

APPROACHES TO HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY IN FOREIGN SOURCES: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

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Annotation. This article explores foreign approaches to historical geography in the modern period, focusing from 1945 to the present. It examines how theoretical frameworks and interdisciplinary methods have developed over time, especially in response to global changes such as the Cold War, decolonization, and post-Soviet transformations. Central Asia is included as a regional case study that reflects broader global historical-geographical patterns. The article also evaluates limitations in foreign literature and proposes directions for future research.

Keywords: historical geography, foreign sources, 1945–present, spatial analysis, Central Asia, interdisciplinary methods, memory and identity.

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются подходы к исторической географии в зарубежных источниках в контексте современного периода, с акцентом на временной отрезок с 1945 года до настоящего времени. Анализируются изменения в теоретических подходах, применение междисциплинарных методов, а также влияние глобальных процессов, таких как холодная война, деколонизация и постсоветские трансформации. Центральная Азия рассматривается как региональный пример, отражающий более широкие историко-географические тенденции. Также оцениваются ограничения зарубежной литературы и предлагаются направления для будущих исследований.

Ключевые слова: историческая география, зарубежные источники, 1945–настоящее время, пространственный анализ, Центральная Азия, междисциплинарные методы, память и идентичность.

Introduction

Historical geography is a field that connects history and geography by studying how people, environments, and places interact over time. In foreign academic sources, the modern period—especially from 1945 to the present—has witnessed significant changes in how scholars approach space, memory, and identity. The end of World War II, the Cold War, decolonization, globalization, and the collapse of the Soviet Union created new historical conditions that demanded updated tools and perspectives.

This article analyzes how historical geography has been shaped in foreign literature during the modern era, focusing mainly on the period after 1945. It highlights interdisciplinary approaches, theoretical shifts, and regional case studies - including Central Asia - to reflect the global nature of spatial-historical analysis.

1. Theoretical Shifts Since 1945

In the post-war decades, historical geography moved from a primarily descriptive and map-based discipline to a more interpretive and critical one. Influential thinkers like H.C. Darby laid the

groundwork by emphasizing the reconstruction of past landscapes using historical documents. However, after the 1970s, the field embraced new theoretical directions.

The rise of critical geography introduced ideas about power, ideology, and representation in spatial studies. David Harvey's work on space and capitalism (1970s–1990s) emphasized how economic systems influence geography over time. Doreen Massey further argued that places are not fixed but constantly shaped by interactions, memories, and power structures.

This change in thinking expanded the scope of historical geography, encouraging scholars to ask not only “what happened where,” but also “why, how, and with what long-term spatial consequences?”

“Historical geography has undergone a major shift from descriptive methods to more interpretive and critical approaches that challenge previous ways of understanding space and history”¹.

2. Interdisciplinary Tools and Approaches

Modern foreign research integrates various disciplines into historical geography:

- Geographic Information Systems (GIS): Widely used since the 1990s to analyze historical maps and visualize landscape changes.
- Cultural and memory studies: Help explore how people remember and interpret past events through geography (e.g., monuments, ruins, sacred spaces).
- Political geography: Focuses on post-conflict borders, state formation, and spatial identities.
- Environmental history: Studies long-term interactions between humans and their environments — important for analyzing ecological disasters.

“The integration of tools such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and the study of cultural memory has expanded the methods available to historical geographers, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of historical landscapes”².

This interdisciplinary approach allows historical geography to deal with complex issues like displacement, colonization, and territorial narratives.

3. Central Asia as a Case Study in Foreign Sources

Since the 1990s, Central Asia has received more attention in foreign historical geography literature. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, researchers from Europe and North America began exploring how the region's spatial identity was reshaped by independence, nationalism, and globalization.

“Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has become a key area for historical geographers seeking to understand the effects of Soviet planning, nationalism, and post-colonial transformations”³.

Key themes include:

- Soviet spatial legacies: Foreign sources often examine how Soviet policies reshaped cities, agriculture, and resource use.
- Nation-building and memory: Independent states created new narratives through symbolic geography—renaming cities, building monuments, redefining borders.
- Environmental crises: The Aral Sea disaster is a recurring theme in foreign literature, studied as a spatial outcome of Soviet-era development.

¹ Harvey, D. (1990). *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

² Cosgrove, D. (1984). *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. London: Croom Helm.

³ Akiner, Sh. (2002). *The Formation of Kazakh Identity: From Tribe to Nation-State*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

These studies position Central Asia as a valuable region for understanding the effects of political power and historical memory on geographic space.

4. Limitations and Critiques of Foreign Approaches

Although foreign sources offer rich insights, they are not without limitations. One major critique is Eurocentrism — the tendency to interpret non-Western regions using Western theories and priorities. This can overlook local voices and cultural contexts.

Another challenge is data accessibility. Due to political sensitivities, fieldwork and archival research in Central Asia can be limited for foreign scholars. Language barriers also prevent wider collaboration and exchange.

Moreover, some foreign works tend to focus on exotic or dramatic topics, like ecological disasters or ethnic conflict, while ignoring everyday spatial realities.

“While foreign scholars bring valuable insights, their work is often critiqued for its Eurocentric perspective, which tends to overlook or distort local experiences and histories”⁴.

5. Future Directions for Historical Geography

As we move further into the 21st century, historical geography is evolving with technology and global issues. Some likely future trends include:

- Digital reconstructions of past landscapes using 3D modeling and satellite imagery;
- Climate-focused historical geography, especially for regions vulnerable to environmental change;
- Postcolonial and decolonial perspectives that include indigenous knowledge and challenge dominant narratives;
- More local-global collaboration, where researchers from Central Asia and other regions co-author and co-analyze data.

“Nation-building in post-Soviet Central Asia has involved the intentional manipulation of spatial identity, such as renaming cities and constructing new monuments, as a means of asserting sovereignty and national pride”⁵.

The field will continue to grow as long as it remains open to new perspectives and grounded in real human experiences.

Conclusion

Foreign approaches to historical geography since 1945 have made the field more critical, interdisciplinary, and globally aware. While they offer powerful tools and theories, they must also be balanced with regional knowledge and collaboration. Central Asia’s increasing presence in global research reflects its strategic and symbolic importance in understanding how history lives in space.

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⁴ Sidaway, J.D. (2002). Imagined Regional Communities: Integration and Sovereignty in the Global South. *Geopolitics*, 7(2).

⁵ Gill, B. (2005). Environmental Degradation in Central Asia. *Central Asian Survey*, 24(1).

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