

THE
SILK ROADS

A NEW HISTORY OF THE WORLD



PETER FRANKOPAN

Author Peter Frankopan rightly says a lot of popular history in recent years has become hyper-focused on individual moments or particular slices of life ("The Paper Clip And How It Saved Western Civilization!"). Not he. In this sweepingly ambitious work, Frankopan offers a world history spanning thousands of years and continents. Empires rise and fall, events familiar and obscure take center stage (often in a new light) and throughout it all he presents the world from a new prism: the primacy of the Silk Roads. The name evokes mystery and exotica and the distant past. But in "The Silk Roads," it's shown as not merely the ancient route taken by traders but as the fulcrum for damn near everything. The usual Western-centric spin on our past is tossed aside repeatedly and convincingly -- yes, the Greek and Roman empires are here, but so are full pictures of the Persian empire (perhaps the most impressive to Frankopan) and the Mongol empire (perhaps the most tolerant of varied faiths) and the Zoroastrians and the British and the American empires too. The Crusades are given a caustic dressing down from religiously inspired to ones mostly about trade. World War I? Presented anew via the ever-present influence of the strategic importance of the Silk Roads. Just when modern time and technology threatens to make the Silk Roads finally obsolete, along come discoveries of oil and natural gas and precious metals essential for technology to keep them front and center. World War II? Barely begun when the Allies were eyeing the end and carving up the countries lucky or damned to be part of the Silk Road. It's eye-opening and fascinating and masterfully done, if a little bewildering. It's almost confusing to reach the present day and have Frankopan still showing recent events through this filter. And prejudices remain, of course. When he argues that the emphasis on rising BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, etc.) should in fact be replaced with an emphasis on the Silk Road countries that are flush with money and making massive investments in this and that, the "backwater" countries invariably prompt the knee-jerk response of "Well, but surely...." He structures the book handily by focusing in turn on the commodities that flowed along the Silk Road, from silk to spices to humans (virtually every empire was happy to trade in humans) to the oil of today. It's a bold -- for Westerners at least -- revolutionary work. -- Michael Giltz