

## THE RENAISSANCE OF FRENCH ORIENTALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA: A REVIEW AND PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract:** *In recent decades, French Orientalism in Central Asia has revived, leading to new intellectual and cultural explorations. This study highlights the contributions of scholars like Pierre Chuvin, Rémy Dor, and Thierry Zarcone, examining the historical context, the impact of the Soviet Union's collapse, and the development of key research centers. The formation of the European Seminar on Central Asian Studies (ESCAS) and key publications are also analyzed. The study concludes that French Orientalism in Central Asia continues to evolve, enriching knowledge and strengthening East-West cultural ties.*

**Keywords;** *French Orientalism, Central Asia, Pierre Chuvin, Rémy Dor, Thierry Zarcone, Soviet Union, ESCAS, CNRS, INALCO, EHESS, cultural heritage, academic research.*

### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, French Orientalism in Central Asia has experienced a significant revival, marking a new era of intellectual and cultural exploration. This revival is attributed to the works of numerous eminent scholars who have made substantial contributions to understanding the civilizations of Central Asia. Notable figures include Pierre Chuvin, Rémy Dor, Thierry Zarcone, Stéphane A. Dudoignon, Vincent Fourniau, Catherine Poujol, Maria Szuppe, Etienne de la Vaissière, Alexandre Papas, Julien Thorez, and Marc Toutant.

### METHODS

This study employs a historical and analytical approach to examine the evolution of French Orientalism in Central Asia. By reviewing the contributions of key scholars and institutions, the study highlights the shifts and developments in this academic field.

### MATERIALS

From the dawn of the 20th century until the end of the century, Central Asian studies were primarily pursued by a small group of scholars in history, archaeology, and linguistics. Their work was mostly confined to the academic community. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 opened up the region, leading to a surge in research opportunities. This geopolitical shift attracted attention from academics, political experts, and the general public. Major research centers in the US and UK began to establish specialized programs, while France, despite its historical significance in this field, lagged initially but eventually caught up with institutions like CNRS, INALCO, University Paris III,

and EHESS. The European Seminar on Central Asian Studies (ESCAS) was established in 1985 to foster interdisciplinary collaboration, hosting significant conferences in Utrecht, London, and Paris.

## RESULTS

The study of Central Asia experienced a significant revival following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-1991. This geopolitical shift opened up access to previously closed republics, sparking a surge of interest from academics, political experts, and the general public.

The establishment of the European Seminar on Central Asian Studies (ESCAS) in 1985 was a crucial step in fostering interdisciplinary and international collaboration. ESCAS conferences in Utrecht, London, and Paris facilitated the exchange of knowledge and methods between European and American scholars.

France, with its substantial historical experience in studying the region, later joined this movement by creating specialized research centers such as CNRS, INALCO, University Paris III, and EHESS. These institutions organized seminars and research programs aimed at training new specialists in Central Asian studies.

Publications such as "Central Asia and Its Neighbors: Reciprocal Influences" and special issues of "Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique" have significantly enriched the understanding of the region's historical and contemporary dynamics. These efforts highlighted the importance of mutual influences between Central Asia and its neighboring countries, such as the USSR, China, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Overall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent opening of the region led to a vibrant development in Central Asian studies, which now hold a significant place in international academic and political discourse.

## ANALYSIS

### Historical Context

From the dawn of the 20th century until the last decade of the same century, intellectual exploration of Central Asia was characterized by a restricted scope, primarily the domain of a handful of scholars specialized in the humanities, particularly in history, archaeology, and linguistics. Their academic work, by nature, was intended for a limited dissemination, finding an audience mainly within the scholarly community, despite the intrinsic richness of their content and its potential relevance for a deeper understanding of the region in question.

### IMPACT OF THE SOVIET UNION'S COLLAPSE

However, it is noteworthy that the collapse of the former Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 significantly altered the geostrategic dynamics of the nations located in Central Asia, thereby catalyzing a significant shift in the perception and interest towards this region. This geopolitical upheaval triggered a major transformation, attracting the attention not only of the academic community but also of political actors, strategic

experts, and ultimately, the general public, towards what was once referred to as "Turkestan" or "Turan."

The collapse of the Soviet Union had profound consequences, leading to the reopening of all its Muslim republics and thereby paving the way for research opportunities across the entire region. This phenomenon generated a growing demand for knowledge, stimulating the establishment of specialized research centers in nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom. These centers were equipped with their own communication tools, such as academic journals and newsletters dedicated to this evolving region.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH CENTERS**

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In response to these changes, major research centers like the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO), the University of Paris III, and the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) began to focus on Central Asian studies. In 1989-1990, they established a seminar on "Cultural and Linguistic Heritage of Turkic Peoples of Inner Asia" to train new researchers and stimulate future research.

#### **Formation of the European Seminar on Central Asian Studies (ESCAS)**

In 1985, European researchers active in Central Asian studies felt the need to create a flexible structure for interdisciplinary collaboration. This led to the formation of the "European Seminar on Central Asian Studies" (ESCAS). This initiative aimed to bridge the gap with the United States, which was ahead in this field, while preserving the specifics of European approaches. ESCAS was primarily designed as a forum for exchange among European researchers, while encouraging individual participation from non-European colleagues.

The first meeting of the European Seminar on Central Asian Studies (ESCAS) took place in Utrecht from December 16-18, 1985, bringing together about thirty participants. Although this number might seem modest, it did not adequately reflect the growing importance of this field of research. The founding role of the Institute of Oriental Languages and Cultures at Utrecht University, along with the friendly atmosphere and the quality of the presentations at this first meeting, should be acknowledged. The proceedings of this conference were published in April 1987 in the Turkological series of Utrecht University.

The second ESCAS meeting marked a significant quantitative transition. Over two hundred and fifty experts from around the world gathered in London from April 7-10, 1987, at the invitation of Dr. Shirin Akiner and the School of Oriental and African Studies. Although the European aspect of ESCAS was somewhat overshadowed, the scale of this event was commendable. The contributions presented at this meeting filled several volumes, whose publication was still not completed by 1990.

ESCAS-III, organized by the Institute of Turkish Studies of Paris III and the Center for Studies on the USSR, Eastern Europe, and the Turkish Domain of EHESS in 1989, brought together seventy researchers and academics from ten European countries, as well as guests from the United States, Japan, and Israel. The central theme of this meeting was the interactions between Central Asia and its neighbors. Depending on the perspective, Central Asia could be seen either as a melting pot from which conquering peoples emerged or as a receptacle shaped by the influences and pressures of surrounding powers.

To deepen the understanding of this geographic region, the emphasis was placed on mutual influences, both historical and contemporary, between Central Asia and its neighbors, notably the USSR, China, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan.

#### Key Publications and Research Centers

The results of these study days were published in two distinct volumes. The first, titled "Central Asia and Its Neighbors: Reciprocal Influences," was published in the fall of 1990 by INALCO, with two sections dedicated to language and literature, as well as anthropology. The second volume, which compiles all historical and political contributions, constitutes a special issue of "Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique," a journal that, since its creation under the impetus of Alexandre Bennigsen and his collaborators, has always given significant space to Central Asia.

After some efforts, a research center named "Turkish and Ottoman Studies" was created in 1990 following the merger of two entities: the Institute of Turkish Studies at the University of Paris III, directed by Louis Bazin, and the Center for the Study of Russia, Eastern Europe, and the Turkish Domain (founded by Alexandre Bennigsen at EHESS), which was focused on Ottoman history.

### DISCUSSION

French Orientalism in Central Asia continues to develop today, thanks to the efforts of numerous researchers and academic institutions. This process not only enriches knowledge about the region but also strengthens cultural and intellectual ties between East and West.

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This review highlights the evolution and achievements of French Orientalism in Central Asia, emphasizing the contributions of key scholars and the development of significant research centers. Future research in this field will continue to play an important role in the global academic community, fostering deeper understanding and collaboration.

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