

Article

The Historiography of Enlightenment Ideas in Central Asia

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Abstract: This article examines the level of scholarly research on Enlightenment ideas in Central Asia from a historiographical perspective. It analyzes the contributions of domestic and foreign researchers to the study of the region's intellectual and educational heritage. The paper highlights the main directions, methodological approaches, and achievements in the study of Enlightenment thought, while also identifying existing research gaps and promising areas for future investigation. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the development of Enlightenment ideas and their role in the social, cultural, and educational transformation of Central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, Enlightenment, Enlightenment Ideas, Historiography, Intellectual History, Cultural Development, Historical Research.

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1. Introduction

The study of the evolutionary development of Enlightenment ideas, as well as their continuity, consistency, and patterns of intellectual succession in the history of Central Asian socio-philosophical thought, constitutes one of the key research priorities of contemporary social sciences and the humanities. Enlightenment should not be regarded merely as an accidental intellectual phenomenon that emerged during a particular historical period and subsequently disappeared [1]. Rather, it represents a comprehensive conceptual system that evolved in response to the region's distinctive socio-cultural needs, spiritual and moral values, and historical transformations. Over the centuries, this system has undergone continuous development, adapting from one historical stage to another while preserving its intellectual continuity and enriching its theoretical foundations [2]. A proper understanding of this system requires a systematic and comparative analysis of the existing body of scholarship, particularly the fundamental theoretical and methodological sources that have shaped its academic interpretation.

The present analysis is situated at the intersection of subject-object relations, social philosophy, cultural studies, pedagogy, and political science. In assessing the current state of research on this topic, we adopt a holistic epistemological approach rather than artificially dividing the problem into separate components or historical periods. This approach enables us to examine the integration of previous studies through their conceptual orientations, philosophical and methodological paradigms, and the contributions of different scholarly schools [3]. Such a perspective makes it possible to determine the extent to which the concepts of the ideal human being (the perfect individual), social justice, the role of knowledge and enlightenment as driving forces of social development, and the formation of spiritual and intellectual resilience in the intellectual heritage of Central Asian thinkers have been investigated at a fundamental scholarly level. The body of scholarly literature examining the continuity and intellectual succession of Enlightenment ideas in Central Asia can be classified into several major

theoretical and methodological approaches. Collectively, these studies contribute to revealing the developmental patterns of philosophical and social thought within the region [4].

Western academic schools, particularly those in the United States, France, and Germany, have made significant contributions to the study of the genesis of Enlightenment and modernization ideas in Central Asia, their socio-political dynamics, and the principles of cultural continuity. Within Western sociology and political philosophy, the Enlightenment movement in Central Asia is interpreted not merely as a localized campaign for the dissemination of knowledge, but as an intellectual and institutional response of traditional society to the challenges of global modernization [5].

2. Materials and Methods

Among the most influential scholars in this field is the American historian and sociologist Adeeb Khalid, whose works constitute a fundamental contribution to the historiography of Central Asian Enlightenment. In his studies of the intellectual history of the region, Khalid examines the Jadid movement in Turkestan through the prism of Western social theory. According to Khalid, Central Asian Enlighteners did not simply imitate Western or Ottoman cultural models; rather, they synthesized these influences with the region's unique religious, philosophical, and historical foundations, thereby creating an original model of Enlightenment [6]. He explains the continuity of Enlightenment ideas through the emergence of new social institutions—such as the press, New Method (Jadid) schools, and the theatre—and their ideological confrontation with the traditional religious elite (the conservative *ulama*). In his interpretation, Enlightenment represents a discursive process aimed at transforming cultural hegemony and reconstructing national identity [7].

Another prominent Western scholar, Edward Allworth, conducted a systematic study of the cultural and intellectual history of Central Asia, particularly the Enlightenment thought of the Uzbek people. According to his interpretation, the Enlightenment ideas promoted by the region's intellectual elite preserved essential elements of classical Eastern philosophy and literature dating from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries while adapting to the socio-political crises of the early twentieth century. Through his analyses of the philosophical and dramatic works of Abdurauf Fitrat and Mahmudhoja Behbudiy, Allworth argues that the concepts of nationhood and the awakening of national consciousness embodied in their writings represent a natural evolutionary continuation of the Central Asian Enlightenment tradition [8].

A prominent representative of the French schools of Soviet studies and Oriental studies, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, examined the process of the politicization of the Enlightenment movement in Turkestan. Her research analyzes the continuum extending from cultural reformism to the emergence of the ideas of national liberation and state independence. According to her scholarly conclusions, the Enlightenment movement in Central Asia was fundamentally characterized by a socio-pacifist orientation, seeking to transform society through an evolutionary process based on the expansion of education and the strengthening of intellectual resilience rather than through revolutionary means [9].

The German orientalist Ingeborg Baldauf focused on the literary and philosophical content of Enlightenment ideas and their relationship with the sociology of language. Her studies provide a linguo-philosophical analysis of the connections between the ideas articulated in early twentieth-century Enlightenment publications, textbooks, and national poetry and the region's historical cultural heritage, thereby demonstrating the continuity of the Central Asian intellectual tradition.

Similarly, the Japanese scholar Hisao Komatsu extensively explored the regional and international networks of Central Asian Enlighteners, emphasizing their intellectual interaction and ideological integration with other reformist movements across the Islamic world. His research highlights the transnational dimensions of Enlightenment thought and its contribution to the broader reformist discourse of the Muslim world [10].

Among the most significant theoretical contributions in this field are those of the sociologist and historian Ahmet Kanlidere. In his scholarly works, he provides a comparative sociological analysis of the ideological foundations of the Muslim intellectuals of the Russian Empire, with particular emphasis on the Enlightenment movements in Turkestan and the Volga-Ural region. According to Kanlidere, the Central Asian Enlightenment should not be interpreted merely as a manifestation of Westernization; rather, it represents an attempt to revive the traditions of Islamic rationalism. He argues that the continuity of the Enlightenment tradition is reflected in the institutionalization of the classical ideal of the primacy of knowledge and education—originally articulated by thinkers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna)—through the establishment of New Method (*Usul-i Jadid*) schools in the early twentieth century. Kanlidere further maintains that the ideas advanced by the Jadids constituted an internal intellectual response to the spiritual and moral crisis confronting society [11].

Another prominent Turkish scholar, Nadir Devlet, examined the cultural and social life of Turkestan under Russian imperial rule from a socio-political perspective. According to his interpretation, the Enlightenment ideas that emerged in the region and the Jadid movement were interconnected through a continuous chain of intellectual and ideological links. He argues that Ismail Gasprinsky's newspaper *Tercüman* and his *Usul-i Jadid* educational system played a decisive role in awakening the intellectual elite of Turkestan. At the same time, he emphasizes that local Enlighteners—including Mahmudhoja Behbudiy, Munawwar Qari, and Abdurauf Fitrat—further developed and adapted this educational model to the specific socio-economic, cultural, and religious conditions of Central Asia [12].

3. Results and Discussion

The genesis, stages of development, and continuity of Enlightenment ideas in Central Asia have also been extensively examined in Turkish historiography and socio-philosophical scholarship. Turkish researchers generally interpret the Central Asian Enlightenment—particularly the Jadid movement—as an integral component of the broader Turkic intellectual awakening and as one of the principal foundations for the modernization of the Islamic world.

Representatives of the Turkish schools of Turkology and social philosophy, including Ahad Andican, Timur Kocaoğlu, Mehmet Saray, and İnci Enginün, have systematically examined the role of Enlightenment ideas in the formation of national consciousness, social mobility, and intellectual resilience. Their studies demonstrate that the Central Asian Enlightenment was not merely an educational movement but also a significant intellectual force that contributed to the social, cultural, and political transformation of the region [13].

In particular, Ahad Andican analyzes the evolutionary continuity of the Turkestan Enlightenment from a movement of cultural modernization to a political movement advocating national autonomy and, ultimately, independence. He argues that the continuity of Enlightenment ideas should be understood not only through internal developments within Central Asia but also through the dynamic intellectual interactions between the scholarly circles of Bukhara and Tashkent and the intellectual milieu of Istanbul.

Similarly, Timur Kocaoglu examines the philosophical, aesthetic, and socio-political writings of thinkers such as Abdurauf Fitrat and Cho'lpon (Abdulhamid Sulaymon o'g'li). He emphasizes that their concepts of freedom and Enlightenment represent a distinctive synthesis of the classical cultural heritage of the East and the intellectual achievements of Western civilization, thereby illustrating the unique character of the Central Asian Enlightenment tradition [14].

Within the Turkish schools of Oriental studies and philosophy (represented by Ahmet Kanlıdere, Mehmet Saray, and Ali Gündoğdu), the Central Asian Enlightenment movement has been examined within the broader framework of global Islamic modernization. From the perspective of Turkish scholarship, the Enlightenment and Jadid movements in Turkestan are interpreted not merely as social or pedagogical phenomena, but as a distinctive model of Eastern civilization that sought to modernize society through an evolutionary process while preserving traditional values and the principles of Islamic rationalism, rather than pursuing Westernization or secularization.

A distinctive feature of Turkish scholarship is its consistent examination of the Central Asian Enlightenment within the broader context of Islamic and Turkic civilizational integration. Their analyses demonstrate that the Enlightenment movement in the region functioned as a socio-pacifist response to external political and cultural pressures and as one of the most effective mechanisms for preserving the spiritual and intellectual resilience of society. Nevertheless, the studies conducted by Turkish scholars have generally devoted greater attention to the socio-cultural and political dimensions of the Enlightenment movement, whereas its strictly philosophical and epistemological aspects—particularly issues related to the theory of knowledge and the nature of substance—have received comparatively limited attention. This observation underscores the need for future national socio-philosophical and historical research to address these theoretical dimensions in a more comprehensive and systematic manner.

The evolution of Enlightenment ideas, the primacy of science and knowledge, and the issues of social modernization in Central Asia have attracted considerable attention from the schools of Oriental studies and Islamic philosophy in Arab countries, particularly in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Kuwait. In their analyses of the Central Asian Enlightenment, Arab scholars employ a distinctive civilizational and epistemological paradigm. From this perspective, the Enlightenment movement in Turkestan is viewed as an intellectual continuum that ensured the continuity between medieval Islamic rationalism—represented by thinkers such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and the Maturidi theological tradition—and the reformist movements of the early twentieth century.

Among the most systematic contributions to this field are those of the prominent Arab scholar of Islamic intellectual history and philosophy, Professor Muhammad Imara. In his seminal works on Enlightenment and reform movements in the Islamic world, Imara devotes particular attention to the Jadid intellectual milieu of Central Asia (Turkestan). According to his interpretation, the Central Asian Enlightenment should not be understood as a mere imitation of Western modernization; rather, it constituted an indigenous reform movement aimed at overcoming social and intellectual stagnation through the revival of Islam's internal intellectual resources, particularly by reopening the "gate of *ijtihad*." Imara demonstrates that the intellectual continuity reflected in the ideas of Abdurauf Fitrat and Mahmudhoja Behbudiy emerged through the synthesis of the region's traditional spiritual heritage and its ideological connections with the Salafi reformist movement in the Arab world, represented by such thinkers as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida.

Another distinguished Arab scholar, Professor of Philosophy and Sociology Fahmi Jadaane, addresses the socio-philosophical thought of the Central Asian Jadid intellectuals in his studies on the relationship between modernism and secularism in the Islamic world. According to Jadaane, the defining characteristic of the Turkestan Enlightenment was its

use of education and enlightenment as instruments of socio-pacifist transformation. Rather than advocating revolutionary change, the intellectuals of the region sought to transform society through an evolutionary process by modernizing educational institutions based on the *Usul-i Jadid* system, promoting the social mobility of women, and fostering spiritual and intellectual resilience among younger generations. In his view, these initiatives constituted the principal mechanisms through which the Jadids pursued social reform while preserving the cultural and moral foundations of their society [15].

4. Conclusion

The analysis of scholarly literature demonstrates that the study of the continuity, evolution, and succession of Enlightenment ideas in Central Asia occupies an important place in contemporary socio-philosophical research. The works of Western, Turkish, and Arab scholars reveal that the Enlightenment movement in the region was not a temporary intellectual phenomenon but rather a historically grounded and continuously developing system of ideas shaped by the interaction of local traditions and global modernization processes.

The reviewed studies indicate that Central Asian Enlightenment thought emerged as a unique intellectual model that combined the principles of Islamic rationalism, national cultural values, and modern educational reforms. In this regard, the Jadid movement played a decisive role in institutionalizing Enlightenment ideals through the establishment of new-method schools, the development of the press, and the promotion of social and cultural reforms. The ideas advanced by Central Asian Enlighteners contributed significantly to the formation of national consciousness, social mobility, and intellectual resilience. At the same time, the historiographical analysis shows that existing scholarship has primarily focused on the socio-cultural, educational, and political dimensions of the Enlightenment movement. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to its philosophical, epistemological, and theoretical foundations, including issues related to knowledge, cognition, and the conceptual principles underlying the Enlightenment worldview. Therefore, further research is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the philosophical essence, intellectual continuity, and civilizational significance of Enlightenment thought in Central Asia.

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