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Review Essay: Enlightenment Lost?

S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

James Pickett, *Polymaths of Islam: Power and Networks of Knowledge in Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

UN Human Development Programme, *Arab Human Development Report* (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2009 and research papers at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/arab-states>

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Lost Enlightenment and *Polymaths of Islam*, each analyzing a different but linked period of Central Asian civilization, is each a masterwork of scholarship. Each author, now at a different stage in his academic career, has put to good use a bevy of languages to unveil the achievements of societies and ways of life smothered by the *Sturm und Drang* of life including great power aggressions. S. Frederick Starr has led Soviet as well as Central Asian research institutes based in Washington, D.C. He was the first director of the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and later the founding chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, now affiliated with the American Foreign Policy Institute.¹ James Pickett is Assistant Professor of Eurasian History at the University of Pittsburgh. Each author has done research in Russia and Central Asia.

¹For Starr's views on current affairs, see his "China's Brutality Can't Destroy Uighur Culture," *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 2019; Starr and Svante Cornell, "Why the Trump Administration's Central Asia Strategy Improves Over Its Predecessors," *The Diplomat*, March 1, 2020. In regard to human rights, Starr and

When I studied at Moscow State University (MGU) in 1958-1959, the official Soviet line toward Central Asia appeared to be condescension. Russian students complained that Turkmen and Uzbeks were admitted to MGU by a quota-based affirmative action. MGU students grouched also that they were forced for weeks to bring in harvests in the “Virgin Lands” of Kazakhstan, one of Party leader N.S. Khrushchev’s pet projects. When musical and dance groups from Kazakhstan performed in Moscow, gratis tickets were given to MGU students in the hope of filling seats with happy spectators, who could be duly filmed for TV reportage. When an Uzbek student received a package of fresh fruit from home, however, some Russians and Americans were glad to sample her bounty.

Some three decades later, Kazakh literary figure Olzhas Suleimenov sparked widespread protests when a Soviet underground nuclear explosion vented radioactive material into the atmosphere from the test site near Semipalatinsk, where the USSR conducted 456 nuclear tests from 1949 to 1989.² In 1990, the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War organization held an anti-nuclear testing conference in Alma-Ata. Kazakh scientists showed photos and graphs detailing the ravages on public health of the nuclear tests—most of them conducted in the atmosphere prior to the limited test ban signed with the United States and United Kingdom in 1963. The Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement drew scientists and nuclear radiation victims not only from the USSR and United States, some wearing feathered headdresses, but also from the French Pacific and Japan. A local artist pictured a Kazakh family in their yurt bewildered to see a mushroom cloud rising from the desert not far away. A sociologist showed me his notes on the deaths from starvation in Kazakhstan tied to collectivization in the 1930s, comparable in scale, he said, to the *Holodomor* in Ukraine, but less known outside of Central Asia.

Another Central Asian author was Chinghiz Aitmatov born in the Soviet Union-Republic of Kyrgyzstan in 1937. Like Suleimenov, Aitmatov studied at the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow. His novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (Russian: И дольше века длится день) was originally published in Russian in the literary magazine *Navy Mir* in 1980 and later in English by Indiana University Press. A side story in the novel tells about *mankurts* prisoners of war turned into slaves deprived of memory—a stark image of intellectual repression. A *mankurt* did not recognize his name, family or tribe—“a *mankurt* did not recognize himself as a human being,” Aitmatov wrote. In the novel, a mother is killed by her own *mankurt* son when she tries to free him from bondage. Close to Mikhail Gorbachev, Aitmatov served as Soviet and later Russian ambassador to the European Union, NATO, UNESCO and the Benelux countries. He died in a German hospital in 2008.

Cornell suggest that the U.S. government try to collaborate with Central Asian regimes instead of pillorying them. Washington should value countries like Uzbekistan as important per se, according to Starr and Cornell, and not just as ramps into Afghanistan.

²Suleimenov’s best known book, *A3 и Я*, was published in 1975. It noted the Turkic influences on the Russian chronicle *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign*. Having heard that the book was nationalist-chauvinist, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev looked at it prior to a major Party meeting but concluded it did not warrant an official reprimand. Still, Suleimenov told me, it was kept out of most Soviet and Eastern European bookstores except in Hungary.

The Taliban give the impression that Islam is against knowledge and hostile to any religious worldview that differs from what they espouse.³ In 2021 it is unclear to what extent today's rulers of Afghanistan will permit females to acquire education and work outside the home. *Talib* is Arabic for student; while *an* is a Persian plural suffix. So Taliban means “students”—recalling their late nineteenth century origins in madrasas in Deoband, India where they absorbed a strict version of Islam.⁴

Starr's *Lost Enlightenment* and Pickett's *Polymaths of Islam* remind us that Islam has fostered and nourished great intellectual prowess in a spirit of cosmopolitan learning. Among the most respected segments of most Islamic societies have been the *ulama*—“those with knowledge.” The polymaths described by Starr and Pickett appear to have been among the most broadly educated individuals in world history. Both Starr and Pickett analyze parts of the Islamic realm that produced some of the world's greatest polymaths—men who studied Arabic and the Qur'an for a decade in madrasas and then learned astronomy, law, geography life sciences, and poetry. They made serious contributions to knowledge in all these fields—many written in verse.

Starr describes the intellectual and spiritual climate of Central Asia, 750 to 1150 CE. For much of these four centuries, Starr argues, Central Asia was the intellectual hub of the world—the one region whose activities impinged on other intellectual centers in India, China, the Middle East, and Europe (p. 4). Yes, many Central Asian scholars went to Baghdad, but there was also a reverse brain drain. Far more than Arabs or Chinese, Central Asian polymaths were polyglots. They considered it normal to live amid a bewildering profusion of languages and alphabets and somehow managed to master whichever ones they needed at the time.

Starr's understanding of Central Asia includes not only the five “stan” republics of the former USSR, but also Balkh and Ghazni in today's Afghanistan.⁵ Starr also takes account of happenings in neighboring Iran, Iraq, Xinjiang, and India. In its heyday Balkh was larger than

³This impression is confirmed by the Islamic State factions that bomb Shiite religious services in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Of course, many religious groups—some Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, some Hindus in India, some Jews in Israel, some Christians in the United States—are intolerant and see themselves in zero-sum conflict with other faiths. Like other religions, Islam has experienced diverse currents, many of which disagree with one another. One of the deepest rifts dates back nearly to the time of Mohammed, that between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

⁴Taliban students read some of the same texts studied in the nineteenth century Bukharan madrasas. The Taliban studied in Deobandi madrasas. Deoband was a movement that started in the late nineteenth century in British India that combined modern educational techniques and mass mobilization with classical Islamic texts. The version of Islam promoted in Deobandi madrasas was far more rigid and fundamentalist than the sort taught in Bukharan madrasas. By the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Deobandi movement never made any real foothold in Central Asia north of Afghanistan. The modern Taliban would probably have persecuted the Bukhara polymaths over doctrinal differences and the Sufi practices of the Bukharan ulama. Since the late 1970s, the movement appears to have been influenced by Wahhabism. From the early 1980s to the early 2000s, some Deobandis were funded by Saudi Arabia.

⁵Zoroaster, who probably lived in the 6th or 7th century BCE, came from the region of Balkh, but his religion spread westward, eventually to Babylon, where Jews encountered it and fell under its influence. Its concepts then spread first to Christianity and then to Islam.

Paris, Rome, Beijing, or Delhi. Like all the great regional centers, it had running water, baths, and majestic palaces—and solidly built homes of sun-dried brick for non-palace dwellers. This vast region of irrigated deserts, mountains, and steppes between China, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and the Caspian Sea is easily dismissed by a casual onlooker as a peripheral backwater. Ancient traditions of learning have withered. While the Soviets revived literacy, they suppressed free thought in both the secular and religious spheres. Making it still harder for Central Asians to learn about their own past, Soviets forced them to print everything in Cyrillic.

Starr writes that it is hard to know where to begin in enumerating the intellectual achievements of Central Asians a millennium ago. In mathematics, it was Central Asians, who first accepted irrational numbers, identified the different forms of cubic equations, invented trigonometry, and adapted and disseminated the decimal system and Hindu numerals (called “Arabic” numbers in the West). Having absorbed and added to a great deal of Greek science and philosophy, Central Asian astronomers estimated the earth’s diameter to a degree of precision unmatched until recent centuries and built several of the largest observatories before modern times, using them to prepare remarkably precise astronomical tables. In chemistry, Central Asians were the first to reverse reactions, to use crystallization as a means of purification, and to measure specific gravity and use it to group elements in a manner anticipating Dmitri Mendeleev’s periodic table of 1871. They compiled and added to ancient medical knowledge, hugely broadened pharmacology, and passed it all to the West and to India. And in technology, they invented windmills and hydraulic machinery for lifting water that subsequently spread westward to the Middle East and Europe and eastward to China.

How did the polymaths interact with Islam? For many scholars, according to Starr, Islam was an unquestioned foundation. But there were variations and outliers. The philosopher and jurist Abu Nasr Al-Farabi was also a scientist, cosmologist, mathematician, and music theorist. He never doubted that his research into the basis of ethics would strengthen formal religion. Other scholars insisted that free inquiry and research should guide religion, not vice versa. Still others were outright skeptics who dismissed religion as fine for the mass of society but a farce for intellectuals. This was the view of Omar Khayyám (1048–1123), the brilliant mathematician who is known today mainly for the poetry in his *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.

Some Central Asian rulers genuinely supported the arts and scientists, others did not. From his capital in eastern Afghanistan, Mahmud of Ghazna (971–1030) ruled an empire stretching from India to the heart of modern Iran. Mahmud was ruthless and viewed culture more as an adornment than a necessity. Yet he successfully engaged al-Biruni, who proceeded to author the first comprehensive study of India and Hinduism in any language. Mahmud also patronized the great poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi, whose grand panorama of pre-Muslim Persia, the *Shahnameh* (ca. 1000), influenced troubadours as far away as France and remains a classic of world literature.

Why did the Central Asian enlightenment wither? Starr grants that Mongol invasions played a role, but urban areas they ravaged recovered in short order. Both in Persian and Turkic Central Asia, as in the Arab heartland and in Persia proper, the demands of a steadily rigidifying Muslim orthodoxy gradually narrowed the sphere in which free thought and humanism could be exercised. The decline of traffic on the Silk Road meant a decline in the stimulation afforded by

diverse cultures. Instead of innovating, Central Asian scholars composed encyclopedias of what was already known.

While Starr analyzes a broad region over four centuries, Pickett examines the energies within and radiating from Bukhara, in today's Uzbekistan, during the "long 19th century." He dates this "century" from the collapse of Nadir Shah Afshar's empire in 1747 to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. These years experienced the zenith of Persianate high culture and its twilight.

The scholars of nineteenth century Bukhara were very much the intellectual heirs of the scholars Starr describes; indeed, they explicitly saw themselves that way. Those classical works were still actively copied, read, and instructed in nineteenth-century Bukhara. The Bukhara ulama of this period, stood on the shoulders of giants and they knew it. Theirs was a cosmopolitan Turkic-Persian culture in which polymaths leveraged their Islamic knowledge on behalf of the Turkic military elite. On occasion the Turkic nobility also spoke on religious-moral issues, but the ulama cultivated a spirit of moral independence and superiority to the state (page 220).

Pickett's book is a tour de force of history and cultural sensitivity—one that reflects his ability to use Persian, Russian, Arabic, and Turkic sources, including the classical Uzbek known as Chaghatay. The majority of sources in Pickett's book are in Persian; the next most common is Russian, then Arabic, then Chaghatay/classical Uzbek. Before the twentieth century, Persian was the dominant written language in Central Asia, even though more people spoke a Turkic language (e.g., Uzbek), and even though Chaghatay was increasingly used as a written language as well (more in Khiva and Khoqand than in Bukhara). Although new works were rarely written in Arabic, most of the madrasa "textbooks" were read in the original Arabic. With the print revolution, Turkic languages took center stage, and only Tajik remained as a formal written Persian language. Russian remains a useful lingua franca in Central Asia to the present day.⁶

The polymaths of Bukhara depended on Turkic military elites for their well-being. But Turkic nobles could not repel the Soviet invaders in 1920, the same year that Soviet Russia began assisting Kemal Ataturk's forces in Turkey. Still, Islamic leaders in much of Central Asia put up stiff resistance to the atheistic campaigns of the Soviet regime and its radical repudiation of the Persian cosmopolis, "The last ulama," according to Pickett, "went out with a bang (p. 247)." Threats to Central Asia in the twenty first century have come from local tyrants, such as Saparmurat Niyazov and his successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow in Turkmenistan, and the know-nothings dispatched by George W. Bush and other US presidents.⁷

Most scholarly writings by the Central Asian polymaths were in Arabic. In the twenty first century, Arab scholars associated with the UN Human Development Programme produced several yearbooks in 2002-2009 on such themes as Building a Knowledge Society, Toward the Rise of Women, Challenges to Human Security in the Arab countries. They have continued writing

⁶Most older Uzbeks speak Russian and younger people also know it from Russian-medium schools and TV. The big divide is probably rural-urban. For now, Tashkent is still a Russian-language city. Uzbekistan is more Russophone than Tajikistan, but Kazakhstan is more Russophone than Uzbekistan.

⁷For official Turkmen films of Berdimuhamedow lifting a (very light) barbell, driving a race car, and recruiting Guinness World Records for Turkmenistan, see John Oliver at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9QYu8LtH2E> (accessed 10/15/2021).

occasional papers (in Arabic or English or both) on human development such as Citizenship 360° in the Arab Region; Perceptions on Sustainable Development across Countries, Income, and Gender; Inclusive Citizenship and the Data Imperative in Arab Countries; Leaving No One Behind: Towards Inclusive Citizenship in Arab Countries; Arab Spring: Demographics in a Region in Transition; Emerging Trends and Recommendations for Future Social Policy; Multidimensional Poverty Index and Policies for Tackling Interlocking Deprivations in the Arab States; Expanding Youth Opportunities in the Arab Region.

Some Central Asian and Arab governments work hard to develop a knowledge-based society and have the funds from oil and gas resources to pursue this goal. Qatar, for example has a National Research Foundation and a Qatar Foundation that sponsor competitions for funded research—not only in hard sciences and engineering but also in social sciences. One foundation project unites scientists from Qatar, MIT, and Sofia University of Bulgaria to see how machine learning could be used to combat fake news across the web. Having served as a juror for several such projects, I would say that the peer review process in Qatar is as rigorous as that of the U.S. National Science Foundation.

A new survey of Central Asian history ends starts with the Qing and Tsarist invasions in the eighteenth century and ends with a chapter on Xinjiang entitled: “A Twenty-First-Century Gulag.”⁸ Another recent book reminds us of the unresolved grievances among Turks, Kurds, and Armenians.⁹ Given the impulses of human nature and world politics, some observers may seek refuge in what Rumi wrote in the thirteenth century, as quoted by Starr:

*The world is a trap and desire its bait:
Escape the traps, and quickly
Turn your face toward God.*

⁸Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

⁹The Central Eurasian Studies Society Book Award for 2021 went to David Leupold, *Embattled Dreamlands: The Politics of Contesting Armenian, Kurdish and Turkish Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2020).