

Editor's Foreword

For those who do not know the region very well, the Central Asian Republics tend to get lumped together due to their location, the seemingly slight variations in ethnic composition, and a common past as part of the erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. However, since 1991 they have all regained their independence and gone their own way, the path of Turkmenistan being perhaps the most different and even idiosyncratic. Among the differences, most obviously, is the ethnic makeup, with a very large majority of Turkmens and a relatively small minority of other groups. There are also notable differences in history, politics, and society inherited not only from the Soviet era but much earlier periods as well. The fact that substantial mineral resources and deposits of oil and gas ease the economic transition cannot be overlooked. However, by far the most striking twist—which has not gone unnoticed by the international community or unmentioned on by the international media—is the dominant role of the president, Saparmurat Niyazov, better known by his title of Turkmenbashi.

Aside from being somewhat different, Turkmenistan is an uncommonly hard place to write about since it is relatively closed to foreigners and the national media is restricted in what it can publish or broadcast. So, there are rather few specialists and rather few sources of information, much of the latter being fairly limited and unreliable. Moreover, not surprisingly Turkmenbashi overshadows the others in his regime, while opponents are scarcely known and probably prefer it that way. Nonetheless, this is an important country, and whatever can be ascertained will be useful for those who willy-nilly have to deal with it, which is why this *Historical Dictionary of Turkmenistan* has been long in coming but is particularly welcome. To the extent possible, and this is often easier for earlier periods than the present day, there are entries in the dictionary section on important persons, institutions, and events; on the economy, society, and culture; and even on politics. The whole history is summarized in the introduction and chronology, going back to the earliest communities and kingdoms, the coming of Tsarist Russia and rule of Soviet Russia, and today's experiments. The bibliography, thankfully large for a country so poorly researched, will prove very helpful for those who want to know more and have had trouble finding it.

This is just about the last volume in the Asian series for the simple reason that it was so difficult to find an author. Even those who are busy working on Central Asia, and they are amazingly prolific, usually do not know much about Turkmenistan, although they would obviously like someone else to find out for them. This someone else has turned out to be Rafis Abazov, who is one of the leading specialists on Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan but has broader regional interests as well, now including Turkmenistan. He has carefully researched what is readily available, and done considerable digging to find many bits of information that are not, and especially managed to fit the parts together into a coherent whole. This was facilitated by his experiences as a scholar in Kyrgyzstan, in Russia, in Great Britain, and now in the United States, where he is an adjunct lecturer at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University. Dr. Abazov has written extensively, with his articles appearing in leading journals and broader encyclopedias, and also as the author of the *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan*. This volume opens new ground for him and paves the ways for the rest of us.

Jon Woronoff
Series Editor