Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources ed. by Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela (review)

Nathan Spannaus

Ab Imperio, 1/2013, pp. 393-397 (Article)

Published by Ab Imperio

DOI: 10.1353/imp.2013.0014

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/imp/summary/v2013/2013.1.spannaus.html
what the Andijan Uprising and the local response to it can tell us about the nature of Russian colonial rule. While, he says, it brought with it many insults and oppressions, and the Soviet description of the Russian conquest of Central Asia as a “uniting” (prisoedinenie) is nonsense, the local Muslim attitude to colonial rule was by no means wholly hostile, as many valued the relative peace and stability that it had brought.

The texts of the twenty poems themselves occupy a long appendix (Pp. 59-107); all are written in Turki, most printed in the Arabic script as they originally appeared, although in a few cases where an earlier edition in Cyrillic Uzbek exists, Erkinov has reproduced these versions. One poem, by Nadim Namangani, also appears in Russian translation as it was published in Turkestanskie Vedomosti in 1898. I am not qualified in either linguistic or scholarly terms to say anything about the texts themselves, except that Erkinov has done a remarkable job in bringing them together from many different locations, ranging from the Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies to Turkistan Wilayatining Gazeti and Ostroumov’s personal “fond” in the Uzbek state archive. Overall then this publication is a fine achievement, which will be of great interest to historians of Russian colonialism, Central Asian Islam, and Turkic literature.

Nathan SPANNAUS


As anyone who has ever attempted to teach the history of Central Asia can attest, the sheer lack of primary sources available in English serves as a tremendous obstacle to introducing students to this fascinating and fruitful subject. To that end, Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela have edited this valuable anthology, explicitly intended as a “pedagogical resource” for the study of the region (P. 1).

In this they are mostly successful. The translations are of uniformly high quality. All are in very readable English and seemingly lacking in technical errors. In addition, many of the translations have been produced specifically for this anthology, making it an important contribution for the study of Central Asian history in and of itself. (We may therefore add this collection of primary source readings to the growing body of translations into English of Central Asian texts, which includes relatively recent contributions by Allen Frank,1

The collection features some more obscure sources, as well. The apocryphal biography of Timur from eighteenth-century Bukhara serves as an important example of the many different facets of historiography as a genre and its place in the political and cultural life of Central Asia. A sixteenth-century deed of sale, also from Bukhara, by a member of one of the city’s most prominent families provides a seldom seen glimpse of the quotidian economic activity of the region. And the excerpt from Fazil Mahmud Churas’s (fl. late seventeenth century) chronicle, which describes the relations between different nomadic groups, sheds light on an aspect of Central Asian history that has very few written sources. (On the other hand, the collection devotes an entire section to the Great Game, an area of Central Asian history that is not lacking in available primary source documents, many in English. Presenting alternative perspectives on this conflict would be beneficial, of course, but unfortunately only two of the five texts included here are by non-European writers.)

One significant advantage this collection has is its historical sweep.


The large number of texts contained here – fifty-five in all – lends itself to a broad scope, and the chronological breadth of the anthology is immense. The texts included stretch from the Arab conquests of *Ma wara’al-nahr* in the eighth century up through the tsarist domination of the region at the turn of the twentieth; one can read within this single volume both the “Secret History of the Mongols” as well as an account of the Russian invasion of Khiva.

In contrast to the chronological sweep, however, the thematic scope is decidedly narrower. The vast majority of texts (some forty of the fifty-five) focus on political and/or military elites. This not only includes straightforward histories, such as the *Zubdat al-athar*, the excerpted portion of which describes the origins of the Shaybanid state, but the travelogue of the journey to Bukhara of the English merchant Anthony Jenkinson (1530–1609) also devotes much of its space to describing the rulers of the city (Pp. 215-221). Even the letters of the renowned Naqshbandi Sufi Khoja Ahrar (1404–1490) included here revolve around the mystic’s relationships with rulers (Pp. 188-190).

One of the obstacles to the study of Central Asia is this narrow perspective taken in scholarship toward the history of the region. A consequence of the Soviet era, when academics were for the most part limited to exclusively political or economic topics (particularly regarding more recent periods), important historiographical areas such as religious, intellectual, and cultural history have until recently received limited attention in Central Asia research. This collection, unfortunately, does little to amend this situation. (One wonders why, for instance, different letters of Khoja Ahrar, some of which deal with interactions with non-Sufis or describe Naqshbandi mystical practice, were not selected.)

There are some very useful texts that could have expanded the thematic scope of the collection. Biographical dictionaries (*tabaqat* or *tarajim*), for example, represent one of the few sources of social history for the premodern Islamic world, yet they are entirely absent here, despite their ubiquity as a historiographical genre. Likewise, a source such as the *Rashahat-i ʿayn al-hayat*, a sixteenth-century history of the Naqshbandi order and its early masters, could have provided a different perspective on the region’s history (as could its enlarged and expanded Arabic translation by Muhammad Murad Ramzi [1853–1934], a Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi Sufi from the Volga-Ural region who composed the work while living in Mecca). Additionally, Mu-

---

hammad ‘Ali Baljuvani’s *Tarikh-i nafi’ gives a valuable firsthand portrayal of Bukhara during the revolutionary and civil war periods.\(^5\) That work would fall outside of the collection’s chronological range (the latest text, Bayani’s history of Khiva, though composed between 1911 and 1914, deals with events in the 1870s), yet this too is remarkable; given the prominence Jadidism has in Central Asian studies, it is surprising that sources related to it and other modernist movements are not present here.

It would be unfair, however, to fault the editors too strongly. They used translations only of those texts that have been published in the original,\(^6\) and the overwhelming majority of edited primary source texts of Central Asian origin were produced in the Soviet Union (and thus bound by Soviet ideological and political constraints). As Levi and Sela presumably wanted to use only sources that were available in the original, such reliance on Soviet-era works was certainly unavoidable. And this emphasis on accessibility is important. Nevertheless, the limited scope of Central Asian historiography remains an issue for the field.

Tackling another (somewhat related) issue, the editors chose to emphasize the important linkage between Central Asia and Islam. They state in the general introduction that one of their main goals in producing the anthology is to connect the history of Central Asia with the study of the history of the Muslim world as a whole, noting that “Much of the recent scholarship on Central Asia exhibits an unfortunate tendency to approach the region and its history with very little knowledge of Islamic history” (P. 3). This is an important and welcome goal, and the inclusion of Arabic-language sources helps to underline the connections between Central Asia and the wider Islamic world. However, a greater emphasis could have been placed on these links. For instance, some details omitted in the section introductions could have provided readers with greater historical context. (This is most striking for the section on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which deals with historical topics that have broad significance for the history of the Muslim world, yet no such connections are made in those introductions.) In addition, the consistent inclusion of Hijri dates and


\(^6\) The citations for all original texts can be found on Pp. ix-xiii.
use of diacritics for Arabic-script transliterations would have been helpful in this regard.

It is important, however, to remember that this volume is intended to introduce undergraduates to the study of Central Asian history with primary sources, and that is a worthwhile goal indeed. Whether Levi and Sela plan to produce subsequent volumes or consider this collection to be a singular contribution is not clear, but here they have produced a useful and important text that instructors of Central Asian history will no doubt find valuable. (And if they do intend further volumes, I for one eagerly await them.) The collection of this large number of primary sources into a single volume in readable English translation and published in paperback will make this a widely used resource for teaching the history of Central Asia at English-language universities everywhere.

7 A point the editors address in the opening materials, P. xv.