

Silk Road – Central Asia – Russian Turkestan: the powers and interconnections

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The idea of the exotic and mysterious Orient acted like a magnet on Russian artists, writers and scientists after the conquest of Central Asia (Fig. 1).

The ambitious commander and the first Governor-General of the Russian Turkestan, Konstantin P. von Kaufman (1818-1882) had faced a different and more challenging task: how to do justice while maintaining control over an entire galaxy of cultures touched by Islam, which spread from the Caspian sea to the borders of China, and which changed constantly over the course of a millennium. First of all, the galaxy was given a distinctive Russian name: the Russian Turkestan.

But behind the title lie decades of careful thought and a number of the lost diplomatic battles on the relation between the universal and the particular across a far-flung commonwealth of cultures. The notion of Islamic culture as a single, uniform system under the Russian banner that spread with monotonous insistence across the territories ruled previously by Muslims was effectively dismantled.

Picturing the old new world and challenging it

It is not often that a political contention is turned into a work of culture in itself. But this is what von Kaufman and his administrators have done during the long run of his governing years (1867-1882). Their work has allied itself with the massive and repeated resistance on the part of the local population that radiate from the photographs of that period. Such truth as photography may yield is often a result of inferring backward. We pass from things we have learned from other sources to the confirmation and the deepened knowl-

edge that photography can afford. This is indeed a knowledge of character, circumstance, the springs of action and feeling, but that is not a kind of knowledge that any photograph carries within it.

As one looks at von Kaufman's formidable creation, the *Turkestanii Al'bom* (The Turkestan Album) that took less than two years to complete (1872), it is the sheer panorama of the Islamic world in its daily form, and of the extraordinary degree of mutual visibility that existed between its various regions that impress the viewer. But what were the projects

von Kaufman's team. A glance at the pictures assembled in its six volumes reveals a rich opportunity, finely grasped: the life at peace, staged or, spontaneous. Other photographers saw further possibilities in the region, pursuing the quest for a more intimate and visually attractive locations. These fabrications should startle us only because they occur so early in the history of Central Asian photography as a documentary art.

What were Russia's cultural priorities and educational goals next to her political agenda for the "mission of civilization"? The first, of course, was the omnipresence of the Russian language that was cultivated in the medrese (religious and secular elementary schools). The Russian language was a kind of God who was always present everywhere with a special place reserved for obtaining the basic knowledge of it. The sound of Russian in the recitation of the textbooks, wove a thick thread through the noise of the otherwise Muslim daily life. The Russian language turned out also to be an effective medium in which to engage the colonial rulers, and therefore men trained at law were lifted into salient rules in public life – and then into whatever elective bodies came to be established.

The multiple interaction between Central Asia and Russia in the actual historical contacts, domains of knowledge and art is clearly visible in three particular contributions to the cultural life of Russian Central Asia: archeology, theology and ethnography. Practicing Russian law, itself a domain of Western learning, turned out to be a multiple-use resource. Given the colonial laws of property and contract, backed by the courts, and their enforceable decrees, legal skills opened the doors to the professions which, at the higher levels, could be very lucrative.

A Different vision of Architecture

What place the Russians reserved in their colonial agenda for architecture in Central Asia? Traditionally it always served a purpose of power, comfort, and majesty.



Fig. 1
Poster for the opening of the exhibition *Russia's Unknown Orient* at the Groninger Museum, the Netherlands (2010-2011) (source: collection het Groningermuseum).

that passed with greatest frequency and insistency from one end of to the other? The photographic development marched parallel with politics; photography was prioritized and financially supported by von Kaufman.

Greater liberties were taken in the Turkestan Album composed and shot by

Almost a millennium later, the situation was the same: rebuilding Central Asia enhanced the prestige of Russian Empire (Fig. 2).

One example will suffice. Between 1890 and 1899, the eminent Russian architect from St Petersburg, Aleksey Benois (1838-1902) was commissioned by the Turkestan Governor to produce designs for the Industrial Fair in Tashkent, based on his specialization to combine the Russian National and Moscow architectural styles, both believed to be suitable for the image of the new Central Asia. Benois's design offers insights into architecture as a colonial concept: the setting of the "Orient" as a physical landscape makes Benois's contestations 'possible. Although it resists common ways of depicting the "Empire" and Russian revival, it does so in a way that is paradoxical and leaves intact the colonial stylistic system, emphasizing how the colonial functions as a reference point for Russian identity with a sense of superiority and grandeur.

Photographers and their subjects

Much of the photographic work of Central Asian everyday life was concerned with giving a personal image to a multitude of Russians. These scenes, portraits and landscapes were cast in an almost uniform generic setting. The vast Central Asian landscape also provided a fertile ground for photography, often produced by photographers who were not trained as painters. Given their initial interest in photography, the work displays a sensible treatment of the subject.

We cannot speak of the exact date of Central Asian photography with the same certainty as we might about the invention of Louis-Jacques Daguerre. It came into being and spread in less time than any technical process in history. Only few months after stepping into the governor position, von Kaufman obtained the first camera for the region. Although Central Asia didn't see a photographic exhibition until the late 1890s, the presence of the

cameras in the cities of Tashkent, Kokand and Samarkand left it dumbfounded. "So far we have only saw the beginning of it"², concluded the *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*, the region's leading newspaper of the time. Vasilii Vereshchagin (1842-1904), the Russian celebrated painter of war scenes who worked in Gérôme's Parisian studio in 1860s, writes in his notebook: "I'm blamed to use the camera for my paintings, but it's the opposite"³. As a battle painter Vereschagin was an old hand at shocking the public. In 1871-1873 he had provoked the Munich public with his Turkestan series, called "The Barbarians", because of the unbearable sincerity of showing the necessary atmosphere created by the atrocities of war in Central Asia. Terrifying backdrops with hundreds of scalps suggested the unknown depths of the human tragedy, while cleverly lit and composed, Vereschagin's canvases produced still air and cloudless skies: life was turned into death.⁴

Vereschagin invited the last of the doubters, the journalists and fellow artists, for a private visit to his Munich studio, a rare occasion for an artist whose ferocious temperament put his friends and enemies at bay. Not unexpectedly, Russia did not take a great pride in the native son who had contributed to the glory of the nation. On a contrary, the Russian government and the military authority saw in his photographic canvases a great threat to their Central Asian actions. Vereschagin depicted the chronology of the conquest while the Russian court was interested in seeing the glorifying results of their deeds in the Russian Orient. No one seemed to notice that Vereschagin minimized the importance of the role played by his government in the development of the region.

A great deal of Vereshchagin's subjects put together could be seen as a potential theme source of the photographic themes for the "Turkestan Album". Depicting Central Asian dwellings and landscapes, majestic monumental architecture, figures dressed in special costumes and engaged in different activities, Vereshchagin's

pictures became enormously popular in the late nineteenth century and were reproduced in France, England, Germany, and the United States. When the Russian and European photographs arrived in Turkestan from 1860s onward to produce their own images of Central Asia, they followed the well-traveled routes of the Silk tract but updated the depictions of Turkestan people and costumes with contemporary visual technology and artistic taste. The puppets like the mannequins in Torvald Mitreiter's first color prints (1870s) were turned into real albeit still nameless, "portraits".⁵

The Silk Road is not an old designation: the term *Seidenstrasse* was coined in 1877 by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen to describe the web of commercial arteries that anciently stretched between China and the Mediterranean. This was never a single road but a network of tracks that split and converged across the breadth of Asia for quarter of the length of the equator. At certain periods its traffic was dense and deeply influential: at these times the trade route became a river of far-reaching intercourse, carrying not only material goods but ideas, faith, and inventions.⁶

Alexander II, the tsar-the-redeemer, the liberator and reformer never went there, communicating his orders from St Petersburg. Unlike Queen Victoria whose effigies were erected in every town and village in India of any size, and whose image was absorbed into the Indian pantheon as a sort of Mother-Deity, the Russian Emperor regarded the new territory as a land of banishment and punishment. As a ruler, he absorbed the battles and the famines with unblinking equanimity. His nephew, Nikolai Konstantinovich (1850-1918) was exiled to Tashkent without a single right to conduct any affairs with the outside world.⁷

Unlike other European countries like France or England, whose colonial appetite was rewarded by the tourist flow into the new countries in Africa and India, the Russian tourists didn't rush into "the steppes of Central Asia".⁸ The irony

of the German writer Karl Leberecht Immermann (1796-1840) who declared that "staying home is the exception, now everyone travels at least five hundred miles a year; they travel for travel's sake, to get away from the daily grind"⁹ fell on the dead ears. Turkestan remained as distant and foreign as it remained dangerous, and it forces us to think, reconsider, and live through each of the impossible choices of the campaign.

¹) Zhdanov 2009.

²) Maslova 1962: 69.

³) Vereshchagin 1898: 109.

⁴) Vereshchagin was closely related to *Peredvizhniki* in his views on the educational role of art, but declined the membership to the Association for he preferred to organize his own exhibitions in Russia and abroad.

⁵) Torvald Mitreiter 2010: 68-69, salt prints, watercolors, collection of the Russian museum of Ethnography, St Petersburg, pls. see Kouteinikova/Wageman 2010.

⁶) Frankopan 2016

⁷) Prince Mikhail the Greek 2002.

⁸) The title of the famous musical tableau (symphonic poem *V Stepiaykh Azii*) by Alexander Borodin (1880). To celebrate the silver anniversary of Alexander II's reign.

⁹) Immermann 1833.



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Fig. 2
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