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Don't blame the Mongols

DAVID MORGAN

S. Frederick Starr

LOST ENLIGHTENMENT

Central Asia's golden age from the Arab conquest to Tamerlane

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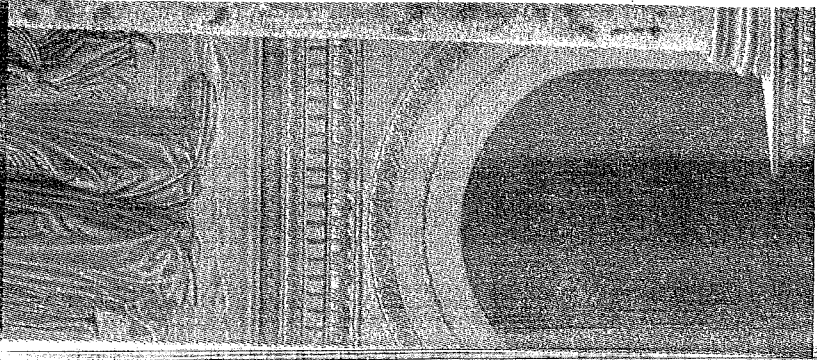
It is a curious fact about Central Asia that it was almost forgotten about for a century or so, until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of the states that tend now to be known collectively, if colloquially, as "the Stans". This was presumably because that vast area had been swallowed up by two great empires, Ch'ing China and tsarist Russia: consequently it lost, in the eyes of many in the West, any real identity of its own. And while the empire of the Tsars and, later, the Soviets may in reality have been the last of the great Victorian colonial empires, it didn't quite look that way, in that – by contrast with the greatest such empire, that of the British – it was one continuous block of territory, so it could easily be mistaken, at a casual glance, for one country.

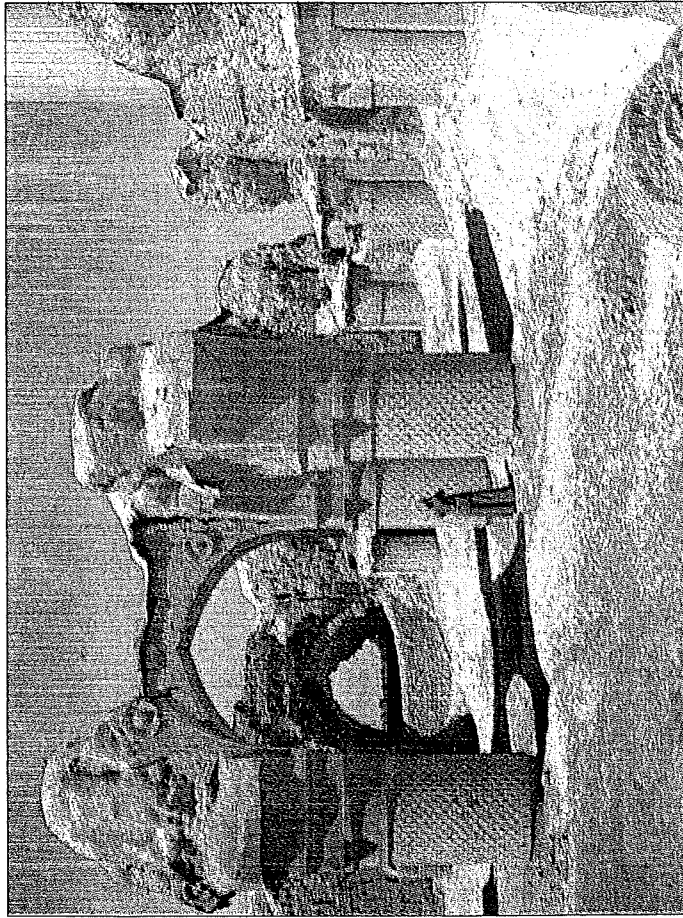
It is true that, in recent times, Central Asia has hardly been in the forefront of world cultural or political history. But in the more distant past, that was very far from being the case. S. Frederick Starr has set himself the task of alerting us to this, at considerable though readable length, and on the basis of formidable reading and scholarship. Starr is a distinguished American academic – a former President of Oberlin College – who began his career as a classical archaeologist, and who has had a long-term interest in Central Asia and its history. A glance at his extensive endnotes shows how remarkably well-equipped he is for the

writing of a survey such as this. *Lost Enlightenment* is not, and would not claim to be, a work of original scholarship, but the author does appear to have read and absorbed virtually everything, in a wide variety of languages.

Nominally, the book begins with the Muslim Arab conquest of the region in the seventh century AD. But in fact the second and third chapters (of fifteen) deal with the pre-Islamic period: one of Starr's emphases is on the continuities of Central Asian civilization. Not only is the book's chronological span wider than we might expect: geographically, his "Central Asia" is not just the "Stans" and Chinese Xinjiang, but also much of what is now eastern Iran, Afghanistan and even parts of Pakistan. The centre of the area he is concerned with is Khurasan: now just a province of Iran, but in the Middle Ages stretching far beyond. It had four quarters, each centred on a great and ancient city: Merv (now in Turkmenistan), Herat, Balkh (both now in Afghanistan) and Nishapur (in Iran). And essentially what Starr is recounting is the history of an urban high culture, centred in cities such as those. For the most part, they were oasis cities. While it is true that in earlier times Central Asia was vastly more fertile than it is now, much of its efflorescence is ascribed to the immensely high level of technical skill developed in the region in irrigation. Today, the most impressive reminders of this are in Iran, where the systems of underground irrigation channels, *qanats*, continue to be important.

At the height of Central Asia's medieval civilization, its great cities were among the largest in the world. Starr suggests that in the twelfth century, when Merv was the capital of the Seljuk sultan Sanjar, it was the largest city in the world – larger even than Hangzhou, in China. He discusses Balkh, and remarks that "to approach Balkh today is a sad experience". It is a small village, still under the shadow of





Balkh, 1971

the remains of its vast medieval citadel, but adorned with a fine fifteenth-century shrine. It is true that the change is momentous, though it should be remembered that Balkh has, in recent centuries, been in effect superseded by the substantial nearby city of Mazar-i Sharif, home to the magnificent shrine which contains the tomb of 'Ali, regarded by Sunnis as the fourth Caliph of Islam, and by the Shia as their first Imam ('Ali is, of course, also buried at Najaf, in Iraq). But Merv is indeed no more today than a paradise for archaeologists, though Herat remains the most important city of western Afghanistan.

Lost Enlightenment begins with an account of a correspondence (discussed later at length) between two celebrated intellectuals of Central Asian origin: Ibn Sina (d. 1037; known in the West as Avicenna) and Biruni (d. 1048). Starr says of them that "they were but two . . . of a pleiad of great scientists, thinkers, poets and artists who worked in the region a millennium ago". He adds that "across Central Asia there existed hundreds of learned people who delighted in disputations such as that between Ibn Sina and Biruni, and who expected them to be resolved, as far as possible, on the basis of reason". Most of the book is devoted to recounting the achievements of such luminaries. He considers "mathematics, astronomy, and the sciences, and what might be lumped under the heading 'philosophy'" as "the fields in which Central Asians especially stood out". And he is concerned to give such Central Asian thinkers and scholars the credit that has con-

al-Ghazali, the eleventh/twelfth-century thinker who usually appears as an intellectual and spiritual hero, emerges here as something of a villain (though his real achievements are not discounted). He is blamed for his elevation of revelation over reason, to which is attributed a constriction of free thought. But when it comes to explaining how the "enlightenment" came to be "lost", Starr discusses a number of possible causes, without coming down firmly in favour of any one (in this, historians, as ever inveighing against monocausal explanations in history, are likely to be with him). Refreshingly, he declines to follow the time-honoured fashion of blaming it all on the Mongols.

Some specialists may think that at times, Starr tends to overstate his case. For example, he follows many in attributing enormous importance to Zoroastrianism (in his definition, a religion of Central Asian origin), in terms of its perceived influence on the evolution of Judaism and, by extension, Christianity. The position is perhaps not quite so simple, to judge from what Professor Shaul Shaked has to say on the subject in the first volume of the *Cambridge History of Judaism*. And while, rightly in my view, he does not attempt to minimize the disastrous results of the first Mongol invasions, he probably underestimates — though he does not ignore — the cogency of the findings of recent scholarship on the more positive elements of post-invasion Mongol rule. Nonetheless, *Lost Enlightenment* is a remarkable and accessible scholarly tour de force.

ventionally been accorded to Arabs, for example in terms of what was accomplished in Baghdad when it became the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate after its foundation in 762. Even the skilled aspects of the building of the new city, he tells us, were the work of "a phalanx of artisans and craftspeople who made the long trek from Merv to the building site". He refers to a list of 515 notable mathematicians and astronomers during the Islamic Middle

There can be no doubt that Starr builds up an impressive case for Central Asia having been a — perhaps even the — world centre of science, philosophy and scholarship during the centuries he is concerned with. It is interesting that

Ages, and tells us that "the overwhelming majority were Central Asians, nearly all of them of Iranian ethnicity" (this estimate being based on what is known of their place of origin).