

Central Asia in World History

BY PETER B. GOLDEN

NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011

192 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0195338195, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Reuel R. Hanks

This volume, one of the geographically themed books in the *New Oxford World History* series, is a welcome addition to the quite limited number of works on Central Asian history written for high school students and college undergraduates. Peter Golden is an accomplished scholar of the region, and he offers a broad sweep of historical development, ranging from the earliest era of oasis civilization to the modern era. The narrative is organized around basic themes that include the tension between agrarian and nomadic lifestyles, the complex and multilayered social fabric of Central Asian societies, and the recurrent infusion of new cultural markers and peoples via invasion and trade. For students encountering the region for the first time, Central Asia's crucial position as a conduit in world affairs unfolds in the centuries-long interplay of Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Turks, and Mongols. This story is ably presented in just over 100 pages, providing a concise but engaging rendering of this region's fascinating past.

In a short account covering several millennia, discussion of some periods invariably must be limited in scope. A weak spot in Professor Golden's book is the slim account given the Soviet period and the past twenty years, representing the aftermath of independence for the five former USSR Central Asian republics. Only the last seven pages or so are devoted to a quite brief overview of Soviet policy and the problems faced by the arc of states lying between the Caspian Sea and the Tien Shan. Yet the major crises plaguing this portion of Central Asia, be they environmental, economic, social, or political, all stem from policies and mismanagement wrought by Soviet ad-

ministrations. Examples include the destruction of the Aral Sea with its associated ecological and health problems, persistent episodes of ethnic violence in the Fergana Valley, and the continuing failure of the national leadership in the era of independence to establish social and political institutions in most of these countries that contribute to civil society and stability. Likewise, there is little information on the pivotal place of Afghanistan in post-9/11 Central Asian development strategy and stability. In the rare instance where students encounter coverage of Central Asia in the Western media, these issues are likely to be the focus, and a fuller presentation of their origins and consequences would be useful. A minor quibble is that the book contains five good maps, but there is no listing of these in the front matter. Introductory-level students would be more likely to make use of these resources if there was a quick-reference list at the beginning of the volume or at the beginning of the chapters in which they appear.

This work will be useful to teachers covering world history (tenth grade or above); those providing a unit on Asian history, especially the pre-modern era; and is a valuable addition to a study of Middle Eastern or South Asian history to 1800. It will serve nicely as the fundamental text in a course devoted exclusively to Central Asia, if bolstered with a few supplemental articles covering the last two centuries. ■

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Bamboo People

BY MITALI PERKINS

WATERTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS: CHARLESBRIDGE PUBLISHING, 2010

272 PAGES, ISBN-10: 1580893287, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Sara Van Fleet

Bamboo People is a coming-of-age story about two teenage boys caught up in the Burmese government's brutal regime and its systematic repression of ethnic minority groups. The story touches upon each boy's struggle to maintain a sense of morality, identity, and compassion in a world filled with cruelty and injustice. It is a tale that addresses current conditions of human rights abuse and inequality inside Burma; it would be an effective novel to use in the classroom to engage and teach about these issues while bringing a greater understanding of Burma and mainland Southeast Asia to young adults.

The story is told in two parts. The first is from the perspective of Chico, the teenage son of a Burmese physician imprisoned without a trial for what the government calls "crimes against the state." The crimes consist of his medical care for individuals labeled enemies by the government. Chico's mother is trying to survive without her husband's income and at the same time trying to protect her only son from being seized by the military and forced into fighting.

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