

Travelers' Tales: Great Game Narratives¹

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Travelers' tales became a vital part of an evolving imperial narrative during the Great Game, the nineteenth century rivalry between Britain and Russia.² Brimming with adventure, exotic landscapes and peoples in the frontiers of Central Asia, travelers' tales also made empire and imperialism familiar³ to a growing reading public. Travel literature was in this way useful for the imperial project because "it enabled a larger understanding of social and racial difference which made European government in colonized territories appropriate and natural."⁴ Travelers' tales were not only entertaining; they also communicated knowledge useful for playing the Great Game and for imperial expansion.

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² See Sarah O'Hara and Michael Heffernan, "From Geo-Strategy to Geo-Economics: The 'Heartland' and British Imperialism Before and After MacKinder," *Geopolitics* 11 (2006): 54-73.

³ See Katya Hokanson, "Russian Women Travelers in Central Asia and India," *The Russian Review* 70 (January 2011): 1-19.

⁴ Nicholas Thomas, "Anthropology and Orientalism," *Anthropology Today* 7 (1991): 5.

During the early years of the Great Game most travelers had “specific business to transact” and were subsidized by the government.⁵ Scientific surveys, descriptions of steppe borderlands, and the mapping of physical and cultural geographies were all “essential to the expansion and preservation of empire,”⁶ according to Arash Khazeni. Military travelers in Central Asia played various roles. Russian general staff officers served as geographers, statisticians, and reconnaissance experts.⁷ British officers collecting data, suggests R.A. Johnson, “had not regarded themselves as covert agents, engaged on clandestine missions, but as ‘players’ and gentlemen.”⁸ As a result, many of the classic travelers’ tales felicitously combined military, political, and scientific functions. There were also later-day writers and journalists, in fact a “virtual stampede” of travelers,⁹ who explored the fast-disappearing frontiers of Eurasia. With the construction of the Transcaspian Railroad (1879-1898) more female voices added complexity and ambivalence to an imperial narrative. Nevertheless, the Great Game remained for the most part a masculine imperial project.

Travel books found a keen audience. In England from the 1860s “adventure/travel accounts by pro-imperialist writers were highly popular among a reading audience which was expanding beyond class boundaries from the 1860s onwards.” When Alexander Burnes, a lieutenant of the East India Company’s Bombay army, returned to London in late 1833 “he became the most celebrated young man in the city and, for a time, Britain’s most widely discussed and celebrated traveler.” The next year, his multi-volume *Travels into Bokhara* “was virtually sold out on publication day.” He wrote of his travels across “fabled lands” from the north of India, through

⁵ Michael Beard, “European travelers in the Trans-Caspian before 1917,” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 13 (1972): 590-191; Frank G. Siscoe, “Eugene Schuyler, General Kaufman, and Central Asia,” *Slavic Review* 27 (1968).

⁶ Arash Khazeni, “Across the Black Sands and the Red: Travel Writing, Nature, and the Reclamation of the Eurasian Steppe Circa 1850,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 591-614.

⁷ Anatolyi Remnev, “Siberia and the Russian Far East in the Imperial Geography of Power,” in *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930*, eds. Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatolyi Remnev (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 437.

⁸ R. A. Johnson, “‘Russians at the Gates of India? Planning the Defence of India, 1885-1900,’” *The Journal of Military History* 67 (2003): 739.

⁹ Gordon T Steward, *Journeys to Empire: Enlightenment, Imperialism, and the British Encounter with Tibet, 1774-1904* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2.

Afghanistan, to Bokhara and Persia and back to India. His life of daring-do was cut short in 1841 when he was killed during the rebellion in Kabul against the British;¹⁰ but not before he wrote another book on his way to Kabul.¹¹ In Russia, too, explorers were lauded. Russia's dashing "first Explorer of Inner Asia," Lieutenant-Colonel Nikolai M. Przhevalsky, won popular acclaim in the mid-1870s after a three-year expedition through Inner Asia. His story of the expedition, published a year later, became a best-seller.¹² Fred Burnaby's *Ride To Khiva* (1875), published at the apex of Russian expansion into Central Asia, went through multiple editions and made him a popular hero.¹³

British and Russian geographical societies sponsored expeditions that had both scientific and intelligence-gathering aims. Przhevalsky was given a wide brief when he surveyed Central Asia (1867-9). To the Russian Geographical Society, which financed his endeavors, his mission was understood as both scientific and concerned with "interests of state." As Bower puts it, "geographers were placing their tools in the service of empire as well as in the cause of international science." Przhevalsky, praised for his "scientific dedication," was useful to both projects. In the famous statue of Przhevalsky he is dressed in his uniform, which "remained an inextricable part of his reputation."¹⁴ In 1872-73, the Royal Geographical Society of London, presided over by former political agent of the East India Company, Major-General Sir Henry C. Rawlinson,¹⁵ claimed the same importance for geography in the British empire. Following Rawlinson's paper on the geopolitics of the Khivan khanate, Sir Rutherford Alcock pointed to the "important part which geography played in the

¹⁰ G. J. Alder, "Standing Alone: William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game, 1808-1825," *The International History Review* 2 (1980): 172-3.

¹¹ Alexander Burns, *Cabool: Being a Personal Narrative of a Journey to, and Residence in that City in the years 1836, 7, and 8* (London: John Murray, 1842).

¹² Daniel Brower, "Imperial Russia and its Orient: The Renown of Nikolai Przhevalsky," *Russian Review* 53 (July 1994): 369.

¹³ See Thomas Wright, *The Life of Colonel Fred Burnaby* (London, Everett & Co, 1908).

¹⁴ Brower, "Imperial Russia and its Orient," 372, 380.

¹⁵ Eric Widmer, review of *England and Russia in the East* by Sir Henry Rawlinson (New York: Praeger, 1970), *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30 (1971): 694-695.

political drama that was going on in Central Asia.” Far from being a mere “dilettante pursuit,” geography had “an important bearing upon national interests.”¹⁶

For Russia’s General-Lieutenant Aleksei Ivanovich Maksheev, the logistical and military focus of his surveys was even more explicit. In the mid-1840s Maksheev graduated from the Imperial General Staff Academy where he studied geography and the new subject of military statistics. Putting theory into practice, he then went on an expedition sponsored by the Imperial Russian Geographic Society to survey the areas around the Caspian and Aral seas and the Syr Daria.¹⁷ Experiencing the challenges of Russia’s frontiers, Maksheev became an advocate of Russia’s civilizing mission. In 1896 his painstaking survey of the best and worst military routes through the Kirgiz Steppes and Turkestan’s extremities was published posthumously. As the survey explains:

The difficulty of the military expedition to Khiva, with the goal of conquest of the khanate, involved not only the power of the adversary, but overcoming the obstacles for movement presented by nature itself. ...before all else, one had to pay attention to physical data of the expanse of space (*prostranstvo*)...between the Russian frontier, through this space, to the borders of the khanate.¹⁸

This concern with space, knowledge and power was not limited to surveyors, explorers, and military men. Willard Sunderland maintains that Russia’s ruling elite was so “space-conscious” by the nineteenth century that “Russian territorial consciousness and Russian national consciousness became deeply intertwined.”¹⁹

¹⁶ H. C. Rawlinson, “Notes on Khiva,” *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 17 (1872-1873): 164-165.

¹⁷ David Rich, “Imperialism, Reform and Strategy: Russian Military Statistics, 1840-1880,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 74 (1996): 629.

¹⁸ Aleksei Ivanovich Maksheev, *Puteshestviia po Kirgizkim stepiam i Turkestanskomu Kraiu* (St. Petersburg: Voenaiia tip., 1896), 82.

¹⁹ Willard Sunderland, “Imperial Space: Territorial Thought and Practice in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930*, eds. Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatolyi Remnev (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 53.

As Kipling's novel *Kim* illustrates, surveys and surveyors became key players in gathering knowledge of Asian expanses during the Great Game. Central Asia was now traversed by travelers toting compasses. Among his other duties, Lieutenant Alexander Burnes was tasked with surveying and gathering intelligence. On his visit to Bukhara in the early 1830s, he was summoned to an audience with an elderly vizier, the Koosh Begee, who interrogated Burnes for two hours. Knowing that his luggage would likely be searched, Burnes prudently acquainted the minister with the matter of his sextant, which, he claimed, was for observing "the stars and other heavenly bodies."²⁰ A few days later, the Vizier asked if Burnes might have "any curiosity to exhibit to him either of India or my own country." Despite the possibility that it might arouse suspicions, Burnes thought that the "all-curious Vizier might be gratified by the sight of a patent compass, with its glasses, screws, and reflectors." Seeing the old man's fascination, Burnes made a present of the compass, which "would enable [the Vizier] to point to the holy Mecca...." After this diplomatic gesture, Burnes enjoyed the Koosh Begee's full protection and could visit "all parts of the city." However, as he laments, "Thus fell one of my [two] compasses." But spying by means of measuring city walls, as the suspicious Uzbek residents surmised he was doing, was not the only way: "they have no idea of the value of conversation."²¹ "Asiatics" were also employed by the British for surveying. A Turki- and Persian-speaking "former employee of the [British] Survey" known as "the Mirza" was sent to survey the route between Kabul and Kashgar. Departing a still unsettled Kabul in October 1868, the Mirza's journey – because of dangerous terrain and rebellious servants -- took two years to accomplish. But the greatest danger for the Mirza was that an official might find his compass, thus condemning him to be punished as a spy.²²

During the nineteenth century Russia's rapid expansion in Central Asia fueled British fears that Russia also had its eyes on India. Russia's conquests started with the gradual acquisition of most of Kazakhstan in the period 1730-1848 and accelerated during 1864-1884, the period of the New Imperialism when the European Great

²⁰ Alexander Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara* (London: John Murray, 1834), 268-269.

²¹ Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara*, 272, 281

²² T.G. Montgomery, "Report of 'The Mirzas' Exploration from Caubul to Kashgar," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 41 (1871): 135, 137.

Powers were anxious to gain strategic positions, markets, and resources around the globe. Russia captured Kokand and Tashkent (1865); Bukhara (1868); the region of Khwarazm and its dazzling city, Khiva (1873); Andizhan (1876); Geok-Tepe (1881) and Merv (1884).²³ With the fall of Merv, the last sphere of British political influence was eliminated from Central Asia.²⁴

In the context of the Great Game, the most hilarious adventure tale was Fred Burnaby's *Ride to Khiva*. A British army officer on leave, Burnaby decided to set out toward Khiva in mid-winter 1875 because St Petersburg had just ordered that 'no foreigner was to be allowed to travel in Russian Asia.'²⁵ Not only did his *Ride* afford Britain a closer view of Russia's recent expansion, Sinan Akilli also maintains that in the 1870s "this vein of travel writing also functioned as a channel of propaganda for pro-imperialist political views."²⁶ Burnaby portrays the Russian government as despotic and a potentially dangerous adversary of Britain's empire in Asia.²⁷ "It was really very extraordinary," says Burnaby, "to see how much interest this paternal government in St. Petersburg took in my movements."²⁸ In Kasala he meets a former Guards officer whose description of the dull life at the local fort convinced Burnaby that "Nothing would be so popular with the officers in Central Asia... as a war with England about India."²⁹ But it was the many exiles in Siberia and their miserable loved-ones that most disturbed the self-proclaimed Russophobe. "Such are the delights of living in a country where a despotic form of government prevails. Such is the civilization which certain people in England are eager to see forced upon the inhabitants of Central Asia."³⁰

²³ See Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 195-208.

²⁴ S. N. Abashin, *et. al.*, *Tsentral'naia Aziia v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008), 66.

²⁵ Fred Burnaby, *A Ride to Khiva* (London: Century, 1983), 3

²⁶ Sinan Akilli, "Propaganda through Travel Writing: Frederick Burnaby's Contribution to Great Game British Politics," *Journal of Faculty of Letters* 26 (June 2009): 1, 3.

²⁷ Burnaby, *Ride*, xx, 82, 365.

²⁸ Burnaby, *Ride*, 82.

²⁹ Burnaby, *Ride*, 181.

³⁰ Burnaby, *Ride*, 365.

At the same time, the *Ride to Khiva* subtly suggests that bringing “civilization” to the natives of Central Asia was going to be a challenge. At each stop Burnaby discovered that there were few horses, camels or experienced drivers to be found. At Orenburg the head waiter at his lodging eventually found a tartar to be Burnaby’s driver. But Burnaby discovered that, before they could set off for Khiva, the tartar required two months wages in advance to support his “aged mother.” Burnaby, delighted to hire this “prodigy” of “filial affection,” gave him the money. But when morning dawned, “no man arrived.” The head waiter, duly summoned, inquires of Burnaby:

“Perhaps, one of noble birth, you gave him some money?” “Yes,” was my reply, “for his bedridden mother.” ... tears poured down the fellow’s face as he became convulsed with laughter. “Oh! The cunning pigeon!” and the head waiter left the room evidently much delighted at the way I had been taken in by his countryman.³¹

For Burnaby and the bemused reader, this encounter between British civility and Asian craftiness becomes emblematic of his journey and Western attitudes toward Central Asia. But after a few more bumbling incidents, Burnaby was at last on his way to Khiva.

Travel to Khiva in the nineteenth century was fraught with peril, not only because of the extremes of climate and landscape, but also because of the slave trade that connected the steppes to Persia, Turkey and Russia. Przhevalsky complained bitterly that “our drivers always kept watch at night while traveling through this country, because they said that all its inhabitants were the greatest thieves.”³² In 1869, at the same time as Przhevalsky was exploring Central Asia, the Mirza, on his way to Khiva, condemned the mayhem that raiding and slaving created: “The country generally between Cabul and the Oxus appears to be in a very lawless state; slavery is as rife as ever.... A slave girl is valued at from four horses of more, according to her looks...; men are, however, almost always exchanged for dogs.”³³ The Russian

³¹ Burnaby, *Ride*, 99-101, 113.

³² Nikolai Przhevalsky, *Mongolia, the Tangut Country and the Solitudes of Northern Tibet* v. 1 (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1876), 32-33.

³³ Montgomery, *Report*, 146.

government spent much effort retrieving its citizens from slavery, negotiating with Turkey and other neighbors and, according to official rhetoric, trying to eradicate the trade by conquering Bukhara and Khiva, both infamous for their slave markets. Lieutenant Burnes visited the Saturday morning slave-bazaar of Bokhara and reported that the “Uzbeks manage all their affairs by means of slaves, who are chiefly brought from Persia by the Toorkmuns.”³⁴ And it was Merv’s “Tekke Turkmen,” according to Perowne, who had the most “evil” reputation as “wild and cruel and fierce” raiders and warriors.³⁵

Female travelers were for the most part excluded from the male preserve of the “Great Game.”³⁶ Unlike Ella Maillart, who explored Asia “solo” in during the 1930s, most women who wrote travelers’ tales during the Great Game were not normally traveling as explorers, scientists, or writers in their own right, but accompanying husbands in the military, civil service or scientific professions. Even geography was considered “gendered knowledge.” British geographical societies generally barred women from giving addresses in person and adamantly opposed female attendance at meetings for fear that they might descend into “a mere pleasure society.”³⁷

But there were exceptions, such as the plucky Annette Meakin, fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Britain. In a game of cat and mouse, she traveled with her brother to the oasis towns of the Silk Road, all the while avoiding Russian authorities³⁸ because the siblings lacked the required permit for entering Russian Central Asia. “You have been playing the game of bluff!” remarked Lord Curzon when Annette’s brother later told him the story.³⁹ Meakin visited Central Asia twice,

³⁴ Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara*, 281, 294-296.

³⁵ J.T. Woolrych Perowne, *Russian hosts and English Guests in Central Asia* (London: The Scientific Press, 1898), 102; L.P. Morris, “The Subjugation of the Turcomans,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 15 (1979): 193.

³⁶ Ali Behdad, review of *Women Travelers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze* by Indira Ghose, *Victorian Studies* 43 (2001): 523.

³⁷ Gerry Kearns, “The Imperial Subject: geography and travel in the work of Mary Kingsley and Halford Mackinder,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* New Series 22 (1997): 450-472, 457.

³⁸ Annette M. B. Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan: A Garden Of Asia And Its People*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1915), 274-5, 278.

³⁹ Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan*, 274-278.

in 1897 and 1902, in the wave of “casual” travelers that descended after the Transcaspian Railway was built.

Meakin studied the lives of women in Central Asia with open-mindedness and finesse, a contrast to the ill-informed views sometimes passed on to her by Russian settlers.⁴⁰ Meakin notes that Sir Richard Burton, “in describing his pilgrimage to Mecca, speaks of the baseless but world-wide calumny which declares that Islam recognizes no soul in, and consequently no future for, the female sex.” Nevertheless, she says, “the erroneous idea about Mohammed’s opinion of women exists to this day in the minds of many of the Russian settlers in Turkestan.”⁴¹ Careless settlers and travelers in this way contributed to an Orientalist “self-confirming” discourse, part of the “catalogue of Western prejudices about and misrepresentations of ... Muslims.”⁴² Mistaken or prejudiced views (as several tales will illustrate) served to confirm the lack of civilization within Oriental society and highlighted the benefits that “Western” civilization could bring.

Contesting these and other stereotypes, Meakin’s experience was that Muslim women in oasis towns were industrious, creative, often literate, and lived in comfortable rooms.⁴³ A woman had recourse to divorce,⁴⁴ although this was difficult “without the consent of her husband.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, women’s lives were circumscribed: one woman she visited had read about the world, but had not “been in the street since her marriage.”⁴⁶ After talking with a woman who had been to Mecca, Meakin pondered the contradictions of Islam: “It is strange that while a woman may go all the way to Mecca to pray, she is not permitted to join in any public worship [in Turkestan], but must carry out all the prescribed rules or devotion in her own house.”⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Noah Tucker, “Into Russian Turkistan, 1872-1917: English Travel Literature and the Creation of the Russian Orient,” 4, 10-11. <http://www.registan.net/wp-content/uploads/2007/03/Into%20Russian%20Turkistan.pdf>.

⁴¹ Annette M. B. Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan*, 73.

⁴² Talal Asad, *English Historical Review* 376 (1980): 648, quoted in Gyan Prakash, “Orientalism Now,” *History and Theory* 34 (1995): 204.

⁴³ Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan*, 72, 87, 90, 107, 111.

⁴⁴ Tucker, “Into Russian Turkistan.”

⁴⁵ Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan*, 143-44.

⁴⁶ Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan*, 89.

⁴⁷ Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan*, 73.

On her journey Meakin became acquainted with “Russian friends” and Central Asian “ladies” with whom she could visit in their houses. In this sense, suggests Ghose, “women’s ability to enter the private realm of the harem or zenana made their accounts of this female space both less fanciful and more marketable than those of their male counterparts.”⁴⁸ When Meakin returned to Merv, she was cheered to find an invitation to a Turkoman wedding. She drove out to the bride’s village and saw “a settlement of beehives full of excited women.” Meakin was invited in to one of the *kibitkas* to join in the wedding feast: plates of *pilau*, nuts, sweets, fruit, and tea -- with sugar to be eaten separately. Soon carts (now increasingly taking the place of camels) began to come and go and one drove up to fetch the bride.

We saw the mother step forward to receive the price that had to be paid for her. Three women then rushed into the *kibitka* and soon reappeared carrying what looked like a large silk-covered bolster suitable for a double bed. They bundled it into the cart, in a horizontal position. That was the bride! Two women jumped in beside her and off she went; but a shout from the men soon stopped the cart. I now heard that as only half the money had been paid she could not proceed. Then a man from the crowd stepped up to the mother and put a silver coin into her hand. She looked at it, and being apparently satisfied, let the cart go on. I was then told that the bride must return to her parents after twenty days, as not all the money had yet been paid.⁴⁹

Women also inscribed their own stories into the imperialist narrative. Lady Florentia Sale described the horrors of the retreat of the British occupying force from Kabul in 1842, forced out by an Afghan rebellion, lead by Akbar Khan, son of Dost Mohammad, whom the British had deposed in 1838. On 1 January 1842, Brigadier William Elphinstone capitulated and soon the British started their retreat from Kabul to Jelalabad. Troops, officers’ wives, servants, and camp followers clogged the mountainous, snow-covered roads from Kabul, making them easy targets for the Afghan rebels. Each day of the march was characterized by fatally slow progress, lack of leadership, confusion, maddening hunger and thirst, freezing cold, and lack of

⁴⁸ Behdad, “Review of *Women Travelers*,” 523.

⁴⁹ Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan*, 302.

ammunition. In the manner of daily military reports, Lady Sale described the catastrophic retreat, but only fleetingly revealed distress on her own account: that she and her son were wounded; that her daughter's husband, Lt. Sturt had been killed, that she hoped, in vain, for her husband to abandon the siege of Jallalabad and come to their rescue. On 11 January, 1842 Lady Sale and the officers' wives gave themselves up as hostages to Akbar Khan, though "overwhelmed with domestic affliction, neither Mrs Sturt nor I were in a fit state to decide...."⁵⁰ The rest of the story was a death march, with only one British officer and several sepoy arriving in Jellalabad. Too late, she realized it had been a mistake for the "civilized British" to take on faith the various offers of the Afghans to ensure their safety.⁵¹

Such a rich source for the history of the British in Asia, written by a woman implicated in the imperialist project, has been the subject of wildly divergent analyses. Susan Bassnet, for example, applies an orientalist critique to Lady Sale's journal:

In this book, all the familiar stereotypes of the region and its peoples recur, woven into the stark details of the massacre... and the appalling conditions faced by the few hundred survivors, including Lady Sale (I had fortunately only one ball in my arm).... As the British presence in India grew in importance...another dimension was added to the history of European fantasies about Central Asia. For the British in India and for the Russians in the nineteenth century, the Central Asian regions marked the frontier between civilization and barbarism.⁵²

But there is other way of looking at Lady Sale's experience. For Lee Sterrenburg, it is the reverse side of heroic imperial discourse.

The disastrous retreat from Kabul in Afghanistan in early 1842 may be taken as a handy symbol for exceptions that do not fit our usual critical

⁵⁰ Lady Sale, *The First Afghan War*, ed. Patrick Macrory (London: Longmans, 1969), 107-09, 162.

⁵¹ Sale, *First Afghan War*, 115.

⁵² Susan Bassnet, "Translating Terror," *Third World Quarterly* 26 (2005): 401.

proclamations about British imperial hegemony, the univocal sway of imperial discourse, and the silencing of non-European peoples. ... Down at the contingent micro-levels of traveling words, things, and organisms, there are potentially many instances left to explore in the fluid relationships between Britain and the rest of the globe.⁵³

Such “fluid relationships” provided a subtle matrix for the New Imperialism of the nineteenth century. Critiquing an over-reliance on Edward Said’s orientalist approach, Edward J. Lazzarini suggests that it was “the interaction between colonizer and colonized that shaped (unintended) relationships perhaps more than orientalism did.”⁵⁴ In her journal of the Afghan rebellion, Lady Sale attaches a glossary of Afghan words so that the reader can understand her entries. During her time in Kabul, she forged networks with Kabul residents that kept her household and vast numbers of servants supplied with food during the Afghan uprising. In contrast, Przhevalsky lacked an interpreter on his expedition, due (he says) to lack of adequate funding by the Russian Geographical Society. Without an interpreter, his team often lost their way in China because they could not communicate with villagers and quite literally could not interpret local cultures.⁵⁵

Lady Sale’s experience of British imperialism, read by a horrified but engrossed audience, was a world away from the variegated lives of Central Asian women. Here, where women were often cloistered, male travelers lacking knowledge of local languages and customs did sometimes indulge in stereotypes and imaginative descriptions. In oasis towns such as Bokhara and Khiva women were barely seen or heard by male travelers. On alighting from a train in Central Asia, Count Konstantin K. Pahlen, head of Russia’s Senatorial Investigation of Turkestan, noticed a few “grey-clad, mummy-like figures in the crowd, veiled to the eyes and moving furtively

⁵³ Lee Sterrenburg, “Significant Evidences and the Imperial Archive: Response” *Victorian Studies*, 46 (2004): 283.

⁵⁴ Edward J. Lazzarini, review of *Crucifying the Orient: Russian Orientalism and the Colonization of Caucasus and Central Asia*, by Kalpana Sahni, *Russian Review* 58 (October, 1999): 700.

⁵⁵ Przhevalsky, *Mongolia*, xxx-xxxi, 95, 150.

in the wake of their men.”⁵⁶ But it was the indoctrination, as he saw it, about women and marriage that most upset Pahlen:

Rules governing the personal life of the individual are set down in texts and are learnt by heart... The problem of sex is thoroughly explained to boys only 8 years old, who are also taught the rules of married life, warned of possible diseases and instructed in preventative and curative measures in explanations as detailed as any to be found in...scientific works ...in the West. It is at this stage that the all-prevailing attitude of contempt for women is particularly emphasized.⁵⁷

In the early 1830s, Alexander Burnes described the women of Bokhara as conforming to strict ideas of decorum outside the house:

The ladies of Bokhara stain their teeth quite black; they braid their hair, and allow it to hang in tresses down their shoulders. Their dress differs little from the men: they wear the same pelisses, only that the two sleeves, ...are tucked together and tied behind. In the house even they dress in huge hessian boots made of velvet, and highly ornamented. [...] On the head they wear large white turbans, but a veil covers the face, and many a lovely countenance is born to blush unseen. The exhibition of beauty... is here unknown. A man may shoot his neighbour if he sees him on a balcony, at any but a stated hour.⁵⁸

By the late 1800s, black teeth were no longer in fashion for young women. And it seems that women's dress had become more puritanical and dour, perhaps because of Western colonial expansion into the region. American journalist William Eleroy Curtis writing in 1911 described the female attire in Bokhara: “women never leave their houses except when concealed behind heavy black veils of horsehair falling from the forehead to the bosom, and loosely wrapped in shawl of silk or cotton, which cover their heads as well as their bodies. A Bokharoit woman never allows her face to

⁵⁶ Pahlen, *Mission*, 7.

⁵⁷ Pahlen, *Mission*, 42.

⁵⁸ Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara*, 287.

be seen by a man, excepting her husband and sons, from the time she is 12 years old, when she puts on a veil forever.”⁵⁹

This was a contrast to the life of the nomadic Kirgiz women on the steppes. Kirgiz women were not veiled and Burnaby was rather horrified when one pretty young woman, whom he had previously admired, skillfully cut the throat and dismembered a whole sheep in preparation for the coming dinner.⁶⁰ Life in the yurt did not lend itself, evidently, to female seclusion. According to Pahlen, the Kirgiz woman “is free to talk to and deal with strangers” and is sufficiently independent-minded that she “frequently refuses to follow an unloved husband to whom she has been sold by father or brother.” The Kirgiz way of life, notes Pahlen, gives Kirgiz Mohammedanism a distinctive imprint... Nevertheless, he could see that the teaching of the Shariat was slowly spreading throughout the Kirgiz steppes.⁶¹

Among the Mongols, Captain Frank E. Younghusband, of the Indian Staff corps, was impressed by the feistiness of the wife of a chief, who was being escorted back to her husband by a “party of Kamaks” after being captured in a raid. She was “very strong and robust-looking, and had the whole party under her thumb...”⁶² Przhevalsky’s team reported, with alarm, that adultery was the norm: Mongol “men have only one wife, but also concubines... the women are good mothers and housewives, but unfaithful wives.” Przhevalsky also noted the strict division of labour: “In the household the rights of the wife are nearly equal to those of the husband, but in all the out-door arrangements...the authority of the men is supreme.”⁶³

Both British and Russian imperialist narratives of Asia have been criticized as Orientalist and patriarchal. As Meakin discovered, travelers and settlers overstated the misogyny of Islam and Central Asians, and understated the agency of Central Asian women. “The Orient,” in Edward Said’s view, “was routinely described as feminine,

⁵⁹ William Eleroy Curtis, *Turkestan: the heart of Asia* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911), 101-2.

⁶⁰ Burnaby, *Ride*, 232-33.

⁶¹ Pahlen, *Mission*, 61.

⁶² Frank E. Younghusband, *The Heart of a Continent: A Narrative of Travels in Manchuria, Across The Gobi Desert, Through The Himalayas, The Pamires, and Chitral, 1884-1894* (London: John Murray, 1896), 145.

⁶³ Przhevalsky, *Mongolia*, 69-72.

its riches as fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic – but curiously attractive – ruler.” The more Victorian sexuality was suppressed at home, the more imperialist ideologies and “fantasies abroad” affected the “late 19th-century male imagination.”⁶⁴ But orientalist fantasy was by no means confined to Victorian Britain, as the *New York Herald* journalist Januarius MacGahan illustrates in “An Adventure in the Harem.”

In his own dash to Khiva in 1873, MacGahan finally caught up with the General K. P. von Kaufman’s victorious army and began to explore the inner-sanctum of the khan of Khiva’s palace. There he came upon the harem full of “clamoring and weeping women and children,” guarded by two sentinels. In this chaos, he could see through the gates that “there was one who had remained calm.” Her noble bearing convinced MacGahan that she must be the “sultana of the harem.”⁶⁵ MacGahan now determined to help her in any way he could. At mid-night, he endeavored to find an unguarded entry to the harem. Through pitch-black passageways, revolver in hand, he found himself in a silent “hopeless labyrinth,” but finally heard the “chattering and laughing” of female voices. Finding a door, he knocked, was admitted, and greeted with a peal of laughter. “It was she who opened the door.... She looked at me intently with her great dark eyes, and only smiled gravely when the others laughed.” Tea was served, and MacGahan asked: “Are the Russians good?” “No-no-no” she answered, using a “gesture of dislike.” MacGahan also discovered that after the “Khan had fled, they had been prevented from leaving by their own servants.” This, he thought, explained why “the poor things now looked to a stranger for protection.” MacGahan found his way back to camp, where he fell sound asleep. “The next morning, when food was sent into the harem for its inhabitants, it was found to be empty. The women had escaped!”⁶⁶

If European imperialists “orientalized” and classified the peoples of Central Asia, there was also similar categorizing among Europeans during the Great Game.

⁶⁴ Edward W. Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” *Cultural Critique* (Autumn, 1985), 89-107, 103-104.

⁶⁵ J.A. MacGahan, *Campaigning on the Oxus and the Fall of Khiva* (London: Samson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1876), 252.

⁶⁶ MacGahan, *Campaigning on the Oxus*, 251-266.

Britain's George Curzon, writing in 1889, "considered the Russians to be barbaric."⁶⁷ Ironically, writers such as Arminius Vambery suggested that this might even make the Russians "better fitted to undertake the civilization of Asia" than the English.⁶⁸ In 1865 the Hungarian-born linguist and artful traveler who disguised himself as a Dervish had even wished Russia well in "the interests of civilization."⁶⁹ By 1906, however, Vambery had become an Anglophile⁷⁰ and argued that Russia was clearly less fit than England as a colonizer, since a culturally developed, "politically free nation ... has nobler ends in view" than a culturally backward, despotic nation which has "scarcely emerged from infancy." Whereas "England appeared in the modest garb of a trader" and "never meant to attack the religion of Hindustan", Russian conquest was a "process of absorption," even annihilation, of local cultures.⁷¹ Russia's elite saw things differently. In Europe, Russia was seen as a barbarous kingdom; in Asia, Russia could be a civilizing influence, bringing enlightenment, economic development, and superior technology to a backward land. The Russians, as they pushed into Turketstan, argued that they were less racist than the British, claimed to naturally mix more easily with the natives, and that they had a civilizing mission. Pahlen recalled that there had been 'shocking happenings in India,' while the "Russian conquest of Turkestan [had] brought about an immense alleviation in the lot of the common man. Slavery was abolished...Peace reigned over the land..."⁷²

Travel literature almost always portrayed Central Asia as lagging behind the civilized West. Adeeb Khalid argues that Western European Orientalists in the nineteenth century did not see the essence of the Orient as primarily racial, but *civilizational*. "Orientals were Oriental because they belonged to a civilization that had no potential

⁶⁷ Alexander Morrison, "Russian Rule in Turkestan and the Example of British India, c. 1860-1917," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 84 (October 2006): 671.

⁶⁸ Arminius Vambery, *Western Culture in Eastern Lands. A comparison of the methods adopted by and England and Russia in the Middle East* (London: John Murray, 1906), v.

⁶⁹ Arminius Vambery, *Travels in Central Asia; A Journey From Teheran Across The Turkoman Desert on The Eastern Shore of The Caspian to Khiva, Bokhara and Samarcand* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1865), 492.

⁷⁰ "Obituary: Arminius Vambéry," *The Geographical Journal* 42 (November 1913), 500-501.

⁷¹ Vambery, *Western Culture*, 249-250, 256-257.

⁷² Pahlen, *Mission*, 156-7.

for historical development.”⁷³ Stephen Graham, for example, found Bokhara charming and its inhabitants admirable: “the city is like a magical box full of strange magicians and singers and toy shop-men and customers.”⁷⁴ But ultimately it was a land and people that would be left behind: “nothing moves them. The Bokharese have no ambition; civilization and mechanical progress do not tempt them. A Russian motor-car comes bounding over the cobbles, whooping and coughing its alarm signals; a score of dogs try to set on it and bit it as it passes, and the natives sit in the cupboard shops and laugh.”⁷⁵ Innately, the Bokaharese “remained Orientals.”⁷⁶

Just as the British exhibited racism and class snobbery in its colonies, Russian travel writing reveals imperial hauteur.⁷⁷ Przhevalsky described the people he met on his journey with relative scorn.⁷⁸ In Urga, Chinese occupied Mongolia, he is disparaging of the Lamas there and appalled by the “disgustingly dirty “ Mongol part of the town itself. “All the filth is thrown into the streets, and the habits of the people are loathsome.” Witnessing a traditional ‘sky burial’ with “dead bodies ...flung to the dogs and birds of prey” and its aftermath – the ground “littered with heaps of bones, through which packs of dogs prowl, like ghosts, to seek their daily repast of human flesh ” -- created an “awful impression” on the explorer. Dirtiness and male slothfulness are also noted as characteristics of the Mongols.⁷⁹ The local food and drink virtually everywhere on his journey, from China to Mongolia, was “disgusting.”⁸⁰ Jeff Sahadio points out that “discourses, such a as dirtiness...served to racialize the colonial relationship.”⁸¹ But in the case of Przhevalsky’s discourse of filth and sloth, he also aimed to depict the lack of civilization among the peoples of Central Asia in order to highlight the need for Russia’s civilizing influence.

⁷³ Adeeb Khalid, “Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism,” *Kritika* 1 (2000): 696.

⁷⁴ Stephen Graham, *Through Russian Central Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 34.

⁷⁵ Graham, *Through Russian Central Asia*, 34-36.

⁷⁶ Khalid, “Orientalism,” 696.

⁷⁷ See Morrison, “Russian Rule in Turkestan,” 697.

⁷⁸ The introduction forewarns the reader that Przhevalsky “is inclined to indulge quite strongly in contemptuous and inimical judgments.” Przhevalsky, *Mongolia*, xxx-xxxi.

⁷⁹ Przhevalsky, *Mongolia*, 12-13, 51-52, 58-9.

⁸⁰ Przhevalsky, *Mongolia*, 41-43, 52-53.

⁸¹ Jeff Sahadeo, “Visions of Empire: Russia’s Place in an Imperial World,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11 (Spring, 2010): 386.

Conclusions

The genre of travel literature quite literally informed the imperialist project and made it familiar to the reader. Readers, militaries, and governments learned from the knowledge gleaned by travelers and imbibed a new political worldview.⁸² Readers also learned that the West was progressive and Central Asia suitable for colonization. In the cacophony of pro-imperialist narratives, MacGahan was a lonely voice: “Why talk of civilizing such people?’ ...The Khivans possess to a remarkable degree the qualities of honesty, virtue and hospitality – virtues which our civilization seems to have a remarkable power of extinguishing among primitive people.”⁸³

When travelers during the Great Game began to explore Central Asia, they wrote of the slowness of travel, the craftiness of the local peoples, the lazy lands and people that the world had left behind. Burnaby in 1875 notes that the Russians and Central Asians alike had a touch of the Spanish *manana* and the Russian *zavtra* in the way that drivers and guides – who never want to push on – want to wait until “tomorrow.”⁸⁴ By the turn of the century, travelers record how Central Asia was changing under the impact of Russian commerce and colonization, the influx of Western travelers, and the encroachments of modernity. In some cases, travelers such as Curtis express their profound disappointment (“Sentimental readers of its romances should stay away”) in the legendary oasis towns such as Bukhara: made up of mud buildings, with the formerly beautiful blue and white tiles cracked and falling off the facades of once glorious mosques;⁸⁵ where Russian goods have pushed native crafts from the Bokhara bazaars.⁸⁶ Rather than expressing disappointment, imaginative travelers such as Count Pahlen tune into the sights and sounds of Central Asia and lapse into rhapsodic descriptions of the colours, smells, and sounds of Central Asia that might have come from any time in the past thousand years. At Tashkent, at the beginning of his journey, he noticed the sounds:

...the muezzins were calling from the tops of the minarets, there was the gentle murmur of water trickling down the irrigation runnels, and an all-

⁸² See Burbank, et.al., *Russian Empire*.

⁸³ MacGahan, *Campaign on the Oxus*, 63.

⁸⁴ Burnaby, *Ride*, 20.

⁸⁵ Curtis, *Turkestan*, 127-128.

⁸⁶ Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan*, 281.

pervading din of thousands of crickets. ... and I could hear the dull rumble of the heavy two-wheeled arabas and the unmelodious intermittent braying of donkeys, ironically dubbed ‘the nightingales of Turkestan’ for lack of feathered competitors.⁸⁷

Pahlen had a profound belief in Russia’s civilizing mission. His tour of Central Asia in 1908-09 was designed to correct or eliminate the corrupt officials who were subverting this aim.⁸⁸ But in Bokhara, toward the end of his *Mission*, he despairs that the prisons he has just inspected were “quite incompatible with the civilizing influence Russia was trying to exert.” In Khiva, though, Russian merchants helped run the long-desired oasis town.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Pahlen, *Mission*, 8.

⁸⁸ Pahlen was well aware of problems. His mission required him to gauge the effectiveness of the Russian colonial administration, discover corruption and abuses, and initiate criminal prosecutions of “suspicious administrators.” S. N. Abashin, *et. al.*, *Tsentral’naia Aziia v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008), 123-4. Pahlen’s report became the best source for the study of Central Asia in the pre-war period: *Vsepoddanneishaia zapiska, sodержashchaia glavneishie vyvody otcheta o proizvedennoi po vysochaishemu poveleniiu senatorom gofmeisterom grafom K.K. Palenom revizii Turkestanskogo kraia* (St. Petersburg, 1910).

⁸⁹ Pahlen, *Mission*, 69-77.