

# Empires of the Steppe: Eurasia from the Mongols to the Soviet Union

*Spring 2025 Syllabus Version 10.0*

## Course Information

### Logistics

- **Instructor:** Dr. James Pickett
- **Course:** HIST 0752
- **Schedule:** Tues / Thurs 11am - 12:15pm
- **Classroom:** Barco 109
- **Email:** pickettj@pitt.edu
- **Office:** 3908 Posvar (in annex to the right of dept.)
- **Office Hours:** Mondays 2-3:30pm (3908 Posvar with Zoom available upon request: Zoom Link, 696-530-3747)
- **Course Policies** (*considered part of the syllabus*): <https://courses.bactriana.org/policies/>

### Content Overview

**Course Objective** Over the last several centuries, Eurasia's millennia-long domination by successive nomadic steppe empires (stretching from Europe to China) was displaced by new imperial challengers from the periphery (notably Russia, China, and Britain). This course examines the nature of that transition by charting the history of Eurasian empires from the Mongols (thirteenth century) to the present day. From Genghis Khan to Tamerlane to Stalin; between Russian spies, Viking berserkers, and the Taliban; across silk roads, great games, and more.

**Organization of Course Content** The empires of the steppe were truly vast in scale, integrating territories usually studied in isolation from one another – and so this course provides important context for separate courses on Russian, Eastern European, Chinese, and Middle Eastern history. The chronological scope of this course is similarly epic, spanning over seven centuries, which will allow us to focus on recurring themes related to empires in world history. Our primary focus will be on geopolitical strategies for imperial rule, but we will also examine entangled cultural, religious, and economic themes along the way. The course will emphasize three lenses of historical analysis: institutions, ideology, and the broader geopolitical environment.

**Learning Outcomes** The principle learning outcomes of this course are twofold:

1. Ability to deploy original analysis through the engagement of primary sources
2. The articulation of that analysis through evidence-based writing

Both of these skills are developed in view of applying them beyond the academic field of history.

### Course Requirements

**Required Texts and Readings** **Required Textbook:** Scott Levi and Ron Sela (eds.), *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, available as an e-book through the library online catalog.

**Important Reference:** Yuri Bregel's *An Historical Atlas of Central Asia* (geography is included in the study guides), also available as an e-book through the library online catalog.

All readings (other than the Levi & Sela volume) are available electronically in the shared folder.

### Workload Expectations

- **Weekly Reading:** 40-60 pages per week (complete before associated class)
- **Time Outside Class:** 4-6 hours per week
- **Platforms:** Canvas and TopHat (required)

It is the student's responsibility to have all of these platforms up and running within the first week of class. It is also the student's responsibility to log into TopHat (which is used for in-class exercises) before the start of class. For technical support, consult <https://teaching.pitt.edu/educational-software-consulting/>.

### Assignments & Grading

#### Study Guides (15% of final grade)

**What they are:** - One assignment per unit posted weekly on TopHat - Designed to help guide you through difficult material, integrating lectures and assigned readings - Due on TopHat one hour after the associated class session

**How to complete them:** - Complete responses relating to assigned readings before attending class - Complete remaining questions during class based on lecture information - Be ready to submit at the end of class - If you are unsure about a question, raise your hand and ask – everyone will benefit

**Grading:** - 80% or higher completion → full credit (bumped up to 100%) - Below 80% → raw score - Questions or concerns about your grade should be discussed during office hours only

#### In-Class Participation (20% of final grade)

**What it includes:** - TopHat real-time quizzes and reinforcement exercises completed during class - Interactive simulation - Credit given for participation (even if you get questions wrong)

**Important rules:** - Completing in-class TopHat exercises without being present is considered cheating

**Grading:** - 80% or higher completion → full credit (bumped up to 100%) - Below 80% → raw score - Questions or concerns about your grade should be discussed during office hours only

#### Midterm Essay (35% of final grade)

**Format & Requirements:** - Approximately 700 words (3 pages) - In-class, handwritten essay - Prompts provided a week in advance - You may consult any hard-copy references (e.g., printed notes – up to ten pages). Notes must be handed in along with the essay. - Bonus points from the *optional* Analytical Writing Skills Sequence will be applied to this category.

**Revision Option:** - You may revise your handwritten draft into a typed, electronically submitted revision by the specified date - The second grade will fully replace the first one

#### Final Paper (30% of final grade)

**Format & Requirements:** - 1300 words (around 5-6 pages) - Handwritten during the designated finals time in the designated finals room - Based on assigned readings (no additional research required) - Prompts provided a week in advance - You may consult any hard-copy references (e.g., printed notes – up to ten pages) - You are welcome to discuss your draft during office hours before the exam

## Extra Credit Opportunities

Numerous opportunities available throughout the semester (counted in Participation category). Generally involves attending a university lecture and writing a short reflection (no more than one page) relating the content to course themes. Suggest extra credit assignments at least three days in advance so colleagues can also attend.

## Grading Scale & Policies

**Letter Grade Distribution:** Standard Canvas cutoffs apply, with one exception: only the two highest overall grades receive an “A+”; other grades in the standard A+ range are collapsed into “A.”

**Absences and Makeup Work:** Course policies build in substantial flexibility. If you miss an assignment or class, existing systems accommodate you without separate communication needed. For extreme circumstances requiring additional accommodations beyond these policies, a note from your advisor is required.

**Online Grading:** All grading administered through Canvas, where you can check your status in real time. TopHat tracks point totals, but only Canvas grades count officially.

**Artificial Intelligence:** This course follows a “broad use” AI policy: you’re encouraged to use LLMs for tasks like formatting, grammar checking, brainstorming, and summarizing readings. You must cite AI-generated material when it fundamentally shapes your conceptual understanding or creative output—but routine assistance with writing mechanics doesn’t require acknowledgment. (Note that the midterm and final essays are handwritten in class, so AI assistance is naturally limited for major assignments.

**Communication:** Promptly responding to emails sent to your official Pitt account is a course requirement.

## General Education Requirements

This course fulfills:

- **Specific Geographic Region** (Section 2 of Global Awareness and Cultural Understanding): This course will be an in depth study and analysis of a particular region or locality outside of the United States.
- **Historical Analysis** (Section 6 of Division Requirements in the Humanities and Arts, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences): In this course, students will develop skills and methods by which to understand significant cultural, social, economic, or political accounts of the past.

## Content Advisory

Sections of this course will variously deal with subjects such as violence, enslavement, and misogyny. Some primary source readings were written by historical actors harboring intense prejudices of various kinds; discussions will tackle some of these issues head-on.

## Course Schedule

### Part I: Prehistory of the Steppe-Sedentary Dynamic and the Silk Road

#### Core Questions

Where is Central Asia, exactly, and what is the difference between all the different terms associated with it (e.g. Eurasia, Inner Asia, Transoxania, etc.)? How can we conceptualize steppe-sedentary relations? How did pastoral-nomadism originate? Was there one Silk Road, or multiple silk roads? Was Central Eurasia oriented more toward China, the Middle East, India, or Russia during the pre-Islamic period?

#### Session 1 (Jan. 13): Course Overview Agenda:

- Mini-Lecture: “Two Thousand Years of Nomadic Empire”
- Policies and Expectations, Syllabus Q&A

**Session 2 (Jan. 15): Core Concepts in Eurasian History   Agenda:**

- Mini-Lecture: “(Central) Eurasia in World History”
- Lecture: “When Nomads Attack”
- Syllabus Quiz

**Assignments:**

- Peter Golden, *Central Asia in World History* (2011): Chapter 1, “The Rise of Nomadism and Oasis City-States,” pp. 9-20.
- Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book 4 (selections – 12 pages).
- Readings in Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Records of the Historian): Chapter 110, pp. 129-148.
- Persian inscriptions and reliefs (1 page).

**Session 3 (Jan. 20): Pre-History of the Steppe-Sedentary Symbiosis   Agenda:**

- Mini-Lecture: “Three Lenses of Historical Analysis”
- Lecture: “Origins of Pastoral Nomadism”
- Lecture: “Linguistics as a Historical Tool”
- Group Discussion of Primary Sources (from previous session, i.e. Herodotus, Sima Qian, Persian inscriptions)

**Assignments:**

- “A Pair of Steppe Earrings” in Susan Whitfield, *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas: Material Culture of the Silk Road*, First edition (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018): pp. 9-33.

**Session 4 (Jan. 22): Silk Road(s)?   Agenda:**

- Lecture: “More Than Just Silk: Economic, Cultural, and Religious Exchange Across Eurasia”
- Group Discussion of Primary Sources (i.e. Hansen, Sogdian wall paintings)

**Assignments:**

- Selected texts from Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History with Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) (25 pages).
- Selected Sogdian wall paintings.
- Peter Golden, *Central Asia in World History* (2011): Chapter 3. (Note again that the symbol designates an optional – but recommended – reading.)

**Part II: The Mongol World Empire**

**Core Questions**

Were the imperial innovations of Genghis Khan “revolutionary”? How do you assess continuity and change with the Turkic empires that came before (e.g. the Türk, Uyghur empires)? Where did the Mongol advance falter and why? What was the role of empire in facilitating the exchange of ideas, material culture, and personnel across an entire continent?

**Session 5 (Jan. 27): Mongol Origins   Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Rise of Islam”
- Lecture: “Eurasia on the Eve of Mongol Conquest”

**Assignments:**

- David Morgan, *The Mongols*: Chapter 3, pp. 49-73.
- Mini-Assignment Due (Optional): Writing Skills Sequence, Phase 1

**Session 6 (Jan. 29): Mongol Onslaught   Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Genghis Gathers the Horde”
- Group Discussion of Primary Sources

**Assignments:**

- Levi & Sela: “Temujin and the Rise of the Mongol Empire” – entire section, pp. 115-138.
- David Morgan, *The Mongols*: Chapters 1-2.

**Session 7 (Feb. 3): Succession   Agenda:**

- Mini-Lecture: “The Quick and Dirty Guide to Primary Source Analysis”
- Lecture: “Dividing the Horde: Mongol Imperialism after Genghis Khan”

**Assignments:**

- David Morgan, *The Mongols*: Chapter 4, pp. 74-98.

**Session 8 (Feb. 5): Empire of Exchange   Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Mongol Imperial Institutions”
- Lecture: “Mongol Imperial Exchange Networks”

**Assignments:**

- Secret History of the Mongols revisited (i.e. the same source introduced in Levi & Sela, p. 115): excerpts on conquest of Jin (northern China) and Khwarazmshahs (Central Asia) (8 pages).
- Rashid al-Din revisited (i.e. the same source introduced in Levi & Sela, pp. 139-140): anecdotes about Ogedei Khan (5 pages).
- Mini-Assignment Due (Optional): Writing Skills Sequence, Phase 2

**Part III: Post-Mongol Successor States****Core Questions**

Was there a Mongol “ideology”? If so, why did Mongol rulers convert to foreign religions, rather than convert local populations to their own? Is the Yuan dynasty better viewed as “Chinese” or nomadic? How do you assess the respective influences of Persian, Islamic, and Mongolian culture on the Ilkhanids? In what ways was Muscovy a successor state to the Mongol Empire? In what ways was it a successor state to the Kievan Rus (and to what extent can we speak of a “Kievan Rus”)? Was Tamerlane’s (Timur) empire the Mongol Empire reincarnated?

**Session 9 (Feb. 10): China as a Mongol Successor State   Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Yuan China between Steppe Traditions and Ancient Culture”

**Assignments:**

- Hidehiro Okada, “China as a Successor State to the Mongol Empire,” *The Mongol Empire and its Legacy* (Brill, 2000), pp. 260-270.
- “Spirit-Path Stele for His Honor Yelü” in Christopher P. Atwood, ed., *The Rise of the Mongols: Five Chinese Sources* (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2021) (pp. 131-134, 151-158 – note that the entire chapter is available, but not all pages are required).

**Session 10 (Feb. 12): The Mongol Impact on Middle Eastern History   Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Islam and Conversion in the Ilkhanate”

**Assignments:**

- Marco Polo, *Travels*: selections (22 pages).

- Levi & Sela 25: Juvaini - The Il-Khan Hülegü Captures the Castles of the Heretics, pp. 142-148.
- Levi & Sela 26: Mirza Haydar Dughlat - Conversion to Islam of Tughluq Timur Khan, pp. 149-152.
- David Morgan, *The Mongols*: Chapters 5-7.
- Mini-Assignment Due (Optional): Writing Skills Sequence, Phase 3

#### **Session 11 (Feb. 17): Northwestern Eurasia Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Background: Kiev, Byzantine Culture, and the Coming of the Northmen”
- Historical Simulation: Round 1

#### **Assignments:**

- Excerpts from the Russian Primary Chronicle (10 pages).
- Levi & Sela 10: Ibn Fadlan, pp. 65-68.
- Ibn Fadlan’s Description of a Norse Funeral (2 pages).

#### **Session 12 (Feb. 19): Golden Horde Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Muscovy as a Mongol Successor State”

#### **Assignments:**

- Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (1985): Chapter 3, “The Mongol Empire and the Golden Horde,” pp. 21-32; Chapter 4, “The Mongol Administration of Russia,” pp. 33-43.
- Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*: Chapters 1-2.

#### **February 26: In-Class Midterm Essay Agenda:**

- Mini-Lecture: “Tamerlane, the Last Nomadic World Conqueror”
- In-Class Midterm Essay

#### **Assignments:**

- Beatrice Forbes Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*, (1989): Chapter 6: “Structure and function in Temür’s administration,” pp. 107-127.
- Levi & Sela: 28 Ibn ‘Arabshah - Timur and His Steppe Campaigns, pp. 165-170.

#### **Session 13 (March 3): Long Shadow of Chaghatay Agenda:**

- Lecture: “The Timurid Renaissance and European Science”
- Historical Simulation: Round 2

#### **Assignments:**

- Selected miniature paintings showcased in: Michael Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzâd of Herât (1465-1535)* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004); combined with Persian poetry excerpts in translation.
- Levi & Sela 32: Nava’i - A Comparison between Persian and Turkic, pp. 184-187.
- Beatrice Forbes Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (1989): Chapters 2-3.

### **Part IV: Gunpowder Empires into an Age of Colonialism**

#### **Core Questions**

What were the core features of Islam, and Perso-Islamic high culture, during the early modern period? After millennia of serving as an underdeveloped tributary of nomadic empires, suddenly northwest Eurasia is conquering its former masters. How do you explain this momentous historical change? Was Nadir Shah’s state the last of the so-called gunpowder empires, or the first example of modern imperialism? Was there really a “Great Game,” and what was so great about it? How did Russian and Chinese imperial administrators

make sense of the new nationalities they encountered? Why did China turn its imperial ambitions inland rather than toward the oceans?

**Session 14 (March 17): Islam before Colonialism Agenda:**

- Lecture: “High Persianate Islam”
- Historical Simulation: The Grand Quriltai (Finale)

**Assignments:**

- Levi & Sela 34: Five Readings on Sufi Orders in Central Asia, pp. 190-198.
- Levi & Sela 35: Zubdat al-athar - Beginnings of the Shibaniid State, pp. 203-207.
- Levi & Sela 38: Juybari Archives - A Sixteenth-Century Bukharan Deed of Sale, pp. 221-222.
- “An Occultist Petition in 19th Century Bukhara” (3 pages).

**Other:** Deadline to revise and resubmit midterm essay

**Session 15 (March 19): Persian Cosmopolis Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Sufism, Poetry, and Law; Medicine, Scripture, and the Occult”

**Assignments:**

- Peter C. Perdue, “Boundaries, Maps, and Movement: Chinese, Russian, and Mongolian Empires in Early Modern Central Eurasia,” *The International History Review* 20, no. 2 (1998): 263–86.
- Levi & Sela 41: Ivan Khokhlov - A Russian Envoy to Central Asia, pp. 230-232.

**Session 16 (March 24): Gunpowder Empires Agenda:**

- Lecture: “India as a Chaghatay Successor State”
- Lecture: “Gunpowder Empires and Beyond”

**Assignments:**

- Levi & Sela 46: ‘Abd al-Karim Kashmiri - Nadir Shah’s Campaign in Central Asia, pp. 260-264.
- Levi & Sela 45: Thompson and Hogg - British Trade East of the Caspian, pp. 255-259.

**Session 17 (March 26): Colonial Dawn Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Muscovy Marches East, China Marches West”
- Lecture: “Russian Rule comes to Turkestan”

**Assignments:**

- James Pickett, “Central Asia Between Empires: New Research on the 18th and 19th Centuries,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (Oxford University Press, June 2023).
- Selected photographs of Central Asia under Russian rule.
- Levi & Sela 54: Nikolai Ignatiev - Russia’s Agenda in Central Asia, pp. 295-299.
- Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism* (2007): Chapter 1.
- Dominic Lieven, *Empire: the Russian Empire and its Rivals* (2001). Chapters 6, pp. 201-230.

**Session 18 (March 31): The Last Empire of the Steppe (?) Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Qing Imperialism and the Annihilation of Jungharia”

**Assignments:**

- Levi & Sela 52: Mohan Lal -A Journey among the Turkmens, pp. 287-291.
- Levi & Sela 53: Levshin - Observations on the Qazaqs, pp. 292-294.

**Session 19 (April 2): Chinese Rule Returns to Central Asia Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Qing Rule in Xinjiang: China as a Colonized Colonizer”

**Assignments:**

- James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads* (2009). Chapter 3 excerpt, pp. 88-102.
- *Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K'ang-Hsi* ed. John Spence (Vintage, 1988), pp. 7-23.
- James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads* (2005): Chapter 3 (full).
- Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (2005). Chapter 4, “Manchus, Mongols, and Russians in Conflict, 1670–1690,” pp. 133-173.

**Part V: Eurasia’s Socialist Century****Core Questions**

Were there “nations” before the twentieth century? If so, how did they differ from our understanding today? If not, how do we understand pre-modern ethnicity? What is Islamic “reformism” or “modernism”? As a successor state to the Russian Empire, where did the Bolsheviks lose territory, and where did they hold it? Did they pick up any new territories? How do you explain the new boundaries of this polity? Would you consider the Soviet Union to be an “empire”? In the absence of communism, what positive programs and ideologies replaced it in China and the post-Soviet states? How do you explain the preoccupation with Islam in contemporary discourse about Central Eurasia?

**Session 20 (April 7): Islamic Modernism Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Jadidism and other Eurasian Reform Movements”

**Assignments:**

- “New Visions of the World” in Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2021): pp. 114-133.
- James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads* (2005): Chapter 4.

**Session 21 (April 9): The Creation of Ethnicity Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Nation and Ethnicity on the Eve of Modernity”
- In-Class Simulation: The Colonial Census

**Assignments:**

- Sharīf Jān Makhdūm Ṣadr Ḍiyāʿ, *The Personal History of a Bukharan Intellectual*, ed. Rustam Shukurov, Muhammadjon Shukurov, and Edward Allworth (Leiden: Brill, 2004): 318-335; 350-354; 362-366.
- Translation of Russian Resident report on events of 1917.

**Session 22 (April 14): Revolution Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Total Imperial Collapse”
- Lecture: “The Mad Baron and the Fate of Mongolia”

**Assignments:**

- “Revolution from Above” in Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2021): pp. 215-241.
- “Po Samarkandu” (short Soviet propaganda film with subtitles)
- Joshua Kunitz, *Dawn over Samarkand: the Rebirth of Central Asia* (New York: CoviciFriede, 1935): 169-78, 217-50, 274-301.



**Session 23 (April 16): Red Flag Over Turkestan    Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Sovietization and the Party-State”

**Assignments:**

- James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Chapter 6 excerpts, pp. 235-254.
- James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads* (2005): Chapter 5, 6 (full).

**Session 24 (April 21): From the Rubble of Empire    Agenda:**

- Lecture: “Communist China: The Centralized Alternative”
- Lecture: “Soviet Islam”
- Group Discussion of Secondary Works (Kotkin or Devji or Thum) and Primary Sources (i.e. Uzbek Islamic Debates and Poetry of the Taliban).

**Assignments:**

Choose one of these three articles:

- Stephen Kotkin, “Trashcanistan: A Tour through the Wreckage of the Soviet Empire,” *New Republic*, April 15, 2002, pp. 26-38.
- Faisal Devji, “The Dictatorship of Civil Society in Tajikistan,” November 27, 2012, <http://www.currentintelligence.net/a/dictatorship-of-civil-society-in-tajikistan.html>.
- Rian Thum, “China’s Mass Internment Camps Have No Clear End in Sight,” *Foreign Policy* (2018), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/22/chinas-mass-internment-camps-have-no-clear-end-in-sight/>

Plus:

- Allen Frank (ed.), *Uzbek Islamic Debates: Texts, Translations, and Commentary* (2007): selections (26 pages).
- Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, eds., *Poetry of the Taliban*, trans. Mirwais Rahmany and Hamid Stanikzai (London: Hurst, 2012): selections (9 pages).

---

*I reserve the right to amend and update this syllabus throughout the semester.*