

Rethinking Central Asia: Non-Eurocentric Studies in History, Social Structure and Identity. By Korkut A. Erturk (ed.). Ithaca Press, 1999. Pp. vi + 202. Figs. Notes. Index. £35. Hb. ISBN 0 86372 240 7

This is a very refreshing book which challenges the prevailing Eurocentric perception of world history and offers a fascinating analysis of Central Asian historical evolution from an Eastern perspective. Its editor has done an excellent job: a comprehensive and inclusive editorial introduction is followed by seven separate essays by different researchers which together form a logical and integral narrative.

The first essay, 'ReOrient', by Andre G. Frank, argues that until the present, Afro-Eurasian history has been studied predominantly from a Eurocentric vantage-point. This has led to the distortion of the real historical record of East and Central Asia, in particular. This distortion, initiated by the works of Adam Smith and Karl Marx in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, constituted an ideological component in the advance of Europe-centred capitalism. Central Asia was proclaimed to be in a state of decline and stagnation which had begun in the early 16th century and was therefore dismissed from early modern and even contemporary world history. Frank's analysis reveals that Central Asia continued to play an important economic and political role in the world historical process right through the 18th century until at least 1800.

Another article of particular interest is on 'Central Asian societies and the oral literature', by Lois A. Giffen. Giffen examines the correlation between the historical transformations of Central Asian Turkic societies and the evolution of their oral epic tradition. She identifies three stages in this evolution which corresponded to the pre-Islamic, early Islamic and late Islamic periods of Central Asian history. An essay by Sharon Bastung on 'Tribe, confederation and state' offers an original, although somewhat scholastic analysis of the nature of tribal organisation and state formation among Altaic nomads. The author concludes that the tribal structure common to Central Asian nomads is a 'segmented lineage' system which is quite different from a clan-type organisation. An article by Serif Mardin on 'Abdurreshid Ibrahim and Zeki Velidi Togan' introduces a Sufi (Nakshbandi) dimension into the study of Jadidism—Islamic reformism—among Russia's Muslims of the 19th century. Mardin assesses the impact of the Sufi affiliation on the historical perceptions and political positions of the two leading Tataro-Bashkir intellectuals and politicians on whom he focuses. A weakness of this contribution is its selective approach to history as a result of which some inconvenient facts—such as, for example, the active involvement of Abdurreshid Ibrahim in the Russian revolution—

Isenbike Togan contributes two articles: 'Patterns of legitimization of rule in the history of the Turks' and 'In search of an approach to the history of women in Central Asia'. The first is concerned with the relationship between the economic organisation of a Turkic society in Central Asia and a particular form of political legitimisation. Togan argues that major changes in the legitimisation of rule have taken place during periods of rupture in internal redistributive patterns. Her other article offers a feminist interpretation of women's role in the history of Central Asian Turkic societies. In her view, patriarchal domination intensifies in Central Asia whenever the political centre weakens and tribes re-emerge as powerful autonomous forces. An essay by A. Aydin Cecen examines from a Turkish perspective the major phases in the history of Central Asia, and especially Uzbekistan. These three last essays suffer in various degrees from Turkocentrism, in my view the principle weakness of the book.

Overall, however, this volume stands out in contemporary Central Asian studies and deserves a warm welcome.

GALINA M. YEMELIANOVA