

Turkestan and the Rise of Eurasian Empires. A Study of Politics and Invented Traditions.
By Ali Anooshahr. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 209 pp. (ISBN
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The formation of a new polity often requires a definition, if not a redefinition, of identity. In the case of empires, because of their size, stretch, and reliance on internal loyalty as well as external legitimacy and respect, this may be said to be even truer. Ali Anooshahr's recent book, *Turkestan and the Rise of Eurasian Empires. A Study of Politics and Invented Traditions*, is an excellent study in how historiography can assist in this ultimately political project.

The book's chapters are woven very well together, although at times they are uneven in length and depth. This notwithstanding, Anooshahr's work is an excellent contribution to Persianate historiography that is likely to become a must-read for scholars of Persian, Central Asian, and South Asian history and historiography.

The foundational argument of the book is that the Ottomans, Safavids, Mughals, Mongols, and Shibanids all struggled with the full acceptance of their Turco-Mongol heritage. This is evident on page 2 of the book, when Anooshahr maintains that "Turco-Mongol or Turkestani origins were frequently deferred to another time, another place, another phase, or another people" in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Persian historical writing. This was the case even for the Mongols and Shibanids, located in Central Asia, or Turkestan. For the historians, "the invention of pedigrees from a mythologized past for new leaders was necessitated by the very act of inscribing one's patron in the teleology of Islamic monarchies, by the very logic of historiographic expectations" because "Persian historical narratives reified and attempted to construct stable categories such as 'kings,' 'dynasties,' and the 'foundation of a state' out of chaotic military-political events".

The introductory first chapter serves as a frame for the author's contribution. Newly established rulers in the late fifteenth century, seeking to legitimise and ground their rule after

an unstable century in which the Timurid, Aqqoyyunlu, and Lodi dynasties collapsed, prompted historiographers to (re)write history as to present the new rulers and their origins in a bright, glorified, and praising way, a process that increased during the sixteenth century.

Chapter 2, “Origins of the Question of Origins,” is an intellectual genealogy of historiography that meticulously surveys seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth century Western Orientalist tropes on the origins of Asian empires and ethnolinguistic continuities between Turco-Mongol rulers, while chapter 3, “The Early Ottomans in Idris Bitlisi’s *Hasht Bihisht*,” argues that Idris Bitlisi, a refugee from Safavid Iran, mythologised Ottoman origin stories in his *Hasht Bihisht (Eight Paradises [1506])* by layering symbolic significance onto extant accounts of the dynasty’s early period.

Chapter 4, “The Early Safavids,” presents several methodological and narrative challenges since no official chronicle or ‘royal account’ of the early Safavids exists. Anooshahr argues that the early Safavids wished for an alternative to an ethnic Turkic identity and as argued on page 80, “chose a nonethnic self-identification as a holy warrior state”. Anooshahr primarily addresses the Ottoman chronicler ‘Aşıkpaşazade (d. after 1484), who wrote in Turkish, Fazl Allah b. Ruzbihan Khunji Isfahani (1455–1521), who wrote in Persian, and Hasan Beg Rumlu (b. 1530–1531), who wrote in Persian.

Chapter 5, titled “Uzbeks and Kazakhs in Fazl Allah Khunji’s *Mihmannamah-i Bukhara*,” pertains to the Shibanid state in Central Asia founded by Muhammad Shiban Khan, a Chingisid warrior. In this chapter, the analysis is centred on Fazl Allah b. Ruzbihan Khunji Isfahani (1455–1521), who wrote *Tarikh-i ‘Alam’ara-i Amini, Mihmannamah-i Bukhara*, and *Suluk-i Muluk*. Anooshahr argues that in order to redefine the Shibanids’ Turco-Mongol legacy, Khunji wrote in a way as to assign the uncomfortable elements of the

Shibanids' past to the neighbouring Kazakhs, through a mechanism reminding the reader of Julia Kristeva's abject.¹

Chapter 6, "Mongols in the *Tarikh-i Rashidi*," focuses on the *work of* Mirza Haydar Dughlat in the mid-sixteenth century, who had an ambivalent take on the Mongol heritage, considered to be both a source of pride and shame due to its pagan and bloody legacy, while chapter 7, "Timurid India," deals with the shifting perception of South Asian states in regard to their Timurid heritage and sovereignty as it was reflected in Indo-Persian historiography from the very end of the fourteenth century, right after Delhi's conquest by Timur, to the mid-sixteenth century through nine sources: *Tarikh-i Mubarakshahi*, *Tarikh-i Muhammadi*, *Maasir-i Mahmudshahi*, *Tarikh-i Mahmudi*, *Tarikh-i Sadr-i Jahan*, *Tabaqat-i Baburi*, *Qanun-i Humayuni*, *Tarikh-i Ibrahimi*, and *Tarikh-i Qutbi*. Finally, an epilogue recaps the main argument of the book.

Reading this book from the perspective of International Relations and Global Historical Sociology, it is evident that it powerfully complements recent research performed in those fields on processes of order-making in Eurasia.² Political practices, military conquests, the invention, or localisation, or modification of norms and the establishment of new polities and new forms of legitimacy all impact, and crucially are impacted, by the official narratives that accompany them. In this respect, therefore, one possibly underdeveloped area of the book is its rather tenuous link with 'the political', and with how these narratives very much informed status, ranking, authority, and dignity in the very complex processes of identity (re)formation. In fact, 'identity' as a trope could be explored more in the book and linked to more recent and event contemporary aspects of 'the invention of traditions' in Eurasia as well as the creation of the notorious dichotomic categories of

¹ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1982.

² Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

‘I/Me’, on top of ‘Self/Other’ and ‘Inside/Outside’, developed in psychoanalysis and anthropology. Chapter 5, for example, made me think of how Uzbeks and Kazakhs nowadays see themselves in jokes, popular stories, stereotypes, and teasing mythologies, and the whole book made me wonder about the relevance of Anooshahr’s work for understanding how the Central Asian republics, after 1991, have nationalised histories and selectively used aspects of their past to institutionalise their identity in contemporary international society.³

Overall, this is an excellent contribution to the comparative historiography of all five early modern Eurasian empires, rich in empirical material, and fertile for further studies on linking memory, identity, and selective legitimacy. After all, even Freud said that forgetfulness, which is seldom unintended and therefore intentional, is one of the best defence mechanisms at our disposal.⁴

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³ Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2000.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books, 2002 [1901].