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THE ETHNOGENESIS OF THE UZBEK PEOPLE AND THE PROCESS OF THEIR FORMATION AS A NATION: THE EVOLUTION OF SCHOLARLY THOUGHT AND THE CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

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Abstract. This article examines the ethnogenesis of the Uzbek people and the long historical process through which they consolidated into a distinct nation. Following the IMRAD structure, the study pursues two connected aims: to reconstruct the principal stages of Uzbek ethnogenesis from antiquity to the modern period, and to trace the evolution of scholarly thought on the problem from its origins in early twentieth-century Orientalism, through the Soviet ethnogenesis (etnogenez) school, to post-independence national historiography and contemporary critical and interdisciplinary approaches. Drawing on a qualitative synthesis of historical, archaeological, anthropological, linguistic, and historiographical literature, the analysis shows that the Uzbek people emerged not from a single ancestral group but through the gradual integration of an autochthonous Iranian-speaking substratum (Sogdians, Bactrians, Khwarezmians, and related populations) with successive waves of Turkic-speaking peoples, culminating in the Turkicization of Transoxiana between the ninth and sixteenth centuries and the later incorporation of the Dasht-i Qipchaq nomadic Uzbeks. The discussion further demonstrates that competing primordialist and constructivist interpretations reflect not only differing evidence but differing methodological premises and political contexts. The article concludes that a balanced, multidisciplinary, and source-critical framework offers the most productive path forward, and it offers recommendations for future research, including the integration of paleogenomic data with textual and archaeological evidence.

Keywords: ethnogenesis; Uzbek people; ethnic history; Transoxiana; Turkicization; nation formation; Central Asia; historiography.

1. Introduction. The question of how a people comes into being — how disparate tribes, languages, and cultural traditions coalesce over time into a community that recognises itself as a single nation — is among the most enduring problems of the historical and ethnological sciences. For the Uzbek people, who today constitute the most numerous nation of Central Asia, this question carries particular weight. The territory of present-day Uzbekistan has for millennia stood at the geopolitical and cultural crossroads of Eurasia, serving as a meeting place for Iranian, Turkic, Mongol, and other ethnic and linguistic communities (DNAGENICS, 2026). The ethnogenesis of the Uzbek people is therefore not a story of isolated descent but of prolonged interaction, migration, assimilation, and synthesis.

The term “ethnogenesis” (from the Greek ethnos, “people,” and genesis, “origin”) denotes the process of formation of an ethnic community, including the emergence of its territorial, economic, linguistic, anthropological, and cultural unity, together with a shared ethnic self-consciousness. As the Uzbek academician Akhmadali Asqarov observed, ethnogenesis corresponds to the period in a people’s history before the full formation of its society; at its conclusion, the principal markers of

ethnicity — common territory, economic life, ethnocultural and linguistic unity, anthropological type, and, ultimately, political unity — are arranged one by one until the ethnos stands complete (Asqarov, 2007). Understood in this way, ethnogenesis is inseparable from ethnic history: the former describes the formative stage, the latter the subsequent development of an already constituted people.

Yet the study of Uzbek ethnogenesis has never been a purely academic exercise. Since the 1920s it has been entangled with the politics of nation-building, first within the Soviet framework of national-territorial delimitation and later within the independent Republic of Uzbekistan's search for historical legitimacy (Laruelle, 2010). Successive generations of scholars have approached the same body of evidence with markedly different premises, producing interpretations that range from claims of deep autochthonous continuity to arguments that the modern Uzbek nation is a relatively recent construction of the twentieth century (Ilkhamov, 2006). For this reason, any serious treatment of Uzbek ethnogenesis must attend not only to the historical process itself but to the evolution of the scholarship that has sought to explain it.

Accordingly, this article pursues two interrelated objectives. The first is to reconstruct, on the basis of the available historical, archaeological, anthropological, and linguistic evidence, the principal stages through which the Uzbek people were formed. The second — and the one given particular emphasis here — is to trace the evolution of ideas about Uzbek ethnogenesis: how the problem was first framed, how successive scholarly schools reshaped it, and how it is studied today. The article is organised according to the IMRAD convention. After this introduction, the literature review surveys the development of scholarship on the subject; the methodology section describes the approach and sources; the analysis and discussion section reconstructs the ethnogenetic process and weighs the competing interpretations; and the final section offers conclusions and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review.The scholarly literature on Uzbek ethnogenesis is extensive and has developed through several distinct phases, each shaped by the intellectual and political conditions of its time. Surveying this body of work chronologically reveals not a single accumulating consensus but a sequence of paradigms, each redefining the very questions that ethnogenesis research was expected to answer.

The systematic study of the origins of the peoples of Central Asia began with the Russian and European Orientalist tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The work of Vasily Bartold (V. V. Barthold) on the history of Turkestan and the Semirechye region established the documentary and source-critical foundations on which later research would build, drawing attention to the long coexistence of Iranian and Turkic populations in the region (Bartold, as discussed in Golden, 1992). Ethnographers such as Nikolai Aristov catalogued the tribal composition of the Turkic peoples, providing data still cited today. In this early phase, however, the concept of "ethnogenesis" as such had not yet crystallised; scholars spoke rather of the "origin" and "composition" of peoples.

The concept of ethnogenesis acquired its characteristic form within Soviet scholarship of the 1930s through the 1950s. As Abashin (2008) has shown, ethnogenesis emerged as a distinct discipline in the 1940s, when the Soviet state required a scientific account of the origins of its constituent nationalities that could underwrite the national-territorial structure created by the delimitation of 1924. Three scholars in particular shaped the narrative of Uzbek ethnogenesis in this period: Aleksandr Semenov, Aleksandr Yakubovsky, and Sergei Tolstov. Yakubovsky's influential study on the question of the origin of the Uzbek people (Yakubovskiy, 1941) and

Tolstov's work on the main problems of the ethnogenesis of the peoples of Central Asia (Tolstov, 1947) advanced the thesis that the modern peoples of the region had formed on the basis of an ancient, largely autochthonous population, into which later migratory groups were absorbed.

This Soviet tradition rested on a primordialist premise: that once formed, a national identity becomes an enduring, almost immutable attribute of the population that bears it (Laruelle, 2010). The framework emphasised local continuity and tended to minimise the disruptive effects of migration and conquest, partly for scholarly reasons and partly because the political climate discouraged accounts that might fragment or destabilise the newly drawn national identities. Debates of the period — including accusations of "pan-Iranianism" levelled against scholars who stressed the Iranian substratum — illustrate how closely the discipline was bound to ideology (Abashin, 2008).

With the independence of Uzbekistan in 1991, the study of ethnogenesis entered a new phase. The discipline retained much of its Soviet methodological inheritance while being redirected toward the construction of a national narrative for the new state (Laruelle, 2010). The figure who most fully embodies this phase is Akhmadali Asqarov, whose synthesis Ethnogenesis and Ethnic History of the Uzbek People (Asqarov, 2007) became the standard reference work. Asqarov, together with the prominent ethnographer Karim Shoniyozov, whose monograph The Formation Process of the Uzbek People (Shoniyozov, 2001) traced the consolidation of the people through the early and high medieval periods, provided the philosophical, methodological, and retrospective framework that dominates Uzbek scholarship to this day.

Scholars of this school emphasise the deep autochthonous roots of the Uzbek people, locating the decisive stage of consolidation in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries and stressing the antiquity of statehood traditions on Uzbek soil. As Laruelle (2010) notes, the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences was formally tasked after 1998 with studying the "authentic history of the Uzbek people and their state," a mandate that reinforced the continuity thesis. While this body of work has produced valuable empirical research, critics have observed that it sometimes projects the modern nation backward onto earlier periods in which neither the ethnonym nor the national consciousness existed in their present form.

A distinct strand of scholarship developed largely outside the region, approaching Uzbek ethnogenesis through the lens of modern nationalism studies. Edward Allworth's cultural history of the Uzbeks from the fourteenth century to the present (Allworth, 1990) remains a foundational reference, tracing the layered composition of the population — oasis-dwelling Turkic groups intermingled with Iranian inhabitants, pre-Shaybanid Turco-Mongol tribes, and the Shaybanid Uzbek tribes — and famously describing the Soviet delimitation as a form of ethnic gerrymandering. Building on the constructivist theories of Gellner, Anderson, and Smith, Alisher Ilkhamov (2006) argued that the very concept of ethnogenesis, borrowed from the biological sciences, misrepresents social processes as natural ones; he identified 1924 and the creation of the Uzbek SSR as the decisive turning point in the formation of the modern Uzbek nation. Adeeb Khalid's study of the early Soviet period (Khalid, 2015) similarly recast Uzbekistan as a project advanced by the Muslim reformist intelligentsia rather than a mere artefact of Soviet decree.

The encounter between these critical approaches and the national school has produced sharp scholarly exchanges, including the well-documented debate between Ilkhamov and his Uzbek critics over the relative weight of autochthonous formation versus modern construction (Laruelle, 2010). This dialogue, however contentious, has enriched the field by forcing explicit attention to its methodological and theoretical assumptions.

Contemporary research on Uzbek ethnogenesis is marked by methodological pluralism and a growing interdisciplinarity. Within Uzbekistan, a steady stream of journal articles continues to refine the periodisation of ethnic formation and to examine particular components — the Turkic Khaganate, the Karakhanid sedentarisation, the Timurid ethnic processes, and the Shaybanid migrations (e.g., recent studies in regional and international journals). Internationally, the most significant development is the incorporation of archaeogenetics. Paleogenomic and population-genetic studies now describe the modern Uzbek population as a genetic mosaic, combining West Eurasian components linked to ancient agriculturalists and the historic Perso-Sogdian networks with East Eurasian components associated with Turkic and Mongolic migrations (DNAGENICS, 2026). Such data increasingly allow the long-debated balance between continuity and migration to be tested against material evidence rather than asserted on textual or ideological grounds. The field today thus stands at a productive juncture, in which traditional historical-philological scholarship, critical nationalism studies, and the natural sciences are beginning to converge.

3. Methodology. This study is a qualitative, source-critical synthesis rather than an empirical investigation generating new primary data. Its method is appropriate to a problem whose evidence is dispersed across several disciplines and several languages, and whose central difficulties are interpretive as much as evidentiary.

The research draws on four complementary categories of evidence. First, written historical sources and the secondary historiography built upon them, including the classic works of the Soviet ethnogenesis school and the syntheses of the post-independence national school. Second, archaeological data concerning settlement continuity, urban stratigraphy, irrigation agriculture, and material culture in the historic regions of Sogdiana, Bactria, Khwarezm, and Fergana. Third, physical-anthropological and, increasingly, paleogenomic evidence bearing on the biological composition of the population. Fourth, linguistic evidence concerning the long interaction of Eastern Iranian and Turkic languages and the eventual predominance of Turkic speech, including the substratum features that the modern Uzbek language preserves.

Three analytical principles guide the treatment of this evidence. The first is the methodological caution, emphasised by Asqarov (2007), that the language and anthropological type of a people's ancestors do not necessarily coincide with the language and type of the later ethnos, because language, physical type, and ethnic identity are realities of different periods that do not form simultaneously. The second is the historiographical principle that scholarly interpretations must be situated in their intellectual and political contexts, so that the conclusions of a given school can be assessed in light of the premises and pressures under which they were produced (Abashin, 2008; Laruelle, 2010). The third is the comparative principle of weighing competing interpretations — primordialist and constructivist, continuity-centred and migration-centred — against one another and against the convergent testimony of independent disciplines.

The sources analysed were identified through bibliographic searches of the international and regional scholarly literature, with priority given to peer-reviewed studies, standard monographs, and primary historiographical statements. Material of uncertain provenance or evident ideological bias was used only with explicit attention to its character. The synthesis that follows is therefore offered not as a final settlement of a contested question but as a reasoned integration of the current state of knowledge.

4. Analysis and Discussion. The earliest layer of Uzbek ethnogenesis is formed by the ancient sedentary and pastoral populations of Transoxiana. By the first millennium BCE the region was

home to a constellation of Eastern Iranian-speaking communities: the Sogdians of the Zarafshan valley centred on Samarkand, the Bactrians of the upper Amu Darya, the Khwarezmians of the lower Amu Darya, the inhabitants of Fergana, and the pastoral Saka (Scythian) and Massagetae tribes of the surrounding steppes (graphsearch.epfl.ch, n.d.). These civilisations practised irrigation agriculture, built cities along the trade corridors that would become the Silk Road, and developed literate cultures, the Sogdian language in particular serving as a lingua franca of long-distance commerce across Inner Asia. Anthropological research indicates that the physical characteristics typical of the modern oasis populations of the region had already taken shape among these Sogdian and related communities (Western European Studies, n.d.). This substratum constitutes the autochthonous foundation upon which all subsequent ethnogenetic processes operated.

The second decisive layer is the Turkic. While limited Turkic-speaking elements may have been present earlier, the major influx accompanied the expansion of the Turkic Khaganate in the sixth to eighth centuries, which brought Turkic-speaking groups into the central regions of Central Asia — the Tashkent oasis, the Zarafshan, Qashqadarya and Surkhandarya valleys, the Fergana Valley, and Khwarezm (Western European Studies, n.d.). Over succeeding generations these groups settled among the local population and entered into a prolonged process of mutual interaction and assimilation. The early ancestors of the Uzbeks in Transoxiana and Khwarezm thus spoke both Turkic and Iranian languages, and it was through their sustained contact that the foundations of a Turkic-speaking sedentary population were laid (International Journal of Artificial Intelligence, 2025).

From the ninth and tenth centuries the pace of Turkic sedentarisation intensified, even though political authority in much of the region long remained with Iranian dynasties such as the Samanids. The establishment of the Karakhanid state in the tenth to twelfth centuries marked a watershed, as a Turkic dynasty ruled a Transoxiana in which Turkic speech was steadily displacing the older Iranian languages of daily life. The eleventh-century scholar Mahmud al-Kashgari recorded that the population between Bukhara and Samarkand included Turkicized Sogdians, vivid testimony to the linguistic shift then under way (Turkification, Wikipedia, n.d.). By the end of this period the Sogdian, Bactrian, and Khwarezmian languages had largely ceased to be written, and a Turkic-speaking population had become predominant across much of the region, even as it absorbed the cultural, urban, and agricultural inheritance of the Iranian substratum.

Many scholars of the national school locate the decisive consolidation of the Uzbek people in the period from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, when a Turkic-speaking ethnic community with a shared territory, economy, and culture took recognisable shape across Transoxiana (Shoniyozov, 2001). The literary vehicle of this community was the Chagatai language, often termed Old Uzbek, which matured into one of the great literary Turkic idioms of the medieval Islamic world and reached its classical apogee in the poetry of Alisher Navoi in the fifteenth century. The Timurid period in particular witnessed intensive political centralisation and cultural integration in Maverannahr, accompanied by the further intermixing of Turkic and Turkicized tribes and of nomadic and settled populations (Journal of Applied Science and Social Science, 2024). It was during these centuries that the cultural and linguistic profile of the future Uzbek nation was substantially formed, even though the people of the region did not yet generally bear the name “Uzbek.”

The history of the ethnonym itself constitutes a distinct strand of the problem. The name “Uzbek” originally designated the Turkic-Mongol nomads of the Dasht-i Qipchaq — the Qipchaq steppe to the north — organised in the confederation associated with the “ninety-two Uzbek tribes” (Uzbeks, Wikipedia, n.d.). At the beginning of the sixteenth century, several hundred thousand of

these nomads, led by Muhammad Shaybani Khan, moved southward into Transoxiana and established the Shaybanid state (Uzbek national identity, Wikipedia, n.d.). The newcomers were initially a ruling minority among a Turkic-speaking sedentary majority of Karluk and Chagatai background and an enduring Iranian (Tajik) population. Over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Shaybanid Uzbeks largely assimilated linguistically and culturally to this majority, and their elite designation — "Uzbek" — was gradually extended, under the succeeding Janid dynasty, to the broader Turkic-speaking population of the region (Allworth, 1990). In this way a political and dynastic label evolved into an ethnic name for a community of diverse origins.

This sequence helps reconcile the apparent tension between the antiquity of the population and the relative recency of the name. The substratum, the Turkic component, and the medieval Turkic-speaking community were all of long standing; the ethnonym that would eventually unite them under a single national designation arrived comparatively late and was generalised later still. The population thus comprised, in Allworth's analysis, several layers: the oasis Turkic groups intermingled with Iranians, the pre-Shaybanid Turco-Mongol tribes, and the Shaybanid Uzbek tribes proper, with the last two long preserving a tribal identity expressed in such names as Qipchaq, Karluk, Mangit, and Kungrat (Allworth, 1990).

Table 1. Principal stages in the ethnogenesis of the Uzbek people

Period	Stage / process	Principal ethnic content
1st mill. BCE – 4th c. CE	Autochthonous substratum	Eastern Iranian-speaking Sogdians, Bactrians, Khwarezmians, Ferghanans; Saka and Massagetae of the steppe.
6th – 8th c.	Major Turkic influx (Turkic Khaganate)	Settlement of Turkic-speaking groups among the local Iranian population; bilingual interaction begins.
9th – 12th c.	Turkicization and sedentarisation (Samanid–Karakhanid)	Turkic speech becomes predominant; Turkicized Sogdians; decline of written Iranian languages.
11th – 14th c.	Consolidation of a Turkic-speaking community	Formation of a shared territory, economy and culture; Chagatai (Old Uzbek) literary language.
15th – 16th c.	Shaybanid migration; transfer of the ethnonym	Dasht-i Qipchaq nomadic Uzbeks enter Transoxiana and assimilate; the name "Uzbek" begins to spread.
1924 – present	National-territorial consolidation	Codification of a modern Uzbek nation, language and statehood; rise of national self-consciousness.

Source: Developed by the author based on the collected data.

The final stage in the formation of the Uzbeks as a nation in the modern sense unfolded in the twentieth century. Before the Soviet delimitation of 1924, the Uzbek dynasties of Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand governed territories in which many peoples lived intermingled, and where the idea of tying a polity to a single ethnic or linguistic group was largely foreign; Persian remained the prestige language of administration and learning even under Turkic rulers (Uzbek national identity,

Wikipedia, n.d.). The national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia in 1924, which created the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, transformed this situation. It fixed political borders around a titular nationality, standardised a modern literary Uzbek language, and, through census categories, education, and cultural institutions, consolidated a national identity that incorporated previously distinct groups — Turkic-speaking settled populations, Qipchaq and Karluk tribal groups, and many Persian-speakers who came to identify as Uzbek (Allworth, 1990; Khalid, 2015).

It is precisely this stage that divides the principal interpretive schools. For the national-historiographical tradition, 1924 merely gave political and administrative form to a nation whose ethnogenesis had been substantially completed centuries earlier; the modern nation is the natural culmination of an ancient, continuous process (Asqarov, 2007; Shoniyozov, 2001). For the constructivist tradition, by contrast, the modern Uzbek nation — with its bounded territory, codified language, and shared national consciousness — is to a significant degree a product of the twentieth century, assembled from heterogeneous materials by the combined agency of the reformist intelligentsia and the Soviet state (Ilkhamov, 2006; Khalid, 2015).

The analysis above suggests that the opposition between these schools is less absolute than their polemics imply. The continuity thesis is well founded insofar as the population, the agricultural and urban civilisation, and the Turkic-speaking community of Transoxiana are demonstrably of great antiquity, and the genetic record confirms deep local roots alongside migratory contributions (DNAGENICS, 2026). The constructivist thesis is equally well founded insofar as the ethnonym “Uzbek” was generalised late, national boundaries and a standardised language were fixed only in the twentieth century, and national self-consciousness in the modern sense is a modern phenomenon. The two positions describe different aspects of a single layered process: an ancient and largely continuous ethnocultural substratum, repeatedly enriched by migration, upon which a modern national identity was constructed through deliberate political and cultural work.

Recognising this allows the methodological caution noted earlier — that language, physical type, and ethnic identity belong to different temporal layers (Asqarov, 2007) — to do its proper work. The Iranian-speaking ancestors of much of the population, the Turkic language they eventually adopted, and the Uzbek national identity they ultimately assumed are realities of successive periods; collapsing them into a single timeless essence, or dissolving the entire process into a twentieth-century invention, equally distorts the historical record. The most defensible account is one that holds continuity and construction together as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

5. Conclusion. The ethnogenesis of the Uzbek people was a long, layered, and multidirectional process. From an autochthonous foundation of Eastern Iranian-speaking civilisations — Sogdians, Bactrians, Khwarezmians, and their neighbours — the population of Transoxiana was progressively transformed through the settlement and assimilation of Turkic-speaking groups, the Turkicization and sedentarisation of the ninth to twelfth centuries, the consolidation of a Turkic-speaking community with its own Chagatai literary language by the fourteenth century, the arrival and assimilation of the Dasht-i Qipchaq Uzbeks in the sixteenth century, and the codification of a modern nation in the twentieth. The Uzbek people are thus the product not of a single ancestral lineage but of the synthesis of Iranian, Turkic, and other components over more than two millennia.

The study of this process has itself evolved through several paradigms: from early Orientalist inquiry into the “origin” of peoples, through the primordialist Soviet ethnogenesis school, to the national historiography of independent Uzbekistan and the critical, constructivist scholarship developed largely abroad, and now toward an interdisciplinary synthesis that incorporates

archaeogenetic evidence. Each phase reframed the problem in light of its own intellectual commitments and political context, a fact that itself forms part of the history of the subject. The current state of research is characterised less by a single consensus than by a productive convergence of methods, in which the long-standing debate between continuity and construction can increasingly be tested against independent material evidence rather than asserted on doctrinal grounds.

On the basis of this survey, several recommendations for future research may be offered. First, scholarship would benefit from the systematic integration of paleogenomic and population-genetic data with the textual, archaeological, and linguistic record, so that hypotheses about the relative weight of autochthonous and migratory contributions can be evaluated empirically. Second, researchers should make their theoretical premises — primordialist or constructivist — explicit, since much past disagreement has stemmed from unstated assumptions rather than from the evidence itself. Third, the field requires further source-critical, comparative studies that situate Uzbek ethnogenesis within the broader ethnogenetic processes of Central Asia, alongside those of the Kazakhs, Tajiks, Turkmens, Kyrgyz, and Karakalpaks, with whom the Uzbeks share much of their history and ancestry. Fourth, the historiography of ethnogenesis study itself deserves continued critical attention, so that the relationship between scholarship and nation-building remains visible and is not mistaken for the historical process it describes. Pursued together, these directions promise a more balanced, rigorous, and genuinely interdisciplinary understanding of how the Uzbek people came to be.

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