

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about Central Asia's place in the early modern world. The discussions that follow reference a few original sources, but only a few. The central concerns here are historiographic, and so I have endeavored to pull back the lens to provide the reader a vantage point from which it is possible to appreciate a number of ways that the field of Central Asian history has changed in recent decades.

Studies of Central Asia that address the period between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries have traditionally portrayed the region as passive, disengaged, and pushed to the margins of the rapidly globalizing early modern world. This interpretation is changing, but even today, efforts to explain the region's eighteenth-century crisis remain focused on the presumed collapse of Central Asia's historical role in overland Eurasian trade. Whether scholars have framed this in terms of the end of Central Asia's privileged position in the Silk Road trade or something else, they have generally assumed that economic isolation not only undermined the Bukharan Khanate but caused the region as a whole to suffer a civilizational decline. The chapters that follow aim to demonstrate that such notions, while highly resilient, are built upon erroneous understandings of Central Asian commercial history.

The resilience of these notions can be attributed to several factors. One is the relatively small amount of attention that scholars in the field have directed to questions of commercial history. In fact, there has yet to be a study that applies a sufficiently broad scope to determine even the key features of Central Asia's early modern commercial economy.¹ It is therefore not surprising to find that no researcher has yet stepped forward to compare Central Asia's early modern commercial economy with earlier periods. Without a deeply critical and evidence-based analysis of such questions, we are ill-prepared to understand how overland trade through Central Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries compared to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, or earlier periods. So, how is one even to measure economic decline? The discussions that follow do not fully fill these lacunae.² They do, however, demonstrate that Central Asia's mediatory role in trans-continental trade continued throughout the early modern era, and that in some measurable ways commercial activities actually increased.

That is not to say that early modern Central Asians did not suffer political and economic crises or that, in the first half of the eighteenth century, the Bukharan Khanate did not fall into decline. These points are well documented in the historical sources, they are presented quite clearly in the secondary literature, and they are also discussed below. However, this book argues that the concept of decline is a blunt instrument that cannot be applied with any precision to the region as a whole, that early modern Central Asia was far from isolated, and that the actual causal factors propelling the Bukharan crisis have remained obscure. In an effort to resolve that problem, chapter four of this study advances a new explanation for the weakening of the Bukharan Khanate in the seventeenth century, its fall into a state of deepening crisis during the early eighteenth century, and its utter collapse in the wake of the Persian invasions of the region in 1737 and 1740.

There was no single causal factor that precipitated these developments. The available evidence points to several factors, some interrelated and some independent, some of which unfolded over long periods of time while others shocked the region more abruptly, and all of which converged in the

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1. Audrey Burton merits recognition for her exceptional contributions to this field, though she brings her study to an end at the turn of the eighteenth century. See Audrey Burton, *The Bukharans: A Dynastic, Diplomatic and Commercial History, 1550–1702* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).
 2. I aim to advance research into these question with a forthcoming collaborative project: Scott C. Levi, ed., *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia for Asian Commercial History*.

early eighteenth century to the great detriment of the Bukharan Khanate and those dependent upon it. In Central Asia, the first half of the eighteenth century was a harsh period of transition that confronted regional power holders with great uncertainties and a number of insurmountable challenges. At the same time, one must ask just how far this crisis extended. While this convergence of historical processes drove political decentralization and unleashed hardship and rebellion in some areas, new opportunities emerged elsewhere in the region. The history of early modern Central Asia was neither simple nor straightforward. History rarely is.

With that point in mind, this book presents a number of thematic discussions pertaining to Central Asia's early modern historical context. Chapter one, "Bukhara in Crisis," introduces the crisis that led to the ultimate collapse of Chinggisid rule in the Bukharan Khanate and surveys the ways that historians have endeavored to explain it. Chapter two, "Silk Roads, Real and Imagined," critically examines the Silk Road concept and illustrates a number of ways that shallow and romanticized interpretations of Central Asia's commercial history have misdirected researchers toward certain modes of thought and away from others. Extinguishing the specter of isolation, chapter three, "The Early Modern Silk Road," turns attention to the networks of commodity exchange, circulation of precious metals, merchant diasporas, and other structures that kept early modern Central Asians economically engaged with the large agrarian civilizations on the Eurasian periphery. This chapter draws on a number of recent studies to demonstrate that, far from falling into decline, commercial relationships that one could cast as a continuation of the fabled "Silk Road" exchange remained quite active throughout this period, and in some ways even expanded. Chapter four, "The Crisis Revisited," returns attention to the Bukharan crisis and endeavors to connect local events to a number of larger historical processes. While previous treatments of this subject have focused on describing the crisis, this chapter aims to identify the causal factors behind it, explaining why it occurred when it did and its uneven impact across the region.

This book takes stock of recent achievements in multiple historical fields, examines how that research collectively demonstrates that Central Asia remained a connected region throughout the early modern era, and identifies a number of ways that those connections shaped Central Asia's occasionally tumultuous historical trajectory. Put another way, it aims to demonstrate that a connected histories approach can provide valuable perspectives and insights into important questions pertaining to early modern Central Asian history that one cannot satisfactorily address by relying on

local sources alone.³ While scholars have long worked to connect Central Asia to other regional histories in some periods—the Mongol era represents an obvious example—there have been very few such efforts for the early modern era.

In the Central Asian context, I use *early modern* to refer to the roughly three and a half centuries between the end of Timurid rule (c. 1500) in Central Asia and the beginning of Russian imperial expansion into the region in the nineteenth century. In the past, some have categorized this as the “Uzbek Period” in Central Asian history. Such a label is not objectionable insofar as it draws attention to the dominant role that the Uzbek tribes came to play in Central Asian politics. However, I have a strong preference for *early modern* as it focuses attention on the ways that Central Asia was intertwined with larger Eurasian, and global, historical processes throughout these centuries.

Like all efforts at periodization, the concept of an “early modern period” is a device, an effort to identify common themes within a particular era and set them against distinctive themes that characterize the previous era (medieval) and the following one (modern). Its identification and application are complicated, not least because many of the processes that are considered to be the defining features of the early modern period remained obscure, even invisible, to those living at the time. Nobody in seventeenth-century England would have identified themselves as living in the early modern era, just as nobody in second-century Rome would have recognized themselves as living in antiquity. A further complication is that, for some time, the application of the early modern era as a discreet historical period within Europe, much less beyond it, encountered some resistance. In a 1998 essay on the subject, sociologist Jack Goldstone critiqued the term as “neither ‘early,’ nor ‘modern’” and, insofar as it was designed to reference a period prefacing the emergence of the modern world, wholly inapplicable beyond Europe and poorly applicable within it.⁴

But even as Goldstone was drafting his critique, other scholars were refining their use of the term in ways that have made it more useful for European history, and more versatile beyond the European context. This

3. For a detailed source-based treatment highlighting the use of power and authority in Manghit state-building efforts beyond the capital in the period after the Bukharan crisis, see Andreas Wilde, *What is Beyond the River? Power, Authority and Social Order in Transoxania, 18th and 19th Centuries*, 3 vols. (Wien: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2016).

4. Jack Goldstone, “The Problem of the ‘Early Modern’ World,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, no. 3 (1998): 249.

has involved deemphasizing the need for the early modern period to serve as a springboard into a rigidly defined (and overtly Eurocentric) modernity on the one hand and highlighting the importance of increased mobility and tightening interconnections across regions on the other. In his work on connected histories, Sanjay Subrahmanyam provides one example of just this type of approach.⁵ Victor Lieberman has since articulated another example, one that emphasizes parallel social, political, and other historical developments (“Strange Parallels”) unfolding in apparent synchrony across great spaces.⁶

In recent years, there has been a blossoming of new works that use early modernity as a framework for global analysis. Jerry Bentley, a founder of the field of world history, studied the development of the early modern era as a distinct period in European history and then, from the 1980s, its subsequent expansion onto the global stage.⁷ Bentley takes stock of Goldstone’s critique, but surveying the notion’s merits he finds that “the early modern era was a genuinely global age not so much because of any particular set of traits that supposedly characterized all or at least many lands, but rather because of historical processes that linked the world’s peoples and societies in increasingly dense networks of interactions and exchange, even if those interactive processes produced very different results in different lands.”⁸ The historian of Mughal India, John Richards, provides an especially pertinent example from the perspective of environmental history in his study of the ways that four quite specific early modern dynamics led to dramatic environmental changes across the globe. Of these, the most relevant to recent discussions in Central Asian history is a significant increase in the use of land for agriculture spurred by global market trends.⁹

For his part, Goldstone himself has more recently adopted a decidedly different view of what constitutes the early modern world. This course

5. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 735–62.

6. Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, vol. 1, *Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); vol. 2, *Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

7. Jerry H. Bentley, “Early Modern Europe and the Early Modern World,” in *Between the Middle Ages and Modernity: Individual and Community in the Early Modern World*, ed. Charles H. Parker and Jerry H. Bentley (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 13–31.

8. Bentley, “Early Modern Europe,” 20, 22.

9. John F. Richards, *Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

correction is at least partly in response to Lieberman, whose work, Goldstone finds, presents “an overwhelming case that the attributes of ‘early modernity’—administrative centralization under a state bureaucracy, consolidation of national vernacular languages, the emergence of politicized ethnicity throughout the influence of more powerful states using those languages, extensive commercialization and the growth of urban centers, economic and population growth—were pan-Eurasian phenomena, and in no way made European states distinctive.”¹⁰ That said, what constitutes early modernity is necessarily, as Bentley suggests, “a messy affair,” as the historical processes that linked distant regions affected disparate societies in different ways.¹¹ Some of the characteristics Goldstone identifies are relevant to discussions of Central Asia, while others are not. Nevertheless, exploring these linkages stands to offer new insights into historical developments throughout the early modern era.

Following in the footsteps of the late Joseph Fletcher, a Central Asianist and one of the earliest voices in the discussion of what constitutes early modern world history, I am intrigued by the “horizontal continuities” across the Eurasian space during this period, and the ways in which the early modern context informed historical developments in Central Asia.¹² By focusing on Eurasian connections rather than regional distinctiveness, Fletcher argued, historians would find that “in the seventeenth century, for example, Japan, Tibet, Iran, Asia Minor, and the Iberian peninsula, all seemingly cut off from one another, were responding to some of the same interrelated, or at least similar demographic, economic, and even social forces.”¹³ Fletcher went on to identify a set of seven features that he found applicable to the early modern world, and which represent a framework for global analysis. These are: (1) population growth, (2) a steady increase in the rate of trans-regional interactions, (3) a sustained pattern of urbanization, (4) the rise of larger and more powerful “urban commercial classes,” (5) religious reformations, (6) peasant rebellions, and (7) a gradual decline in the nomadic way of life.¹⁴

10. Jack Goldstone, “New Patterns in Global History,” *Clodynamics: The Journal of Theoretical and Mathematical History* 1, no. 1 (2010): 97.

11. Bentley, “Early Modern Europe,” 23.

12. Joseph Fletcher, “Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period, 1500–1800,” *Journal of Turkish Studies* 9 (1985): 37–57. Fletcher’s ideas are addressed in greater depth in chapter two.

13. Fletcher, “Integrative History,” 38.

14. Fletcher, “Integrative History,” 40–56.

I consider such lists to be works in progress and do not cling too tightly to them.¹⁵ Looking back over the decades since Fletcher drafted his essay, which was very near the end of his life in 1984, one finds that subsequent research has proven some of his features to be more resilient than others. The chapters in this book emphasize certain aspects of this discussion—most notably a general trend in population growth (while accounting for certain important exceptions), an increase in transregional interactions, a general trend toward urbanization (again, noting certain exceptions), and the decline of nomadism, partly in response to advancements in military technologies. At the same time, today, one might be more inclined to attribute the proliferation of early modern peasant rebellions to recurrent famines caused by the global climate crisis of the seventeenth century, and not the emerging Marxist aspirations that one might have expected to encounter in the literature of the 1970s and 1980s. That is not to say that a general increase in peasant rebellions is not a feature of the early modern era. Rather, it is to suggest that efforts to identify the causal factors propelling such historical patterns—and even the patterns themselves—are destined to change as historical research continues to advance and reshape our understanding of the past.

At the same time, scholars working on Central Asian history both within the region and in the West have approached their research with a tendency to examine Central Asia between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries either in relative isolation from larger Eurasian historical processes or vis-à-vis the region's relations with *one* of the neighboring agrarian empires on the Eurasian periphery, most often doing so from the perspective of the outside power. Scholarly studies of Central Asian states have used earlier states in the same geographic zone as their framework for comparison: drawing a linear (in Fletcher's model, "vertical") connection between the nineteenth-century Bukharan Amirate and the sixteenth-century Shibanid state, for example. Their conclusions have often supported Soviet-era interpretations that the Uzbek tribal dynasties were in essence feudal states led by tribal chieftains who exhibited little in terms of innovative abilities. This leaves unasked the larger question of whether the subjects of our research were sensitive to developments external to their homeland—and

15. John F. Richards identified six "distinct but complementary large-scale processes" as defining features of early modernity in "Early Modern India and World History," *Journal of World History* 3, no. 2 (1997): 198. See also the similar list presented in Bentley, "Early Modern Europe," 22–27. These overlap in some ways with those that Fletcher proposed, but not completely.

here I mean political, commercial, technological, intellectual, artistic, spiritual, and more—and if they were, to what extent. Such a rhetorical question should be an easy one to answer. The historical literature is rich with information that demonstrates not only an awareness of broader developments across Eurasia and the globe but a sustained thirst for just this type of knowledge. This was true even during the heart of the eighteenth-century Bukharan crisis.¹⁶

Prior to venturing into the thematic discussions below, there is one final point that merits attention. In examinations of the remarkable cultural exchanges that unfolded along the trans-Eurasian commercial and communication networks commonly referred to as the Silk Road, the framework for analysis most often emanates from the field of Chinese studies. I argue that there is much to be gained by shifting the gravitational center of analysis westward and exploring more fully the ways that Central Asians mediated the transmission of merchandise, knowledge, technology, and more among multiple Eurasian societies. This is relevant for studies of the Silk Road in the classical period, and it is equally relevant for the early modern era. It was during this period that the great Inner Asian nomadic empires came to an end; localized crises in the eighteenth century contributed to the end of more than five centuries of political legitimacy based on Chinggisid ancestry; political authority in the region became divided among multiple compact and competing tribal dynasties, and then by Chinese and Russian imperial powers; the outside world experienced a rapid and unprecedented degree of integration and technological advancement; and, I argue, Central Asians became even more deeply integrated into that outside world in new ways, though not always willingly and not always in ways that were to their advantage.

From the perspective of Central Asian history, understanding the ways that early modern Central Asian societies were linked to larger world historical processes is critical if we are to reach an improved understanding of such historical problems as: the causal factors behind the eighteenth-century crisis; why it occurred when it did, and in the ways that it did; its impacts beyond the governing administration; the ways that the Uzbek tribes and other groups within Central Asia responded to the crisis; and how their decisions influenced their historical trajectory as they moved out of crisis and into a new era. I examine these questions in an effort to shed new

16. For one brief but enlightening example, see Devin DeWeese, “Muslim Medical Culture in Modern Central Asia: A Brief Note on Manuscript Sources from the Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries,” *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 1 (2013): 3–18.

light on ways that global political, economic, technological, and environmental developments influenced states and society in early modern Central Asia. No less important is that they provide a foundational framework from which researchers working in Russian, Chinese, and other fields of history can better understand Central Asians' agency in shaping historical events and processes far beyond their homeland, at the seemingly remote heart of the early modern Silk Road.