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Book review

The Bukharan Crisis: A Connected History of 18th Century Central Asia (Central Asia in Context)

Scott C. Levi, 2020

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The Bukharan Crisis: A Connected History of 18th-Century Central Asia by Scott C. Levi presents an exciting new narrative in the field. It is an alternative to previous works which attribute the fall of the Bukhara Khanate to the isolation and decline of early modern Central Asia. Its form is different from his other monographs on Indian diaspora and the Khoqand Khanate. From Levi's perspective, Central Asia was neither isolated nor in decline in the seventeenth and the early eighteenth century, which warrants the reconsideration of explanations of the Bukharan crisis. The book comprises of four chapters, which elaborate on the challenging historical situation Bukhara faced in early modern Central Asia through thematic discussions about the causal factors for its vicissitude. Levi argues that Bukhara became more deeply integrated into the outside world in multiple ways during this period, calling into question theories that early modern Central Asia is isolated from world history.

In the first chapter, Levi provides a short history of Bukhara and how research on the Bukharan crisis has developed in academia. The Bukhara Khanate emerged as a semi-nomadic power in the early sixteenth century after the last Timurid emperor Babur and his followers were expelled by the Uzbek Chinggisid ruler Muhammad Shibani Khan. Two Chinggisid dynasties then followed: the Shibanids (1500-1599) and the Toqay-Timurids (1599-1747/85). The Bukhara Khanate maintained its rule through the appanage system originating from the Mongol Empire. However, from the 1680s to the first half of the eighteenth century the Bukhara Khanate confronted a crisis spurred by internal decentralizing powers in the form of the Uzbek amirs. The amirs elevated the Toqay-Timurids to the throne but then asserted their control over the political centre by consolidating territories assigned to them by the Bukharan leadership and engaging in external conflicts with the neighbouring powers including the Kazakhs, the Khivans, the Safavids, and even the Mughals. From 1747 to 1785, Manghit leaders exercised power and maintained the Toqay-Timurids, the legitimate Chinggisids rulers, as puppets until they were replaced by the Emirate of Bukhara.

Previous studies have often characterised Central Asia as isolated and backward in this period because of the rise of the Oceanic trade and the collapse of the Silk Road. Since the

1990s, however, scholars have challenged the early modern decline thesis through detailed research on Central Asian history, including in works by Audrey Burton, Robert MacChesney, Morris Rossabi and Ron Sela. While some academics still attribute the fall of the Bukhara Khanate to the economic crisis in the eighteenth century, the assumption that isolation led to the decline of early modern Central Asia risks obscuring causal factors. Levi argues that commercial, economic, and environmental connections linked Central Asian states with neighbouring societies including China, Russia and India showing that Central Asia was integrated in larger early modern world processes. The Bukharan crisis cannot be attributed to a collapse of Central Asia's commercial economy or to an overall decline of Central Asia. Both the representation of Central Asian merchants solely as caravans trading luxury goods between China and the Mediterranean as well as the assumption that the maritime trade finally undermined the Silk Road are therefore identified as tropes rather than explanations for Central Asia's purported isolation and decline. Instead, Levi claims that Central Asia became more tightly linked to the early modern global economy due to several key changes. In the sixteenth century, the Indian merchant diaspora expanded into the region, supporting the local agricultural economy and linking the region to the growing Indian Ocean economy. In the eighteenth century, the Qing Dynasty extended its economic interests westward because of its affairs in Xinjiang. From the mid-sixteenth century to the late eighteenth century, Central Asia also developed commercial arteries with Russia across the northern steppe through Russia's southward expansion into Siberia and the Irtysh River.

Contrary to the narrative that Levi argues is so prevalent in previous studies, his conclusion is that Central Asia stayed connected with its powerful neighbours. In the final chapter he argues that there was no single causal factor in the Bukharan crisis and that multiple historical processes converged. In addition to the impact of decentralization, the cooling climate from 1640s to the early eighteenth century shortened the growing season, decimated livestock in the steppe, killed crops in the fields, and adversely affected the regions' agricultural production and tax revenues, which exacerbated the friction between the Bukharan state and the Uzbek amirs. Another factor that merits attention is the availability of gunpowder weaponry from the late seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries, which disadvantaged traditional militaries by disrupting local power structures.

This book presents a compelling argument against the common thesis that the Bukharan Khanate fell due to the isolation and decline of early modern Central Asia. But Levi takes stock of recent studies on early modern Central Asia rather than material that detail the internal Bukharan history. The failure to address the internal affairs of the Bukharan Khanate is a weakness in terms of historiography and means that his account is not fully convincing. Nevertheless, the critique levelled by Levi is an important intervention in the field that challenges commonplace ideas about how Bukhara fell by examining the 'connected history' of early modern Central Asia.