

Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane. By S. Frederick Starr. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013. (Paperback 2015). 680 pp. (ISBN: 9780691157733)

Interest in the history and culture of Central Asia tends to increase at times when the fate of the region is in the balance. For most of the 19th century, right up to the signing of the Pamir Boundary Commission protocols in 1895, that introduced the division of the region into spheres of British and Russian influence, there has been rivalry between world powers for control of the central part of the Asian continent, run through by the trade routes from Europe and the Middle East to China and India. During this period, European travelers and scientists penetrated into Central Asia, publishing descriptions of their travels, in which the Western reader could learn about a hitherto unknown part of the planet and its various vernacular languages, historical and architectural monuments, diverse sanctuaries and religions.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of five new independent States in Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, have given rise to a number of practical issues related to the integration of these countries and the region as a whole into the international community. Challenges of interstate relations within the region and between new states and their neighbors, regarding the roles Central Asian countries would be able to play in global economic and political projects were part of the discourse. Answers to these questions could not be found without a proper understanding of the history of the region and its cultural and historical identity.

By the time of the emergence of the new states, Central Asian studies initiated by European and Russian scientists in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century had gained significant empirical data from extensive archaeological work and studies of written historical monuments. In the second half of the 20th century, the works of Russian and Central Asian scholars, which included the findings of long-term field and desk research, started to be published. Many of these scientists left this world at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, but there are many who continue to work productively today: Masson M.E. (1897-1986), Jakubowski A.Y. (1886-1953), Margulan A.H. (1904-1985), Belenitski A.M. (1904-1993), Bernshtam A.N. (1910-1956), Pugachenkova G.A. (1915-2007), Akishev K.A. (1924-2003), Litvinsky B.A. (1923-2010), Davidovich E.A. (1922-2013), Klyashtorny S.G. (1928-2015), Negmatov N.N. (1927-2011), Bolshakov O.G. (1929-), Buriakov Y.F. (1934-2015), Baipakov K.M. (1940-), Rtveladze E.V. (1942-), and others.

The work of these scientists has substantially facilitated the appearance of generalizing studies by Western scholars. Works are beginning to appear concerning the importance of the Central Asian region in the history of world civilization, and the opening and operation of the historic Silk Road. Since it is impossible to give an exhaustive list of such works, we mention here only a few that have received the greatest readership in recent years.

- Joe Gribb. *After Alexander: Central Asia before Islam*. London 2007.
- Christopher I. Beckwith. *Empires of the Silk Road: a history of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- R. Foltz. *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization* Palgrave, 2010.
- Peter Golden. *Central Asia in world History*. Oxford University press, 2011.

In this series of works, special significance belongs to *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* by the famous American orientalist, archaeologist, historian and culturologist, Frederick Starr. Since its publication in 2013, the book has attracted a flurry of responses from prominent scientists and political figures in the world. Experts on the problems of Central Asia at leading American and European universities have reviewed the book in the most prestigious scientific and popular periodicals. Politicians, who for many decades determined the fate of the region, among them the current President of Afghanistan and the retired Secretary of State of the United States, have confirmed the importance of the book for a broad audience, and in particular for specialists studying the history and culture of the peoples of Central Asia and the Silk Road. The well-known expert on the history of Central Asia and the Middle East, Professor Peter Golden, himself the author of the recently published "Central Asia in World History," briefly identified the why the new book had received so much attention: "This ambitious and much-needed book will be an eye-opener for many readers. S. Frederick Starr shows that Central Asia, often viewed today as a backwater, produced some of the most outstanding minds of the Middle Ages."

Everyone who reviewed the book and shared their impressions in the media has supported Professor Golden's assessment. The author of the book himself, who has repeatedly spoken about the work's main ideas in public, has emphasized that his task has been to highlight the contribution of Central Asian intellectuals in the development of the Islamic civilization and its predecessors, and to reinstate the famous names who have been cut off from their Central Asian identity and their peoples, because they were perceived as outsiders from Arab Muslim civilization.

Professor Starr formulates his reasons for writing this book in the first words of the preface. He did not aim to answer traditional scientific questions pertaining to the history of the region, or to submit his opinion on the range of debated issues, but simply wrote a book that he would like to read himself. This approach immediately singles the author out from a number of his colleagues, authors of purely academic research on Central Asia. Instead, Professor Starr takes the reader's position, as he leads the inquisitive student by the hand and guides him or her along a gallery of monuments to the material and intangible culture of Central Asian peoples. These monuments are not silent statues, or difficult to read medieval treatises, arranged in chronological order for his companions, but spirited people and talking books which argue with each other, and demonstrate to the inquisitive visitor of the gallery the controversies of intellectual life and the quests that worried the minds of Central Asia natives for centuries, in the shaping and development of their cultural lives.

The first chapter, entitled “The Center of the world,” has a special assignment. Here we come face to face with two of the most prominent figures of medieval Islamic science and culture, polymaths widely known during their lifetimes, just as now: al-Biruni of Khwarazm (973-1048) and Ibn Sina of Bukhara (980-1037). The narrative begins with the story of the correspondence of these scholars, when the youngest, Ibn Sina, was only 21 years old, and his senior colleague 28. These two young men discussed the fundamental questions of the universe: the existence of other worlds, the creation of the Earth and the stages of its evolution. The range of issues discussed in their correspondence covered those for which Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) was burned at the stake six hundred years later, and which subsequently formed the foundation of Darwinism.⁽¹⁾

How could this happen more than a thousand years ago, in countries considered today to be an intellectual backwater? The answer to this question is given in the first three chapters of the book. These demonstrate to the reader that at the time of the advent of Islam, the culture and intellectual environment in Central Asia reached a level sufficient to encounter the Middle East Muslim world and engage in an equal exchange of material and cultural ideas. According to the author, Central Asia at this historical stage was a coherent intellectual space, in which different cultures and religions merged together. This included the practice of translation and absorption of multilingual texts, and the interaction of different philosophical and religious teachings. Professor Starr calls this state “A Cauldron of Skills, Ideas, and Faiths.”⁽⁶³⁾

Central Asian intellectuals actively undertook exploration and development of the new environment in which they found themselves after the Arab conquest. Translations of Greek and Roman scholars allowed to draw from ancient wisdom, and the past experience of cultural interaction enabled them to develop and multiply the achievements of antiquity in the sciences. Young Ibn Sina and al-Biruni argued about the correctness of Aristotle and Plato, and they themselves moved on, approaching what polymaths achieved in the development of secular sciences and social thought in Europe. The author’s idea is very clear: Central Asia in the centuries experienced an era of intellectual life that can reasonably be compared with the era of European Enlightenment six hundred years later in the century.

Perhaps one of the main controversial issues, which is discussed in the book, but, apparently, will be the subject of further discussion in contemporary social scholarship, is that of a Central Asian identity. Is it possible to single such an entity out, or should the term ‘Central Asia’ be dealt with as a purely geographical concept - the space where different cultures met and interacted? The essence of Professor Starr’s position was correctly and concisely presented by one of the first reviewers of the book, Turkish professor Isinbike Togan, the daughter of the famous orientalist Zaki Validi Togan: “Central Asia should not be regarded as the “crossroads of civilizations,” ... but rather one should consider it as a “crossroads civilization”.¹

¹ http://www.bujournal.boun.edu.tr/docs/140073458727_2_6.pdf

The space in which Professor Starr locates this civilization includes, in addition to five new states, also Afghanistan and eastern Iran, Khorasan, as well as modern China's Xinjiang. (5-6) Local languages and culture - among these Sogdian, Khwarezmian, Bactrian and others - provided a consolidated nucleus of interaction with the languages and cultures that came to the region with invaders and traders. Turkic, Iranian and Arab traditions fused here into a single identity, each at its particular historical stage. One can see in the book the stages of rising cultural identity of the region as its component elements intermix.²

While reading this fascinating story chapter by chapter, we can see that the sages of Central Asia were among the leading intellectuals in the formation of the main features of Islamic civilization, performing in almost all the fields of science and culture. Some were active in engineering and the hard sciences, such as the mechanical engineers of the Banu Musa brethren, the mathematicians al-Khwarizmi and Omar Khayyam, the doctors ar-Razi and al-Masihi, and the astronomers al-Fargani, al-Tusi, Ulugbek. Tens and hundreds of names of geographers, historians, poets, philosophers, and theologians pass in front of the reader. As we become familiar with the work and achievements of each, we learn about the importance of their work in the development of world science, and come to understand how much they are ahead of their time and of European science.

A special feature of the book is that the fascinatingly presented extensive information about the achievements of the Central Asian scholars is at the same time placed in the context of the developmental trends of world culture and science. It becomes obvious that long before the European Enlightenment and the Encyclopedists' activities in Europe, Muslim Central Asia was the seat of secular science and philosophy, with its advanced humanistic ideas and technical achievements. Like many other works on the history of the Muslim world, Professor Starr's book addresses the constant question: what obstructed the era of technological modernization and social renewal in the region after this brilliant epoch, which the author called the Lost Enlightenment? We may not find a direct answer to this question in the pages of the book, but we do get a lot of data and ideas for deep discussion about this enigma.

The European Enlightenment of the 17-18th centuries brought a radical change in the balance of religious and secular thinking. Reasonability and rational thinking are an important criterion of a knowledge society and of human reasoning. Science and scientists became the most reliable source of knowledge at this time, and access to knowledge ceased to be the advantage of a privileged group of people, becoming open to the wider community. The most important change was that the European enlightenment went beyond the scientific

² See chapters 4 and 10 respectively: "How Arabs Conquered Central Asia and Central Asia Then Set the Stage to Conquer Baghdad" (Chapter 4), "Turks Take the Stage: Mahmud of Kashgar and Yusuf of Balasagun" (Chapter 10).

and educational process and started influencing policy and social reformation. Social revolutions in England and France, and the American Revolution are a direct consequence of the Enlightenment. Education fostered the power of critical thinking and scientific analysis against the irrationality and emotionality of the religious world.

Such a conflict between two systems of learning occurred in the Islamic Enlightenment several centuries before that of Europe. Professor Starr explains the Islamic Enlightenment as a phenomenon of the Central Asian cultural impact. Complex problems of Muslim theology and philosophy, and the conflict of worldviews in Islam are presented by Professor Starr in an exciting, dramatic and easily intelligible form to the general reader.

Standing at the center of the conflict of worldviews in Islam is the eminent personality of the Muslim philosopher al-Ghazali, also a native of Central Asia. Indeed, the conflict appears as an internal contradiction of the Muslim theologian. His spiritual quest and changes in his way of life have led to the development of a persuasive system of arguments that approved the predominance of a conservative fundamentalist doctrine of knowledge supported by the authorities. He managed to reconcile human personality with the dictates of religious fundamentalism by recognizing the Sufi principle of learning through the emotional sphere of the person. However, he condemned the scientific outlook prescribing scientific activities only outside of the world vision quest. According to al-Ghazali, Al-Biruni and Ibn Sina deserved strong condemnation and punishment for the use of scientific thought in the discourse about God.(210, 381-383) These thoughts of al-Ghazali influenced the medieval Christian doctrine of knowledge and attitudes toward science. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment followed in Europe after that era.

Professor Starr's book can be recommended both for experts and beginners of Central Asian Studies. So intelligible and captivating is the author's narration that the large amount of factual material does not hinder the students from becoming familiar with the intellectual history of Central Asia. By the end of the book it is absolutely clear why the author gave it the name "Lost enlightenment." However, the efforts of Muslim scholars and polymaths of the early Middle Ages did not become an influential factor on society and individuals. Instead, they were lost to the modernization of public relations and social thought. The Europeans were able to benefit from the fruits of Muslim Enlightenment more than the descendants of its great figures.

Farda Asadov
Kazhar University, Azerbaijan