roots, and the country did not have a counter-elite, drawn from dissident groups, ready to assume leadership positions. Throughout the 1990s, things have stayed that way. Turkmenistan has led the way in pursuing a top-down nation-building policy in Central Asia.

President Saparmyrat Niyazov has managed to build a personality cult that tolerates no political opposition. Though Niyazov modeled his identity on Kemal Ataturk, founder of the modern Turkish state, the Turkmen leader's policies are said to conform to ancient traditions. His administrative reform divided the country into veloyat (districts) and etrap (regions), rather than self-governing oblasts. The National Assembly, which is composed of tribal elders, has veto power over the rubber stamp parliament.

With Soviet iconography discredited, new state-building motifs have emerged. Class and Marxist-Leninist ideology have yielded to a national idea that seeks to unify the population around nationalist symbols and the glorification of the pre-Russian past. State nationalism has filled the ideological void left after the collapse of communism as a useful tool to build the newly independent state. Saparmurat Niyazaov, the old Communist party boss, has anointed himself "Turkembashi," or father of the Turkmen people.

Niyazov's brand of nation-building stresses unity and homogenization, and looks askance at regionalism. The new national anthem is played each morning at schools and factories as a way of reinforcing this new, collective identity. Still, the Soviet legacy weighs heavily on the growing national identity. On Independence Day, for example, military parades follow the Soviet-era model.

Niyazov has placed great emphasis on reviving ancient culture. Anniversaries are celebrated with pomp and grandeur. May 18, the Day of Revival and Unity, matches Independence Day in importance.

State Flag day, unsurprisingly, coincides with the birthday of the Turkmenbashi, closely linking together the "Father of all Turkmen" with the ideology of the newly independent state.

That ideology also enforces isolationism and neutrality. Turkmen live in small numbers in Iran and Afghanistan, but Turkmenistan is portrayed as the only true homeland of the Turkmen. The World Turkmen Humanities Association strives to unite Turkmen everywhere with their "true motherland," defined in ethno-cultural as well as territorial terms. This again draws on the Soviet legacy, since the Soviets defined all non-Russian republics as the homelands of titular nationalities.

Turkmenistan's isolationism, combined with its authoritarian tendencies, has prevented citizens from learning about other cultures. As in other Central Asian states, the re-writing of history is an important element of the nation-building process. Soviet historiography has been discarded in Turkmenistan because Communist-era textbooks portrayed the region as backward before the arrival of Russian colonizers.

This historiography, of course, had its roots in Stalin's fusion of Bolshevism and Russian nationalism. Since it portrayed non-Russians as incapable of surviving without the assistance of the "elder (Russian) brother," it has yielded to other forms of nationalism. (Belarus and Moldova have reintroduced Soviet historiography in schools.) In Turkmenistan, the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences has been renamed the Department of Independence and History. It plays a role in promoting past glories, to establish that Turkmen lived well in pre-Russian "golden eras" and can live equally well in the post-Soviet era. Over the past decade, many streets have been renamed after characters drawn from Turkmen history.

The modern Turkmen state is portrayed as the descendant of the ancient Parthian civilization, and the successor to its historic legacy. Turkmen are seen as the indigenous inhabitants of the area and not, as Tsarist and Soviet history claimed, newcomers. Turkmen have now been given a 1,000-year history with historic links to the Oghuz Turkish tribes and the Seljuk. Notorious 20th-century events, such as the anti-Soviet Basmachi revolt in the 1920s, no longer appear in a negative light. Collectivization is now described in less glowing terms.

Islam is linked to the Turkmen nation-building process because it provides an additional basis for an alternative identity. The number of mosques has increased and religious attendance has grown. Nevertheless, as in other post-Soviet states, Islam remains controlled by the state.

**Editor's Note:** Taras Kuzio is a research associate at the Centre for Russian & East European Studies, University of Toronto.