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**Peter Benjamin Golden, *Central Asia in World History*  
Oxford University Press, 2011**

Reviewed by Connie Lamb

For many in the West, Central Asia is a relatively unknown region. What are the boundaries? Who lives there? What is its history? These are questions Peter Golden attempts to answer in this book. Although little is known about this area, it has played a significant role in the world's history because of its position as a crossroads of trade, migration and conquest. For millennia it has been a bridge between East and West, between China, India, Iran and the Mediterranean lands. In modern times, Russia has greatly influenced Central Asia. It is the meeting ground of many religions - shamans, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, among others - as well as multiple languages and peoples that over time created an ethnic mosaic. Its shifting racial, linguistic, political and cultural borders encompassed two interacting yet fundamentally different life ways, each inhabiting different ecological niches: the settled folk of its oases and the nomads of the steppes.

The title of the introduction, "A Layering of Peoples", provides the theme of the book. The history of Central Asia is complex. Two quotes from the introduction present the enormity of the project to write the area's history. "Historically, Central Asians had no all-embracing term for the region or its peoples. The ties of clan, tribe, status, locale or religion were the primary components of Central Asian identities, and these were often multi-layered. For its large nomadic population, political delimitations were of little consequence. Control over people brought control over territory" (1). "As the history of Central Asia amply demonstrates, medieval and modern 'peoples' are often the product of many ethnic and linguistic layers mixed over time and brought together with no small measure of political calculation, especially in modern times" (7).

Central Asia occupies approximately one-seventh of Earth's landmass, some eight million square miles. Today, Central Asia covers the land from the Caspian Sea on the west and extending into some parts of Mongolia and China on the east and from Kazakhstan on the north to the borders of Iran and Afghanistan on the south. The author covers the entire history from when people first moved into the Central Asian area (about 40,000 years ago during the ice age) to the present time, all the ethnic and religious groups involved, and the continuous flux of migrations. It is a massive area and timeframe to cover, hence a great challenge for the author. For those not too familiar with the region, the writing is a little difficult to follow because Golden seems to jump back and forth some, although the book is essentially organized chronologically. In sum, however, Golden does an admirable job of writing from both a global and local perspective.

Golden's book is a volume in The New Oxford World History series, which is divided into three categories: chronological volumes, thematic and topical volumes, and geographical volumes. This book is in the geographical section along with eight other works, some of which also refer to the Central Asia area. This new series is intended to "offer readers an informed, lively, up-to-date history of the world and its people" that is comprehensive, and "emphasizes connectedness and interactions of all kinds – cultural, economic, political, religious and social - involving peoples, places, and processes." So the series "presents local histories in a global context and gives an overview of world events seen through the eyes of ordinary people." (Editor's preface)

The author, Peter Golden, is an obvious expert on the topic. He is a Professor Emeritus of History, Turkish, and Middle Eastern Studies at Rutgers University. He also served as Director of the Middle Eastern Studies Program from 2008-2011. He earned both his Master's and Ph.D. at Columbia University. Golden is the author of a wide array of books, book chapters, articles and book reviews on Turkic and Central Asian Studies.

Much of what we know about the area of Central Asia comes from archaeological excavations and accounts from settled societies who recorded not only their own activities but also the primitive way of life of the nomads. Chapter one provides an explanation for the evolution of pastoral nomadism and its adoption of low and high technology as circumstances required. The domestication of the horse was a turning point for the nomads. Horses were used for food, their hides were used for clothing and dwellings, and their strength was harnessed for carrying burdens. Another stage of development came with the invention of the compound bow, which revolutionized warfare of the steppe. The nomads were organized into clans, tribes, and sometimes confederations as peoples moved, merged and conquered others. Warfare became their business, a topic discussed at length in chapter two. As commerce and trade developed, a few cities arose, especially along the Silk Road that crossed the Central Asian region. Products flowed across the steppes from east to west and back to the east, with cities along the route later contributing goods themselves.

Chapter two emphasizes the third-century emergence of a new power on the Mongolian steppe, the Xiongnu, and the Chinese response. The Han rulers of China were aggressive toward their northern neighbors. They initiated the construction of the Great Wall and established an era of Han-Xiongnu conflict and diplomacy. China not only traded across the region but also began its own western expansion. To its west, two nomadic powers emerged with important global consequences--the Kushan Empire (derived from the Yuezhi nomads who conquered the Graeco-Bactrian state) and the Huns. The Kushans promoted Buddhism, which subsequently spread across Central Asia into China, while the Huns advanced toward Europe, pushing back the Germanic tribes. Later, Turkic groupings came into the steppe where they joined with other tribes to finally form a new tribal union (33).

Chapter three speaks of the Turks and their successors. It is a time of much violence and conquest; many groups came and went or merged, producing a variety of ethnic and religious groups. Following the fall of the Xiongnu and the Han dynasty of China, the Turkic nomads built new states that stretched from Manchuria to the Black Sea. Although they adopted sedentary administrative structures and were empowered by the silk trade, pastoral nomadism remained important to the Turkish economy and horsepower remained the key to their military might (43). While Turkish armies controlled trade routes, the Sogdians, who were vassals of the Turks, served as middlemen, buying, selling and moving the goods.

Chapters four and five discuss the significance of the silk trade in Central Asia and the arrival of Islam. The focus is on the social and cultural history of the region as it is transformed once again with new peoples, religions, and languages alongside the old. Islam accompanied the Arab wars of conquest in the seventh and eighth centuries, meeting with Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, and shamanism. Following the collapse of the Turkic Empire, waves of Turks migrated westward to the borders of Irano-Islamic Transoxiana where many became military slaves of the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad. By the mid-eleventh century, the Seljuk Turks, who had embraced Islam, overthrew their Abbasid overlords and “formed the ethnic building blocks of the Turkic peoples of modern Central Asia” (63).

Chapter six covers once again the story of nomadic steppe tribes joining forces to establish dominance over both settled and pastoral Central Asia with the climax of the “Mongol Whirlwind”. The Mongols swept across the region from the east, conquering and “uniting” various tribes, which at first produced considerable destruction but then led to a space where peaceful intercultural exchange could flourish. Mongols not only facilitated and were active in the great cross-cultural highway but they also acted as filters in the wider exchange process. Chapter seven highlights the preeminence of the Turkic language and Islam in Central Asia, and depicts Tamerlane (Timur-the-lame) as “the last of the trans-Eurasian great nomadic conquerors” (95).

In the early sixteenth century, Central Asians found themselves increasingly wedged between competing empires on their borders. The nomads, who had relied on their skills in horsemanship, archery, and military strategy for mastery in warfare, could not compete against the new “gunpowder empires” that surrounded them. The Ottomans built a Near Eastern empire, the Safavids conquered Iran and made Shiite Islam its state religion, and the Uzbeks transformed Transoxiana into Uzbekistan. Russia advanced into the regions on both the west and east sides, and the Manchus advanced into Mongolia, Siberia, and the borderlands of Muslim Central Asia, eventually dominating the region. New maritime trade routes affected trade in Central Asia in that the types of commodities changed from luxury goods to agricultural products (along with slaves and horses), and the routes shifted from east to west to north to south.

Central Asia ultimately became a Russian link to China. Cultural stagnation accompanied political fragmentation, and Central Asia, once the great center of Islamic learning, became increasingly caught up in tradition and rigid legalism (115).

The last chapter, titled “The Problems of Modernity,” discusses the change brought to Central Asia through Russia’s mass colonization with agriculturalists and its policy to create artificial “nationalities” in their republics. In the 1930s, the Soviets completely transformed Central Asian society through collectivization and sedentarization, killing millions in the process. Although liberated from Soviet rule the new countries of today struggle with ethnic unrest, pollution, economic hardship, and the attempt to establish stable governments. China took over the Uighur area with a claim that it is an ancient possession of China and, like the Soviets, instituted mass migrations, but separatist movements continue in the area today.

Golden’s book features various aids for the reader including a pronunciation guide, a chronology, notes, further readings, websites, acknowledgements, and a good index. Maps are scattered throughout the book and are helpful, but even more maps would clarify visually what the author presents in writing. The pictures and photos are interesting and add to the text. One suggestion is to include a glossary, because there are so many names of places, people, and groups that are scattered throughout that, rather than try to find the term’s previous use, it would be valuable to have a glossary for reference.

There are other books on Central Asia but probably none so comprehensive in time frame, territory or topics. Rather than a conventional national history, Golden places Central Asia into its appropriate historical context as a region of shifting ethnic, linguistic, political and cultural borders. The subject matter of this work is immense and Golden has done a remarkable job in explaining the “layering of peoples” including the tribes, life ways, religions, languages, and movements. He places the entire history of this vast area in a global context. This is a highly scholarly and valuable book for those who wish to learn more about Central Asia.

Note: Some of the text in the paragraphs summarizing chapter content is based on a review of the book by Mary Jane Maxwell in *World History Connected*, vol. 9, no. 1, Feb. 2012.