

a great service by writing a book that appeals to three audiences. It introduces young Russian historians to the concept of everydayness, provides Western scholars with unique material on the daily life of a Russian province, and provides an entertaining read for the Russian public. In all three of these incarnations, their book is a worthy tribute to the rich, fascinating, and complex past of Kazan.



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Svetlana Gorshenina, *L'invention de l'Asie centrale. Histoire du concept de la Tartarie à l'Eurasie* [Rayon histoire de la librairie DROZ] (Geneva: DROZ, 2014). 704 pp. ISBN: 978-2-600-01788-6.

“Central Asia,” as anyone who has had the task of introducing a monograph, an article, or an undergraduate lecture on this region will know, defies easy geographical or cultural specification. How we delimit the region in spatial terms; what or whom we include or exclude; the very names that we use to denote particular ethnic groups, countries, subnational territories, and the region itself – all these can easily become political questions as much as scholarly ones. A delineation that is sound according to one particular historical, cultural, linguistic, or geopolitical logic risks being contested as imprecise, arbitrary, or Euro- (or Turko-, or Russo-) centric when a different basis for carving up geographical and intellectual space is invoked. In Xinjiang, for instance, the term favored by Uighur activists as an *anticolonial* response to Chinese expansionism to designate the country’s West (“East Turkestan”) is often decried in Chinese academia as *itself* a colonial imposition of Russian origin! And even when scholars share a language

of communication, questions of orthographic convention, editorial policy, and political sensitivity can often be in tension: a vowel shift (from Kyrgyzstan to Kirgizstan, for instance) can elicit heated dispute over “right naming” in different institutional contexts. Students of Central Asia have every reason to feel confused both by the terminological variety they encounter and by the shifting historical fortunes of particular topo- and ethnonyms.

In this context, Svetlana Gorshenina’s erudite, meticulously researched and lavishly illustrated monograph, *L’Invention de l’Asie centrale: Histoire du concept de la Tartarie à l’Eurasie*, is a uniquely important contribution. This is an encyclopedic work in every sense: totaling more than 700 pages, charting a vast range of sources in multiple languages, and chronicling terminological change from the sixth century BC to the present, the text will no doubt become the go-to reference work for understanding the sources and political lives of multiple geographical referents relating to this region, including “Tartary,” “Turkestan,” “Transoxiana,” and “Eurasia” as well as the overlapping threesome of Central, Inner, and Middle Asia. The current volume is the second in a trilogy of monographs developed from Gorshenina’s 2007 doctoral dissertation (a three-volume, 750-page work that

is expansive even by the standards of the French academy). The first volume in that trilogy, published in 2012, provided a forensic treatment of the national-territorial delimitation of 1924–36 and its legacies in Central Asia. The final volume, currently in preparation with Claude Rapin, will explore the cartographic representation of Central Asia, a theme that is also touched on in the current, second volume.

L’Invention de l’Asie centrale is divided into an Introduction and fifteen broadly chronological chapters grouped into five sections. The introduction sets the scene for the chronological account that follows, showing how the territory that we would today designate broadly as Central Asia served in the ancient world as a locus for projections of cultural difference only loosely mapped onto territory – a place of presumed climatic extremes inhabited by mythic beasts and barbarian peoples. The chapter considers how such representations fed into the depictions of the Arabo-Persian world of the eighth to fifteenth centuries, and how the emergence of new technologies of mapping and geometry facilitated new Islamocentric cartographies of difference.

The first section, which follows this insight into ancient cosmography, provides a historical tour de force, taking us from the *mappamundi* tradition of medieval Europe

(Chapter 1) in which Central Asia (or “Tartary”) emerges as a place of simultaneous horror and fascination, to the cartographic experiments of Mercator (1541), which for the first time included toponyms from Marco Polo’s voyages (Chapter 3). This is a story of the shifting possibilities of representation occasioned by new voyages and new techniques of representation, and the shifting fate (and geographical mutability) of “Tartary” as a locus of difference. Gorshenina also explores how these representations were in turn conditioned by the politics of patronage in Renaissance Europe. Whereas the humanists, fascinated by antiquity, saw maps as purely decorative, there emerged in Italy a concern with collecting voyagers’ maps that would chart newly discovered terrain (P. 161), seeking to ascribe precise geographical coordinates to the toponyms to appear in the voyagers’ tales. What this constitutes, Gorshenina argues in her conclusion to this section, is a “dual-speed cartography” (*cartographie à deux vitesses*) in which one finds representations that are “nearly modern” on the one hand, and those that are “mythic” on the other (P. 174).

The second section (Chapters 4 to 6) takes this narrative forward with the emergence of “scientific orientalism” in the mid-seventeenth century and the appearance of modern state nationalism in Europe

and Russia. This fascinating story cannot be done justice in a short review: Gorshenina shows how the convergence of European travel, increasing cartographic sophistication, Jesuit missions to China, and imperial expansion on the part of Russia and Britain led simultaneously to new attempts to map Central Asia while also reproducing the region’s ideational marginality. In the age of Enlightenment, Gorshenina argues, Central Asia figured as a kind of “periphery of transit,” caught between the various poles of Russia, British India, China, Persia, and Ottoman Turkey. This meant that “Tartary,” as Central Asia was still designated at this time, figures very schematically: a frontier zone inaccessible to outsiders, or a buffer zone liable to colonization. Indeed, in Russia, anxieties about espionage and imperial expansion led to the censoring of maps from the public domain in 1798.

The third section (Chapters 7 to 9) explores the emergence of “Central Asia” as a particular way of designating this region in the very different registers of geographical naturalism (Alexander von Humboldt) and geopolitical “pivots” (Halford Mackinder) in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries. This period marks the displacement of “Tartary” by the linguistic designator “Central Asia”: a shift Gorshenina sees as being bound up

with a broader concern at this time with borders and frontier lines occasioned by the growth of European nationalisms. “Too difficult to define with any precision, the term *Tartary* gives way to *Central Asia* of which the limits, easier to trace – or so was thought initially – would allow the zones of influence of the great powers to be marked” (P. 356, my translation).

Subsequent chapters consider how this seemingly stable referent came to be contested in practice, leading to today’s scholarly disagreement over where the bounds of Central Asia actually lie. Chapter 9, which opens the book’s fourth main section, shows attempts by Russian scholars to map “Central Asia” onto the colonized territory of “Turkestan.” Chapter 10 explores how Russian imperial expansion in turn facilitated debates over the region’s ethnic history and the emergence of “Turan” in Russian intellectual circles to designate the putative origin of the region’s non-Aryan (Turkic and Mongol) population; and Chapter 11 digs down into the scholarly debates among late nineteenth-century Russian geographers over the relationship between “Middle” and “Central” Asia. Particularly interesting here is the way that scholarly debates were inflected by Russia’s territorial expansion in Central Asia. Gorshenina shows how, as Russian troops advanced

toward the heart of Asia, Russian scholars invoked diverse theories, including the presumed absence of natural frontiers in Turkestan, and Russia’s own “Asiatic” identity to justify imperial advance until they reached the “natural” frontiers of Central Asia (P. 422). “Each state of the conquest of Central Asia,” Gorshenina argues, “gave birth to a particular justification for new administrative structures in Turkestan” (ibid.)

Scholars of contemporary Central Asia will perhaps be most interested in the book’s fifth and final section, spanning Chapters 13 to 15. Chapter 13 traces the historical fortunes of the term “Eurasia” during the life of the Soviet Union, giving particular attention to the work of Petr Savitskii, who in his 1927 *Rossiia, osobyi geograficheskii mir* insisted that “Russia-Eurasia is, according to several characteristics, a closed circle, a perfect continent and a world unto itself” (quoted on P. 476). While Eurasianism as an ideology came to be officially censored in the 1930s (with Eurasianist texts requiring special permission to be consulted by the public), the expansionist geopolitical vision that underlay Eurasianism had considerable traction among political elites in the Stalin era. As Gorshenina notes, the particular geopolitical imaginary that saw control of Eurasia as critical to planetary domination brought

together some unlikely bedfellows, including Communist apparatchiks and Western geopolitical commentators such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, whose 1997 *Grand Chessboard* has shaped the thinking of Central Asian elites (P. 486).

The final two chapters show how the notion of *Sredniaia Aziia* became consolidated in the Soviet Union following the national-territorial delimitation of 1924–36, and how this came to displace references to *Tsentral'naia Aziia* in Russian-Soviet literature, even as “Central Asia” became the dominant term to describe the region in Western scholarship. In both the Soviet Union and the West what emerges is a story of the complex intertwining of political considerations with terminological ones. In the final chapter, for instance, Gorshenina shows how the institutional fate of “Central Asia” in American academia was shaped by the funding priorities, intellectual preoccupations, and political agendas of the Cold War – and how such concerns continue to inflect how the region is studied. The U.S. State Department, for instance notably regrouped its Central Asia programming alongside South Asia (including Afghanistan and Pakistan) following the launch of the “war on terror” at the start of the new millennium. And so, perhaps, the story comes full circle: Central Asia as a place that has been the locus of mul-

tiple projections of difference and danger by more or less ill-informed outsiders, often accompanied by the violent use of force.

Given the scale and sweep of the volume, and its forensic rather than synthetic treatment of themes, this is not an easy book to conclude. I use the word “encyclopedic” of this book advisedly: this is perhaps more a book to *consult* than to read for a single overarching argument. Gorshenina is not engaged in grand theory; the style is one of rigorous dissection of sources and detailed laying out of micro-debates, but the style is ultimately narrative rather than argumentative: this is, as the title suggests, a history of a concept and not, ultimately, an argument about the relationship between knowledge and power. Perhaps inevitably, therefore, Gorshenina’s “General Conclusion” is a modest eight pages, restating some of the earlier findings and lamenting the ongoing terminological imprecision that characterizes definitions of the region, but not ultimately venturing to synthesize the scholarly analysis of the preceding 550 pages into a single overarching argument. Gorshenina’s primary critique, indeed, is pitched at the level of lexical imprecision. Since the majority of terms relating to the region become incorporated without much question into habitual use, Gorshenina argues, “we find ourselves constantly mak-

ing use of them to define some other appellation, following the formula of $X = Y$ on condition of Z , creating an abstraction from the fact that no one part of the composite parts is clear” (P. 546). This is coupled with a tendency, in both Russian and Western scholarship, for scholars to “move within a closed circuit, not necessarily national in form, using a jargon in which the nuances [of their choice of terminology] remain incomprehensible to others” (P. 549, my translation).

This is no doubt true, but I found myself wondering whether the detailed narrative that precedes this conclusion might not point toward a rather bolder, theoretical analysis of the shifting historical importance of the category of space in relation to Central Asia, much as Stuart Elden has done for the category of territory,¹ or a more general discussion of the mutual imbrications of spatial imaginaries, imperial visions, and colonial politics – critical as this is for understanding both contemporary Central Asian nationalisms and the failures of Soviet and Western interventionism in the region. In sum, *L’Invention de l’Asie centrale* is a work of erudite scholarship that will surely become a classic reference work. In an era when publishers often balk at the prospect of extensive illustrative

material, both Gorshenina and her Swiss publisher, Librairie Droze, are to be commended on producing a book that is both generously and beautifully illustrated. This is a book on an ambitious scale. As I reached the far side of the five-hundredth page, however, I found myself wondering whether the very scope and detail presented in the volume did not ultimately risk undermining rather than supporting the book’s argumentative force.



¹ Stuart Elden. *The Birth of Territory*. Chicago, 2013.