

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Joseph Battat
Mary Lynne Bird
Steven Butler
William F. Foote
Kitty Hempstone
Pramila Jayapal
Peter Bird Martin
Ann Mische
Dasa Obereigner
Paul A. Rahe
Carol Rose
Chandler Rosenberger
John Spencer
Edmund Sutton
Dirk J. Vandewalle

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

GF-23
EUROPE/RUSSIA

Gregory Feifer is an Institute Donors' Fellow studying the current political and cultural reshaping of Russia.

Uzbekistan's Eternal Realities, Part I

By Gregory Feifer

NOVEMBER 2001

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan —Unlike some of Uzbekistan's stunningly beautiful cities, the country's capital chiefly doles out visions of autocracy. Almost completely leveled in a massive earthquake in 1966, central Tashkent consists mostly of broad boulevards and grim Soviet buildings, many of them built in a post-quake spree by workers shipped in from all over the Soviet Union. On top of that unappetizing architectural ensemble has most recently been sprinkled a post-Soviet assortment of glass-and-steel office buildings, some of which tower over the skyline. Much of what little remained of the old town's clay-and-straw brick walls and meandering, windowless streets was razed in the last few years, during President Islam Karimov's push to build large thoroughfares leading into the city center.

It was in front of one of the city's big new projects—a grand sports complex built by the National Bank of Uzbekistan—that Nikolai (not his real name) picked me up in his Daewoo car. (If one thing has improved for the average citizen—as opposed to the few occupants of the city's newest office architecture—it's that Daewoos have taken the place of the ubiquitous Lada. That's thanks to Uz-Daewoo, a joint venture that assembles the now-bankrupt South Korean automaker's products in Uzbekistan.) As we drove off, Nikolai kept an eye on his rear-view mirror, and continued to glance at it often after we had stopped and I began to interview him still sitting in the car. We were parked along a stretch of weather-beaten road outside a row of small, rudimentary restaurants,



A platoon of babushki sweeping streets in downtown Tashkent. President Islam Karimov has gone to great pains to widen streets and keep them clean.



Most of the city is distinctly Soviet, having been largely rebuilt after a devastating earthquake in 1966. The tall building houses newspaper offices.

converted houses that began to serve customers in their courtyards after the Soviet collapse. The plates and utensils in these establishments are often filthy, but the greasy rice pilaf, or *plov*, fatty-mutton-and-chick-pea and other local dishes are often delicious.

It was a couple of weeks after the United States had begun sending troops, planes and helicopters to southern Uzbekistan's Khanabad air base in the effort to wage war on Afghanistan's fundamentalist Islamic Taliban regime and Osama bin Laden—the Saudi-born millionaire terrorist suspected of being behind the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington that killed some 3,000 people and brought down the World Trade Center. Khanabad is 200 miles north of Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan.

"It's just Tashkent that feels secularized," Nikolai told me, speaking about the official—and commonly voiced—opinion that Uzbekistan itself has nothing really to fear from Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. That view became especially popular—in public at least—after the U.S. began bombing Afghanistan earlier in the month. "You go out to the Fergana Valley [east of Tashkent] or anywhere else, and it's completely different. This country is very poor, and that creates the conditions for extremism to grow. When you're poor and you're paid real money and given training by, say, Tajik terrorists, you become zombified. You're ready to believe anything."

A tall, thin, dark-haired Slav in his early forties, Nikolai has reason to know what he's talking about. A KGB special-forces officer under the Soviet Union, he later helped found and run a United Nations-funded anti-narcotics program. He was fired and blacklisted two months earlier for,

as he put it, "talking too much." Another reason was his ethnicity.

The land that is now Uzbekistan has long been home to myriad ethnic groups, including, most obviously, Uzbeks—largely descendants of Turkic nomads—Tajik (Farsi-speaking) sedentary city dwellers and, of course, Russians. It was in 1924 that the Kremlin more-or-less arbitrarily carved the republic of Uzbekistan out of various abutting emirates, khanates and other ethnic and tribal groups. Uzbekistan's politics to this day, however, continue to be influenced by traditional clan politics. Currently, that means being a Slav has distinct disadvantages.

The events of September 11 shone a spotlight on this country, of which most of the world had previously never heard. But the fateful day did more than draw the world's

attention to Uzbekistan. It added a new dimension to internal power struggles and the political modus operandi in general. The world became a different place after September 11, and Uzbekistan is no exception.

Economic Stagnation and Political Oppression

Things weren't always so bad. Nikolai says that following the Soviet collapse until about 1995, a sense of optimism buoyed Uzbekistan. "There were possibilities," he said. "Uzbekistan was called an economic miracle. Small entrepreneurs were setting up businesses and getting to work. Foreign investors saw stability. We had human rights problems, sure. But the population didn't care about it if things were getting better."

In 1996, the government passed a series of legislative acts that put the brakes on private initiative. These included new tax laws and restrictive measures such as high tariffs meant to channel as much business as possible through the state and a few well-connected companies. "Basically, the state wanted to become the number-one monopolist," Nikolai said.

The result is evident. In neighboring Kazakhstan, the economy is booming in comparison, with gross domestic product growth set for around 10 percent this year. Like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan has large reserves of oil and gas. It also has an 81-ton-a-year gold-mining industry, the fifth-largest cotton production in the world, an aircraft plant and, as I've mentioned, a car industry. With fabled cities like Samarqand, Bukhara and Khiva on the mythic Silk Road, it also has massive potential for tourism. Moreover, the country's population of 24 million, the largest in ex-Soviet Central

Asia, is more than enough to make it an attractive market to large multinationals. Tashkent, the region's largest city, has the potential to become Central Asia's business hub.

But Uzbekistan has seen investors leave in droves over the last two years as urgently needed reforms have been repeatedly put off. The evidence is in the abandoned, half-completed office building sites left by Turkish companies that flocked to Uzbekistan in the early 1990s. The wave of friendship and feelings of Turkic unity weren't enough to overcome the barriers. (Among other things, Karimov accused Turkey of harboring Islamic militants.) Even the International Monetary Fund effectively closed its mission in Tashkent this year.

Most fingers point above all to Uzbekistan's refusal to allow free convertibility of its currency, the *som*. The official rate is 429.19 som to the U.S. dollar. However, the black market rate, easily obtainable on the streets—albeit from worried-looking moneychangers—is around 1,200. Only a tiny number of well-connected businesses can buy dollars at the official rate, allowing them to profit handsomely by importing goods for roughly a third of their true value. Most companies cannot. Foreign firms, meanwhile, find it all but impossible to convert *soms* into dollars at any price. As a result, while some of the world's largest oil and gas companies have made huge investments in Kazakhstan—which



Cotton accounts for 40 percent of the country's agricultural production. A Soviet-imposed cotton monoculture wreaked havoc with Uzbekistan's environment and its ability to produce what it needs today.

is itself by no means a democratic or otherwise open country—virtually none are in Uzbekistan. The same picture is true in most other sectors. Uz-Daewoo has been one of the few exceptions.

"It should be the other way around," Nikolai said. "Private initiative should be encouraged. People should be al-



lowed to work, pay their taxes and claim profits.

"But instead, you can't take your profits out of whatever bank they're in," he added, explaining yet another obstacle to doing business in Uzbekistan. "It's not allowed. Or it's allowed but the money has to be spent in certain places. Government-connected, of course. So naturally people don't declare their taxes and when they're caught they're thrown in jail, where they meet criminals with whom they form illegal and semi-legal structures. It's a bad situation."

At the top of the political/economic pyramid sits Karimov, who dominates almost all aspects of life in Uzbekistan. He became the republic's Communist Party boss in 1989 and in 1990 reincarnated himself as president, the position he's occupied ever since. An orphan who is reputed to have foregone the name "Islam" for the Slavic nickname "Slava" when he was a boy, Karimov is an ethnic Tajik from the Tajik enclave of Samarqand. He has surrounded himself with clan members from his hometown, and was last re-elected in 2000, in polling to which the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe declined to send observers because of clear abuses of power. (The government claimed Karimov won 91.9 percent of the vote.) Billboards bearing Karimov's image are ubiquitous in Uzbekistan, as are hand-painted Soviet-style quotations attributed to him.

The hordes of western journalists who flocked to Uzbekistan since September 11 have rightly written much of the administration's human-rights abuses. Many have also criticized Washington for cooperating with Karimov's repressive government. But, as far as I know, no one has offered an alternative. And that's be-

cause there are precious few of them—if any.

Part of Russia's jealously guarded sphere of influence, Uzbekistan suddenly found itself a major nexus in the ostensibly flowering but still-delicate Russian-U.S. bilateral relations.

Following the attacks, Putin called U.S. President George W. Bush and soon after publicly backed the U.S. campaign against bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist group. Among other moves, Putin stood down Russian troops, meaning they would not automatically respond in kind to a U.S. military state of heightened alert. The Russian president also pledged intelligence cooperation and gave his consent for U.S. forces to be deployed in Uzbekistan. Such actions would of course have previously been inconceivable given the recent Russian-initiated standoff between the two former Cold War enemies.

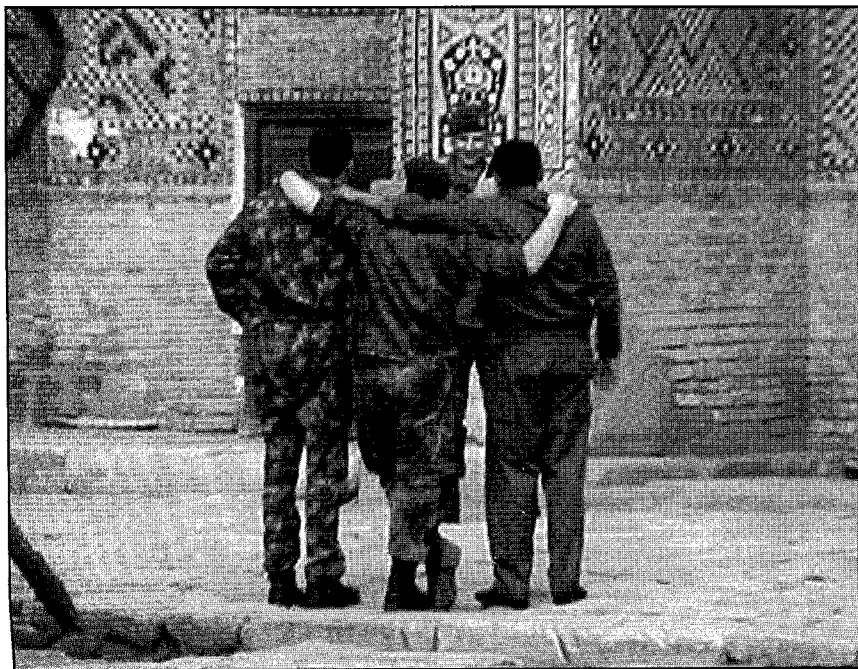
The fact is that Karimov and his allies are using Uzbekistan's new role to strengthen their positions, a development that will inevitably erode the country's already barely existing individual, economic, political and press freedoms. That almost no one I spoke to—except for a hounded ex-KGB operative and a couple of others—would mention anything other than that things are all right in Uzbekistan showed just how deep and all-encompassing average citizens' plight really is.

Slav and Turkic Interaction

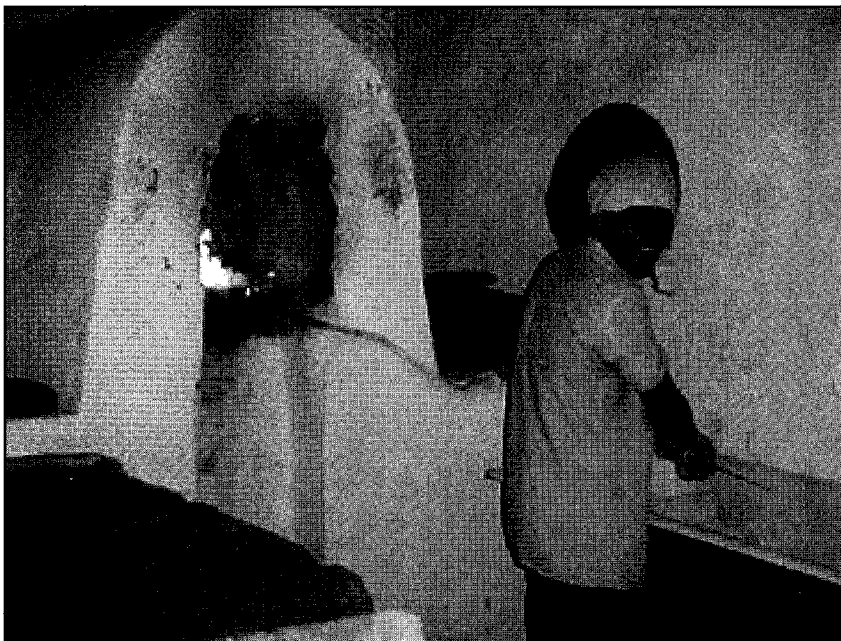
I decided to travel to Uzbekistan shortly after the terrorist attacks on the United States. (I'd been meaning to go there for some time to visit relatives in Tashkent—the family of my mother's first cousin, who was once a minister of

transportation under Communist rule and came out of the Soviet collapse with the lucrative directorship of an electronics factory that once produced radars for the Soviet versions of the AWACS plane.)

But I especially wanted to go to Uzbekistan to observe the development of its society vis-à-vis Russia's. Slavs and Turks have cohabited and interacted with each other since prehistory, and the Turkic nomads living on present-day Russia's southern steppes did as much as any other group to help form Muscovy's culture. "Scratch a Russian and you'll find a Tatar," the saying goes. That's no accident. The steppe around what is now the Volga River city of Kazan—now the capital of Russia's Tatarstan republic, but once a center of the Golden Horde, a successor to the so-called Mongol Empire—was once inhabited primarily by Turkic nomadic pastoralists. Part of the success of Muscovy's rapid growth be-



German and Uzbekistan soldiers in Samarqand. They assured me they were part of a long-planned bilateral exchange that had nothing to do with September 11.



A non-Uzbek flatbread-bakery in a small village between Samargand and Bukhara. It was using local Uzbek flour—a new development as the country tries to crawl out of the shadow of its cotton monoculture.

ginning in the 16th century was its ability to coopt these and other local élites into its own political and social hierarchy.

A number of groups living in the region were once Persian, speaking an eastern Persian dialect, and their influence reached the edges of the Slav forests. (So it's also no accident that the names of a number of rivers, including Ukraine's Dniepr, Russia's Don—even the Danube—derives from the Iranian word for "river.") The name "Kazan" itself comes from the Persian, as does Moscow's Kitaigorod, a medieval neighborhood in the center of town. Even most Russians assume the name means "Chinatown," ("Kitai" is Russian for "China.") In fact, the name means "earthen quarter," and also derives from Persian.

The Persians were gradually absorbed by Turks—who had also inhabited the area from the 5th century—and vanished as a separate group by the mid-15th century. The lingua franca became Kipchak Tatar, a northwestern branch of Turkic. According to Harvard professor Edward Keenan, Kipchak Tatar was spoken from Cairo to Beijing. Present-day Kazakh and Uzbek also derive from Kipchak.

In the winter, Turkic nomads lived in the south, many of them hunkering down around the shores of the Caspian Sea and further east into Central Asia. There, they were exposed to the Persians and sedentary Turks who lived in cities and oases, and maintained a more traditional and highly developed Islamic culture. In the summer, the nomads would travel north to the edges Christendom—the Slav forests south of Moscow—where they would sell sheep and horses and transmit their culture.

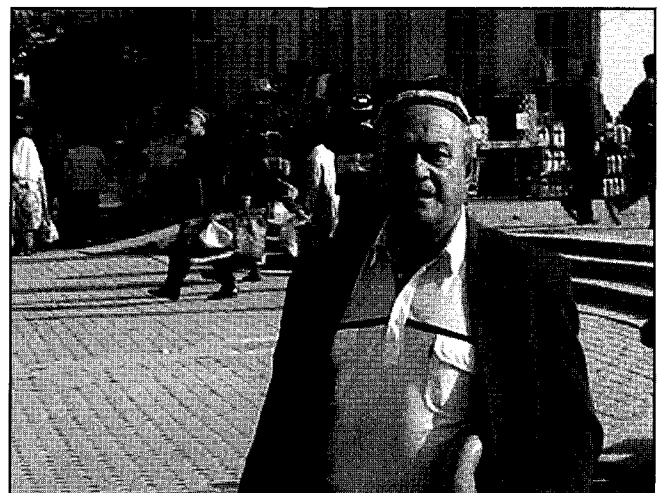
The often-misrepresented Mongol Empire that rose in

the 12th century actually involved many fewer "Mongols" than Turks. In and above Central Asia, these were the same Turks who had been living in the region for centuries. They were essentially plugged into a massive empire brought together by trade moving east to west and back. (Nomadism provides a subsistence existence—perhaps the best kind suited to the barren land. Nomad kinship groups banded together to form fairly independent small settlements called *auls*. But when trade hit the region and wealth was passed downward, the potential for political organization became much greater.)

Most students of Russian history speak of the "Mongol yoke." In fact, those making up the Mongol Empire were far more interested in their all-important trade routes than the bickering Slav principalities to the north. The Turks tended to be more cosmopolitan and gravitated toward Constantinople, a major trade center. When Moscow began its rise following the decline of the so-called Mongol Empire along with its trade routes, it actually belonged more to the old Central Asian steppe world than any other larger culture, including Europe's. The Slav court often imitated the practices of the once-highly successful Turks. Indeed, according to Keenan, the Russian capital was one of the last places in which scribes knew how to write Turkic in Uigur script. (Uigurs are Turkic, mostly Muslim, and live chiefly in present-day Northwest China and Kazakhstan.)

Multiple Groups

Only two-fifths of Uzbekistan's land are now fertile: valleys around the Amu Darya and Syr Darya Rivers where farmers grow mostly cotton and fruit. Six percent of the



A Samargand man. He's wearing the ubiquitous local hat—the tubeteika—and has a loaf of non tucked under his jacket.

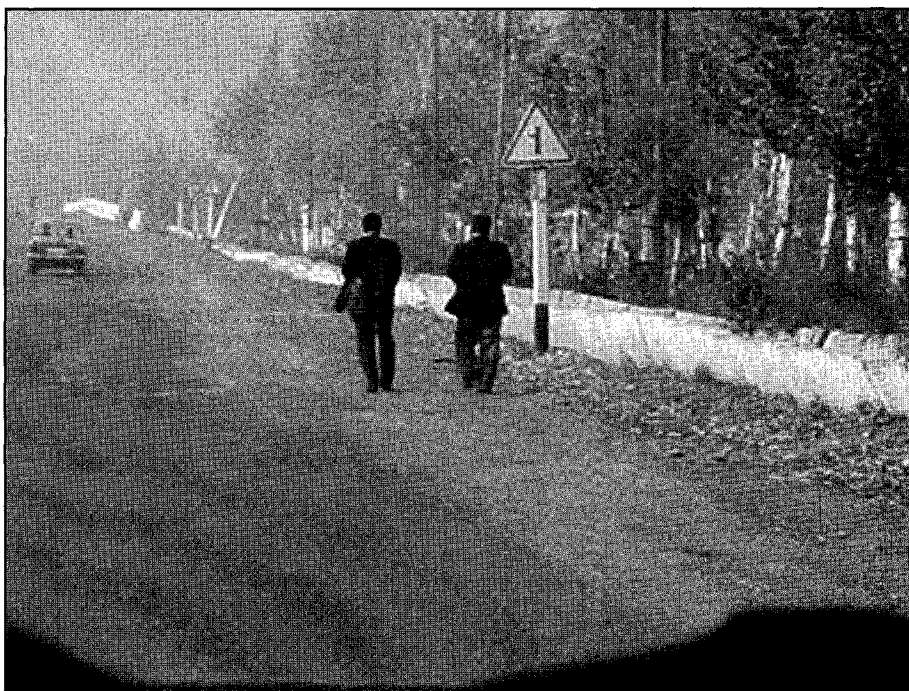
land is irrigated; forty-one percent consists of meadows and pastures; the rest is steppe, desert, and semi-arid land. Uzbekistan claims to be the world's second-largest exporter—and cotton takes up around 30 percent of the country's fertile, irrigated land, Uzbekistan is the largest producer of fruits and vegetables in the Commonwealth of Independent States, or CIS, the loose alliance of former Soviet republics.

According to official figures—which are almost never accurate if for no other reason than it's almost impossible to get an accurate reading—Turkic Uzbeks make up 80 of the populace, Russians, 5.5 percent, and Tajiks, 5 percent. (The government has political reasons for claiming that the bulk of the population—in a land populated by so many groups—is chiefly what it calls “Uzbek.”) Ethnic Koreans also live in Uzbekistan. Stalin exiled many here from the Far East during the 1930s. Poles, Germans, and Tartars, also live here, living records of the flow of people who crossed the land, often during war. A large number of Slavs, however, have left since 1991. Meanwhile, 88 percent of the population is Muslim and 40 percent lives below the poverty line.

Tourism

If September 11 inflicted one single palpable effect on Uzbekistan, it was on tourism. The director of one Tashkent hotel still truly stuck in the Soviet era complained to me that while the number of visitors to Uzbekistan had been growing steadily over the past few years, it suddenly dropped after September 11. “They’re afraid of coming,” the plump, toad-like boss said of the many groups of tourists who had cancelled reservations. “But there’s nothing to worry about. Look around—do you see any threats?” I peered out of the dirty window of his dingily wall-papered office. All I could see were grey, 1980s-era Soviet concrete-slab buildings—and some Daewoos. I got out my notebook to write down some figures. The director changed his tune. “Well, actually, things aren’t so bad,” he assured me. “We have a 70 percent occupancy rate.” He picked up the telephone and barked at a secretary to compile a list of guests for the month of October. Five minutes later, she brought in a hand-written list. The director glanced over it, but refrained from giving it to me.

In fact, even in good times, tourists in Uzbekistan are often elderly people on expensive tours bought through state firms. Independent travel is virtually non-existent, and the government does little to support it. Reuters recently quoted one senior western diplomat in Tashkent de-



On the road between Tashkent and Samarqand

scribing the tourism ministry as “the ministry for the prevention of tourism.”

The hotel director seemed not to notice such obstacles to his business. “The president is a powerful man,” he said instead. “Thanks to him, we can take responsibility and defend ourselves.” An acquaintance later explained the hotel director’s reticence. “Like everyone else in this country, he’s the equivalent of a government official. It may look to you like a private business, but believe me, everything is strictly controlled. He’s essentially a state bureaucrat.”

Islam and Extremism

“Strictly controlled” is perhaps a euphemism because massively corrupt regimes like Uzbekistan’s cannot overcome the inefficiency that comes with everyone being on the take. The bureaucratic oppression worsened significantly after 1999, when a series of coordinated bombings rocked Tashkent, killing 16. One bomb exploded outside the parliament.

The government said the blasts were the work of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, a group proclaiming support for the creation of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. Law enforcement agencies say the IMU received support from bin Laden. Estimates of the group’s size range from western guesses of 1,000 to Uzbek government figures of up to 9,000. All accounts agree that the IMU has grown from what was originally a small, national group aimed at ousting Karimov to a broader movement focused on Central Asia. It draws recruits from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and even China and has until recently been able to hide in Afghanistan.

The country experienced real shock following the ex-

plosions. "We were stable. Then, suddenly, we had terrorists," Nikolai, the former KGB agent, told me. "I saw the blast in front of parliament myself," he added. "I saw ministers come out with shock written all over their faces." Those living in Uzbekistan mention "February 16" as the rest of the world now speaks of September 11.

Karimov said the 1999 explosions were meant for him, and stepped up a crackdown against the population in the name of wiping out fundamentalist extremism. His reaction was more than simply an attempt to shut down his opposition. It was also part of a natural reflex: Karimov is the product of a Russified Soviet bureaucracy that suppressed the practice of Islam. Pledging an intention to fight Islamic extremism is also a means of presenting himself to Russia and other states as the most desirable option. Meanwhile, by aligning himself with so-called "European" countries, he can draw on their influence and resources when needed at home in the name of a general fight against extremism.

As part of the government's new measures, there are checkpoints on every road leading into Tashkent and spaced throughout the republic's roads. They force traffic to come to a halt, even though guards manning the stations rarely do a convincing job of checking cars. Meanwhile, human rights groups say the government's sustained campaign has led to the arrests of thousands of Muslims, many for doing little more than expressing their religious beliefs. Some 5,000 to 10,000 people are believed to be in jail on charges relating to political activities. Countless reports have surfaced of arbitrary arrests, torture and murder at the hands of security forces. Government agents monitor every mosque. Karimov himself offered the following opinion about Islamic extremists: "Such people should be shot in the head," he once

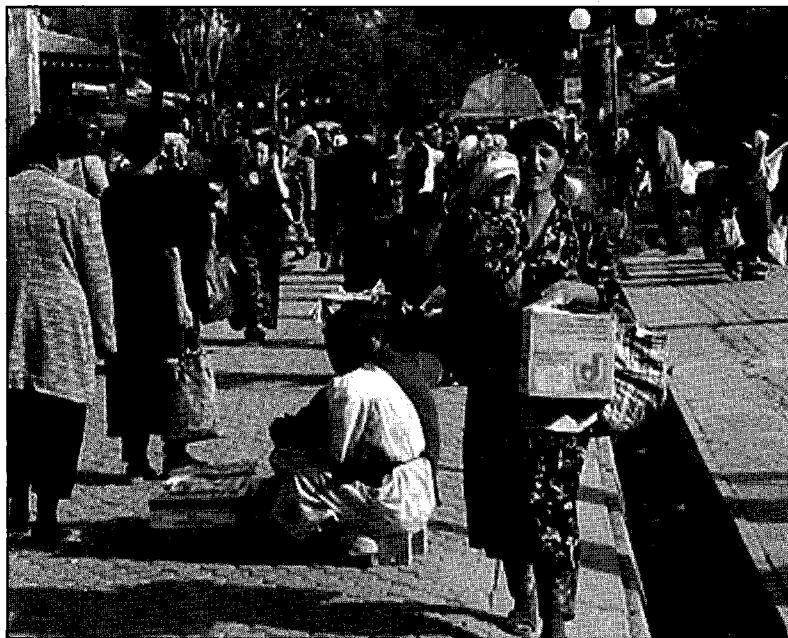
told parliament. "If necessary, I'll shoot them myself."

The campaign's effects are immediately evident to the visitor. Tashkent's handful of newspapers include only government mouthpieces, neutral business journals and Hollywood scandal sheets. "There's no press freedom here," one woman told me. "Karimov runs the country how he wants. It's like under the Soviet Union, when the state pretty much controlled everything. You can't do anything here without approval.

"So we don't read the local newspapers because there's nothing in them of any value," she added. "We get all our news about Uzbekistan from Russian television and newspapers." (The Russian news in fact has very little information if any about the region.)

Still, many locals remain optimistic—testament to the spirit that keeps people here going in adversity. A neatly dressed, elderly Jewish man picked me up in his tiny Daewoo when I was hailing a cab. "I think it's great there are American soldiers here," he told me after asking me where I was from. "Those people who choose not to live by rule of law should be physically eliminated," he added cheerfully. Why had he stayed in Tashkent when so many Jews living here have left since 1991? "I like it here," he smiled. "The weather's good. Plus my favorite woman is here." His wife, I asked? He laughed. "You're a big joker," he replied.

Others aren't so jolly. As I've indicated, Nikolai, the former KGB agent, says he was fired from his job on the country's U.N.-funded anti-narcotics committee partly because of his minority status. "I feel this to be my homeland," he said of Uzbekistan, where he was born. "But Uzbekistan doesn't feel that way about me.



Outside the market in Samarkand. The bazaar is a focal point in social life—especially since 1991.

"It's like in 1937," he added, speaking of one of the darkest periods of Stalin's repressions. He then described a trip he made to the United States in 1998 in his old job. "I spoke to Congressmen who told me, 'You have a human-rights problem in Uzbekistan.' But the first secretary of the Uzbek Embassy was there with me. Of course he was a secret-service operative. So I couldn't say anything.

"If I say there are economic and social problems, I'm told I'll be thrown in jail," he added. "Why? Because the economy is growing on paper. But take one look around you at how the people live and you'll see the reality for yourself."

Nikolai adds that Karimov's authoritarian tactics serve to increasingly isolate him from reality. "He can't have advisers," Nikolai said. "He can only tolerate people who carry out his orders. No one tells him what's really going on. He only hears about things he wants

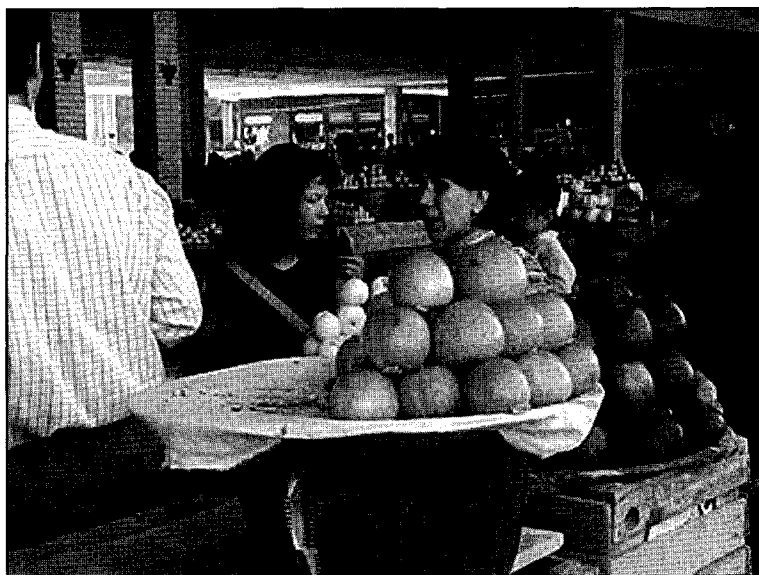
to hear about and he loses sense of reality.”

Indeed, the government reacts to what it sees as problems by increasingly shutting down avenues of criticism. Several days after I'd arrived in Tashkent, the Russian TV-6 television station, broadcast in Uzbekistan along with a number of other Russian channels, aired footage of a U.S. C-17 cargo plane landing in Uzbekistan. The station's cameraman had obviously sneaked into an area forbidden to the press. The following day, TV-6 was yanked off the air.

The Drugs Trade

Nikolai uses his experience in the field of anti-narcotics to illustrate his criticism of the Uzbek authorities. When United Nations representatives negotiated to set up an anti-narcotics commission in 1994, he said, “all of the state structures were against it. The Interior Ministry even said we don't have a drug problem.” But the problem was getting much worse as smugglers looked for new routes to transport opium from Afghanistan to markets in the West. Over the last half-decade, Taliban authorities provided protection to opium convoys for large fees, and used the hard currency they earned to buy arms and ammunition to further their military aims. That in no small part helped allow the Taliban extend its control to nearly 90 percent of the country.

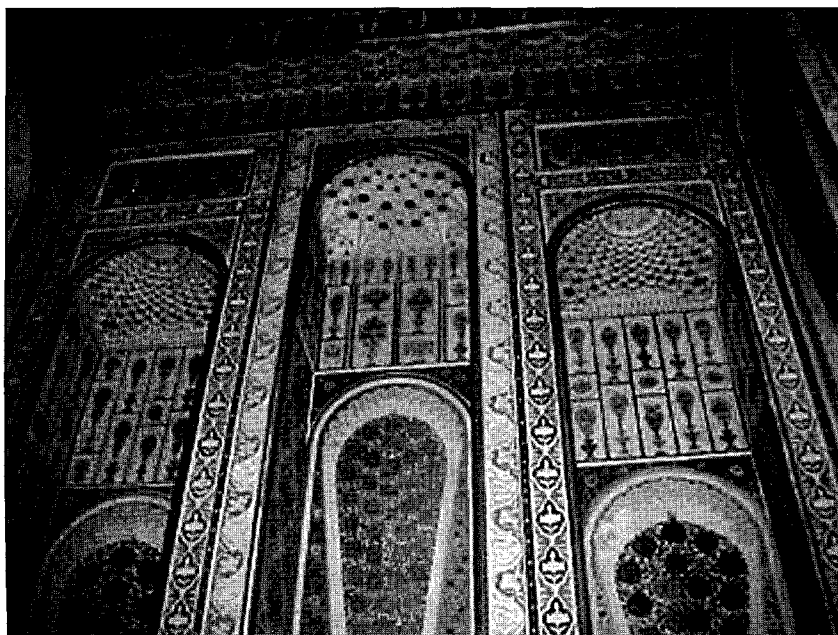
An anti-drug committee was eventually set up in Uzbekistan with the help of Bogdan Lisovich, U.N. Drug Control Program regional representative for Central Asia. “Afghanistan now produces 75 percent of the world's il-



Haggling at the market—an essential skill.

licit opiates,” Lisovich told the BBC in 1999. “And that's a serious threat for the security of Central Asia, with its permeable borders and poor infrastructure.” Indeed, Central Asia's role in the drug trade is growing.

“He was able to draw a lot of attention from the rest of the world,” Nikolai said in praise of Lisovich. Nikolai, who took a leading role in setting up the committee, added that once the body was created, the amount of cultivation in—as opposed to transportation through—Uzbekistan itself plummeted. Cultivation dropped from 130,000 hectares to 2,500 today, he added. But problems concerning cultivation continued to exist.



A 19th-century Persian-influenced interior design once common in the region's cities. This one happens to be in a summer palace outside Bukhara, built by the last emir at the turn of the century.

Nikolai said the Interior Ministry spent \$500,000 a year on helicopters to seek out poppy fields. “But the helicopters hardly ever found anything,” he said. “Either the pilots were flying in the wrong places or they weren't looking out of the window.” Nikolai checked pilots' logbooks and drove to areas supposedly flown over. Locals often said they hadn't seen or heard any helicopters. When he complained at the ministry, Nikolai says, he was told, “Whom are you acting against here? If you create any trouble, you'll be squashed.”

“Only people loyal to the administration are left in the committee,” he said of his recent firing. “The president says a lot on television about the need to fight drugs. But no concrete steps are taken. Heroin is now flowing in from everywhere. It's cheaper than vodka.”

But there are few sympathetic ears in the West, let alone Uzbekistan. Indeed, drugs, Nikolai says, figure prominently in

the authorities' attempts to silence opposition. "They're planted all the time," he said. In just one of countless cases, Uzbek human-rights activist and former member of Parliament Shovruk Ruzimuradov died in police custody earlier this year, reportedly after having been arrested for possessing religious party leaflets, drugs and gun cartridges. He was denied legal counsel and contact with his family and reportedly was subjected to torture and beating. Human rights advocates claim the evidence used against him was planted.

"When I said we had contradictory laws that don't target producers as much as users," Nikolai said. "I was accused of wanting to cut back on the powers of the courts. When I said I wanted to cut down the level of corruption on the part of law enforcers, I was practically accused of being part of the mafia.

"The situation is just going to get worse," Nikolai added, citing the case of an anti-poppy fungus laboratory. Created by the Soviet Union as a center for germ warfare research, the laboratory produced horticultural pathogens designed to destroy the food crops of Russia's enemies. In 1992, the laboratory was reincarnated as a place to develop a deadly strain of fungus for use against opium poppies.

Nikolai says it was he who brought the center to the attention of representatives of western agencies in Uzbekistan. He says the CIA almost immediately gave \$60,000 to the center, in large part to pay the salaries of the scientists working there. That gave the center a large boost, and Nikolai says the lab successfully increased the fungus's potency and safeguarded it against mutation. When the fungus was tested on opium poppies grown in eastern Uzbekistan, initial reports claimed total success. Scientists and U.N. staff were forbidden to talk about the project. Nonetheless, reports did make it into the western press. In 1999, several news agencies, including Agence France Press and the BBC, visited the lab. According to Nikolai, government officials disliked the way in which AFP spun the story. As a result, the fungus program has been all-but-shut down.

September 11 Politics

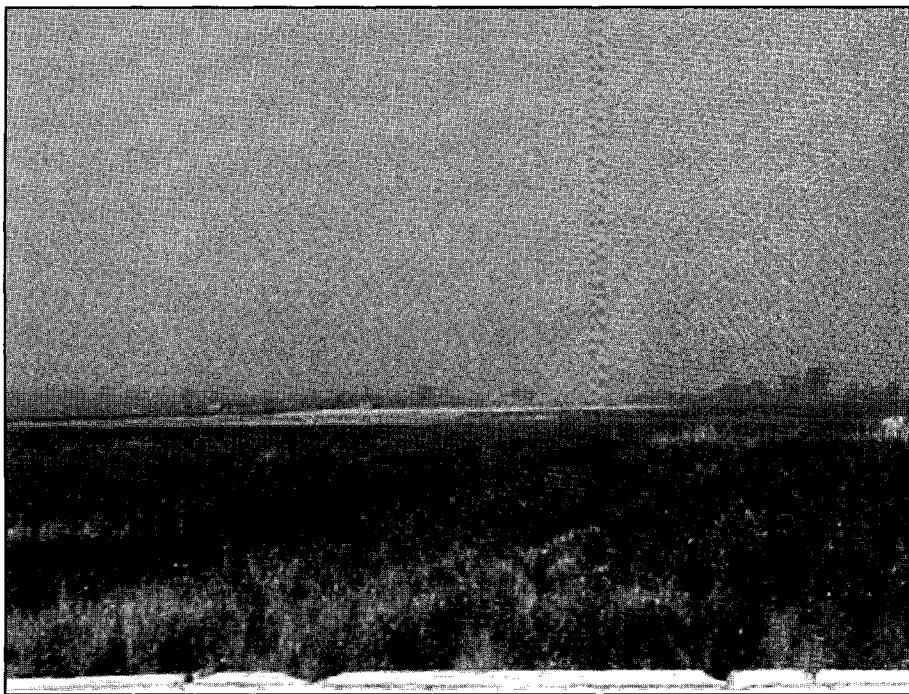
As I've mentioned, Uzbekistan's decision to cooperate with the United States in its campaign against the Taliban and bin Laden has as much to do with Karimov's own aspirations as with the desire to wipe out global terrorism. The deal with Washington, which most observers said the Uzbek president simply couldn't have passed

up—no matter how cautious he appeared in public—is part of a bid to make Uzbekistan the chief regional power.

America and Uzbekistan reached their major counter-terrorism agreement on October 7, the day the United States and Britain launched airstrikes against targets in Afghanistan. One of the concessions the United States is widely believed to have made to the Uzbek regime in return for its help is the singling out of the IMU as a target in the anti-terrorist campaign. Uzbekistan's chief terrorist target is Juma Namangani, the IMU leader reported by *The Washington Post* to have emerged as a top bin Laden lieutenant in the months before September 11. The Uzbek government had even sentenced Namangani, in absentia, to death, accusing him of plotting the Tashkent explosions as well as leading armed forays into the country in 1999 and 2000. Until recently, Namangani was safe in Afghanistan.

For U.S. forces, Uzbekistan's former Soviet bases located so close to Afghanistan make it a natural staging area in the campaign against bin Laden. (Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan extends 84 miles along the Amu Darya River.) The pact allowed U.S. troops and warplanes to use Uzbek airspace and military bases. Uzbekistan followed by opening the Khanabad base for an advance party of 1,000 combat troops from the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division. More troops were later deployed, along with planes, helicopters, and equipment to make the base usable.

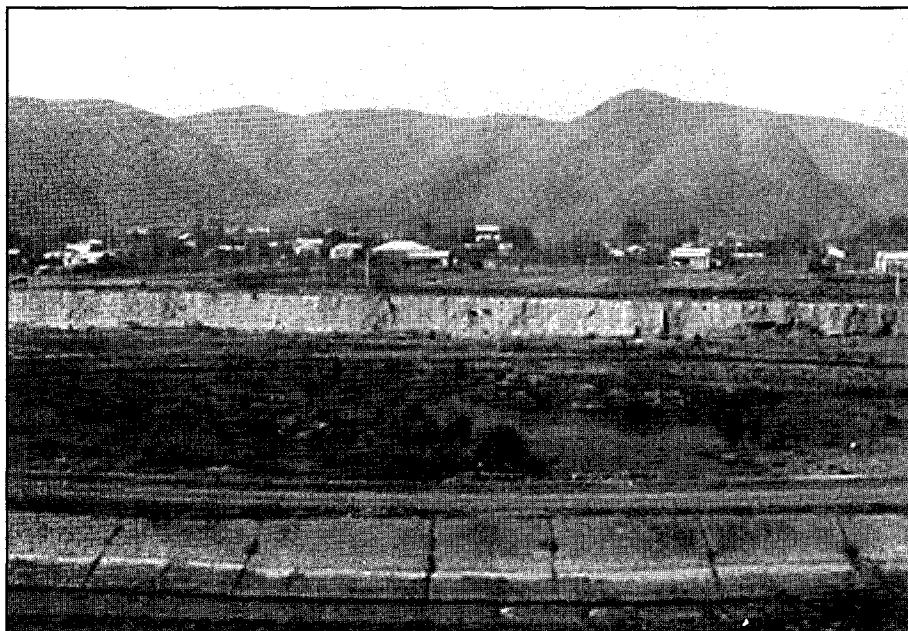
The official announcement of the cooperation agreement came as the Taliban said it had deployed 10,000 troops to its border with the former Soviet republic. That caused a certain amount of jitteriness in the republic for several days. As I've indicated, Khanabad is about 200 miles north of the border with Afghanistan. The roads leading south through



The ubiquitous cotton field.

the Karshi province, in which the base is located, were the same ones taken by Soviet tanks moving into Afghanistan over the so-called Friendship Bridge in 1979—and in 1989 again, on their way back after Mikhail Gorbachev had called the failed war off. (Alexander the Great also crossed the Amu Darya River, once known as the Oxus, not far away, on his way to India 2,300 years ago.)

Cooperation between the United States and Uzbekistan wasn't entirely new. The two countries were drawn to-



Hills outside Samarqand. Dry and deserty in summer, they briefly bloom with flowers in spring.

gether by their concern over Afghanistan in the late 1990s. The *Washington Post* recently reported that the United States and Uzbekistan have been quietly conducting joint covert operations aimed at countering the Taliban and its allies since over a year before the September 11 attacks. Nonetheless, the stationing of U.S. troops in the country was a much larger event, not least because of Russia's say on the matter.

Jockeying for Position

Popular opinion in Uzbekistan now has it that the Russian government is scared that the United States will refuse to withdraw its forces from Uzbekistan. It's almost needless to say that the country is situated in a strategically important location, bordering as it does five Central Asian states and lying along the old Silk Road. "Russia's afraid Uzbekistan will become a second Turkey," an official who asked to remain anonymous told me.

Feelings in Uzbekistan are more complicated. Cotton prices are low this year, and the whole region is scarred by drought, which cut harvest rates. That has reduced a vital inflow of dollars, making it harder for the cash-strapped country to raise foreign credits. Meanwhile, American involvement would surely mean financial aid and an improved economy, the reasoning goes. So unless economic

reforms take place soon, analysts agree, a generous, grateful U.S. looks like the best hope for the immediate future.

Such a "strategy" has its problems. Other Central Asian states, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are concerned that the U.S. presence will indeed boost Uzbekistan's influence in the region—at their expense. That's not entirely unfounded. Uzbekistan has lately become more aggressive toward its Kyrgyz and Tajik neighbors, with Karimov blaming both for harboring IMU rebels. The countries are also locked in border disputes. That has led Stratfor, a private U.S. consulting group specializing in global intelligence, to issue reports warning that Karimov wants to expand his country's borders by seizing the entire Fergana Valley from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Both adjacent countries are small and too weak to provide Uzbekistan with serious opposition, while Turkmenistan's military barely even exists.

As I've mentioned, one of the places in which Islamist sentiment is on the rise is in the fertile yet impoverished Fergana Valley east of Tashkent. Nikolai is concerned that anti-government activists there might stage a "border" incident with Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan. "It might blow up, sparking internal divisions and a grab for money and power." Furthermore, he added, "Many things are done for emotional effect, not rational politics. We shut off gas to Kyrgyzstan. So they shut off our water supply." Border policies are among the worst to suffer. "Uzbeks live in Kyrgyzstan. And Kyrgyz live in Uzbekistan. So harsh border policies can lead to an explosion." The largest potential problem confronting Uzbekistan, Nikolai says, is the possibility that the country may disintegrate into the kind of clan warfare that has crippled Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Uzbek authorities must be mulling over another factor. U.S. involvement would surely mean pressure to clean up the country's human-rights situation. Many on the receiving end of the government's abuses hope that would be true. But such considerations involve the hypothetical and unlikely outcome that U.S. forces would remain in Uzbekistan for a long time. The White House would surely not risk angering Moscow, particularly during Bush's courtship of Putin; even more so since the dividends—given the region's huge uncontrollability—would most likely be very small in any case. Irking Putin would make Russia much less cooperative on the issue of Caspian Sea oil, the largest economic dividend in the region over which Russia now holds the dominant position. But whether or not relations between Russia and the United States deteriorate, there would most likely be little love lost

between Moscow and Tashkent. Karimov has rebuffed the Kremlin's attempts to restore its clout in the region, in part by pulling out of a Russian-led security pact in 1999.

Meanwhile, some in Uzbekistan say the United States isn't really interested in fighting the Taliban—that the bombs being dropped at the time of my visit there were purely for show. The U.S. once outfitted former members of the anti-Soviet mujihadeen now fighting for the Taliban, the reasoning goes. So the chief aim must surely still be to deny Russia and its allies in the Afghan Northern Alliance influence in the region—even at the expense of having the Taliban regime (albeit a more moderate version) remain in power. The implicit threat would be that if the United States were forced to leave, it would relinquish its threat over the Taliban, which would again run amok.

Even more questionable theories have it that Washington wants to use Afghanistan to influence the entire region by controlling the drugs trade. Central Asian states could be corrupted from within by their own drug addicts. Distributing heroin could be used to counteract even Uzbekistan, were its government to act against American wishes. Such views are perhaps more indicative of the government's own ideas about possible uses for drugs than of its foreign policy. But it's perhaps worth noting that dur-

ing the Soviet-Afghan war—a conflict into which former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski boasted of having partly drawn Moscow—the CIA managed to distribute heroin to Soviet troops, among many other clandestine activities.

What's clear from such speculation is that U.S. involvement in Central Asia won't necessarily help the stated cause of democracy and freedom. In fact, it has often had the opposite effect. A mid-1990s policy of trying to "strengthen" the independence of Central Asian states from Russia's influence resulted in Washington's cooperation with the region's most oppressive regimes—Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. As political scientist Ira Straus recently noted, this led to a competition in Central Asia with Russia between "their" dictators and "ours." "Theirs," the dictatorships in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, countries with large ethnic-Russian minority populations and which agreed to form a new semi-union with Russia—happen to be the less oppressive ones (although they, too, have greatly tightened the screws since 1991). Indeed, all of Central Asia has moved away from the freedoms that emerged in the last years of Soviet rule. And it looks set to continue doing so. Meanwhile, Karimov critics worry the U.S. presence in Uzbekistan will help legitimize the president's repressive measures. □



Next to a non stand in the central Tashkent market. Non is central to Uzbek cuisine.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Shelly Renae Browning (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farnelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Gregory Feifer (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican-American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-4273**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

© 2001-2002 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation.

The information contained in this publication may not be reproduced without the writer's permission.

Author: Feifer, Gregory
Title: ICWA Letters - Europe/Russia
ISSN: 1083-4273
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs,
Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; South Asia;
Mideast/North Africa; The Americas;
Sub-Saharan Africa