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*Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* by S. Frederick Starr

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*Reviewed by*  
Paul D. Buell  
Charité Universitäts Medizin, Berlin  
[pbuell@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de](mailto:pbuell@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de)

Most historians strive, once in their lives at least, to produce a 'grand narrative' that, even if for a limited area of inquiry, brings it all together once and for all. To accomplish such a feat requires a thorough knowledge of a field (more than one for 'grand, grand narratives'), the required linguistic competences if an author is working in an area where the primary sources are not in English, and a clear delineation of the goals and scope of the planned project. This includes, for books such as that of Frederick Starr, a clear chronological and geographical delineation. For this reviewer also important is that a 'grand narrative' provide a useful overview and that this should include good notes and a strong bibliography. Also requisite of a narrative of this sort is an engaging style, an ability to connect with readers and interest them in a grand endeavor which can cover impressive ground but must do so without either the author or the reader becoming lost.

Writing a book like this is never easy and bringing it off is even harder. But it can be done. A recent example of what can and should be accomplished is Lincoln Paine's *The Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World* [2013]. The author's grasp of his topic and ability to deliver the goods in terms of a lucid and well written account is simply amazing.

Alas, Frederick Starr is no Lincoln Paine although Starr's book is well written and entertaining. The book has so many problems that it is difficult to know where to start. Starr's first and perhaps biggest problem is that his 'Central Asia' simply does not exist. Not only does he talk more often about events in what is clearly and unmistakably Iran, he has little interest in, or understanding of, anything north of Samarkand, much less the Kipjak steppe or eastern Turkistan or Mongolia. His 'Central Asia' does not even accord with

the Russian use of the term (essentially, for western Turkistan). It is certainly not what he claims it is and no better example of his misunderstanding of a larger context is his presentation of much of western Turkistan as little more than a pile of rubble, without much trade or life after the Mongol invasions. This is not only incorrect according to recent research (which he ignores in favor of very old studies such as that of Barthold [Barthold 1968]) but totally ignores the role of the Golden Horde in a revived Silk Road trade, as exemplified by the large and beautiful cities excavated by Federov-Davydov on the lower Volga. Western Turkistan was certainly no wasteland and had major contacts reaching far into the south and even across the Black Sea where a first maritime age was being played out.

A second major problem with Starr's book is that it is written almost exclusively from an outsider's perspective, although he has travelled in the area. That is, Starr reads none of the relevant languages of his 'Central Asia', including Persian, well enough to consult primary sources. Thus, he lacks the perspectives and insights that come with many years of immersion in foreign linguistic cultures. We can never be insiders for something that happened so long ago. But, for me, by reading and rereading the Persian histories, for example, coupled with what is, I think, the most important source of all, the *Secret History of the Mongols*, the only native perspective on what happened, I gain a direct appreciation, for instance, of the events of the Mongol invasion of Turkistan, the important feel that comes from becoming so immersed in the sources that one almost begins to think like a native.

Starr cannot do this and must rely on translations that come with their own baggage. In addition, his approach deemphasizes historical sources: there is no Ibn al-Athir, for example, even though this Arabic source now exists in an excellent translation. Juvaini, whose work Starr does use in Boyle's excellent rendering, is there but because of Starr's lack of knowledge of the comparative value of primary sources and of what scholars have said about them, he is only too willing to believe any tale Juvaini relays, even the one about more than a million dead by the hands of the Mongols from a city that may have had no more than 50,000 in it to begin with and, of course, the story of the dogs and cats that had obviously done something to disturb the Mongols in a previous life and were killed for it. That is to say, Starr is unaware of the tendentious propaganda throughout Juvaini's account and the internal politics of the Mongol Empire that this represents. Otherwise, he

might have privileged Ibn al-Athir who, unlike Juvaini, was an eyewitness to the Mongol invasions and has no dogs and cats.

Given his limited grasp of the primary sources, even in translation, Starr is forced to rely on secondary scholarship. But he lacks selectivity and seems unable to sift out the old and obsolete from the new. He does read Russian but much of what he cites is old. Moreover, as with primary sources, Starr is unaware of the biases in authors like Barthold and the problems with using, unvarnished, out of the box, Central Asian (in this case using the Soviet definition) scholarship, given that it may be tainted with nationalism that creates or overstates a vision of the past.

In this connection, a big problem is that so much of Starr's narrative comes from generally old literary histories. Literary histories have very different agendas and tend to over-dramatize. They are not the same, for example, as histories of a place or places or of a time or times that have been properly critiqued and come to us with full notes and apparatus that we can cross-examine. There are reasons that F. Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* [1972] is a classic and that it is still authoritative after all these years, even though the scholarship has continued to be updated since Braudel's time. Starr lacks feeling for such works and it seems that for him any old narrative will do.

This fact emerges no more clearly than in his notes and bibliography. In fact there are few notes and no bibliography at all. This being the case, how is Starr's a work that one can take seriously?

There are many minor issues as well. Starr's population estimates for his cities are mostly too high. Some of this is based on the sizes of surrounding walls. But northern Iran or Uzbekistan is not Europe. Inside the walls were not only urban structures but fruit trees and gardens—acres and acres of gardens—and the like. It is by considering this that Federov-Davydov, criticized by Starr for his low estimates, arrived at them. As an archaeologist, and one excavating similar cities, Federov-Davydov was only too aware of how places such as New Saray were structured and of who lived where and did what. We disregard at our peril the advice of such people. Another problem with Starr's book, more minor, is that for him his Central Asia is everything, which leaves him free to disregard the world outside it. Thus, at one point he mentions a 'Central Asian' city, Merv, which is not remotely in Central Asia, as having a population of 200,000, probably far too high, and implies

that it might have been the largest in the world. In fact, Song Hangzhou was probably at least two and a half-times that before 1204; Constantinople was larger too, not to mention the up-and-coming world-city, Cairo.

Largely ignoring the outside world also creates another problem for Starr. He seeks to argue a post-Timurid decline, one that he suggests was general for the Islamic world. Leaving aside the issue of what the supposed decline meant or that it even happened and is not instead some kind of post-colonialist self-delusion in our sources, he can assert what he does only by wearing his own particular set of blinders. The Ottoman Empire was flourishing in the 16th and 17th centuries, including an Ottoman age of exploration that took soldiers as far as Aceh in Indonesia. Some decline! And even if Starr barely remembers key figures of this efflorescence, such as the polymath Sinan, the Ottoman cultural achievement was nonetheless impressive. But poor Sinan, according to Starr, his only claim to fame was that he borrowed architectural ideas from 'Central Asia'. Not exactly.

Starr also understates the importance and sophistication of Mughal India, an area that did have a direct 'Central Asian' connection (including the Chaghatay language) whose significance Starr seems barely to understand. Then, there is medieval Cairo. Hardly an image of universal decline. Further, as a number of scholars have pointed out, even Islamic science did not suddenly close down and disappear. Muslim scholars continued to make contributions, as George Saliba and David King in particular have made clear.

So, in summary, this is not a very good book. Rather than a 'grand narrative' Starr has produced, by and large, an exercise in futility. And because of a strict limitation in space, I have confined myself to the book's big problems. Not catalogued are its many grand errors and misconceptions. It is not recommended.

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