

Adventures with the Stans

The whole 'Stan' thing came up a few years ago when, just out of some vague curiosity, I asked the people I was with about countries and their place on the globe. Most people (who were all from Western Europe) could immediately identify North America, although too many of them upset the one Canadian present by seeing Canada as part of the USA. All could fill in several of the countries around the edge of Africa and draw a big circle in the middle saying 'I think that's the Congo or somewhere' or 'That is probably somewhere like Zambia'. European countries were relatively easy for most people to name, except for the bits that had fallen out of the former Yugoslavia. People could put in the larger bits of the jigsaw like India, China and Russia but were then left baffled by the big hole left in the middle. Even when I gave them the countries' names they didn't know which went where or how big they were relative to each other. It was like a black hole. There was little known about them at all beyond some basic facts about Pakistan and, to a lesser degree, about Afghanistan.

In that sense, to people in 'the western world' (and all such categorisations have their own difficulties) there are other countries that are relative unknowns: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan: and those are just the formal country ones. There are many other regions that spread themselves across the straight lines of empire. The politics and history of those countries and regions are fascinating to those who want to be fascinated by it all. To others, I suppose it's nothing more than strange names of no great consequence, but then they maybe haven't read their history. The Great Game and all of that: Russians and British competing for the attentions of the leaders in those parts. Diplomacy, spying, intrigue and subterfuge galore. The Central Asian republics are gaining ground again as countries of great interest as places with reserves of natural resources, as places in strategic positions in the shifting geopolitics of an emerging new world, and as places that lie at the intersections of north and south/ east and west.

In parallel to that line of thinking was a similar question to groups of people I knew: How many famous people do you know who were called Stan(ley)? Each time the same few names came quickly ... but the list soon ran dry. Famous Stans were in short supply. It became a bit of an obsession to track them down, to list them, and to see how much could be found out about them.

The creative jump was then to imagine a group of Stans (ie people called Stanley), real or from books or films, gathered as a tour-group to go on an imaginary visit to the Stans (ie those Central Asian regions and countries whose names ended in -stan). Readers are invited to come up with their own collection of Stanleys and imagine what they might do on a fictional virtual trip round those fascinating countries.

At some point in the future I may write my own version and put it here in case it is of interest to others. Meanwhile, it stays as an interesting line of thought.