



# CENTRAL ASIA II. DEMOGRAPHY

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## CENTRAL ASIA

### ii. Demography

The combined population of the Uzbek, Kirgiz, Tajik, and Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republics totals more than 30 million people, one tenth of the population of the Soviet Union. Owing to a relatively high birth rate and a low death rate, it is also the most rapidly growing segment, at an average annual rate of approximately 3 percent a year, comparable to those of the most rapidly growing nations of the underdeveloped world. In general the Central Asian population is characterized by a low level of urbanization, very uneven geographical distribution of the oasis type, a high density among the rural population, and a large Muslim majority, including a number of Iranian-speaking peoples. The chief Russian-language sources on the demography of Central Asia are the Russian and Soviet censuses of 1897, 1926, 1939, 1959, 1970, 1979, and 1989, as well as annual population estimates (Tsentral'nyĭ Statisticheskii Komitet, 1899-1905; Tsentral'noe Statisticheskoe Upravlenie SSSR, 1929, 1962-63, 1972-74, 1984-87; *Pravda*, 1989; 1939 data were published in the 1959 census and elsewhere; additional 1979 data have also been published in Goskomstat SSSR, 1988). Although there was no official population census before 1897, there have been estimates of the population of Central Asia for this period. For example, Karakhanov (pp. 226-28) provides annual total



population estimates for the four republics for 1865-1982, and official estimates were made for political units of Central Asia in 1885 (Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet, 1887). The republic of Kazakhstan is sometimes included in "Central Asia," but it will not be considered here, as it is considered today by the Soviets as a separate economic region from that of Central Asia, which consists of the four republics listed above, and has an insignificant Iranian-speaking population (in 1979 there were only 19,293 Tajiks and 17,692 Kurds; no other Iranian-speaking peoples were listed for Kazakhstan in 1979).

*General demography of Central Asia.* Since the turn of the century the population of Central Asia has increased fivefold, from approximately 6 million to 14 million in 1959 and 33 million in 1989. In recent years the number of births per 1,000 peoples has hovered at around 30-40, while females in the reproductive years have continued to bear an average of four to seven children. Conversely the number of deaths has dropped to fewer than 10 per 1,000. Migration has played only a small role in this rapid growth.

Unlike most other regions of the Soviet Union, the majority (ca. 60 percent) of the population in Central Asia still lives in rural areas. There are some fairly large cities in the region, however, the most important of which is Tashkent, the fourth largest city of the USSR, with more than 2 million people. Settlement is concentrated in river valleys and along canals, especially the Amu Darya, Syr Darya, and Zeravshan (Zarafshān) river valleys and the Kara Kum canal zone. The majority of the population is located in the relatively small area extending eastward from Bukhara through Samarkand to the Zeravshan and Fergana (Farḡāna) valleys and along the upper Syr Darya and, on a branch of the Syr Darya, in Tashkent and its surrounding countryside. Rural population densities in these areas often exceed 200 people per km<sup>2</sup>, the highest in the USSR. Other notable areas of concentration are the lower Amu Darya valley just south of the Aral sea, in the Kara Kum canal zone between the Amu Darya and the Caspian, and in the Vakhsh valley of the Tadzhik SSR. On the other hand, great stretches of territory are uninhabited or very sparsely populated, especially the Kara Kum desert in the southwest between the Amu Darya and the Caspian Sea and the Kyzyl Kum desert between the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, and the mountainous zones of the extreme south and east, including the Gorno-Badakhshan area of the Tadzhik SSR (Glavnoe Upravlenie Geodezii i Kartografii, pp. 130-31; Akademiya Nauk Tadzhikskoï SSR, pp. 118-19). Approximately 60 percent of the population is in the Uzbek SSR and 10-16



percent in each of the other three republics.

In 1979 81 percent of the population of Central Asia was Muslim; 15 percent, or nearly 4 million, consisted of ethnic Russians, concentrated chiefly in cities (1989 nationality data are not yet available). Of the Muslim nationalities the Uzbeks were clearly the largest; with more than 12 million people in 1979, they had become the third largest national group in the USSR after the Russians and the Ukrainians. There were nearly 3 million Tajiks, and the Kirghiz and Turkmen populations totaled about 2 million each. Other notable Muslim nationalities included Kazakhs (740,000), Tatars (730,000), and Karakalpaks (300,000).

The overwhelming majority of the Muslim populations speaks Turkic languages, especially the Uzbeks, Turkmen, Kirghiz, Kazakhs, Tatars, and Karakalpaks. In 1979 this language group accounted for 86 percent of the Muslim population of the four republics and 69 percent of the total population of Central Asia.

*Iranian-speaking populations.* Virtually all the remaining Muslim population (11 percent of the total population of Central Asia in 1979) speaks Iranian languages. This group is composed almost entirely of Tajiks (2.9 million, or 98 percent), 77 percent of them living in the Tajik SSR and 21 percent in the Uzbek SSR. Ethnic Tajiks constituted 59 percent of the population of the Tajik SSR, the remainder being mostly Uzbeks (23 percent) and ethnic Russians (10 percent). The Tajiks are among the least urbanized and most rapidly growing nationalities in the USSR. In 1979 only 28 percent lived in urban centers, and the population growth rate, 3.4 percent a year between 1970 and 1979, was the highest among the fifteen nationalities that enjoy SSR status. The native language of 98 percent of them is Tajik, the Central Asian variant of Persian, which includes many archaisms in phonology (e.g., preservation of *majhūl* vowels) but is strongly influenced, especially in local dialects, by the morphology and syntax (particularly the verbal system) of the surrounding Turkic languages (see xv, below).

It is difficult to trace historical population trends among individual nationalities in the USSR because of changing ethnic classifications and governmental decisions on whether or not to include a particular national population in published census reports (Lewis, Rowland, and Clem, pp. 42-48, 388-92). It is especially difficult to assess long-term population trends among the Tajiks because the nationality was defined differently in the 1897 Russian



census and in the Soviet censuses of 1926 and later. One major source of confusion is the language category “Sarts,” which was included among the Turkic languages in the 1897 census. Some sources agree with this classification, but according to others the Sarts, who were regarded as the settled peoples of Central Asia as opposed to the nomadic peoples, spoke either a Turkic language or an Iranian language (Tajik); the name has even been used practically synonymously with Tajik (Akiner, p. 304; Bennigsen and Wimbush, p. 92; Krader, pp. 55-56; Wixman, p. 174). In the 1897 census more than 900,000 Sarts were counted in the Russian empire, and there were also 350,000 Tajiks listed separately. Virtually all of the “Sarts” and the “Tajiks” were in Central Asia. The last figure represents a serious underestimate of the Tajik population at that time, however. Not only may a number of Tajiks have been included in the “Sart” category, but also a large part of what is now the Tajik SSR was then part of the khanate of Bukhara (q.v.), a vassal state that was not officially part of the Russian empire and thus not included in the 1897 census. It has been estimated elsewhere that perhaps 30 percent of the population of Bukhara at that time was Tajik (Becker, p. 7; Lorimer, p. 36). As the total estimated population of Bukhara was 2-2.5 million, the Tajik population must have been 600,000-750,000, approximately twice the official census figure for the Russian contingent. It thus appears that the total Tajik population of Central Asia approached 1 million or perhaps even exceeded it. In 1926, however, it was slightly less than 1 million (978, 680, or 980, 509 if the Yağnōbī are included; see below). The figure increased to 1,229,300 in 1939 (Kozlov, p. 285), 1,396,939 in 1959, 2,135,883 in 1970, and 2,897,697 in 1979, when Tajiks were the eleventh largest nationality in the USSR. In that year they accounted for 1.1 percent of the total population of the country, whereas in 1959 they had been only the sixteenth largest nationality, accounting for 0.7 percent of the total population.

In the 1979 census, only three other Iranian-speaking nationalities were recognized in Central Asia: “Persians” (Persy), who have been in Central Asia for centuries, Baluch, who have arrived only since the late 13th/19th century, and Kurds, who reside primarily in Transcaucasus when in the USSR. In 1979 there were 31,313 Persians (Persy) and 18,997 Baluch (Beludzhi). The totals for Persians were not broken down by republic in 1979, but in 1970, when the total of Persians (Iranty or Persy) in the USSR was 27,501, three-fourths (20,525) lived in the Uzbek SSR and one-fourth in the Turkmen SSR. Virtually all of the Baluch live in the Mary (Marv oasis) area of the Turkmen SSR. Soviet censuses provided figures for these groups in 1926 (43,971 Persians, also called



Farsi; 9,188 Iranians, or Irani; and 9,974 Baluch) and 1959 (20,766 Persians or Irantsy and 7,842 Baluch). The listed numbers of Kurds in Central Asia in 1926, 1959, 1970, and 1979 were 2,308, 7,046, 10,907, and 9,544, respectively (the 1959 and 1970 data are for both the Kirgiz and Turkmen SSRs, while the 1979 data are for the Kirgiz SSR only).

Other Iranian-speaking peoples of Central Asia are apparently counted with the Tajiks. Most notable among them are the speakers of East Iranian Pamir languages (Mountain Tajiks; the languages were formerly also called Ġaļča/Ghalchah, see, e.g., Grierson, pp. 3-4) in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, eastern Tajik SSR. Eight specific nationalities are recognized there, and the populations of seven of them have been estimated for 1960 (Akiner, pp. 374-79): Šuġnī (20,000); Rōšanī (7,000-8,000); Wākī (6,000-7,000); Bartangī (q.v.; 3,000-4,000); Yazġulāmī (1,500-2,000); Kūfī (1,000-1,500); and Eškāšmī (500). No estimate was provided for the Bajūī. Also now included with the Tajiks are the Yaġnōbī, who were listed separately in 1926 (population 1,829). In addition, Afghans were listed in the 1926, 1959, and 1970 censuses (populations of 5,348, 1,855, and 4,184, respectively) but not in the 1979 census.

See also [AFGHANISTAN iv. ethnography](#); [v. languages](#).

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