

H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 533

2 November 2023

Alexander Morrison. *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781107030305 (hardcover, \$103.00); 9781107640177 (paperback, \$54.99).

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E533>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Andrew Szarejko | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Review by Masha Cerovic, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales

How did Central Asia become Russian? In answer to that question, the Russians wove grand tales of civilizational unification punctuated by a handful of dramatic episodes of military heroism.¹ Marxists tried to divine economic motives for the very costly conquest of steppe and desert.² The British and many traditional military and diplomatic histories saw it as a side-product of the famed “Great Game” between the Russian and British empires.³ In many ways, the glaring inadequacies of these grand narratives⁴ have been ignored because the initial question seemed largely irrelevant from the point of view of those writing from Moscow or London.

Yet, Alexander Morrison’s narrative does not look out from Moscow or London, but from forlorn, unsustainable fortresses on the steppe, from Tashkent and Kokand, Aq Masjid and Denghil Tepe. His starting point is that this Russian colonial expansion is, first and foremost, a Central Asian history. It needs to be studied “in its own right, not as an incidental outcome of the great power politics of the nineteenth century” (5). It is a history in which local actors, including Russian officials, Qazaq intermediaries, rival khans and political factions, and the local ecology played a decisive role in driving and shaping the Russian conquest. This does not mean that Morrison discards “great power politics.” On the contrary, in this outstanding military and diplomatic history of imperial expansion, “great power neurosis” (25) is one of the most influential constant factors he identifies in Russian decisionmaking. Much of the book probes what happened when Russian military officers, who dreamt of Napoleon and Alexander the Great, of conquering British India and earning glory and medals in battles fit for songs, faced the desert as their main enemy and found

¹ For a recent example, see Evgenij Glushchenko, *Rossija v srednej Azii. Zavoevanija i preobrazovanija* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2010).

² Naftula A. Khalfin, *Prisoedinenie Tsentral’noj Azii k Rossii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965); Zinaida D. Kastel’skaya, *Iz istorii Turkestanskogo kraja* (Moscow: Nauka, 1980).

³ See the classic Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (London: John Murray, 1990), and for a criticism, Malcolm Yapp, “The Legend of the Great Game,” *Lecture, Proceedings of the British Academy* 111 (2001): 171–98. For more recent and scientific histories of the “great game” in Central Asia, with opposite conclusions, see Jennifer Siegel, *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002); Evgeny Sergeev, *The Great Game, 1856–1907: Russo-British Relations in Central and East Asia* (Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

⁴ William C. Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600-1914* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); John P. LeDonne, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650-1831* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Alfred Rieber, *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

camel drivers as their only chance of survival, while dealing with people they saw as barbaric. The book is thus an in-depth exploration of the “official mind of [Russian] imperialism.”⁵

Morrison firmly grounds his analysis in the broader field of colonial and imperial history, as well as Russian history thanks to his impressive mastery of works by English and Russian-speaking historians who have mostly ignored each other.⁶ It is based on two decades of work in libraries and archives, mostly in Russia and Kazakhstan. The perspective is mostly Russian, although the author does make some very interesting use of the limited Persian and Chaghatai sources he accessed, usually in their Russian or English translations. The book is elegantly but densely written, which may make it sometimes difficult for readers who are not already familiar with Central Asian and Russian history, but the numerous maps, illustrations, as well as the author’s occasional wry humor, offer welcome help. The book is divided in ten chapters, each of which offers a microhistorical analysis of the conquest of a specific region. It follows Russian expansion through Central Asia, from the 1830s to the early twentieth century. The timespan covered is thus significantly longer than the usual focus on the 1860s to the 1880s, broadly from the fall of Tashkent in 1865 to the defeat of the Akhal-Teke Turkmen in 1881.

One of Morrison’s important arguments is that the conquest of Central Asia was conceived—as an imperial idea, not a well-designed plan—well before the first major conquests in the 1860s. As he demonstrates in his first chapter, its initial fathers were not “on the spot”⁷ colonial frontier officers, but a Russian military elite, whose members were close to Tsar Nicholas I, that was entirely made of veterans of the Napoleonic wars. Morrison calls them a “Napoleonic generation.”⁸ Their victory against Napoleon had made these men certain of the superiority of Russian civilization and of their place in Europe, but also obsessed with maintaining their perceived equal status with Britain, the other victorious “great power.” The “game” between the Russians and the British was thus not about security, but about prestige.⁹

In Central Asia, there was no military competition between the two great powers, but a continuous quest for mutual recognition and reaffirmation of mutual respect, based on the ability to subdue what they viewed as

⁵ Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1966). Cf. T. G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy, 1865–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶ The book is situated within several fields, defined, among others, by Sergei Abashin, Dmitriy Arapov, and Nailja Bekmakhanova, eds., *Tsentrāl'naja Azīja v Sostave Rossijskoj Imperii* (Moscow: NLO, 2008); Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ian W. Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire: Kazak Intermediaries and Russian Rule on the Steppe, 1731/1917* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017); Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Laura Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire: Imperial Russia's Illiberal Path* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Marlène Laruelle, *Mythe aryen et rêve impérial dans la Russie du XIXe siècle* (Paris: CNRS, 2005); Virginia Martin, *Law and Custom in the Steppe: The Kazakhs of the Middle Horde and Russian Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001); Marina Mogilner, *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013); Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Harvard University Press, 2009); Jeff Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent: 1865-1923* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Dmitriy Vasil'ev, *Bremja Imperii: Administrativnaja Politika Rossii v Tsentrāl'noj Azii: Vtoraja Polovina XIX v.* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2018).

⁷ Contrary to the classic thesis by David Mackenzie, “Expansion in Central Asia: St. Petersburg vs. the Turkestan Generals (1863-1866),” *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 3:2 (1969): 286–311.

⁸ This important proposition is a counterpoint to the dominant trope of a “Decembrist generation”, uniting the “men of 1812” in their dreams of liberal reform and revolution; see Marc Raeff, *Political Ideas And Institutions In Imperial Russia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 65–75; Stephen Lovell, “From Genealogy to Generation: The Birth of Cohort Thinking in Russia,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9:3 (2008): 567–94.

⁹ Cf. Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

inferior, uncivilized people and areas. The Russians conquered Central Asia because the local khanates had nothing to counter the Russian rifles and artillery, and because the Russians believed that their dignity relied on displaying this superiority. No territory was so poor, with a climate so harsh and a people so hostile, that Russian officials would not see it as a glorious addition to the empire's prestige. In this, they were indeed quite European, and had much in common with their British counterparts in particular. Morrison stresses the ease with which the British and the Russians resolved any tension that arose between them. The ultimate meeting of the two empires in Central Asia, and the delineation of their borders, which is depicted in the final chapter of the book, did not involve a fraught, tense confrontation between two rival powers, but rather were a caviar and champagne-laden common celebration of the triumph of European civilization over savages.

Russian military and diplomatic defeats, especially in the 1853–56 Crimean war, only strengthened Russia's drive to reassert its dignity and status, and Central Asia offered one attractive ground for doing so. One of the reasons was that while the British were not challenging Russia's great power status, the nomadic people and the khanates of the Asiatic steppe were. They did so not because they were hostile to or competing with the Russians, but because the steppe frontier world in which they lived operated outside the political culture of "great powers."¹⁰ The fluidity—and violence—that characterized the steppe frontier, and the divergent understanding of sovereignty among the Central Asian political elite, had been an irritation to Russians since they had started challenging the Middle Horde in the early eighteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the raiding, the taking of slaves, and the shifting loyalties of the Muslim nomads had become marks of unbearable "insolence," a notion whose centrality Morrison stresses (24, 55, 82, 121, 309, 470, 534). The punishment of these intolerable insults against Russia as a great power became the main driver of Russian expansion. Local circumstances, not geopolitics, were almost always decisive for the temporality and the forms of Russian expansion.

In the 1830s, Qazaq resistance to Russia's determination to impose a "civilized" order in what it considered its territories, through taxation, regulation of mobility, administrative reform, and strict border controls led to punitive expeditions. In 1839, the attempt to strike directly at the Khivan khanate, which was seen by the Russians as the most "insolent" power in the region due to its enslaving of Russian captives, was a disaster, thanks to a mix of arrogance and willful ignorance. The Russians learned a key lesson then, that logistics, specifically the logistics and skills of travel by camels, would be the single most important factor for the conquest of Central Asia. Morrison analyzes this lesson in detail for all the campaigns he describes. He underscores that it meant that the Russian "men on the spot," no matter how rash and impetuous they may sometimes appear, were tightly bound by their double dependence on the camel-rearing and driving skills of the local Qazaqs and Turkmen, against whom they were also fighting, and on the financial and logistical support granted by the imperial center, without which the elaborate preparations needed for such campaigns would not have been possible.

After the failure of the Khivan expedition, the Russians shifted to a more systematic and progressive tactic, which the author analyzes in chapters 3 and 4. To secure what they saw as their border, seen by the locals as an imaginary line cutting through established nomadic routes and encroaching on the territory of the khanates, the Russians built forward fortresses, from which they would conduct punitive raids on the unruly Qazaqs. Security then required the building of further fortresses. This led the Russians always deeper in the steppe, as they kept looking for regions where their military settlements could rely on an agricultural base that was sufficient for their sustenance. The governors of Orenburg and Omsk, Syr-Darya in the west, and Semirechie in the east thus built two lines of fortresses which immediately became a major center of Russian settler colonialism.

¹⁰ Bakhtiyar Babadzhonov, *Kokandskoe Khanstvo. Vlast'. Politika. Religija* (Tashkent - Tokyo: TIAS, 2010); Scott C. Levi, *The Rise and Fall of Khoqand, 1709-1876: Central Asia in the Global Age* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).

The Semirechie conquest briefly extended into Qing-ruled territory, as the Russians seized the opportunity provided by the Yaqub Beg uprising to occupy the Ili valley in the mid 1870s.¹¹ Their peaceful retreat and their diplomatic settlement of the border with the Qing highlight the stark differences between the treatment that the Russians afforded to those they recognized as states, like Qing China, and those they did not, like the khanate of Khoqand. In fact, Morrison repeatedly demonstrates that the quest of Russian officials for secure borders in Central Asia was thwarted not just by their ignorance of the region, and thus inability to find the “natural borders” they were desperately looking for, or by the refusal of the nomadic population to respect the logic of territorial sovereignty, but by their systematic refusal to acknowledge the Central Asian khanates as legitimate state actors and to negotiate with them in good faith. This meant that the differences between the Russian and Central Asian understandings of sovereignty were indeed unbridgeable.

Having established these two lines of fortification, the Russians turned their efforts to uniting them, preferably along a “natural” frontier that they thought would necessarily appear, if only they put enough scientific effort in identifying it.¹² The author analyzes this quest, which “accidentally” led to the fall of Tashkent in 1865, in one of the most fascinating chapters of the book. Morrison traces in detail how the tensions between the imperial grand designs of the tsarist government, the growing importance of scientific professionalism in elite circles, and the reality on the ground played out in the colonial expansion in Central Asia: “it was the incommensurability between the Russian military–bureaucratic episteme [...] and the facts of human and physical geography in Central Asia itself that allowed seemingly uncontrolled expansion” (219). Thus Turkestan was born, while the fall of Tashkent profoundly shook Central Asian Muslim societies, destabilized the Bukharan emirate—and, in the usual pattern, necessitated further conquests to secure militarily and economically the new Russian possession.

The next two chapters dwell on the transformation of the Bukharan emirate and the khanate of Khiva into Russian protectorates, princely states which were based upon the model of British India. After a series of military victories over Bukharan forces in 1866–68, the Russians ended up concluding that these would not suffice to bring the lasting peace and stability they wanted on their border, as they weakened the emir and deepened the tensions within Bukharan society. The final part of the Bukharan campaign was thus meant to strengthen the emir’s position against his own rivals, and succeeded in stabilizing the emirate as a flourishing protectorate that outlasted the Russian empire itself. In contrast, the Khivan campaign of 1872–73 sounds almost like a tragic farce, a totally unnecessary show of force, which was elaborately staged in order to feed tales of historic glory.

The new Turkestan governor, Konstantin von Kaufman, was determined not to let Khiva negotiate its way out of war. Its mere diplomatic surrender would not have erased the 1839 disaster, nor turned von Kaufman into a hero. He was not the only Russian leader who was looking for triumph; his Caucasian and Orenburg colleagues were just as eager to reap the laurels, as were countless “pheasants,” young noble officers from Petersburg who managed to get sent to Central Asia in the hope of heroic feats and subsequent medals and careers. The officers’ arrogance cost them dearly. One of the columns failed, the other was only saved in extremis from death by starvation and thirst by the help of the Bukharan emir and by the skills of the Qazaq guides. Nevertheless, the Russians made it to Khiva, which fell easily. Still looking for a way to turn this into a heroic battle, but also for a way to restore the khan’s authority and make Khiva into a stable vassal, von Kaufman then proceeded with a massacre of the Yomud Turkmen, women and children included, whom he suspected of opposing the khan.

¹¹ Cf. Immanuel Chung-Yueh Hsü, *The Ili Crisis. A Study in Sino-Russian Diplomacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); Hodong Kim, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864-1877* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Ian W. Campbell, “‘Our Friendly Rivals’: Rethinking the Great Game in Ya’qub Beg’s Kashgaria, 1867–77,” *Central Asian Survey* 33:2 (2014): 199–214.

¹² Cf. Svetlana Gorshenina, *Asie centrale - L’invention des frontières et l’héritage russo-soviétique* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2012).

Contrary to Bukhara and Khiva, Khoqand did not survive as an autonomous entity. After repeated military defeat to the Russians, the khanate's growing social tensions led to a major uprising against the last khan, who was ultimately forced to flee. As shown in chapter 8, the Russians chose to interpret this event as a Muslim uprising against them and used the opportunity to conquer what was left of the khanate. In 1875–76, they entered the Ferghana and proceeded with a vicious campaign of “pacification.” The slaughter earned its commanding officer, Mikhail Skobelev, a heroic reputation, which, Morrison notes, had been one of his main motivations for the campaign in the first place.

Skobelev's propensity for slaughter was also notable in his 1881 victory against the Akhal-Teke Turkmen in Gök (Denghil) Tepe,¹³ who had offered strong resistance to recurring Russian raiding and plunder in the Transcaspian region. In 1879, they inflicted a humiliating defeat to a Russian officer who had, again, severely underestimated both the terrain and his opponents. Charged with restoring Russian prestige, Skobelev successfully laid siege to the Gök-Tepe fortress, in spite of heavy losses, then proceeded to slaughter most of the survivors.

The conquest of Transcaspia had almost closed the Central Asian steppe frontier; the border with Persia was soon settled, in spite of Qajar attempts to protest some of the Russian annexations. The annexation of the Pamirs at the turn of the century completed the process. Morrison shows that the Russians claimed to be acting according to their civilizing mission, as protectors of the “Aryan, white men” (480), descendants of Alexander the Great, who dwelled in the high mountains, against the “black Mohammedans,” (480), the Afghans, who oppressed them in their own attempt to consolidate a major Central Asian state with British backing. Ignoring Afghan outrage, the Russians and the British easily agreed on the Afghan-Russian borders. The British would not have sided with the Persians nor the Afghans against another European state. By the early twentieth century, Central Asia was firmly divided by clear borders between Persia, Russia, British-backed Afghanistan, and China.

Morrison offers a rich, remarkable, history of this process of conquest and the closing of the frontier that spanned more than half a century, and yet does not offer any grand narratives. The contrast between the quite mundane details of a slow conquest resting on the back of camels, the pettiness, vanity, arrogance driving the men in charge, and the scope of the conquest, and its far-reaching social, political, economic consequences is actually part of Morrison's argument on imperialism. It was driven by the quest for personal and collective status of the members of the imperial military elite, whose feelings of insecurity were fed by their ignorance and their contempt for lesser peoples, races, and religions rather than by fellow great powers. In the end, the Russians conquered Central Asia because, relying on their military superiority, they kept advancing until they met another state whose status they recognized, with which they easily negotiated the limits of their expansion, given that their British, Qing and Qajar counterparts had neither the means nor the desire to contest Russian territorial gains. Understanding these dynamics of the colonial expansion of Russia as a European great power is unfortunately of great relevance today, far beyond the purview of scholars of Central Asia.

Morrison acknowledges that the main limit to his work is the paucity of non-Russian Central Asian sources. The systematic integration of non-Russian perspectives on the events, no matter how limited, is nonetheless a major quality of the book. Morrison stresses the importance of the complex internal dynamics of rapidly changing, very diverse Central Asian societies. In contrast, the total absence of Russian society—either the broader imperial society or the local, colonial society that emerged in Turkestan—is striking. Indeed, the reader is left with the impression that very little changed on the Russian side over the decades, as if the profound transformations that Russia went through over that half century had no bearings on the conquest

¹³ Cf. Ian W. Campbell, “Bloody Belonging: Writing Transcaspia into the Russian Empire,” in Krista A. Goff and Lewis H. Siegelbaum, eds., *Empire and Belonging in the Eurasian Borderlands* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 35–47.

of Central Asia. It could be worth pondering precisely how and why the imperial military elite under examination in this book managed to remain so insulated and stable over time.

Masha Cerovic is an Associate Professor at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS), Paris, France, and a researcher at the Center for Russian, Eastern European and Caucasian Research (CERCEC). She specializes in Russian and Soviet history, with a focus on war and borderland history.