

**Scott C. Levi.** *The Bukharan Crisis: A Connected History of 18th-Century Central Asia.* Central Eurasia in Context Series. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020. Illustrations, maps. xiv + 208 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8229-4597-0.

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World history today is enjoying a renaissance. Freed from the need to follow the path of “Western Civ” as the central protagonist, nourished by the growing number of historians who use non-Western languages in their research, and challenged by increasingly precise scientific documentation of previously imponderable variables, such as climate, bullion movements, and disease, world history is now looking for a new narrative. One way this search takes place is through deploying new periodizations, such as the fourteenth- or seventeenth-century crises or the idea of the early modern. Another way is through finding new modes of what climatologists call “teleconnections”—connections that link variability over continental or even global scales. In *The Bukharan Crisis*, Scott C. Levi of Ohio State University situates Central Asia within this emerging new discipline of world history. The result is a masterful, if still preliminary, synthesis of how oasis Central Asia from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century fits within world history.

*The Bukharan Crisis* turns on rejecting an old way of reading Central Asia in world history and substitutes this inadequate view with a more complex, multicausal approach. The issue at hand is to explain a pattern of secular decline in early modern Central Asia that appears to hit a nadir in the

second quarter of the eighteenth century. The traditional Eurocentric explanation goes like this: the Silk Road linked China and Europe and it was this overland link that made Bukhara and other Central Asian cities rich and important. When European sailors pioneered the way from Europe to the Far East, that trade was diverted from land to sea. Hence the Silk Road fell into decline and the resulting isolation led to Bukhara’s crisis. Levi argues, however, that this argument not only misconstrues the so-called Silk Road but also misunderstands the extent of Bukhara’s connectivity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In place of this simplistic model, he then advances a multicausal explanation of Bukhara’s undoubted crisis, one that takes into account the role of climate; bullion flows; trade with India, China, and Russia; and firearms.

*The Bukharan Crisis* has an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction sets out the problem and argues for “early modern” as the best lens to understand Central Asia from 1500 to the Russian conquest. The first chapter then surveys the history of Central Asia, focusing on Bukhara, from the Uzbek conquest at the turn of the sixteenth century through to the years of crisis, which lasted from 1681 to 1747. The first chapter then closes with a historiographical sur-

vey of explanations for Bukhara's successive disasters during those years, focusing on the idea of "a collapse of Central Asia's commercial economy, believed to have stemmed from a shift in Eurasian trade from overland to maritime routes" (p. 36). Levi also considers more recent views that have either challenged the very idea of a crisis or else accepted the idea of crisis but preferred to explore them by tightly focused micro-histories.

Chapter 2, "Silk Roads, Real and Imagined," critically examines the concept of the Silk Road, one central to most explanations of Bukhara's pre-crisis efflorescence. This chapter surveys both the classic formulations of Ferdinand von Richthofen and Vasilii Vladimirovich Bartold and the more recent studies of Richard Frye, Christopher Beckwith, Frederick Starr, and Valerie Hansen. While sympathetic to Valerie Hansen's critique of the whole "Silk Road" concept, he focuses his fire on the idea of Silk Road linking China to Europe, arguing that the only way the concept can be salvaged is to envision the Silk Roads as a "multivector network" that is "firmly situated in Central Asia" (p. 64).

In chapter 3, Levi dovetails his non-Sino-centric Silk Road with the concept of the "early modern." Adopting John Richards's definition of the early modern as a period of "increase in the use of land for agriculture spurred by global market trends" and Sanjay Subrahmaniam's concept of "connected history," he details Central Asia's connections with India and the Indian Ocean (including Iran), with China, and with Russia (pp. 7, 67). Key commodities were not so much silk (although that was not insignificant) as horses, specie, cotton, and tea. Key mediators were the Indian diaspora in Central Asia and the Bukharan diaspora in Siberia. His survey concludes that "the value of intra-Asian trade far exceeded the revenue achieved through sale of Asian merchandise in Europe," even if that trade was not always on the upswing (p. 114). Before, during, and after the crisis, Central Asia remained "tightly linked to the

emerging early modern global economy" (p. 118). Since Bukhara was not isolated and the maritime trade with Europe had not replaced intra-Asian trade, these factors could not have caused the khanate's crisis.

Chapter 4, "The Crisis Revisited," then unpacks the crisis and its potential causes. Its most visible symptoms were the successive invasions and occupations of the Bukharan area: first by the rival oasis city Khiva, then by Buddhist Jungar nomads, and finally by the Afsharid ruler in Persia, Nadir Shah. These occupations took place against a background of currency debasements, frequent coups and rebellions, poverty, famine, and flight resulting by the 1720s in virtual depopulation of oases like Samarqand. Bukharan traders in Siberia and refugees in the Ferghana valley weathered the difficulties and presaged future developments, but by 1740 even the army of Nadir Shah was surprised by the slimness of the pickings in occupied Bukhara.

What happened? Levi weighs several factors. The well-documented cooling trend of the mid-to-late seventeenth century probably drove economic decline in the second half of the seventeenth century, but the worst was over by the turn of the eighteenth century. At that point, however, he argues that the Bukharan khans' ability to recover was impeded by flight of silver from Central Asia into the reviving economy of early Qing China and a sharp crisis in Indo-Persian trade in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. Finally, the fiscal burden of keeping up with military modernization involving flintlocks and other firearms exacerbated endemic tensions between the khan and the nobility.

*The Bukharan Crisis* succeeds admirably in its aim to relate Central Asia to major trends in world history. It is an ideal introduction both to world history for Central Asianists and to Central Asia for world historians. The critique of the Silk Road concept will be of particular use to students. As Levi recognizes, his positive explanations for the

early eighteenth century crisis still need further investigation. The claim of a large-scale silver drain from Central Asia to early Qing, for example, is plausible but as yet undocumented. And with respect to climate, precipitation in arid Central Asia would seem to merit as much or more atten-

tion than temperature. But these caveats only illustrate how effectively *The Bukharan Crisis* has set out an agenda for historians of early modern Central Asian history. It will be exciting to see what they find as they pursue their own “connected histories” of the region.

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