

into our understanding of Proto-Dravidian phonology, it achieves a significant breakthrough in the study of areal connections between Dravidian peoples and other early inhabitants of Northern India.

George Starostin

National Research University Higher School of Economics/Russian State University
for the Humanities

CENTRAL ASIA

IVER B. NEUMANN and EINAR WIGEN:

The Steppe Tradition in International Relations: Russians, Turks, and European State Building 4000 BCE–2018 CE.

xv, 309 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. £75. ISBN 978 1 108 42079 2.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X19000533

If a student were to take an introductory political science class, it is unlikely that a steppe empire, be it the Mongols or otherwise, would receive more than a passing mention. This would change, however, if *The Steppe Tradition in International Relations* succeeds in its goals. Although neither the concept nor substance of a steppe political tradition is new to specialists in Inner and Central Asian history, this work is one of the first to consider pastoralist state-making outside of a single region. Moreover, the book refreshingly places Central and Inner Asian politics in a global context without recourse to a Silk Road-centric framework, in which Central Eurasia is merely a space of transit and exchange. The authors synthesize a large body of literature in English, Turkish, and Russian to present and analyse what they term the “steppe tradition”, defined as a dynamic set of political and military practices developed over nearly 6,000 years. As indicated by the book’s title, the work is primarily interested in two related questions: first, how this tradition shaped inter-polity relations and, second, how it itself contributed to projects of European state building. In exploring these questions, the authors conclude that “the emergence of complex polities not only in Europe but also in world history in general owes a lot to the largely overlooked Eurasian steppe tradition” (p. 252).

So why, according to the authors, has the steppe tradition been so long overlooked? The first chapter takes up this question and posits several reasons. In part, Euroamerican theorists continued in the Hegelian tradition of defining the state, and therefore political traditions, as territorially bounded, which in turn led them to ignore pan-regional traditions such as those from the Eurasian steppe. More broadly, many in international relations and political science continue to take “international society” as a synonym for a world made by Europe, on which the traditions and institutional memories of other regions had little effect. But they show that the steppe tradition is the necessary background for understanding both the development of the European state system and Europe’s historical and even contemporary relationships with Russian and Turkish states. Without attention to the steppe tradition, our understanding of inter-state relations is severely impoverished.

The next three chapters examine how the tradition developed and subsequently shaped the early Russian and Ottoman states. The second chapter expands upon

the idea that the steppe tradition was crucial for the emergence of chiefdoms in Europe. These range from the more obvious, such as the use of cavalry by Goth and Byzantine armies, to the more provocative, albeit carefully stated, claim that “kinship and lineage seems to have gained increased political importance during a period of extensive interaction with polities in the steppe tradition” (p. 110). The authors point out that the Byzantine emperors began to appoint their own sons as successors only after centuries of close interactions with steppe polities such as the Goths, Huns, Bulgars, and the Khazars – a claim I will leave to specialists of European history to examine. Drawing largely upon work by the anthropologist Thomas Barfield, the chapter argues that steppe empires influenced sedentary neighbours not only through raids and predation, but also through the expulsion of rival groups to the margins of the state, which often pushed these groups to join their settled neighbours. Going beyond Barfield and others who have written on early steppe empires, the authors claim that “the key point was that rulers considered their subjects as economic assets, not as political actors. There was no kind of tie between ruler and ruled beyond that of the immediate need for the subject to pay taxes and obey direct orders” (p. 124). Such a sweeping statement is difficult to prove not only because of the limited source base available for early steppe empires – particularly sources written by these groups themselves, which are often non-existent – but is also further strained by the actual practices of later steppe empires’ governance, such as the Mongols and their successors.

The third chapter turns to the Turko-Persian political tradition, with a particular focus on the practices that became incorporated into Ottoman politics. They claim that the early Ottoman state was successful in part because both the post-Byzantine Christian tradition and the Islamic tradition had already been hybridized with steppe political traditions. The fourth chapter turns to the Russian and Ottoman Empires which, the authors argue, thanks to their shared history of steppe politics, developed a common set of diplomatic practices. Diplomacy provides “a concrete and . . . crucial early example of how relations between Eurasian and European states are shaped by the steppe tradition within which the former states are steeped” (pp. 193–4). The final chapter proposes that the steppe tradition continues to affect contemporary Russian and Turkish political practices. For example, seen through the lens of the steppe tradition, the lack of separation between the economic and political spheres in contemporary Turkish, Russian, and Central Asian politics is not simply “corruption”, but a remnant of earlier practices. But whether an idealized steppe tradition has more explanatory power than the specific political and economic circumstances of the past century is, as the authors themselves acknowledge, debatable.

The Steppe Tradition in International Relations joins several works on Inner and Central Asian history in convincingly demonstrating not only the existence of a dynamic steppe political tradition, but also that this tradition, as a force in world history, is worth studying. For those unfamiliar with Central and Inner Asia, the work radically up-ends the still present ideas of steppe politics as merely cycles of trading and raiding. For specialists, the work provides an impressive and wide-ranging synthesis that would be useful both for teaching and furthering comparative work. As for the steppe’s influence on European state building, the book makes several provocative propositions that will hopefully encourage further work on the topic.

Devon Dear
Independent scholar