GLOBAL SNAPSHOTS
Issues Transcending Regional Boundaries:
Central Eurasia

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A vast and little known expanse, Inner or Central Eurasia is the historic home of nomadic conquerors, centers of Islamic and Buddhist learning, and some of world’s most striking natural vistas. Today, the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center (IAUNRC) at Indiana University offers you and your students the opportunity to experience the cultures and peoples of multifaceted Central Eurasia.

The IAUNRC brings together experts and educational resources on a tantalizing diversity of Central Eurasian locales: Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Some of these areas are prominent in the news today: the Kurds and their presence all over the Middle East; Tibet’s controversial relationship with the Dalai Lama and struggle for autonomy in China; Turkey’s balance between Europe and the Middle East. Yet even the lands we hear little of—the Roof of the World in Tajik Badakhshan, the wide-open Mongol Steppe, or Finland’s breathtaking region of Lapland—are also culturally striking, strategically important, and worthy of exploration.

The IAUNRC is always interested in new and innovative ways to broaden knowledge about the Central Eurasian region. In the pages that follow, we’ve highlighted a series of topics at the forefront of Central Eurasian studies which we hope will serve as the basis for ongoing conversations and the start of possible collaboration.
LEARNING OUTCOMES: 10 THINGS STUDENTS SHOULD LEARN ABOUT CENTRAL EURASIA

1. We’ve heard of Marco Polo and his travels along the Silk Road, but what was the Silk Road and where was it located? Its history via some of the world’s most influential trade routes once crossed through Central Eurasia.

2. Chinggis (Genghis) Khan and Tamerlane are famous conquerors from Central Eurasia whose legacies can be seen today in the massive palaces they built, the fortresses they leveled, and the capitals from which they ruled.

3. From Samarqand to Bukhara to Urgench, Central Asia has long been home to some of world’s most important centers of Islamic learning and culture.

4. The quickly disappearing Aral Sea (Uzbekistan / Kazakhstan) remains today a poorly known but internationally important ecological disaster.

5. On the fringe of the USSR only twenty years ago, Estonia has since emerged as a center of technological advancement and economic growth in the EU.

6. Tibet has given us not only the Dalai Lama, but its monasteries have for centuries generated oral epics, written histories, and Buddhist teachings of worldwide import.

7. Hungarian, Finnish, and Estonian, together with Komi, Mari, and other Finno-Ugric languages, make up the broader Uralic language family.

8. The spring holiday of Navruz, a pre-Islamic and ancient Iranian Spring celebration, is today observed across Central Eurasia and the world.

9. Nomadic pastoralism, also known as herding, historically was a key lifestyle for peoples throughout the Eurasian steppe-lands, from Mongolia to Hungary.

10. Baku, Azerbaijan was the world’s first oil “boom-town,” and Central Eurasia remains a region rich with oil, natural gas, and other natural resources.
CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

Drug Trade

With Afghanistan continuing to produce the vast majority of the world’s opium and heroin, neighboring countries, such as Iran, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan have become an important corridor of illegal trade to the rest of the world. Heroin and other narcotics travel through Central Asia to Russia, and from there to Europe, or through Iran to the Middle East and then further. No matter the route, the drug trade negatively impacts local structures of governance and encourages the growth of “gray” economies.

Resources:


Kurdish Efforts for Greater Autonomy

A people with roots stretching back centuries across Central Eurasia, Kurds are currently a minority population in many countries of the region, including Turkey, Iran, and Turkmenistan. Without a state or nominal “homeland” available for them to turn to, Kurdish populations have frequently sought increased levels of localized autonomy and privilege within one or another state, which has brought them into conflict with the authorities. In Turkey, for example, this escalated into violent confrontations and the use of terrorist tactics. 2013 brought peace talks with the Turkish government but also larger conflicts with Syria and Iraq about oil exports. Today, Kurdish military forces are on the frontlines in the battle against ISIL.

Resources:


ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN IMPACT

Water Use

From the Aral Sea along the Kazakh-Uzbek border, to the Rogun Dam that has embroiled Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in an ongoing war of words, to the delineation of international waters in the Caspian Sea, water rights and water usage are an issue of region-wide scope and import. As a region covered by many deserts and arid plains, water and irrigation have been for centuries at the heart of diplomacy and politics. This remains true today, especially as sources of water become fewer and further in between. The disappearing Aral Sea is one of the largest examples from the region with environmental, economic, and social impacts across Central Asia.

Resources:


Logging & Paper Mills

Description: The Baltic basin and Scandinavia are home to some of the world’s largest remaining old-growth pine forests, a bounty of natural wealth that both Finland and Estonia share in. In past decades, however, logging concerns – for example, the Finnish paper-making giants Stora Enso and UPM – have significantly increased the expanse and breadth of their operations. This has led to increased concern over the long-term loss of old-growth forests in this corner of Eurasia, as well the threat this poses to sustainable economic growth in the region.

Resources:

Central Asian Oil and International Energy Security

Many countries in Central Asia have vast deposits of oil and gas, leading international investors to rethink their reliance on the Middle East for these resources. Azerbaijan, a large country in the Caucasus region, has already built and planned several transnational pipelines. Among them, the Trans-Anatolian pipeline connects the country to Turkey and the European Union to potentially help shore up its energy security. China, the second largest national consumer of energy in the world, has also increased its presence in the countries of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Resources:


The rising role of Kazakhstan in Nuclear Energy

Under the Soviet Union, the Semipalantinsk Test Site in Kazakhstan was used for over forty years to test nuclear weapons, and even though the site closed after the fall of the Soviet Union, the local population still suffers from health problems. This first-hand experience of the harm of nuclear weapons has made the Kazakh government an active proponent of nuclear disarmament. It has also been active in exploring the benefits of nuclear technology, as the country has rich uranium reserves and is the world’s biggest uranium producer. To this end, Kazakhstan has proposed opening a civilian nuclear fuel bank that would help other countries meet their energy needs with safely produced enriched uranium. Over 30 countries today use nuclear energy as it is cheaper and has relatively low carbon emissions thereby contributing significantly less to global warming.

Resources:

**HUMAN RIGHTS**

**Rangeland Management**

Mobile herding is an important lifestyle for many groups who live in Central Eurasia. In the Inner Mongolian and Tibet Autonomous Regions of China, government policies on land use, land ownership, and the management of livestock are greatly impacting indigenous cultural practices and local environments. The Chinese government implemented these policies to increase productivity and restructure communities to be more accessible to roads, schools, and local governments. But researchers at Human Rights Watch say the program has had a devastating impact by fracturing families, forcing nomads to give up their livestock, and indebting many residents by requiring they pay for costs of their relocation.

**Resources:**


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**Impacts of Mining on Local Communities**

The rich natural resources of countries like Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia are attracting international mining companies with national governments eager to gain large foreign investments at the expense of local communities’ comforts and homes. In 1998, Kyrgyzstan’s Kumtor gold mine, owned by the Canadian company Centerra, poisoned a major water source with a chemical used in gold-processing. Mongolia’s government along with Australia’s mining company Rio Tinto have been accused of underestimating the hydrological impacts of their joint project, the Oyu Tolgoi copper and coal mine, on water sources in the Gobi desert. These health and environmental concerns led to riots and protests in both countries in 2012 and 2013 which called for greater government oversight of these mines.

**Resources:**


POPULAR CULTURE

Hip-Hop

**Description:** Across much of the former USSR, including Central Asia and the Caucasus, a local blend of western rap, Russian-influenced themes, and traditional music styles is growing in popularity and importance. Today in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Almaty, Kazakhstan, or Krasnovodsk, Turkmenistan, local musicians are recording tracks and gaining followings. In Azerbaijan, hip-hop artists have even become involved in political protests and are now an important element of a burgeoning reform movement.

**Resources:**

*Article:* “Arrests, Beatings Reported At Youth Rally in Baku,” RFE/RL, [http://www.rferl.org/content/opposition_youth_rally_in_baku/24518796.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/opposition_youth_rally_in_baku/24518796.html).

*Video:* Novaya Gil’diya, “My s toboi” (Me and You), [http://youtu.be/opX7dvdod60](http://youtu.be/opX7dvdod60).


Avant-Garde Film

**Description:** While France may have the weight of history behind it, other countries are catching up when it comes to producing independent, important, and critically acclaimed films. This includes many of the IAUNRC’s areas of interest: Hungary, Finland, Iran, and Tibet are amongst some of the most outstanding examples. In Hungary, a long and well-established tradition of filmmaking has produced masterpieces such as Bela Turin’s *Werkmeister Harmonies* and *The Turin House*; in Finland, recent years have seen the release of difficult-to-categorize but culturally important material like *The Cuckoo*; Iranian-émigré material such as *Persepolis* has been wooing audiences, and juries, the world over; and in Tibet a new wave of Tibetan film makers is producing films like *Old Dog* that portray a lesser-seen side of Tibet set in the complexities of everyday modern life.

**Resources:**


OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES ON CENTRAL EURASIA

Resources from the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center at Indiana University:

- Curricular resources: lesson plans, syllabi, links to external resources, and more: http://www.indiana.edu/~iaunrc/outreach/lesson_plans
- Supplementary curricular resources: video conferencing programs: http://www.indiana.edu/~iaunrc/outreach/video_conferencing
- Free learning materials: http://www.indiana.edu/~iaunrc/resources/learning_materials
- Multimedia lending library: collection of DVDs, books, traditional clothing, and other resources: http://www.indiana.edu/~iaunrc/resources/loanable_resources
- Online audio/visual materials: podcasts, image galleries, and media archives: http://www.indiana.edu/~iaunrc/resources/av.
- The IAUNRC Newsletter: This newsletter, maintained by IAUNRC staff and students, contains analyses of Central Eurasian news and updates on departmental events. http://www.indiana.edu/~iaunrc/newsevents/newsletters

Introductory books on the Central Eurasian Region:

- The Travels of Marco Polo.

News sources on the internet:

Central Asia:
- The Telegraph: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/central-asia/
- Eurasianet: http://www.eurasianet.org/
- Asia Times Online: http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia.html

Mongolia:
- Bloomberg: http://topics.bloomberg.com/mongolia/

Tibet:
- Phayul: http://www.phayul.com/