



THE HISTORY OF THE USE OF THE TERM “CENTRAL ASIA”

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the origin of the term “Central Asia,” its historical usage, and the issues surrounding its geographical delimitation. From ancient sources onward, the term “Central Asia” has been used by different people with various meanings, and its territorial boundaries have been interpreted differently in different historical periods. The article provides information about who used this term, when, and within what geographical scope. As a result, conclusions are presented regarding the historical formation of the term, its scholarly interpretations, and the characteristics of regional delimitation..

Introduction. Central Asia is one of the ancient centers of human civilization. For many centuries, the region has developed as a crossroads of various cultures, states, and peoples. Since ancient times, this area has served as an important segment of the Great Silk Road and as a hub of political, economic, and cultural relations between the East and the West. Therefore, the term “Central Asia” encompasses not only a geographical concept but also a historical and cultural meaning.

The term appears in various forms in ancient sources and acquired different meanings in each historical period. In Greek, Persian, Arabic, and Chinese sources, the terms “Turan,” “Movarounnahr,” or “Inner Asia” were sometimes used synonymously. Beginning from the early 19th century, as a result of scientific expeditions and geographical studies conducted by the Russian Empire, the term “Central Asia” began to develop a new scientific meaning. From the 1840s onward, during the process of scientifically studying the region, preparing cartographic maps, and defining political-geographical boundaries, the concept became more precisely defined.

Since then, the term has been widely used in international scholarly literature, with varying interpretations by geographers and historians. Some scholars define Central Asia as the territory between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, while others interpret it as a broader region encompassing all of Inner Asia [18:2].

Literature Review. A number of studies have examined the term “Central Asia,” including works by A.A. Asqarov [13:149], E.E. Kuzmina [20:76], V. Barthold [15:424], S. Gorshenina [18:2], Ferdinand von Richthofen [26:12], A. de Humboldt [8:25], Godlewska [4:41], Bayard Taylor [3:2], Y. Khanikov [28:30], I. Bichurin [16:326], and others. The term was first scientifically applied in the geographical description of the region by German scholars such as A. Humboldt, and later by F. von Richthofen. Although European geographers

traditionally used the terms “Turan” or “Turkestan,” more detailed descriptions were provided by Khanikov, I. Mushketov [25:19], and L. Berg.

In the 19th century, “Central Asia” was still not widely used, while its synonym “Inner Asia” became more common only in the 20th century. Both terms were close in meaning to “Turkestan,” with boundaries largely overlapping. German scholar F. von Richthofen [26:21] was the first to introduce “Central Asia” (Ger. *Zentral-Asien*) as a scientific concept, describing it clearly as a geographical region. His work marked an important stage in the formation of the scientific meaning of the term. Modern scholar S. M. Gorshenina [18:2] provides a deep theoretical analysis of the term’s formation and its role in European geopolitical thought, particularly in the 19th–20th centuries.

Research Methodology. This article employs an interdisciplinary approach, a key trend in the development of modern science. The study uses analysis of scientific sources, geopolitical methods, and historical–geographical approaches. Each source was examined in terms of its contribution to the formation and development of the concept of “Central Asia”.

Analysis and Results. The first half of the 19th century marks a distinct stage in the study of Central Asian geography. Early scientific classifications emerged mainly from military-diplomatic expeditions conducted by the Russian Empire. One of the pioneers was the Russian geographer and diplomat Y. F. Meyendorff (1794–1863). During his diplomatic mission to the Bukhara Khanate in the 1820s, he recorded detailed observations on the region’s natural, ethnographic, and political features. Based on these observations, he developed an early geographical interpretation of “Central Asia” (Map 1) [10:31].

His approach was among the earliest attempts to view Central Asia as a unified region, considering not only political boundaries but also ethnic, climatic, and cultural aspects. Meyendorff’s ideas later influenced the scientific views of A. Humboldt, K. Ritter, and F. von Richthofen.

In the second half of the 19th century, German scholars significantly advanced geographical studies. A. Humboldt used the term “Central Asia” in his 1843 work *Asie Centrale*. He defined the western boundary clearly—bordering the Caspian Sea—but did not specify the eastern boundary. His map included the Tien Shan, Pamir, and the area around Lake Balkhash.

Humboldt’s introduction of the term sparked scholarly debates in Russia and Europe. He also used the Arabic phrase *Ma warā’ an-Nahr* (“beyond the river”) in referencing the region [8:25].

In the mid-19th century, important contributions were also made by Y. Khanikov [28:71] and I. Bichurin (Iakin) [16:326]. Khanikov created one of the first systematic cartographic projects for the region in 1847. I. Bichurin defined Central Asia extremely broadly—from the Ural Mountains to the Korean Gulf—encompassing Mongolia, Manchuria, northern China, Korea, and even parts of Siberia. Later scholars such as P. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky and V. V. Barthold based their studies on these early works. Semenov preferred using “Inner Asia,” while Barthold used “Central Asia” [14:424].

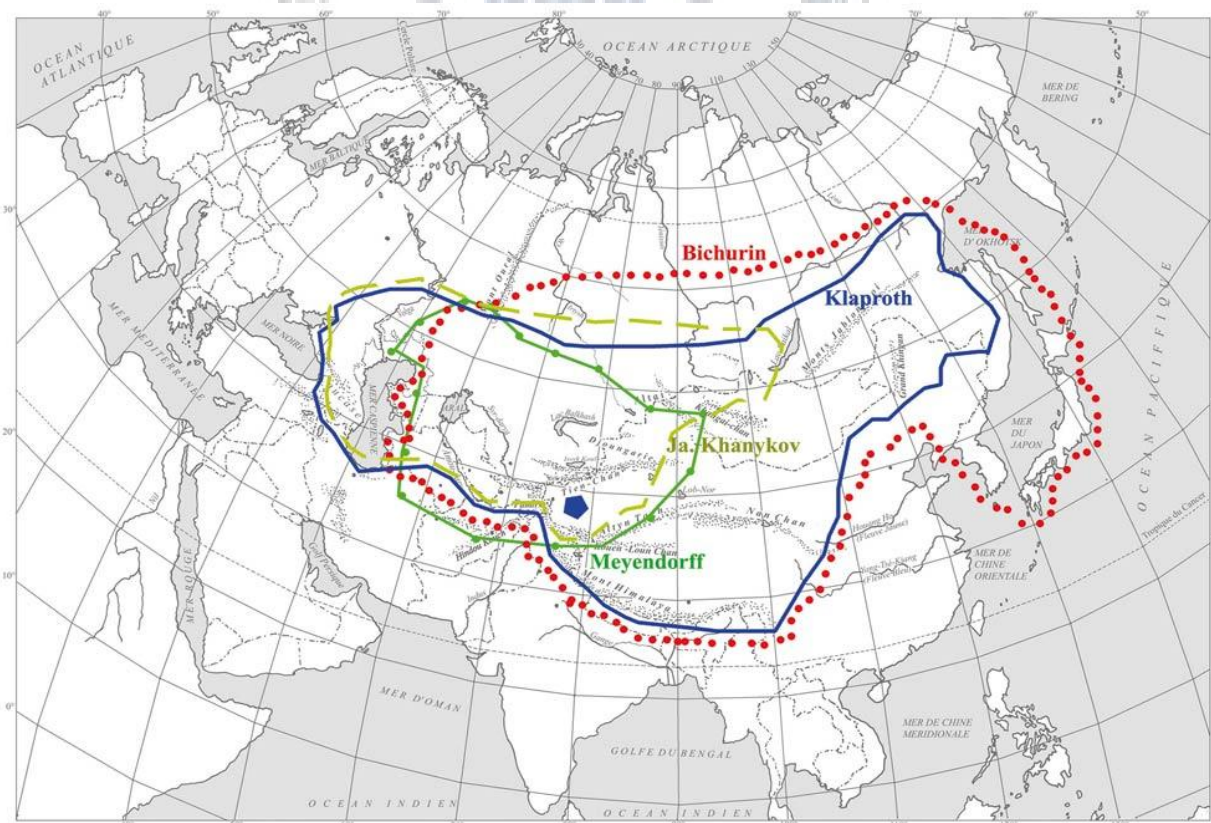
A major turning point came with F. von Richthofen’s 1877 work, where he described the region as “Ichabod,” stretching from Tibet to Altai and from the Pamirs to the Hinggan mountains [26:25].

Another key figure was the German orientalist Julius Klaproth, who described the region as extending from the Don to the Pacific Ocean and from the Caucasus to the Himalayas (Map 3) [24:2]. While Klaproth defined the region very broadly, Bichurin defined it as more closely connected to the territories of China, Korea, Japan, and Mongolia.

Russian geographer I. Mushketov later attempted to delineate the region based on natural boundaries, describing Central Asia as a large, enclosed continental basin surrounded by mountains and separated from neighboring regions by seas and mountain ranges [25:19]. Thus, the concept of “Central Asia” gradually took shape in European scientific literature during the 18th–19th centuries.

Conclusion. In conclusion, ancient sources refer to Central Asia using terms such as Arya, Bactria, Sogdiana, Turan, Movarounnahr, and Turkestan. This region has long been recognized as one of the earliest centers of human civilization.

Comparing ancient geographical terms with historical sources is vital for reconstructing the historical boundaries, territorial development, and historical geography of Uzbekistan. Today, identifying the locations of ancient geographical names and correlating them with historical territories makes it possible to restore and reinforce the historical memory of the region.



Map 1. A schematic representation of Central Asia in the “Russian style” of 1820–1850 (Georgiy Meyendorff, Julius Klaproth, L. Bichurin, and Yakov Khanikov). Gorshenina S.M., 2019, p. 40.



Map 2. A. Humboldt. Map of Central Asia. 1843.



Map 3. Map. Julius Klaproth. *Asia Polyglotta*. 1823.

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