

Douglas E. Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires: Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*
(Boulder: Westview Press, 2011)

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This is an important survey book that successfully provides a “coherent, current, and accessible” (p. ix) account of the three Islamic gunpowder empires up to the middle of the eighteenth century. It not only gives historical outlines of those polities, but organizes the knowledge about them with a focus on comparing their political and military structures. This does a great service to the general reader, as well as to scholars of any one of these empires who currently find it difficult to penetrate the histories of the others. The author tells us it took him twenty years to write this book; conceiving of the project must have been daunting indeed.

Although Streusand covers vast expanses of time and space (chapter two even takes us back to the ancient Near Eastern concept of sacral kingship which existed before the beginning of Islam), his account is easy to follow as it sets out the relevant context and is divided into consistent subsections. He makes it clear at the start (pp. x, 2–3) that he took his cue from Hodgson’s *The Venture of Islam*, Book 5, where the ideas of gunpowder empires were presented in a preliminary form but not fully elaborated upon, due to the author’s sudden death. (Beyond Hodgson and McNeil, who both dealt with the “gunpowder empires,” this book bears the mark of the graduate

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school and scholarly networks at the University of Chicago, which has been very lively and productive in the field, as also becomes clear in the acknowledgements.) Streusand intends to replace Hodgson's unfinished book with his own, but does not fixate on the concept of a "gunpowder empire." He defines gunpowder empires "not as empires created by gunpowder weapons" but as "empires of the gunpowder era," making this a rather loose and flexible classification that can encompass a broad range; so "there is no one single ideal type against which these empires can be measured" (p. 3). This would seem to be a sensible approach given the vast differences between the three empires.

What all three had to confront was a post-Abbasid impasse in which the caliphal authority as a source of legitimacy disappeared and the Turco-Mongol patrimonial tradition of distributing appanages made it difficult to maintain political centralization and stability. In the face of the challenge of having to invent new stabilizing political traditions and new ways to use religion to legitimize their rules, the three empires took rather different paths. In the chapters that describe respectively the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal state systems, Streusand successfully draws out their differences and similarities. He first (in chapter three) gives the Ottoman case, where the central control was the strongest over the provinces and the military, and the monarchy was legitimized on the basis of multiple ideological elements, among which there were the "frontier *ghazi*, warrior Irano-Islamic, Turco-Mongol, Roman, millenarian, and sedentary Irano-Islamic" (p. 64). He proceeds by describing the other empires while making comparisons with the Ottomans. Safavid rule was relatively decentralized and largely depended on the tribal military forces and the monarch's quasi-sufi religious authority (chapter four). The Mughal system was one of a delicate balance between the center, which had decisive but limited superiority, and the diverse local elite groups of various provinces, where the unifying principle was "more Timuri than Islamic" (chapter five). Each empire developed its unique ruling system in accordance with its needs and circumstances, but he also points out parallels in their strategies and other political phenomena. The use of artillery and cavalry together with wagon fortresses was common to all three, and Ottoman-style fratricide of male relatives of the dynasty occasionally transpired in the Safavid and Mughal realms.

The author's strategy of concentrating on military history, political ideology, and provincial government keeps the plot of the book focused and coherent despite its enormous scope. In addition, his succinct but comprehensive account of the natural environment, economy, culture, and

foreign relations helps the reader enormously in understanding the history involved, and gives an adequate summary of the state-of-the-art research in each field. What is especially noteworthy about this book is that many pages are devoted to the history of scholarship on each of the empires, and to explaining what kinds of studies and arguments have been made and why (or why not). Furthermore, he tends to challenge the conventional wisdom in each field, avoiding simplistic generalizations but adding his unique interpretations. This can help readers in making sense of the often biased secondary literature, particularly since the historiographical and other currents in academia are usually beyond the reach of non-experts.

It is unfortunate, however, that he gives only a very limited number of notes, and that one thus cannot fully trace the roots of his statements and arguments. The notes to the Ottoman chapter do not exceed two pages, and those for the Safavid and Mughal chapters do not extend beyond one apiece. This is all the more regrettable since he presents interesting pieces of information and idiosyncratic arguments that leave readers wanting to know more than what is provided in the book. He also makes some factual mistakes (e.g., that Mustafa I was older than Ahmed I [p. 74], which contradicts what is said on p. 55, and that the Karamanlis “used the Greek liturgy in Turkish (Arabic) script” [p. 114], where in fact it was the other way around), and misspells some important proper nouns—Kadizadeli, for example, appears as Kadizeli (p. 130). There are also some inconsistencies in spelling foreign words, such as “Babai Revolt” (p. 65) and “sahib-qiran” (p. 69) in addition to grammatically incorrect sentences, which seem to have been due to the difficulty of proofreading a text which included a vast number of foreign terms. It is perhaps unavoidable that errors would creep into a work of such scale; they simply remind us how difficult it is for one person to maintain an accurate knowledge of all three of the empires.

Mistakes notwithstanding, this book is the best account of the Islamic gunpowder empires yet produced, and will probably retain this accolade for a long time. It is by far the most successful of the attempts to survey the Islamic empires of the post-Mongol era, providing outlines of political and military history in a manner that is comprehensible and readable. There is no question that Streusand’s book is worth the twenty years he spent on it.

