

INTRODUCTION

MAKING BORDERS, MAKING WORLDS

WHOSE BORDER?

On a wintry night, sixty-year-old Gulya was preparing to cross the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border.¹ Although she had made this once simple journey countless times in her life, this would be her final and most dangerous attempt. The decision to undertake it had effectively been made for her by the recent leveling of the home in which she had lived with her husband for some forty years. It was destroyed, the state authorities told her, and she should leave this supposedly “dangerous” location only yards from the border. She carried a single, plastic-wrapped suitcase containing documents, books, photographs, and a few stones gathered from the site of her ruined home. Hiding alone, she watched as a patrol of armed border guards passed nearby. She reckoned she had about fifteen minutes to get across before they returned. Acting quickly, she scrambled under two lines of barbed wire through the mud and snow, eventually reaching the canal that marked the site of the boundary. Through the darkness she peered across the gulf that had once been spanned by a concrete bridge: would her friends be there to help, as carefully planned by phone? A rush of relief: yes! They cast a board attached to a rope across toward her. Grabbing it, she clung on to the wood and held her precious suitcase tight as they pulled her toward them through the surging waters. She knew that over the past few years people much younger and stronger than her had drowned trying to make this illicit crossing, and others had been shot dead by border guards. Somehow she clung on, and was pulled from the freezing water and hurried to warmth and safety. Although grateful to have survived, she knew now that she could never return to the place where she had passed much of her life. Indeed, it was a place that no longer existed.

At its simplest, this book can be read as an attempt to explain why that journey took place. Gulya’s story reminds us that the world in which we live is

made. That is evidently true of the physical geography of the world, made over hours and epochs through geomorphological processes. Yet it is also true of the earth's human geography, and its most striking component as portrayed in a world political map—states. Although the enchantments of cartography may seduce us to regard them as permanent, even transcendent, states are made just as much as are mountain ranges, river deltas, and oxbow lakes.

This book explores how arguably the most palpable aspect of stateness—the international boundary, and the borders that it produces—are made. It is at the border where state power is encountered as most real and most sheer, but also where it can appear most fragile, contingent, and absurd. The border is thus a particularly productive site to show how the modern, territorial, national state is not a finished product on a map with a flag and a seat at the United Nations, but is rather a contested process. The book is thus about what international boundaries can tell us about nationalism.

To emphasize that boundaries are made and remade, the central motif is that a particular boundary has a *biography*. As Nevzat Soguk colorfully puts it, “Borders have lives of their own. They move, shift, metamorphose, edge, retract, emerge tall or powerful or retreat into the shadows exhausted.”² Boundaries are not simply areal expressions of the limits of jurisdiction: they *do* things. They do different things to different people. This book suggests that these dynamics are well captured through multiscalar studies over time—“biographies” that draw on a variety of theoretical and disciplinary paradigms conducted using multiple methods.

This argument is built on a study of one particular international boundary between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.³ The attempt to understand the interface between these remarkable countries has occupied much of my energy over the past two decades, as the boundary has seeped into my being and shaped my life. This book is thus not a case study to illustrate a general argument, but a study derived from that encounter. It explores the biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary—how it has materialized, rematerialized, and dematerialized since 1991, and the significance and consequences of these processes. In so doing it offers a novel vantage point to address the question that has engaged students of Central Asia from a variety of disciplines: what happens when bordered, independent nation-states are created in a region where they did not exist before? To answer that question, I explore both the elite production and the everyday construction of the Central Asian national state. I thereby provide a unique account of nationalism in modern Central Asia that emphasizes the interplay of these factors and the importance of scale. This approach also sheds new light on political contestation, regime formation, and state making in the new republics, as well as their international

relations and geopolitics—topics that, I argue, can be better understood when viewed from the border.

Finally, this is a book about ethics, as any study of the *making* of the world must be. If the world were uncreated—accidental, self-made, or simply given—or if its origins were inscrutable, then this would not follow. But because international boundaries and borders are indeed made⁴—by politicians, cartographers, lawyers, engineers, geographers, customs and border guards, traders, smugglers, farmers, and border dwellers—then we are inevitably faced with the question of ethics. The greatest human geographer of our age, Yi-Fu Tuan, wrote that whereas the primary question in philosophy is “What is a good life?,” geography’s counterpart is, “What is a good place?” For all the cant of 1990s hyperglobalization theories about the dawn of a “borderless world,”⁵ international boundaries and borders are here to stay for the foreseeable future. The challenge is to ask how they can be made into *good* places. Any study of borders that does not ask that question is necessarily deformed. And as this book shows, it is one that makers of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border have all too rarely asked.

THE KYRGYZSTAN–UZBEKISTAN BORDER SINCE 1998

Upon independence from the Soviet Union, Central Asian leaders did not envisage formally delimiting and demarcating their new mutual boundaries.⁶ In 1992 Uzbekistan’s first president Islam Karimov stated that he intended to preserve open borders and free travel in Central Asia, which he believed was to the state’s and the region’s collective advantage.⁷ Likewise, Kyrgyzstan’s first president, Askar Akaev, repeatedly spoke about his desire for regional economic planning and “a single informational space” based on the cultural and spiritual unity of its peoples.⁸ However, from early 1999 the hitherto largely invisible boundary between the two republics became a concrete reality for those living in the Fergana Valley, a densely populated 60-by-180-mile lowland basin at the intersection of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Barbed wire fences were erected, bridges destroyed, cross-border bus routes terminated, customs inspections stepped up, noncitizens attempting to cross were denied access or seriously impeded as visa regimes came into force, and unmarked minefields laid. Generational patterns of transboundary pastoralism were shattered. Tensions between guards and local populations flared into violence at checkpoints, people and livestock were killed as they strayed onto minefields or were shot by security forces, and suspicion and fear at times reached fever pitch. Close-knit communities that happened to straddle the boundary were split in two, and a squeeze on trade added to the poverty and

hardship of the Valley's folk. These experiences of "the border" led to a collective trauma throughout the frontier region, contributed to the downfall of two presidents in Kyrgyzstan, and eventually contributed to the cataclysmic events of June 2010 that saw mass ethnic-based violence on the Kyrgyz side of the boundary and at the same time the literal destruction of whole villages on the Uzbek side. Such affronts to any sane notion of human well-being simply demand critical scrutiny. That is the purpose of this book: to investigate *why* these events occurred and *how* the Ferghana Valley changed as a result.

The book argues that the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border tensions were not a dispute between long-suppressed ethnic antagonisms that were waiting to explode once the "lid" of the Soviet Union was lifted off.⁹ Nor were they simply a conflict between two states over territory, water, and natural resources, although the importance of these issues is not denied.¹⁰ Uzbekistan's attempt to control the circulation of capital, labor, and goods within its territory certainly led it to tighten its border controls; however, the pursuit of diverging macroeconomic policies by the two states cannot, pace Gleason, account for the particular course of the "border question."¹¹ Nor was it, as Clem and Olcott would have it, the unavoidable legacy of poorly (or maliciously) drawn boundaries dating from the Soviet period, although these clearly form a background to the events of 1999 and beyond.¹² Neither was it, as Salamat Alamanov implies, largely a product of the technical difficulties in Ferghana Valley boundary making.¹³ Finally, I do not accept that it was the inevitable result of the pursuit of national interests and security in an anarchic world of independent states.

In contrast to these general explanations, this book emphasizes *politics*—that the border issues are best understood as a product of the interaction of domestic power struggles in the two states. The discursive terrain of post-Soviet Central Asian geopolitical space was a key site of these struggles. "Border disputes" formed vehicles for rival political factions to frame their geopolitical visions of Central Asia, and to assert control over national space through a variety of textual, cartographic, security, and governmental strategies. The stakes were high: the (lucrative) glory of high office, or the ignominy of the dungeon or exile. The implications and consequences of these struggles were felt most acutely by borderland dwellers, especially those belonging to ethnic minorities.

The border reveals the territorial, national, and geopolitical fantasies and dreams of elites in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It shows the strategies and lengths they have been prepared to go to in order to ensure the survival of their states as independent polities, and the dominance of themselves and their allies within those polities. In so doing, it conceals how the geopolitical

visions of those who live directly alongside the border may sharply diverge from those who make border policy in distant capital cities. The border was used by elites in both countries to spatialize ethnicities and inscribe their geopolitical visions onto the landscape, but it is also the site at which these identity and authority projects are contested and reworked by borderland dwellers. This book aims to match border talk to border walk, to explore in equal detail the interplays and disjunctures between state practices/discourses and the everyday lives of the borderland citizenries of two states. It sees borders not as ephemeral shadows cast by states but as being particularly illuminating of their core processes.

BOUNDARIES OF THE BOOK

The chapters of this book use the story of the boundary to narrate the seemingly relentless march of the territorial logic of nationalism, and its scarcely believable culmination in two different but terrible acts of violence in 2010. This introduction continues by sketching out a historical biography of the boundary. The narrative ends in 1998, on the eve of the 1999 border crisis, which is where chapters 1 and 2 take up the story. The remainder of this chapter explains why I have undertaken this research, how it contributes to studies of nationalism and international boundaries in Central Asia and the wider world, the methods I used, and the ideas that shaped it.

What is important to take from this chapter is that boundary had little visible presence or impact on the lives of borderlanders until the late 1990s. This forms the background to chapters 1 and 2, which examine the politics of the changes that took place as the border materialized into a brutal reality in the lives of folk who lived alongside it. However, the story is not told from their perspective; rather, these chapters explore how “the border” is located at the heart of political contestation and nation-building projects in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. These two republics make an informative contrast, as both existed under similar conditions in the Soviet period. Since independence, however, Kyrgyzstan has liberalized its economy, allowing the emergence of elites able to challenge the regime. However, their legitimate scope for doing so has been curtailed by various formal and informal means. Uzbekistan, by contrast, has maintained a high level of state economic and political control enforced by a loyal and well-funded security apparatus, which has curtailed the potential of elites to mobilize against the regime.¹⁴ Chapter 1 looks at illiberal nation building in Uzbekistan from the border, and chapter 2 then turns the other way to explore the politics of nation building in semiliberal Kyrgyzstan. They bring comparative understandings of key political dramas

including border closures, the 1999 invasion of Kyrgyzstan's Batken region by exiled Uzbek Islamists, and the Andijon violence and the Tulip Revolution of 2005. The two chapters highlight how nationalist visions of borders are contested and undermined by the actual practices of border management and defense forces. These chapters bring new perspectives on these two countries and explain their political trajectories from 1991 until 2010.

Chapter 3 reverses the scale, telling the same story over the same time period but from the perspective of people who actually lived directly alongside the course of the boundary. In particular, it narrates the story of one small village, Chek, which straddles the boundary. In places like Chek the alternative geopolitical visions of the borderlands rub up against the visions of those who manage them, and bleed. It shows a community eating, working, resting, arguing, praying, and romancing, and how this community was affected and changed by the gradual impingement of the border on its daily life. This chapter is the core of the book; it conveys the essence of this volume through the everyday stories of border folk and their interactions with state officials.

Whereas chapter 3 shows the violence of imposing the ideology of nation-state boundaries on a small village, chapter 4 demonstrates the outcome of these processes in the cataclysmic intercommunal urban violence that destroyed the fabric of the Ferghana Valley's quintessential border city, Osh, in 2010. Osh is considered as bordered national territory and contested space, and the chapter explores the place of the border in contrasting Uzbek and Kyrgyz narratives about the city's history. The temporal narrative of the book is completed by tracing the biography of the border from different scales in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from the aftermath of the violence up until 2015.

As I insist throughout the book, the Ferghana Valley borderlands are not accidental but have been *made* by a series of choices. The question of ethics and politics—"how could they have been made otherwise?"—is woven into the argument throughout. This book rejects a determinism that suggests that the violence described in chapters 3 and 4 was an inevitable product of Soviet-era geography. Choices were made that might well have been otherwise. The conclusion thus ends by grappling with the question of whether the Ferghana Valley would be better without borders at all, and the implications of this argument for Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, international donors, and scholars of Central Asia.

A HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHY OF THE BORDER

The biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary does not begin until Soviet rule. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Ferghana Valley

was ruled by the Khanate of Kokand. Although a sense of the frontiers of territorial control grew over time and was marked to an extent by a chain of fortresses,¹⁵ this was not a bordered, national state. People were identified with others in a range of registers and at a variety of scales, including religion, language spoken, village/town/region inhabited, sovereign allegiance, and kin group/genealogy. Designations such as “Uzbek” and “Kyrgyz” were in currency but their meanings were fluid.¹⁶ Vertical vassal-subject relations were more important for state sovereignty than were territorialized practices of control.¹⁷ In 1876 the Russian Empire abolished the Khanate, annexing most of its territory to the province of Turkestan.¹⁸ Interimperial rivalries exposed Central Asia to the emerging norms of European boundary jurisprudence,¹⁹ the Kashgar Protocol of 1882 being the materialization of what would later be independent Kyrgyzstan’s boundary with China.²⁰

The Bolshevik Revolution led to a bitter power struggle for the Ferghana Valley,²¹ and when finally victorious, Bolshevik rule was written onto the region through territorial practices. Lenin proposed that Turkestan be divided into Uzbek, Kyrgyz (Kazakh), and Turkmen areas; others countered that this would only help the “nationalist bourgeois” elements of anti-Bolshevik opposition.²² Lenin’s view prevailed, and in 1920 the Politburo began considering the division of the region into national units, in line with Stalin’s concept of the nation as “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”²³ The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was a federal system ideologically committed to the construction of a nonnationalist humanity, but composed—paradoxically—of nationally defined union republics—the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and so on, Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs).²⁴ Between 1924 and 1927 Central Asia was divided by the process of National Territorial Delimitation (NTD), with the Kyrgyz SSR upgraded from the status of autonomous republic in 1936. With this process the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan boundary materialized.

The drawing of these boundaries was performed by party functionaries of the region and was informed by Imperial Russian-era ethnographic principles of distinguishing between social groups.²⁵ Because ethnicity was so fluid and Stalin’s ideas of republics being self-contained and homogenous geographical, economic, and ethnic entities was a fiction, NTD was a complicated and fractious process that territorialized some identities and not others.²⁶ As nationality had become a significant factor for the newly refashioned emerging elites because it was salient for access to land, resources, and power, NTD involved fierce political battles between the leaderships of the nascent states for control of disputed borderlands and settlements such as Aravan, Isfara, Uch-Korgon



FIGURE I.1. The two parts of Kyrgyzstan's Aravan region (1) were entirely dissected by Uzbekistan's Ferghana oblast around the town of Marhamat (2). This presented no impediments to movement between the two halves until 1999. *Source: Oruzbaeva et al., Oshkaya Oblast' Entsiklopediya, 190.*

and Osh.²⁷ Scholarly opinion is divided as to whether this process *created* new nations or *recognized* existing ones.²⁸ Hirsch sidesteps these debates by showing how the process of making submissions to the parity commissions working on NTD taught people to participate in a new political sphere.²⁹ Rematerializations of the boundary helped experts, social scientists, local elites, workers, peasants, and others make the Soviet nations and became integrated into the Soviet Union through the spatialization of ethnicities as national communities.

Although the Soviet authorities had declared the territorial question settled in 1927, practices and patterns of formal sovereignty in the Ferghana Valley did not remain static. In the 1950s, for example, "Special administrative divisions" granted to minorities such as Kypchaks and Kurama were abolished.³⁰ In 1955 the Supreme Soviets of the Kyrgyz and Uzbek SSRs established a joint commission to adjust boundaries to address historical grievances or contemporary changes in land use.³¹ Proposals to transfer resource-rich territory to the Kyrgyz side were rejected by the Uzbek government but imposed by Moscow to settle what Ravshan Nazarov and Pulat Shozimov call "the Ferghana Valley crisis" of 1958.³² This move (unintentionally) laid the groundwork for

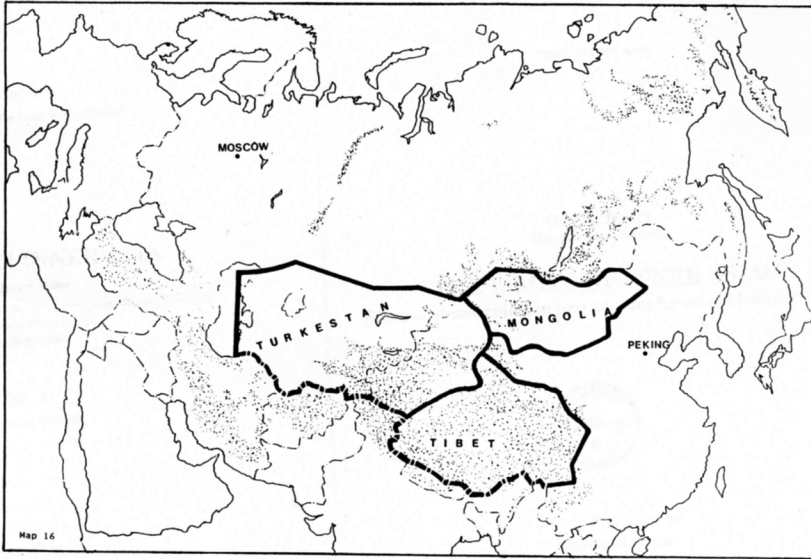


FIGURE I.2. Guy Imart's prediction of the borders of the authentic Inner Asian nations that would arise in the twenty-first century with the collapse of the Chinese and Russian empires. *Source:* Imart, *The Limits of Inner Asia*, 9. Reproduced with permission of the Sinor Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, Bloomington, Indiana.

delimitation difficulties in the twenty-first century.³³ In the meantime, as the Uzbek-Kyrgyz SSR boundary was never intended to be an international one, Soviet planning designed borderland electricity, gas, irrigation, water, transport, and economic networks on an interdependent basis. Road and rail links freely crisscrossed republican boundaries, often making it easier to travel between different parts of the Kyrgyz SSR by going through the Uzbek SSR.³⁴ Even some internal administrative units were created whose connectedness depended on the transport networks of the neighboring republic. Thus the two segments of the Kyrgyz SSR's Aravan region were entirely dissected by Uzbekistan's Ferghana oblast around the town of Marhamat (see figure I.1).

Land was rented from one republic to another on fixed-term loans for the use of agriculture, industries, or reservoirs. Often lands were unreturned and their rents uncollected, and meanwhile whole settlements grew up on them. The Uzbek SSR's Ferghana Valley cotton crop depended for irrigation on reservoirs constructed in upland Kyrgyz SSR territory; in turn, some raw cotton was taken for processing to factories in Osh. It is not surprising then that the dynamic borderland created by these processes produced significant overflows of populations as people relocated residence or commuted daily to

the neighboring republic, unhindered by the passport-propiska system for restricting demographic mobility that existed in many Soviet urban areas.³⁵ Similarly, educational qualifications were fully transferable, and the Kyrgyz and Uzbek minorities in the Uzbek SSR and Kyrgyz SSR respectively traveled freely over the border for instruction in their mother tongues, meaning the republics had no need to develop further education institutions for their minorities. Such exchanges created new social networks as former groupmates maintained contact as friends or spouses after graduation. The legacy of the 1924 delimitation and the subsequent patterns of economic development was a highly complicated mosaic of land use that wantonly transgressed the Kyrgyz-Uzbek SSR boundary. This would bequeath numerous headaches to the independent republics that would appear in 1991.

What would happen to the Ferghana Valley's interrepublican internal Soviet boundaries with the collapse of the Soviet Union? Many Sovietologists believed that its demise would be triggered by "Muslim nationalism."³⁶ Guy Imart—who considered Central Asian boundaries to be wholly artificial—predicted that the "Soviet and Chinese condominium over Inner Asia" would collapse with the reassertion of latent "Inner Asian nationalism" and authentic new states based on the three nations of Turkestan, Mongolia, and Tibet (figure I.2) would "settle down" within "proper boundaries."³⁷

With the benefit of hindsight, we know that Imart's prediction was profoundly wrong. Upon the extinction of the Soviet Union, its continuing state (Russia) and successor states (the other Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS] members)³⁸ adopted the so-called principle of *uti possidetis*, meaning that colonial boundaries remain valid on independence.³⁹ Reiterating this principle, on December 21 the Alma-Ata Protocol was signed whereby the new CIS states recognized "each other's territorial integrity and the inviolability of the existing borders." Kurbanboy Iskandarov, head of the Department of Territorial Issues (Aymaktik Problemlar) of the administration of the prime minister of the Kyrgyz Republic, told me: "the Almaty declaration recognized existing borders, and this was an important document. Some few places have sought exchange, but they are not allowed to, according to this principle. However, delimitation is not yet complete, and it may be that some formal exchanges of territory will be possible."⁴⁰

Thus, in 1991 the lines established with China and Afghanistan in the pre-Soviet period and by the SSRs in the 1920s became the boundaries of the newly independent Central Asian republics. The Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary rematerialized—peacefully—as an international boundary. However, it had little immediate impact on the valley. Border and customs posts were established in some places, but control checks were minimal and easily

evaded. Cross-border travel for education, pleasure, pilgrimage, employment, and to see family and friends continued as before. Soviet-era bus routes persisted, plied by the same vehicles in the same liveries.

Nonetheless the boundary made its presence known by the gradual materialization of a border landscape as the development pathways of the two states diverged. Symbolically, Uzbekistan (but not Kyrgyzstan) moved to a one-hour difference daylight saving time scheme, and valley residents had to factor this in to bus timetables, and work and school schedules. The change-over to a Latin alphabet in Uzbekistan in 1995 meant that highway signs and roadside slogans were printed in different scripts either side of the border. A switch from the Soviet telephone network to independent technologies meant that calls across the border became international using international codes; while a call from O'sh to Ferghana cost the same as a call from Osh to Bishkek in 1997, by 1999 it cost almost ten times the price.

More substantially, macro-scale political and economic changes led to a slow emergence of a new border landscape. Economically, Uzbekistan maintained a variant of Soviet-style production and procurement of key agricultural resources such as cotton, whereas the application of more neoliberal economics in Kyrgyzstan led to the breakup of collectives and a greater diversification into cash crops like tobacco. In 1993 Uzbekistan formally sealed its border with Kyrgyzstan as an emergency measure to prevent Russian rubles flooding the valley, in response to Kyrgyzstan's exit from the ruble zone as it introduced its own currency.⁴¹ This proved to be only temporary, but nonetheless anticipated things to come. Like Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan eventually introduced a separate currency, and border landscapes became peppered with exchange booths. These served the cross-border shuttle trade that grew to take advantage of emerging supply and price differentials.

Politically, the administration of Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov was marked by an illiberalism that differentiated it from the relatively freer regime in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz border towns were flooded with independent newspapers, some oppositional to the government and others peddling pornography and gossip, whereas in Uzbekistan media remained rigidly under state censorship. While Uzbekistan diligently exterminated traces of Marxism-Leninism by attempting to expunge its territory of symbols celebrating the Bolshevik revolution, in Kyrgyzstan statues of Lenin and Marx and slogans declaring "Glory to labor!" continued to adorn the built environment. Contrasting this mismatch between symbolic and substantial change, one Osh resident wryly told me that "in Kyrgyzstan they have kept the statues of Lenin, but departed from Lenin's way; in Uzbekistan they have gotten rid of the statues of Lenin, but all the same they have continued to follow down his way!"

Although there was no immediate dramatic materialization of a new border landscape with independence, from 1991 until the end of 1998 a gradual divergence of political and macroeconomic trajectories in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan led to the slow materialization of a more differentiated borderland. For most borderlanders, the Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan of the 1990s still did not feel like different countries. In fact, a fuller consciousness of nationality and independence did not dawn on many inhabitants of southern Kyrgyzstan until the events of 1999–2000.

NATIONALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

The multiple materializations of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary since 1991 are a geographical manifestation of *nationalism*. “Nationalism” is used here in the technical sense of meaning—as Graham Smith puts it, a “political ideology which holds that the territorial and national unit should be allowed to coexist in an autonomously congruous relationship.”⁴² Independent Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were “born” into a world structured by this ideology. Although some thinkers such as Kyrgyz author Chyngyz Aytmatov and Osh Uzbek poet Gʻanijon Holmatov advocated instead the creation of a broader Turkestan confederation, it would have been difficult to buck the trend of worldwide decolonization and create new nonnational states.

Under nationalism, the *raison d'être* of a nation-state is to embody and express the character and defend the interests of the territorialized nation. In Central Asia this has meant the “titular” nation: thus, for example, state legislation in the Kyrgyz Republic has promoted the use of the Kyrgyz language, given preferential access to citizenship for ethnic Kyrgyz immigrating from abroad, required that the president be fluent in the Kyrgyz language, adopted a flag with explicitly Kyrgyz ethnic symbols, and so on. Nonetheless, nationalism is not simply a chauvinistic and anachronistic reassertion of a primitive form of tribalism. It has been the engine of liberation movements across the world, and as Jonathan Hearn argues, is “part of the normal functioning of democratic regimes.”⁴³ Liberal theorists like Leah Greenfield see it as a humanistic worldview based on the principles of popular sovereignty and egalitarianism by which individuals can find meaning through investing their dignity in their nationality.⁴⁴ As Alain Dieckhoff puts it, “nationalism is a key configuration of modernity.”⁴⁵

In Central Asia it has allowed a recovery of the sense that ethnic and religious traditions and practices are not the politically dubious byproducts of subjugation to feudal or capitalist overlords, as Soviet Marxist ideology would have it. Nonetheless, nationalism’s great weakness is that the ideolo-

gy of a congruent territory and ethnic nation is usually a fallacy. In turning second-class Central Asian citizens of the Soviet Union into masters of their own domains, it inevitably intensified preexisting problems for a new tier of second-class citizens—ethnic minorities. Valery Khan argues that because the region knows no ethnically “pure” territories, the model of promoting the political dominance and language of titular majorities and reimagining past histories around their historic command of modern territory (what he calls “titular ethnicisation”⁴⁶) is deeply problematic for minorities.⁴⁷

Understanding Nationalism—Classical and Postclassical Approaches

Given the importance of nationalism as the primary political ideology of the modern world, it is unsurprising that an extensive body of scholarly literature has been generated in the attempt to understand it. “Classical” theories set out to trace the historic *origins* of particular nationalisms. “Primordialism” sees nations as communities marked by common descent, territorial belonging, shared language, and underlying emotional attachments, which together form enduring essences that remain substantially unchanged over extended periods of history. Nationalist projects are thus the flowering of suppressed nations who are finally achieving what they have historically yearned for.⁴⁸ Rejecting this, “modernism” follows Kedourie’s argument that “Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century.”⁴⁹ Subsequent thinkers developed Kedourie’s argument by highlighting particular sociological aspects of modernity as generative of nationalism such as industrialization (Gellner),⁵⁰ capitalism (Nairn),⁵¹ the growth of the printing industry and state bureaucracy (Anderson),⁵² and democratization (Hobsbawm).⁵³ For modernists, nationalism is the creation of nations rather than their flowering.

The third main school of thought within the classical tradition is the “continuationist” or “ethnosymbolist” approach.⁵⁴ Like modernism, this rejects primordialism, but sees the modern nation as having roots in preexisting categories of sociological organization and affective identification that nationalism built upon rather than “invented.”⁵⁵ Anthony Smith argues that some nations are developed upon “fairly cohesive and self-consciously distinctive *ethnies*,” which later became the “ethnic cores” of subsequent nations.⁵⁶

The study of nationalisms in Central Asia has until relatively recently been dominated by these “classical” approaches whose primary interest is the question of historical origins. Within post-Soviet Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan the Soviet-era tradition of exploring the “ethnogenesis” of nations exerts a powerful influence.⁵⁷ This variant of “primordialism” seeks to identify the “ethnos” as an essence that persists over time, changing socioeconomic trans-

formations. This endeavor was given a fillip by independence and the newer freedom to make assertions about historical importance of different nationalities.⁵⁸ Foreign scholars have more commonly adopted “modernist” approaches. Allworth sees the Soviet system as creating nations “where none existed before,”⁵⁹ an argument echoed from a range of newer theoretical perspectives in the 1990s.⁶⁰ Roy even attributes a measure of sadism to “the Soviets,” who he supposes “amused themselves by making things more complicated” during NTD.⁶¹ Many scholars have critically engaged with the nation-building projects of the governments of the newly independent republics, faulting what Akbarzadeh calls “the gross falsification of history.”⁶² The “continuationist” approach of seeing contemporary Central Asian national groups as Soviet creations but based on recognizable preexisting social groupings is more marginal, but Alisher Ilhamov and Charles Weller have produced accounts that attempt to sit between ethnos and modernist theories.⁶³ Whatever labels are used, the multiple traditions of scholarship on nationalism in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been dominated by the classical question of *when* modern nations originated.

However, there are weaknesses in the classical approach. First, it can easily deteriorate into an argument about semantics: the origins of both “nation” and “nationalism” depend upon how they are defined. Second, the focus on origins obscures many other interesting questions. Yiftachel parodies the pivotal debate between Gellner and Smith, focused on when a nation was “created,” as akin to asking “do nations have a navel?”⁶⁴ Third, it is ethnocentric, studying nationalism in Asia and Africa through arguments developed largely in historical sociological debates about European modernity. As Tønnesson and Antlöv insist, national forms in Asia are no mere reflection of European models.⁶⁵ Fourth, it often involves a troubling politics of knowledge, as modernist arguments have been deployed in colonial societies to delegitimize the claims of indigenous groups to a range of political and cultural rights.⁶⁶ The use of history to attack nationalist projects is as much a political strategy as the use of history to support them: the ethics of the former are questionable when unequal power dynamics come into play.⁶⁷

To address these shortcomings, “postclassical” approaches to nationalism have sidestepped the terms of the classical debate.⁶⁸ These ask not “when did a particular nation or nationalism develop?” but “how is nationalism invoked as a form of social consciousness, and how do individuals become national in everyday contexts?” Brubaker “reframes” the study of nationalism by inquiring, “How is nationhood as a political and cultural form institutionalised within and among states?”⁶⁹ For Billig, what he terms the “banal nationalism” of everyday life—how the nation is figured in otherwise mundane weather maps,

postage stamps, newspaper circulations, and so on—is vital to the ongoing subtle process of becoming national.⁷⁰

If 1990s Western scholarship on Central Asian nationalism was dominated by the agendas of “modernist” historiography that frame “classical” approaches to nationalism, the twenty-first century has witnessed a profusion of postclassical approaches to the subject. These have particularly proliferated within disciplines that use fieldwork. These scholars have enhanced our understanding of Central Asian nationalism by sidestepping the classical question of the provenance and authenticity of contemporary nationalism, and instead exploring topics such as the creation of post-Soviet militaries,⁷¹ youth culture,⁷² new currencies,⁷³ postconflict peace-building operations,⁷⁴ music,⁷⁵ dance,⁷⁶ sport,⁷⁷ TV soap operas,⁷⁸ oral poetry,⁷⁹ independence celebrations,⁸⁰ and even food.⁸¹ This book is located within this body of scholarship, which shows how the nation is produced as a form of social consciousness, political strategy, and quotidian practice.

Geographies of Nationalism

One productive postclassical approach to the study of nationalism is the geographical insistence on the importance of space. Geographers like Yiftachel fault classical debates about nationalism for their “spatial blindness.”⁸² He argues that classical theorists see homeland and territories—so crucial to modern nationalist projects—as the passive nests of nations, rather than active determinants of national trajectory and identity.⁸³

Some of the most productive work on nationalism in Central Asia in recent years has drawn on this conception of geography as an active ingredient in nationalism.⁸⁴ Horsman shows how the renaming of toponyms featured prominently in 1990s Central Asian nationalisms.⁸⁵ Liu suggests that the social codes embedded in *mahallas* in Osh provide their inhabitants with ways of negotiating their relationships with Tashkent and Bishkek.⁸⁶ Féaux de la Croix underlines the importance of invocations of *jailoo* (summer pasture) as the last refuge of pure Kyrgyz traditions.⁸⁷ Diener demonstrates how imaginations of whom the “homeland” is for structure migration patterns and conceptions of national belonging.⁸⁸ Anacker shows how the relocation of Kazakhstan’s capital city to Astana functions as “the centrepiece of the official nation-building project in Kazakhstan.”⁸⁹ Koch extends Anacker’s analysis by elaborating the nationalist implications of Astana’s design, and showing how its impact is enhanced through its proliferation in miniature reproductions throughout the republic.⁹⁰ Considering domestic presentations of Turkmenistan’s doctrine of “positive neutrality,” Anceschi elucidates how a geopolitical imagination is used in nation building.⁹¹ These diverse examples from

anthropology, geography, and political science show that “the nation state” in Central Asia is encountered, negotiated, and represented through specific local places and geographical imaginaries.

INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES AND NATIONALISM

This book highlights in particular the significance of international boundaries for nationalism and seeks to open up new directions in their study.⁹² International boundaries are “perhaps the most palpable political geographic phenomena.”⁹³ Marking the formal extent of constituent units of the international state system, they are best conceived of not as lines but as invisible vertical planes extending upward into the airspace and downward into the subsoil.⁹⁴ Unique spatiolegal entities, they outlive the treaties that create them, cannot be annulled by war, and are outside the “clean slate rule” that invalidates international treaties upon independence.⁹⁵ As such, they are distinct from international borders. These are the institutional paraphernalia and practices associated with policing and managing boundaries, such as customs checkpoints, passport controls, fences, and barriers. Borders are thus the spaces of division and interaction created by the presence of an international boundary.

Over time, as studies of international boundaries have multiplied, geographers have repeatedly sought to move beyond the multiplication of case studies to generalize about the nature of international boundaries themselves. These efforts have taken four main forms. The first attempt, mirroring modern political geography’s naturalistic/evolutionary assumptions, sought laws that governed the genesis and change of boundaries.⁹⁶ A second, more influential school of thought, evident at least as early as Curzon’s famous 1907 Romanes Lecture, was that of producing taxonomies of boundaries as spatial entities of various provenance whose function was to mark the extent of territorial governance by states.⁹⁷ Third, the 1960s and 1970s desire to make geography into a rigorous social science able to speak with authority to policy debates inspired the search for models of processes at international boundaries, such as John House’s expansive “operational model” of transaction flows.⁹⁸ Although House argued that “it is premature to outline a general, comprehensive theory for frontier studies,” he clearly hoped for such a development.⁹⁹

Finally, House’s challenge has been taken up in the 1990s and 2000s by a group of scholars who have sought to theorize international boundaries as processes of bordering/bounding.¹⁰⁰ This body of thought has been given impetus by both the influence of wider social theory on human geography and the proliferation of boundary studies within cognate disciplines. For Paasi,

borders are institutions and symbols, “processes that exist in sociocultural action and discourses.”¹⁰¹ For Henk van Houtum and his collaborators, international boundaries are significant because “they symbolise a social practice of spatial differentiation,” a process they describe as “bordering.”¹⁰² Van Houtum is anxious to critique what he sees as the traditional view of boundaries as spatial lines. “Borders do not represent a fixed point in space or time,” he opines with Naerssen, “rather they symbolize a social practice of spatial differentiation.”¹⁰³ Likewise for David Newman, “bounding” is a dynamic process of drawing lines around spaces and groups. International boundaries are “simply the tangible and visible feature that represents the course and intensity of the bounding process at any particular point in time and space.”¹⁰⁴ This impressive body of literature has opened up a productive engagement of international boundaries scholarship with studies of nationalism.

My own work emerges out of this fourth approach. However, while opening new lines of inquiry, as a general approach to boundary studies its totalizing presumptions close down other avenues and thus it cannot serve as general framework for boundary studies. For example, Newman and Paasi call for “the creation of a suitable framework which can bring much of this traditional research into line with the emphasis on social constructs and identities.”¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Berg and van Houtum claim that work in this field means that “the field of border studies has been re-routed to other paths,”¹⁰⁶ which they name in particular as sociology, anthropology, and semiotics. The body of research on international boundaries, however, includes much technical material on aspects of international boundary making, such as their legal formulation through treaties and their physical demarcation. These processes are clearly social but do not readily lend themselves to the type of analysis that van Houtum and Newman advocate. Largely missing from their work, too, are discussions of the voluminous literature on maritime boundaries, one of the most vibrant areas of contemporary international boundaries research.

To overcome this limitation, I draw on recent advances in historical geography to propose that the study of international boundaries can be advanced by crafting their biographies.¹⁰⁷ These explore how specific international boundaries (and the borders that they produce) appear, reappear/change, and disappear/become less significant in different ways and in different spatial and discursive sites over time. These processes are termed how boundaries *materialize*, *rematerialize*, and *dematerialize*.

This approach is sensitive to the subtle ways in which the functions and effects of boundaries change, and allows us to maintain the insight that they are social processes without limiting their study by tying it to a particular

moment in social theory. In adopting this approach here, the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary becomes a powerful optic to make visible processes of nationalism in the Ferghana Valley and the region more generally.

Although this formulation of “boundary biographies” is new, a growing body of literature uses boundaries and borders to explore what they tell us about state-building processes in Central Asia. Authors such as Hirsch, Shaw, and Kassymbekova have shown how making borders and territories spatialized national identities in the early Soviet period.¹⁰⁸ More recently, Christine Bichsel and Madeleine Reeves have demonstrated convincingly the importance of postindependence borders at the southern margins of the Ferghana basin as sites where social identities and the limits of the state are performed, contested, and inscribed onto space. My own work builds on these important contributions, taking them in new directions.¹⁰⁹

The general, “biographical” approach to boundary studies advocated here has relevance far beyond the region of Central Asia. What I would term “boundary biographies” have been used to explicate processes of nation-state formation worldwide. In particular, Willem van Schendel’s detailed work on the Pakistan-India borderland, Anssi Paasi’s eclectic study of the significance of the Finno-Russian border, and Joseph Nevins’s research on the US-Mexico interface have shown how national identities are often created and reworked at the border.¹¹⁰ Although physically at the extremity of a state, metaphorically boundaries may be at the heart of national imaginations. The “biography” approach is based upon the assumption that borders provide excellent vantage points to view ethnonationalism in the contemporary world because, as van Schendel puts it, they “demarcate a nation’s imagined homeland,” are “symbolically marked with the nation’s imprint,” stake out “the arena[s] where neighbouring nations confront each other,” and become “battlefield[s] of identity.”¹¹¹

IDEAS AND DETOURS

Maps are a form of magic. I have always been intrigued by the deceptive tidiness of cartographic representations. As a child I would gaze at atlases, observing France colored in green and Germany in red, each with a capital city and a flag adorning the margin of the map. But I used to wonder to myself: “what color are the people who live on the border, and who drew it?” That basic fascination propelled me to university to study political geography and, combined with another childhood interest in Central Asia, took me to the Ferghana Valley to try and understand border making and border living along

this relatively new international boundary. To do so, I have drawn inspiration from a number of disciplinary and theoretical sources.

As outlined above, the tradition on theorizing nationalism has been a major influence on this work. In the early 1990s the literature on politics in the newly independent Central Asian republics was awash with speculation that violent conflict was inevitable in Central Asia because of the supposedly ethnic basis of the modern republics.¹¹² My theoretical training led me to doubt that intellectually but also to realize the deadly potential of the new nationalist projects in the ethnic mosaic of the Ferghana Valley borderlands. My initial research plan was thus to study the formal dimensions of national state-building projects on either side of the boundary. In particular, I was interested in the nationalist iconography of architecture and of formal state celebrations and commemorations.

However, I soon realized that few people were interested in these topics—they had more concrete concerns. The border crisis of 1999 showed plainly that instead of being simply a line on a map that hitherto had little impact on people's lives, it had rather become crucial to the remaking of landscapes, ideologies, and societies. This drove me to the geographical literature that theorized boundaries as social processes. In particular, the suffering, anger, and alarm occasioned by the new border politics in both republics demanded reflection on the political morality of bordering as spotlighted in critical border studies. This insists that what matters is “life and living, or human well-being”—the rights and freedoms of people crossing borders, “rather than the easy flow of ideas and money.”¹¹³ It contends that power relations are key to such a consideration, as a borders research agenda should deal with the basic question of “borders for whom?” Who benefits or loses from enclosing, or being enclosed by, others?¹¹⁴

As my work on the border crisis unfolded, it became increasingly apparent that politicians in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were not simply using the border to frame competing national visions of their republics, but also to locate them in regional and international space. Critical international relations theory insists that the idea of the ordered homeland requiring extraordinary measures to protect it from external threat is also a vision of the international system.¹¹⁵ I found the strand of critical international relations theory known as critical geopolitics particularly illuminating of what has occurred in Central Asia. Geopolitics is a tradition of reflecting on the role of geography in international relations, and critical geopolitics explores how space is “labeled.”¹¹⁶ It is a discursive practice by which international politics is spatialized—represented as a world characterized by particular types of people, places, and

dramas.¹¹⁷ The production of visions of regional and global space (through, for example, policing borders and delimiting boundaries) is constitutive of what the nation is and how local politics works: moral and ideological visions of who belongs within the state and who does not, and who should have the power to determine these.¹¹⁸ The border can thus be examined as a way to understand the links between nation-state building, regime consolidation, and foreign policies of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Although these theoretical perspectives on nationalism, borders, and geopolitics afford a powerful optic on nationalist/political processes in the Fergana Valley, they nonetheless have a significant shortcoming: they struggle to account for everyday experiences of being national and identifying with territorially bound ethnic groups. Sharp criticizes Gearóid Ó Tuathail's 1996 landmark text *Critical Geopolitics* for reducing "ordinary people to culture industry drones, empty of agency and awaiting their regular injection of ideas."¹¹⁹ Undoubtedly, as chapter 3 shows, borderlanders were deeply disturbed by new border regimes and often contemptuous of those who enforced them. However, the longer I lived with Kyrgyz and Uzbek people, the more I came to see how their sense of belonging to an ethnic community extending beyond themselves in time and space gave comfort, assurance, and pride. In understanding everyday relational responsibilities and practices as being "Uzbek" and "Kyrgyz," being national imbued life with meaning and located oneself in the world. As Chris Hedges observes, nationalism "can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, reason, a meaning for living."¹²⁰ Whatever the inauthenticity and artificiality of nationalist projects and national designations, they seem to meet the same existential needs that explain the enduring power of political and religious ideologies.

This realization drew me to the description of human attempts to make existence meaningful rendered by existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger.¹²¹ According to these accounts, human beings inevitably have to confront the angst of the threat of meaninglessness. In the Fergana Valley, it is through performing roles of child, spouse, parent, sibling, guest, and host,¹²² augmented by career success and progress in piety, and crowned by eventual elevation to the role of elder,¹²³ that a person gains respect in the community. This allows them to answer the inescapable questions about what the meaning and value of life is, to fend off what Jean-Paul Sartre describes as the gnawing of nothingness at the heart of being.¹²⁴ These kinship performances are seen as the essence of Uzbekness or Kyrgyzzness, of *milliy/uluttuk* (national) practice. Respecting the dignity of the people I was living among meant taking seriously how they understood themselves as national as well as how they critiqued nationalist border making, a step that the critical

theories I had been working with were unable to resource. But how to do this, without abandoning the insights of critical theories?

Here, political anthropology provided a key. Anthropology attempts to understand the meanings and senses that others make of their world, particularly by the use of ethnographic participant observation, “quietly seeking the local terms of life” through “patient engagement.”¹²⁵ Although anthropology has long interrogated the operation of political structures,¹²⁶ engagements with social theory and contemporary questions of statehood and sovereignty have revitalized political anthropology.¹²⁷ Maria Louw observes that people in Uzbekistan use politicized government discourse in subtly different ways from the authorities, and warns that “with an exclusive focus on formal discourse one runs the risk of missing the often very different stakes people in practice invest in similar discursive frameworks, the often very different meanings they attach to them.”¹²⁸

Anthropologists have produced impressive studies of international borderlands, highlighting the impacts on experiences of identity and nationhood when boundaries dematerialize,¹²⁹ materialize,¹³⁰ or rematerialize over time.¹³¹ In particular, I draw on the work of Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson. They contend that those definitions of the political that concentrate on discourse and representation risk underestimating or ignoring the role that the state continues to play in the everyday lives of its own and other citizens.¹³² They argue that nations and states are composed of people who cannot and should not be reduced to the images constructed about them,¹³³ therefore a study of the state must involve an examination of how it is experienced in everyday life. An ethnographic study of border communities is simultaneously the study of the daily life of the state, illuminating “how power is demonstrated, projected and contested in the social, economic and political practices of quotidian life at international borders.”¹³⁴ Political anthropology allows us to make full use of critical theories in studying the political life of states while simultaneously taking seriously the experiences and understandings of those who dwell in them.

As political decisions taken in faraway centers made life in the borderlands increasingly grimmer, it became necessary to find a way to talk coherently about the different forms of suffering borderlanders experienced. They moved quickly, in conversation, from relating stories of shootings and drownings as people tried to slip past border controls, to the economic hardships of not being able to trade, to the social pain of being unable to visit relatives for funerals and weddings, or of being able to listen to music in their own language in public. Here, I found the conceptualization of “violence” in peace studies increasingly useful. For many in the political sciences, violence is, as Kalyvas

defines it, “the deliberate infliction of harm on people” that aims at “intentional and direct physical” damage.¹³⁵ More sophisticated taxonomies of violence have been advanced by other thinkers. Building on Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous distinction between “positive” and “negative” peace,¹³⁶ Johan Galtung provides one of the richest conceptualizations of violence. For him, “violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations.”¹³⁷ Violence may be “personal” (directed against an individual by another individual), or “structural”—when, in the absence of personal intention, it “is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chance.”¹³⁸ Gorveski extends this taxonomy of violence to include “cultural violence,” defined as a rhetorical climate when “our social modes of thinking or behaving cause harm to individuals belonging to ostracized groups, such as gays, lesbians, or members of a minority race.”¹³⁹ This helped me identify and name a variety of harmful effects of border materializations as violence.

The bodies of literature above enabled me reframe research questions and make sense of the unfolding border materializations. However, they themselves beg a number of other questions in turn. So what? If we are simply complex organisms who will one day die individually and eventually become extinct as a race in a universe running out of energy, why does violence against people actually matter in any ultimate sense? What is the significance of our being existentially structured to seek significance? And, if borders are so implicated in violence, do they play any legitimate function at all?

Facing these questions during the course of researching this book led me ultimately to political theology, and in particular to a Christian vision of social justice that accepts neither the inevitability nor inherent desirability of contemporary modes of the political organization of space, nor the immutability of exclusive categories of nationality. This tradition insists that human life matters intrinsically because we are beings created in the divine image.¹⁴⁰ Herein is a compelling basis both for the ethics of justice assumed in critical theories, and for taking the experiences of people seriously as exhibited by anthropology. It also accounts convincingly for a world teeming with existential yearning for significance. But of particular relevance here it entails a political theology of responsibility.

In a germinal intervention, Walter Wink revisits the Biblical material on the presence of *archē* and *archōn*, variously translated from Greek as “the powers that be,” “governments,” “administrations,” “thrones,” “kingdoms,” “empires,” “states,” and “forms of rule.” For Wink these include heads of state, administrations, militaries, officials, rulers of religious institutions, systems of law, modes of governance, ideologies, universities, and so forth.¹⁴¹ I would

add: border guards, customs officials, regional governors, licit and illicit trading networks, boundary commission members, even international boundaries themselves as legal institutions. Theologians debate the extent to which these “powers” are benign or malign, but agree that they are temporal, not eternal, and thus have no legitimate claims to unconditional allegiance. Their appointed task is to promote good and restrain evil—that is to say, make good places on Earth. This is captured well by the Islamic theological concept of *amanat/ omonot* popular in Central Asian thought—that the earth and everything in it is a deposit divinely entrusted to us for proper safekeeping, over which we have no absolute right but a limited responsibility to administer well. So, there may be a role for borders, but only as far as they contribute to making good places. I return to this discussion in more detail in the book’s conclusion.

This combination of theories and approaches forms an intellectual framework that has helped me make sense of the data generated for this book.

METHODS

Research for this book was conducted from my first visit to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1995 until a most recent phase of fieldwork in 2016. A lot has happened in that period, and for this book I have of necessity had to focus on two particular moments. The first is the Ferghana Valley border crisis of 1999–2000, which I argue is when the boundary first became both a crucial political issue in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and a stark reality in the lives of most borderlanders. The second is the spring and summer of 2010 when the two borderland communities whose fate this book traces—the village of Chek (chapter 3) and the city of Osh (chapter 4) faced existential threats. I have chosen these because I consider them the two key moments where materializations of the boundary illuminate the political geography of nationalism in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Another structuring idea of this book is a distinction between “elites” and “non-elites” or “borderlanders.” Following Radnitz (who builds on Etzioni-Halevy), by “elites” in Central Asia I refer to those who wield power on the basis of their command of a disproportionate share of society’s resources.¹⁴² Whereas Radnitz is primarily concerned with how elites act (whether independently or with the governing regime) to capture state or other assets, I am interested rather in how this power is exercised in relation to borders. In most cases in this book, it is the institutional, coercive, and discursive power to make and enforce borders: negotiating processes of delimitation, implementing and enforcing border regimes, and narrating moral and political stories about them in print and broadcast media. By contrast, non-elites are those who lack that

power but who may nonetheless find ways to resist or subvert it. In particular, much of the ethnographic material is based on non-elites who live close to the boundary. I call these “borderlanders.” These distinctions are not always neatly divisible—for example, some “elites” at the “center” clearly originate from the borderlands themselves and, as chapters 3 and 4 in particular show, borderlanders variously agree with or reject the ethnonationalist visions of elites presented to them in media discourse and state practice. Nonetheless they allow us to understand how strikingly different the political geographical imaginations of border makers and border dwellers can be.

The material used in this book has been generated by a variety of research methods. This is not simply a methodological concern for “triangulation,” the use of multiple methods to illuminate the same question from different angles.¹⁴³ It is also about scale: I have sought to compare and contrast the nationalist imaginations and geopolitical visions of elites with the everyday experiences and visions of non-elites who live along the boundary. To study the views of elites I have primarily used interviews and discourse analysis of political texts. To elicit the understandings of non-elites, I have relied on ethnography, interviews, and focus groups.

Elite/Center Perspectives

The theoretical approaches introduced above emphasize the study of discourse as a crucial intellectual activity. For this book, and for chapters 1 and 2 in particular, I draw heavily on the analysis of texts produced by governments and, especially in the case of Kyrgyzstan, opposition. These include poems, songs, posters, and the like, but are principally as recorded in news sources of all sorts and presidential speeches subsequently republished as books. There are four reasons for this focus. The first is the volume of relevant material. I could, for example, have given greater attention to other sources of state discourse that are important in nation-building projects, such as school history and geography textbooks. But these make only limited reference to boundaries, whereas at the key moments considered in this book news media make copious reference to boundary and border issues. Second, news media and presidential speeches play a crucial role in political contestation in the two republics. In Uzbekistan all media is state-controlled, and in Kyrgyzstan state-run media operate alongside “independent” media, which are generally under the ownership of elites who use their news outlets to support their own positions in struggles over economic and political resources. For the case of Uzbekistan (chapter 1) extensive analysis is undertaken of the speeches of President Karimov, who died in September 2016 after this manuscript was completed. Originally delivered on television, radio, and in print media, many

are subsequently republished in an ongoing volume of books that form compulsory study for all university undergraduates.¹⁴⁴ As David Lewis argues in an important contribution, the control of discourse—through news media—is crucial to the operation of illiberal governance in Central Asia.¹⁴⁵ The third is practical. Although extensive use is made of BBC Monitoring reports of Central Asia broadcast media, these collections are only partial, decontextualized, and lack capture of important visual data. By contrast, print media is easier to obtain, as it is archivable, and individual articles can be placed in the context of a fuller publication. Fourth, being easier to produce and distribute than broadcast media, a focus on print media also means there is a wider variety of sources to draw on.

Elite-generated texts and images are not seen as uncomplicated windows into the minds of individuals. Spechler and Spechler argue, “The speeches and books of President Karimov and his authorized spokesmen, plus a few interviews” give us insights into his thinking.¹⁴⁶ But as a number of Central Asian presidential speechwriters have explained to me off the record, it is recognized that most of these speeches are not written by the presidents themselves, but are produced in a collaborative process of drafting and editing with their staff. They are thus not analyzed here for their veracity or accuracy, but read rather for what they seek to tell us about elite self-presentation.

They are read in two particular ways. The first, following the approaches outlined by Ó Tuathail for “Critical Geopolitics,”¹⁴⁷ regards these texts as “practical geopolitical reasoning”—ways in which political actors make sense of the world in the context of power struggles. Paying particular attention to spatial imagery and arguments deployed, these texts are analyzed for how they construct the Ferghana Valley, the two republics, and the region as particular types of places characterized by particular types of dramas and populated by particular types of people. Second, I use the “Essex school of discourse analysis” to examine how identities emerge within and are constitutive of social conflict. This approach is useful in helping identify how a key “signifier”—in this case, “the border”—becomes imbued with different meanings by different actors in conflict.¹⁴⁸ This analytical framework is particularly useful for analyzing Kyrgyzstan in chapter 2, where “the border” figured centrally in a fierce power struggle between elites. It was less useful for understanding Uzbekistan, where open and vociferous criticism of the regime is difficult and dangerous.

Elite perspectives were also studied through interviews. Between 1999 and 2016 I conducted over 110 formal interviews in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and with policymakers abroad. These were largely with both senior and lower-ranking elected politicians or appointed officials, activists and NGO staff,

employees of international organizations, educationalists, local and national state officials in various agencies, journalists, artists, businessmen and women, women's activists, and industrialists.

Non-Elite/Borderlander Perspectives

Non-elite/borderlander perspectives were studied in a variety of ways. Some of the above interviews were with petty traders and border smugglers, refugees, students, homemakers, and the unemployed. I augmented this data with that from focus groups.¹⁴⁹ I ran seventeen focus groups in border regions of Osh, Jalalabat, and Batken oblasts between March and May 2000 and eleven in 2009, plus one in Bishkek as an extension of the latter cycle. These groups were variously composed of students, women's activists, and unemployed men who were sitting at Osh's so-called slave market and waiting for people to come and employ them for casual labor. Focus groups and non-elite interviews conducted in 2000 were structured around the same set of questions (for more on this, see chapter 3). These were also covered in four *ziyofat/gaps* (Uzbek periodic feasting events) in which I ran modified focus groups.¹⁵⁰ Although the *ziyofat* has an economic role in support networks,¹⁵¹ as Liu emphasizes it is important in producing and disciplining knowledge and opinion in the Uzbek mahalla.¹⁵²

However, the largest amount of nontextual data in this book is generated by ethnography. Pablo Vila, who based his impressive research about the US-Mexico border on ethnographic data, argues that "without essentializing fieldwork as a window to reality," ethnography's "stress on taken-for-granted routines, informal knowledge, and embodied practices can yield understanding that cannot be obtained either through standardized social science research and methods (e.g., surveys) or through decontextualized reading of cultural products (e.g., text-based criticism)."¹⁵³ Research for this book has been marked by participation in the lives of borderland folk and reflective immersion within their cultural settings,¹⁵⁴ recorded in detailed fieldnotes.¹⁵⁵ Although this research has involved frequent travel around the borderlands, I have always undertaken this travel from bases initially in student dormitories and subsequently with families, where I moved between the roles of guest and adoptive family member.

Thus between 1995 and 1996 I taught at Ferghana State University in Uzbekistan and between March and September 1997 at Kyrgyzstan's Osh State University. Following half a year spent learning Kyrgyz in the Northern Kyrgyzstani town of Naryn, I returned to Osh in January 1999 only to find that tightened Uzbekistani border controls and a government crackdown following the Tashkent bombings of February and the summer Batken invasion

curtailed ethnographic fieldwork in Uzbekistan. I also discovered that an ill-judged article I wrote about Uzbekistan (which was translated without my permission) attracted the attention of local security services, making research in Ferghana oblast difficult for me and risky for my friends. Separately, I was fined and expelled from the country for inadvertently breaching new visa regimes, which I was not aware had come into force. None of this prevented my return to Uzbekistan for research, but from 1999 on Osh has thus been the base for my research in the region.

Although I was disappointed at being unable to continue border hopping in the same way, being based in Osh was scarcely a hardship. I first went to Osh in 1995, and it was a case of love at first sight. Not only is the city's location beautiful, but as someone speaking both Uzbek and Kyrgyz and fascinated by both cultures, their interface in Osh has made the city a particularly congenial place to be. Over the past two decades I have visited the city regularly, for sojourns of anything between a few days and eighteen months at a time. Formally, I have been variously a student, visiting researcher, and lecturer at Osh State University. Like Stoller's description of an "ethnography of detours following the researcher's intuitions,"¹⁵⁶ I have always attempted to remain open to the unexpected and the serendipitous. When not teaching, interviewing, studying, or researching, my hours were spent in tearooms, concert halls, homes, local council meetings, mosques, churches, schools, bathhouses, theaters, fields—anywhere people were making meaningful lives. As I married and had children, I returned for more frequent but shorter visits, on one occasion bringing my whole family with me for three months. I have lived with both Uzbek and Kyrgyz families and have divided my time and energies roughly equally between the two communities. This is both because of my previous familiarity with both cultures and to obviate the dangers of what Robben calls "ethnographic seduction"—strategies that research subjects use to transfer their understandings of conflict to the researcher.¹⁵⁷

At the same time, I used Osh (and before that Ferghana) as a base for regular forays along Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan's Ferghana basin border regions. My preferred method of transport was the old buses that wound slowly from place to place. Sometimes I would travel the length of a route and simply get off when I felt the whim or the bus came to a halt. I would usually stay with people I met along the way, keeping in touch with families I met and revisiting them over the years. As these buses became less widespread in the twenty-first century I began to use shared cars more often.¹⁵⁸

Clearly, who I am influenced the data thus generated. Anthropologist Ruth Behar approvingly quotes Clifford Geertz's observation that participant observation is less about penetrating another culture so much as putting our-

selves in its way, so that it enmeshes us.¹⁵⁹ This being the case, Behar insists that making the reader aware of how we place ourselves—and how we are placed—is vital, as this affects the material we generate and the stories we tell. My borderland ethnography was undoubtedly facilitated by my citizenship and gender. Although I came to associate with the anger and shock over border closures, as a European Union passport holder I could leave anytime I wanted. As a Briton speaking Uzbek and Kyrgyz I was something of a novelty, and banked on this in turning up in out-of-the-way places without hotels and expecting to find someone to invite me to stay the night with them. This in itself was possible because I am male: a British woman traveling like that would be less safe and would be regarded with more suspicion. In crossing rural border posts, women customs officials and border guards would sometimes flirt or proposition me. I could laugh or brush this off without fear or threat. This might not have seemed so funny were I a single young woman amid a group of male officers.

Knowing Kyrgyz and Uzbek (but not Russian), I enjoyed spending time in milieus that operated in those languages, but this inevitably narrowed my social range. Similarly I generally found the company of government officials and of the “white jeep brigade” of employees of international organizations less congenial than that of non-elite borderlanders. So my perspectives are molded more by them than by, say, the perceptions and experiences of elites in capital cities or those tasked with controlling borders: this partially explains the general skepticism in this book about border control narratives and practices.

Borders offer unique vantage points to produce decentered accounts of the state and denaturalized narratives of nationalist projects. For example, memorable accounts—biographies—of the construction of the Chinese, Finnish, French, and Indian-Pakistani/Bangladeshi states have been provided from scholars positioned at their borders, Owen Lattimore, Anssi Paasi, Peter Sahlin, and Willem van Schendel, respectively.¹⁶⁰ I have sought to use this variety of methods to tell the stories of nation building in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan not from their centers, but from their edges where their presence is both most real and most fragile.

Except where indicated, all interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic fieldwork were conducted by me in Kyrgyz or Uzbek, and a few in English. As far as possible I ensured that people knew I was “writing a book” and that what they vouchsafed might be used in it, in order that people understood I was recording interactions. Unless a surname is indicated, all names used are pseudonyms.

CONCLUSION: WHY WRITE THIS BOOK?

Some of the arguments presented in this book are the younger siblings of those rehearsed in journal articles over the past decade. This book focuses on two key boundary materializations—1999–2000, and 2010—whereas the earlier work only considered the first. Likewise, that earlier work recorded a snapshot of a time when the possibility of resisting the emerging but fragile new Uzbekistani border regime seemed more real,¹⁶¹ and the chances for the consolidation of a more inclusive politics in Kyrgyzstan seemed more hopeful. Much has changed, and much violence has been done, and to record and explain that seems important. In so doing, I have revisited and reworked my original arguments, and augmented previously published material with extensive new work.

The motivation for writing this book is best illustrated with a story from the spring of 2000, when I visited the village of Turkabad at the boundary between Uzbekistan's Andijon and Kyrgyzstan's Jalalabat oblasts. As Uzbekistan's border policies increasingly disrupted kinship networks and threatened livelihoods, many local communities were fearful and angry at the perceived abdication of political responsibility toward them on the part of the governments of both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. An enraged man, when I was introduced by a friend as someone who had come from England to learn about the border for a book I was writing, looked me in the eye, pointed his finger straight at me, and said, "That's very good—you go and tell the world what they are doing to us here!" I promised him that I would.

Since then, many journalists have done that better and with more effect than I could. As a result, "what they are doing" is well known. Furthermore, many of the places and communities described in this book (like the part of Turkabad in which that gentleman lived) have been destroyed, and the people encountered no longer live directly alongside the course of the boundary. Nonetheless—or perhaps even therefore—it is important to record these moments in the history of the materialization of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, and to record in greater detail the effects of this violence. This biography is my attempt to honor that promise made long ago, to a man whose name I never knew, in a community that no longer exists.