The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 forced the Central Asian Republics to create lawful governments, militias, and liberated national identities virtually overnight. Decades of economic exploitation and cultural oppression initiated a panic in the minds of political leaders when suddenly faced with their newfound freedom. These leaders became fearful of a mass anarchy that may have ensued as the façade of communist equality and prosperity dissolved.

The inveterate corruption of their leaders was revealed to the Central Asian populations by Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforming policies of glasnost and perestroika. The people, now disillusioned, turned to find new means of ensuring their livelihoods and breeding a sense of purpose. In the various republics, different societal groups tended to fill these voids.

The USSR warped certain remnants of pre-existing cultural influences through its efforts to constrain nationalist sentiments. These effects pervaded society following the removal of Russian forces, and were perpetuated by the ineffectiveness of the new pseudo-democratic governments. Thus, means for developing a truly liberal democracy were hindered. The culture that emerged was transformed by the struggle for identity and community into kinship networks of clan elites, radical Islamism, and conservatism. As a result, the general public felt intimately in tune with the consistency of a strong authoritarian government.

Unfortunately, these authoritarian regimes provided the roots for many of the problematic radical groups that have formed under their leadership. The politicians needed an enemy to unite the public against in order

“The abrupt concept of independence caused an identity crisis amongst much of the indigenous population.”

The Registan in Samarqand, Uzbekistan, a city known for its location in the heart of the Silk Road.
to distract citizens from the reality of their own ineffectiveness. This same initiative led the governments to oppress the citizens in a way that encouraged them to identify with and join extremist organizations. The abruptness of independence caused an identity crisis amongst much of the indigenous populations. During Soviet rule, any cognizance of their original identification was stripped and repainted with a veneer of ethno-nationalism glossily orchestrated to best perpetuate the political interests of Moscow.

**Divide and Rule**

The Central Asian steppe has been host to many civilizations. Thus, Central Asia developed into a region with many layers of people co-existing. Interaction was minimal, however, mainly because it was not geographically feasible. The Pamir Mountains and various deserts disallowed vast communication networks, thereby ruling out the possibility of forging a uniform identity.

When the Soviets assumed control of Central Asia, they exploited the region’s resources, both natural and human. By creating a destructive cotton monoculture (known as “white gold”), the Soviet Union forced the Central Asian republics to abandon their production of grains and other food crops. Thus, Central Asia became dependent on the Soviets for their grain supply. Moscow, being aware of its dominant position over the republics, was able to set the prices of most products, securing an economic monopoly for Soviet trade.

The Soviet Union appealed to the indigenous population through socialist ideals of economic equality in contrast to the imperialist relationships Western empires had established with their colonies. The hypocrisy of this “ideal” lay in the fact that the Soviet Union was acting precisely as an imperialist nation. The Soviets were manipulating the region by taking its raw resources and creating products that they would sell back to their subjects as the sole supplier. The Soviets sought to present the image that communism would lead to the fruition of ethnic harmony and economic development. Communism instead incentivized black markets for people to buy and sell goods on the side. Black markets became the only way that Central Asian citizens could receive goods that the government failed to supply. This corrupt system has remained in many of the authoritarian republics today as a lasting remnant of the Communist era.

Ironically, the breakup of the Soviet Union revealed the kind of abject poverty that its policies were supposed to have removed, further calling into question the motives of Soviet governance. The Soviet fear for the spread of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism had led them to create new identities for the citizens of Central Asia. This policy was instituted in such a way that would restrict the possibility of uprising, dislocate any feeling of brotherly sentiment, and fabricate the cultural arts that Moscow believed were necessary to establish a Soviet identity in the region.

Moscow believed that in giving each nation a distinct homeland, ethnic conflict would subside. Thus, attention would be drawn to the “correct” type of struggle: disparity between social classes. Through ethnogenesis, the Soviet Union sought to create various ethnicities with which the Central Asian population could identify. Experts of various fields were called in, from ethnographers to historians, to create not only countries, but also languages, histories, folklores, and literatures. In sum, a puppet

"The Soviet Union appealed to the indigenous population through socialist ideals of economic equality"
cultural identity was set in place in order to proceed with the socialist mission of “equality”, which necessitated that everyone had a place, knew their place, and blended in with the community. This is still seen in today’s clan networks, in which a child excelling academically is viewed unfavorably, as it brings attention to a single individual and disrupts the cohesion of the unit.

Soviet planners instituted these policies in a way that actually tore apart existing ethnic groups and forged smaller ones that best suited the Soviets’ political interests. This strategy revealed the underlying reason for the reassignment of identities to be the elimination of the threat of a strong and united Central Asia. The regional understanding of nationalism became increasingly politicized. Compulsory schooling and propaganda were used to institute this model of homogenization. Furthermore, languages were altered for certain groups of people in order to justify them as a distinct ethnic group. This ethnogenesis led to the formation of societal groups that were hollow and fragile. Thus, upon independence from the Soviet Union the citizens of the region were left without clear identities. An effect of this is seen by the changing of alphabets, which limited the new generations’ access to texts of those before them.

Another damaging effect was the creation of autonomous regions, such as Karakalpakstan. At the same time, some regions of one republic were appended as exclaves to another for the purpose of isolating and weakening these societies. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, these constructed communities had no true source of identity and turned to the vestige of collectivization.

**Rise of the Clan Networks**

In order to institute cotton production effectively, the Soviets created and ran collective farms, or *kolkhoz*, that had to meet established quotas to ensure maximum productivity. In this process, environmentally damaging irrigation techniques were instituted, which has led to both the drying of the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan and increased desertification across the region. More specifically, the soil became salinized from overuse, which killed crops and contaminated fresh drinking water. When collectives were first established, they were met with mass frustration by many nomadic tribes that were forced into a sedentary lifestyle. In protest,
many nomads slaughtered their entire herds.\textsuperscript{10} This dramatic and forced transformation of lifestyle led to a pandemic starvation that nearly eliminated many tribal populations. Despite these negative effects, Central Asians came to depend on the institution of collectivization for their primary means of identity, seeing as it was the only establishment that remained constant and stable after independence. The \textit{kolkhoz}, to this day, remains an expression of rural solidarity, and has become an entrenched actor in the economic sector.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{aral_sea_shipwrecks.jpg}
\caption{Aral Sea shipwrecks now clutter the landscape due to the desertification of the sea from damaging irrigation techniques used in kolkhoz farming.}
\end{figure}

In the division of the ethnic groups in Turkestan, Joseph Stalin strategically dismembered the Ferghana Valley, which was the cultural epicenter of Central Asia. The now isolated Pamir localities were forced to look inward, creating a sense of clannish identity. Soviet policies tended to reinforce this sense of a divided and scattered society, which collectivization institutionalized through the breakup of traditional valley loyalties.\textsuperscript{12} Through the \textit{kolkhoz}, clan kinship networks formed in these sequestered communities that were, or acted as, extended families. Urban divisions, or \textit{mahallas}, were formed and eventually became the focal point of their residents’ livelihoods. Elite leaders were elected and a structure was instituted in order to fulfill the needs of the people. After the Soviets left Central Asia and the republics gained their independence, governments could not provide dependable healthcare, stable wages, or various goods. Class conflict transformed into a struggle between clan networks.\textsuperscript{13} Being a member of a kinship group signified a sense of security and stability, and ensured citizens had an established identity. Clan networks became more desirable as they reached beyond both national and regional politics. Politicians adapted to balance the power of clan elites in order to maintain legitimacy and stability in their regime. In this way, an individual’s political voice came to rely entirely upon clan identification.\textsuperscript{14}

In addition, clans established complete control over the social lives of their citizens, having the final say on a range of issues, such as marriage, education, and elections. Clans allowed traditionalism and conservatism to flourish. For example, education of children was not valued because they were needed to work in the fields. Women especially found it more profitable to work part time in agriculture and sell hand made goods through the black market.\textsuperscript{15} Nepotism and bribery became widespread and are today the accepted methods by which a clan can insert their youth into universities

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{traditional_tajik_dress.jpg}
\caption{A young girl in traditional Tajik dress}
\end{figure}
or political positions. There was no incentive for children to work hard in school due to the lack of value placed on grades and on learning in general. The system bred rewards for loyalty and patronage, rather than innovation and creativity.

A Strict Traditionalism

Within the clan, each member was designated a particular role that was usually based on that clan’s perceived notion of Islam. Women were often designated as second-class citizens. As kalīn, or daughters-in-law, they were treated very poorly, often doing a majority of the hard labor in the fields and in the household. Marriage was almost always arranged and was often conducted between first cousins in an effort to strengthen clan bonds. In direct opposition to the ideals of the Islamic community, the Bolsheviks believed that women would only be able to realize their full potential by enlisting in the workforce. Thus, following the fall of the communist regime, many women stopped working, renouncing former Soviet ideals. Women who continued to work were frequently harassed or treated with suspicion by their husbands. The men, who were unaccustomed to the idea of an independent woman, often feared that their wives were carrying out affairs while at work.

One of the most significant themes to result from Soviet policies was radical Islamism, which was initially spurred by religious repression during communist times. Authoritarian leaders used Islam both as a tool to legitimize oppressive rule and as a scapegoat for economic and social problems. Moscow feared Islam could be a unifying force against Soviet communism. Thus, they instituted an official state-approved Islam with appointed clergy. Since Islam was under state control, citizens began to feel that their only means of expression and identity were being taken from them. In its place, unofficial forms of Islam began to take root within the smaller clans, further strengthening their bonds. Radicalization became extremely rampant in the prison system. Typically, men would enter prison well aware that they would likely never leave, so they often turned to religion as their only source of hope. Radical Islamist groups such as Hizb-u-Tahrir and the Islamic Renaissance Party used this to their advantage. These parties also targeted migratory laborers who, upon returning from abroad, faced bleak prospects of employment. They often turned to radical organizations as an outlet for their anger and frustration.

Only the most strict and conservative Islamic groups directly opposed the Soviet regime, considering it actually encouraged the same ideals of education, employment, and redistribution of wealth as Islam. The United States saw Islamism as an antidote to socialism and thus hoped to use these groups to defeat the Soviets, as was done in Afghanistan. The main issue with this was that, as stated above, only the most radical groups opposed the regime. Thus, the U.S. sent support to the same radical organizations that now directly threaten regional security.

Moving Beyond the Soviet Era

The policies of collectivization and religious repression during the Soviet regime helped accentuate the power of the clan, and enabled the future rise of radical organizations. In the interest of their own political and
economic profit, the Soviets left Central Asia crippled through nepotism, corruption, and the manufacture of fake identities. Following the collapse of the USSR, the locals’ needs for consistency and stability induced them to turn to clan networks to fill the voids that the newly independent, authoritarian regimes created. Unfortunately, these closed communities, through their control over all aspects of life, cut members off from many modern ideas and inhibited any concept of individualism.

Most of the Central Asian nations are now ruled by repressive authoritarian regimes while the relevance of kinship networks, radical Islamism, and the traditionalism of the countries continue to inhibit any progress. If these nations truly want to become economically stable and independent, the regimes must be willing to change their propensity towards corruption and provide necessary goods to their populations. Without a dependable government to ensure and provide for their livelihoods, citizens will continue to turn towards radical organizations and clan networks for employment, pay, and household goods. In addition, if the prevalence of repression in mahallas continues to be overlooked, the nation’s citizens will sink deeper into poverty and ignorance from the poor quality of education and the lack of appreciation or reward for intelligence and ingenuity. The continuous repression of individuality and creativity will stunt hopes for development of a real national identity. The Soviet era policies of collectivism and religious repression have led the Central Asian nations to settle into the disconnected and dependent republics that exist today.

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*Cotton kolkhoz, or collective farming, is done by hand. Children are often pulled out of school during harvest season to work in the fields.*
Soviet Legacy in Central Asia
By Chelsea Mickel

4. Ibid., 95.
5. Ibid., 94.
7. Ibid., 74.
8. Ibid., 61.
16. Ibid., 163.


23. Ibid., 17.

24. Ibid.

Image 1: http://www.mirutadelaseda.com

Figure 1: Wikipedia adaptation from Edward Allworth (1967)

Figure 2: http://writersteppe.files.wordpress.com

Image 2: http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_mbltm4BUAK1rs45nwo1_500.jpg

Image 3: http://media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/15/f2/67/15f267a02160e30b3764c034686f0aff.jpg