

The Silk Roads

By Peter Frankopan

London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

It is a bold promise that the Byzantinist Peter Frankopan takes upon himself to fulfill by presenting the reader with “a new history of the world.” The *Silk Roads* (2015) narrates three thousands of years of global history from the perspective of the Eurasian crossroads between the Mediterranean and Central Asia, but the reader who has expected a study of the golden age of silk trade between China and Europe is likely to get disappointed by the title. As the author stresses on the very first page, the main incentive is to offer an alternative vision to the “accepted and lazy history of civilization” where – in the words of the anthropologist Eric Wolf (1982, 5) – “ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution.”

Academic historians who generally – and for good reasons – tend to frown upon grand narratives may question the prudence of taking up the fight against them by constructing new ones instead of simply ignoring existing ones or breaking them down into deconstructable units. But grand narratives are no mere pulp fiction distortions of academic history: sometimes they constitute the invisible warp from which other human sciences derive their everyday definitions, notions and paradigms. By offering an alternative vision of global history, which focuses on the main land mass of Central Asia and its constant movements of goods and people over millennia, Frankopan has not merely questioned the Western historical prerogative but also the grand narrative of “the West” as a distinct and independent historical agent, in which still the post-colonial discourse all too often tend up to get stuck. Has the West ever existed, and if it has, where does it begin and end – historically and geographically?

A main fundament for the grand narrative of the West is the myth about ancient Greece as its cultural cradle. Despite the fact that historical research has since long moved away from this distorting picture of the ancient world in general, it seems that most state school systems keep recycling a notion of history that was en vogue when they were established in the mid-1800s. When Frankopan describes the multicultural interaction under the auspices of the first universal world empire, Achaemenid Persia, and the ensuing dissipation of Greek culture in the Middle East and Central Asia during the Hellenist and Late Ancient period – as it mixed with Near Eastern religions like Judaism, Manicheism and Christianity – it can hardly be called revolutionary knowledge; but it is a history that deserves to be retold, again and again, until it gets stuck in the popular consciousness. Perhaps most of all, it is also a history that is necessary to be aware of if we want to prevent Islamists and Islamophobes from maintaining the myth of Islam appearing out of the blue. From the moment when Islam left the Arabian Peninsula

and spread between the Mediterranean and Central Asia, it became part of the same restless reality that would both provide it with its most lasting cultural and intellectual monuments and pave way for its greatest challenge in the Mongol invasions. A recent work that more specifically deals with this topic is *Lost Enlightenment* by Starr (2013).

Geographically, Frankopan’s re-narration serves to highlight how the “Europe” that we by convention persist in calling a continent despite the fact that it is not, is a late construction that has always been a periphery either to the larger Eurasian land mass or to the Mediterranean Sea. A northwards shift from the Mediterranean took place – as already Fernand Braudel noted in his now classical work from the 1940s – in the seventeenth century and coincided with the overseas expansion of the Western European powers, a shift that has been fundamental for our presently accepted notions about globalization, colonization and modernity. Yet it suffices to throw a glance at Central and Eastern Europe – which succumbed to a second serfdom during its effort to keep up with the Transatlantic powers – or the Mediterranean countries – which were left to offer an exotic backdrop of decay – to realize why this construction would turn out to be much more fragile than the self-appointed Europeans had imagined. It began to crack and crumble already in the 1800s, and it is even tempting to ask whether the whole grand narrative of the West and its historical mission appeared in an effort to compensate for the feelings of vulnerability and insecurity (for German readers, the new study by Koschorke, *Hegel und wir*, 2015, offers a highly recommendable analysis.)

Here is where it has to be stressed that about one third of *The Silk Roads* is in fact a new history of the *modern* world, and the last hundred years in particular, for which the World Wars, the Cold War and the “War on Terror” appear as mere side theaters of a resurgent Eurasia. The premise for this way of narrating history is that the lamps really went out all over Europe in 1914 never to be lit again – that the ensuing history of European and the Western success and global dominance is a hollow myth that can only insufficiently cover up the fact that the sun has gone down a century ago and is now about to rise in the east. Especially the last chapters, which are devoted to US military activities, Russian cultural imperialism and Chinese economic penetration in Central Asia, appear as somewhat premature conclusions of a process that we are currently part of, and the self-confidence of the current Kazakh and Turkmen states is not necessarily a testimony to their actual strength.

This said, *Silk Roads* does raise important questions not least for students of modern history and the Middle East. It makes the colonial division of the Middle East appear as an almost haphazard act of desperation rather than a considerate scheme, and instead Russia re-enters the searchlights as a main historical agent behind the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This matches an increased interest among current historians of the First World War to re-focus on the power rivalries in Eastern and Southern, rather than Northern and Western Europe as main or even actual sources of the war (Reynolds, 2010;

McMeekin, 2011; Clarke, 2012), and it later echoes the hotly debated effort of Timothy Snyder to re-frame the Nazi and Soviet genocides and the Second World War in *Bloodlands* (2010). This new way of narrating the history of the Middle East gives the reader appetite for a more up-to-date version of Hopkirk's 1990 study of *The Great Game*, perhaps with renewed focus devoted to the way in which the struggle between Transeurasian (Russian) and Transatlantic (Anglo-American) powers keep affecting the region.

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Syria from Reform to Revolt Volume 1: Political Economy and International Relations

Edited by Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. 2015.

Syria from Reform to Revolt Volume 2: Culture, Society, and Religion

Edited by Christa Salamandra and Leif Stenberg
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. 2015.

The two-part edited collection entitled *Syria from Reform to Revolt* is a crucial read for anyone who wants to understand complex realities and societal, cultural, religious and economic developments and transformations that took place in Syria prior to the 2011 uprisings. It is one of the most comprehensive recent contributions to contemporary Syria scholarship. The volumes focus on the period between 2000 and 2010, signifying the first decade of Syria under the rule of Bashar Al-Assad. The publications are the result of an academic conference entitled *Syria under Bashar al-Assad* which was organized in October 2010, at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES), Lund University, Sweden. The conference was the first international, cross-disciplinary meeting of scholars of contemporary Syria. The two volumes, conceptualized prior to the Syrian uprisings, are based on grounded empirical research in Syria and shed light on some of the seeds of the Syrian revolt. Both, established scholars and

young academics with more recent experience, contributed to the volumes.

The first volume is a rich book with 14 chapters divided over three parts, all providing valuable insights on the changes and transformations in Syrian society during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The three parts are respectively entitled:

1. Reproducing Power and Legitimacy;
2. Reconstructing the regime's social base;
3. Regional and international challenges.

In the introduction, the reader is informed about the developments in Syria when Bashar al-Assad took power. After years of austerity in the 1980s and the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, his second son, the young 34-year old Bashar al-Assad became president. Bashar's presidency was made possible by an immediate change of constitution, which previously stated that a president of Syria should be at least 35-year old. Immediately after his inauguration speech, a new wind was felt in Syria. People started to openly discuss previously forbidden subjects like politics. Where the old discourse of Hafez had been nationalist and anti-Western, the new discourse introduced relative openness through the introduction of government guided economic markets.

The Damascus Spring shook the old guard of the Hafez reign and when the political openness of this first revolt in 2001 became too threatening to the old power structures, Bashar decided to clamp down on this new openness and its main initiators were arrested. Syrian civil society was controlled and co-opted by the introduction of so called GONGOs, government organized non-governmental organizations, headed by the first Lady, Asma al-Assad. Young urban entrepreneurs replaced the members of the old Revolutionary Youth Union. The First Lady, with a background in banking and a British upbringing, served