

EMPIRICAL EMPIRE:
RUSSIAN GEOGRAPHICAL EXPLORATIONS IN THE 1880s

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ABSTRACT

Stephen B. Riegg: *Empirical Empire: Russian Geographical Explorations in the 1880s*
(Under the direction of Louise McReynolds)

Through the lens of empire building and the creation of knowledge about “foreign others,” my thesis assesses explorations conducted by the Imperial Russian Geographical Society in the 1880s. Based on the reports of Russia’s three most influential explorers—Nikolai Przheval’skii, Gregorii Potanin, and Nikolai Miklukho-Maklai—it illustrates how they worked to incorporate Russia into the global expansion of imperialism in the late nineteenth century. By examining some of the Geographical Society’s principal expeditions beyond the periphery of the Russian Empire, the thesis attempts to answer broader questions about the political and cultural significance of understanding distant peoples with whom Russians traditionally had little interaction.

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CHAPTER 1

“THE DEMANDS OF SCIENCE AND BROADER INQUISITIVENESS”

“Unenviable,” recalled the expedition leader, “but our situation was highly interesting at that moment. On one side was our small bunch of only twelve Europeans, on the other—an entire horde of hostile savages. There—crude physical strength; here—moral force. This moral force had to win—and won!”¹ The reader will be forgiven for visualizing a band of English or Belgian adventurers beset by spear-wielding natives in a jungle. The situation was interesting, indeed, but not for the reasons given by the famed Russian explorer, Nikolai Przheval’skii, (1839-1888). Rather, it is his emphasis on the group’s European identity and their aims during voyages in Inner Asia that serve as the subject of this essay.²

Established in 1845, the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (*Russkoe Geograficheskoe Obshchestvo*, RGO), a professional, learned organization headquartered in the heart of the empire, St. Petersburg, commissioned the expeditions of Przheval’skii and other Russian explorers. Charged with compiling geographic, ethnographic, statistical, and physical data about the Russian Empire and the world beyond, the RGO became an influential institution in nineteenth-century Russia. With a nod to the celebrated explorations

¹Nikolai Przheval’skii, *Tret’e puteshestvie v Tsentral’noi Azii: Iz Zaisana cherez Khami v Tibet i na verkhovia Zheltoi reki* (Petersburg: Tipografiia V. S. Balasheva, 1883), 242.

²Throughout this essay, my use of the term “Inner Asia” follows the model set by this field’s doyen, Denis Sinor. The region refers to the interior of the Eurasian continent, east of the “-stans” of Central Asia and south of Russia. The civilizations of western China, Mongolia, and Tibet have traditionally dominated the geography of this region. The nineteenth-century Russian term for this region, as will be encountered in quotations throughout the essay, was *Tsentral’naia Azia*, or Central Asia, which should not be confused with our modern understanding of that term.

conducted by the British Royal Geographical Society, long the center of western geographic and ethnographic knowledge building, the Russian Geographical Society carried out broad activities. Parrying pressure from various sources to concentrate its efforts on the still-underexplored depths of the vast empire, the RGO dispatched explorers to Tibet, China, the Pacific islands, and central Africa in the 1880s.

What prompted these explorations of the RGO? I argue that the geopolitical task of reconnoitering potential Russian territory was not the primary motivation of the expeditions of the 1880s.³ Rather, the accumulation of knowledge about the unknown—at least to “European science,” as the mantra went—became the primary objective of the most prominent Russian Geographical Society expeditions in the 1880s, those to Tibet, China, and New Guinea. Driven by an international climate that privileged “knowledge” as the key both to power and to admission into the pantheon of “civilized” states, the RGO organized and financed expeditions to corners of Asia and Oceania not strategically important to St. Petersburg but unexplored by Europeans. Russians fully recognized that territorial expansion into regions such as Qing China and Tibet, securely under the control of established political systems, was unfeasible and that attempts at political agitation there would have been futile. Instead, RGO leaders and explorers strove to earn Europe’s affirmation by doing what European empires did so prominently in the nineteenth century: explore “uncivilized”

³This thesis considers imperialist discourse between the Russian Empire and those settled outside its political and cultural influence. For overviews of Russian imperialism within the borders of the Russian Empire and those inhabiting its periphery, see Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatoly Remenev, eds., *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini, eds., *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Nicholas B. Breyfogle, Abby Schrader, and Willard Sunderland, eds., *Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland Colonization in Eurasian History* (New York: Routledge, 2007); and S. I. Kaspe, *Imperiia i modernizatsiia: Obshchaia model’ i rossiiskaia spetsifika* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001).

regions of the globe and fill in the lacunae of European knowledge of Inner Asia. An examination of major RGO expeditions outside the empire in the 1880s reveals that the society viewed the scientific acquisition of knowledge, rather than the facilitation of territorial annexation, as its *raison d'être*.⁴

As geographer Felix Driver has cogently demonstrated, European geographical societies of the nineteenth century carried broad purposes for exploration.⁵ Beyond serving as a tool of imperial power, facilitating cartography, or introducing the curious public to distant terra incognita, geographic exploration often had scientific, missionary, diplomatic, journalistic, military, and literary objectives. Driver deconstructs the often-hagiographic biographies of famed Western explorers such as David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley, pointing to their frequently downplayed tactics such as Stanley's "exploration by warfare."⁶ This thesis similarly complicates standard narratives of noted RGO explorers.

The three most prominent Russian explorers of the 1880s, Nikolai Przheval'skii, Gregorii Potanin, and Nikolai Miklukho-Maklai, represented distinct understandings of empire. All three of these men were Russian imperialists, in the sense of promoting their state's overall geopolitical position, but each set out to do so in a unique way. Recent scholarship has characterized RGO expeditions as little more than reconnaissance parties of territory-seeking Russians. For instance, David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye refers to

⁴Recent studies of imperialism have stressed the enduring presence of empire as a method of political and social organization and its relative stability over the comparatively nascent concept of nation-state. See Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁵Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000).

⁶See, for instance, a particularly romanticized and unctuous history of the Royal Geographical Society and its members by Ian Cameron, *To the Farthest Ends of the Earth: The History of the Royal Geographical Society, 1830-1980* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1980).

Przheval'skii as a "bellicose explorer," who "saw the East as backward and useful only as an arena for tsarist conquest."⁷ Elsewhere, Schimmelpenninck van der Oye argues that, "as [Przheval'skii] saw it, Chinese Inner Asia was not just an unknown region waiting to be opened to science but virgin territory to be conquered for the glory of Russia."⁸ Similar to Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Scott C. Matsushita Bailey sees Przheval'skii and his contemporaneous RGO explorers as instruments of Russian political imperialism bent on annexation. For Bailey, "[the RGO] went from an organization dedicated to vague notions of scientific advancement to a tool of colonial/imperial conquest and an institutional advocate of new conceptions of Russian national identity."⁹ While Przheval'skii's writings from the 1880s justify Schimmelpenninck van der Oye's assessment of the Russian explorer as a pugnacious jingoist, evidence of his promotion of Russian territorial conquest in this decade is lacking. I agree with Bailey's assertion that Przheval'skii, "perhaps more than any previous Russian explorer-traveler to Central Eurasia in the period, [was] very interested in advancing his travels for the benefit of the Russian imperial state."¹⁰ Unlike Bailey, however, I maintain that the "benefit" to the state was derived not from territorial conquest, but from acquisition of knowledge and western acknowledgement of Russian academic accomplishments.

A state-sponsored institution, the RGO comprised prominent members from the military as well as the royal family. As such, the organization could not, and there is little

⁷David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.

⁸David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Toward the Rising Sun: Russian Ideologies of Empire and the Path to War with Japan* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001), 34.

⁹Scott C. Matsushita Bailey, "Travel, Science, and Empire: The Russian Geographical Society's Expeditions to Central Asia, 1845-1905" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 2008), 78.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 225.

evidence to suggest that it ever attempted to, oppose state policy. The accumulation of knowledge about unexplored regions of Inner Asia and Oceania for the sake of scholarly inquiry in and of itself, with the attendant expectation of promoting Russian scientific standing on the world stage, did not contradict official policy.¹¹ This helps to explain the imperial authorities' continued support of the RGO's endeavors. After all, why curb the activities of an organization dedicated to the promotion of Russian scientific standing on the world stage?

The Russian expeditions of the 1880s must be discussed within the Orientalist overtones of Russian imperialism.¹² Because Orientalism is a discursive construct, the features of Russian Orientalism can be better gleaned through an examination of Russia's own position in the discursive practices of the nineteenth century, rather than through an analysis of the geopolitical activities of the Russian Empire, such as territorial expansionism. Ever since the Petrine reforms, Russia has been ascribed hybrid subjectivity, occupying an ambiguous position in the European cultural narrative. At least in its own eyes, Russia has been a discursive Other of Europe, never perceived as culturally equal, always construed as Euro-Asian, and thus hybrid, if not outright subaltern. Slavophiles internalized this understanding in a relatively positive manner and embraced it as evidence of Russia's uniqueness. Westernizers saw European interpretations of Russia as a painful problem that

¹¹In the context of center-periphery interactions *within* imperial borders, knowledge of the subalterns is, typically, a tool of rule and administration. See Jane Burbank and Mark von Hagen, "Coming into Territory: Uncertainty and Empire"; and Francine Hirsh, "State and Evolution: Ethnographic Knowledge, Economic Expediency, and the Making of the USSR, 1917-1924" in Burbank, et al., *Russian Empire*.

¹²I draw here on Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995). For an overview of responses to and discussion of *Orientalism*, see: Gyan Prakash, "Orientalism Now," *History and Theory* 34, no. 3 (1995): 199-212; and Juan R. I. Cole, "Power, Knowledge and Orientalism," *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 3 (1995): 507-13.

needed to be rectified. In this context, Russian Orientalism, unlike other Orientalisms, belongs to two discourses. One of these, which Russia shared with other imperial powers, consisted of constructing Orientalist stereotypes about the natives they encountered. In the other discourse, much more important for its self-perception, Russia attempted to challenge Western Orientalist stereotypes about Russia itself. While in the first binary separation (Russians versus the natives) Russia was the dominant power, in the second (Russia versus the European powers) it was the subaltern. Hence, Russia not only generated Orientalist discourse, but was also its object. As far back as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Russia was depicted in Western literature as “the quintessential oriental despotism.”¹³ As Nathaniel Knight reminds us, “When Russian scholars turned to the east it was often with a sharp awareness of their own supposed backwardness and inferiority in the face of the grand civilization of Britain, France, and Germany.”¹⁴

¹³Nathaniel Knight, “Grigor’ev in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?” *Slavic Review* 59 (2000): 77. For early modern Western discourse on Russia, see Marshall Poe, *“A People Born to Slavery”: Russia in the Early Modern European Ethnography, 1476-1748* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹⁴Knight, “Grigor’ev in Orenburg,” 77. Knight shows that even in the case of ardent Slavophiles, such as mid-nineteenth century scholar Vasilii Grigor’ev, the desire to demonstrate to the West Russia’s ability to match its scientific accomplishments remained paramount.

CHAPTER 2

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE RUSSIAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

The roots of Russian geographical and scientific exploration long antedate the RGO's establishment in 1845. The scientific study of geography was undertaken in earnest during the reign of Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725), the first tsar intent on dragging Russia into the western orbit. The most prominent of the early projects involved mapping the Caspian Sea, carried out under Peter's orders between 1715 and 1719. Subsequently, the Academy of Sciences shouldered the mantle of organized geographic exploration from its formation in 1715 until the establishment of the RGO in 1845.¹⁵

The genesis of the RGO lies in Admiral Fedor Petrovich Litke's (1797-1882) global circumnavigation in 1825, which secured his position as one of Russia's most prominent explorers. Lauded by his contemporaries as avidly as by Soviet historians, Litke's "sympathetic" attitude toward the "under-cultured" (*malokul'turnye*) peoples that he encountered during his voyages in the mid-1820s reinforced his position as the preeminent representative of early Russian exploration.¹⁶ On May 1, 1845, Litke submitted a petition to

¹⁵L. S. Berg, *Vsesoiuznoe geograficheskoe obshchestvo za sto let, 1845-1945* (Moscow: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1946), 18. For a succinct overview of the genesis of Russian scholarly studies of non-Russian peoples within the Russian Empire, with an emphasis on the establishment of ethnographic criteria and categorization, see Yuri Slezkine, "Naturalists Versus Nations: Eighteenth-Century Russian Scholars Confront Ethnic Diversity," *Representations* 47 (1994): 170-95. For a discussion of Russian artistic depictions of non-Russians in the popular press during this time period, see Jeffrey Brooks, "The Russian Nation Imagined: The Peoples of Russia as Seen in Popular Imagery, 1860s-1890s," *Journal of Social History* 43 (2010): 535-57.

¹⁶Berg, *Vsesoiuznoe*, 27.

the minister of internal affairs, L. A. Perovskii, requesting the establishment of a “Russian geo-statistical society.” Litke desired to disassociate the activities of the new organization from similar work conducted by the Academy of Sciences: “Studies, carried out by the government, having largely a specified state objective, do not always satisfy the demands of science or broader inquisitiveness, and these, by their nature, rarely and generally only to a very limited degree are accessible to the public.”¹⁷ The minister quickly approved the petition and the organization held its first meeting on October 7, 1845.

Between 1845 and 1880 the society focused its energies on the Russian Far East. Having missed the Age of Exploration, the RGO, in step with its foreign counterparts, concerned itself with studying regions previously mapped. During this period, no man or mission received as much prominence and prestige as the mid-century expeditions of the society’s “most brilliant man,” Petr Semenov-Tian-Shanskii (1827-1914). Over the course of his forty-year leadership of the RGO, this Russian and German-educated geographer led expeditions to scarcely explored corners of the Russian Empire, including to the mountains of Tian Shan, spanning modern day China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. For his pioneering and exhaustive research of this mountain range, Petr Semenov was granted by royal fiat the byname Tian-Shanskii (meaning of Tian Shan), becoming the doyen of Russian geographical exploration.

From 1849 onward, the RGO comprised four departments (*otdely*), each responsible for a particular field of scientific inquiry: physical geography, mathematical geography, statistics, and ethnography. The physical geography department undertook studies of geology, climatology, hydrology, botanical and zoological geography, and topography. The

¹⁷Ibid., 32.

mathematical geography department focused on geodetic work, cartography, and the determination of geographical coordinates. The statistics department gathered quantitative data about the economic and social conditions of peoples within and outside the Russian Empire. The ethnographic division oversaw the collection of data regarding the customs, beliefs, practices, and material cultures of non-European Russians and foreigners.¹⁸

In the 1880s, the RGO leadership, the council, consisted of a vice-chairman, his assistant, and twelve additional members, all of whom were subject specialists or explorers. The chairman of the organization, a purely titular position, was Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich, the younger brother of Alexander II. All RGO publications that listed the society's leadership presented the tsar as its patron (*pokrovitel'*), a designation bestowed upon Alexander II until his assassination in March 1881, after which it was granted to Alexander III. The council wielded supreme decision-making power within the organization, determining matters regarding expeditions, funding, and major publications.

In addition to regular meetings held by each department and by various ad hoc committees, the RGO convened council meetings, usually held twice per month, and general society meetings, attended by all RGO members and often state and foreign elites and typically held eight times per year. Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich periodically attended the general meetings. The agendas of these large meetings usually included Geographical Society status reports, expedition updates, pressing news, celebrations, and tributes. The council meetings were the venue for more administrative proceedings.

Like its foreign counterparts, the RGO promoted itself and its work through its publications: the periodical *Izvestiia* (News), its annual report, *Otchet* (Report), and

¹⁸Bailey, "Travel, Science, and Empire," 42.

monographs relaying the results of individual expeditions. The society published *Izvestiia*, to the disappointment of many members and readers, irregularly, while it published *Otchet* each January.

During the 1880s, *Izvestiia* appeared in print, on average, between five and seven times per year. Much like *Proceedings* of England's Royal Geographical Society, *Izvestiia* covered a variety of topics and categories in an attempt to appeal to the broadest possible readership. The journal did not publish expedition reports in full but frequently printed brief synopses of them, particularly around the time when returning explorers addressed the RGO council or a general meeting. During the first half of the 1880s, *Izvestiia* also often included letters from members of an expedition to the society's vice-chairman or a state official. The intended audience of the annual *Otchet*, in contrast to that of *Izvestiia*, was primarily the RGO membership, state officials, and domestic and foreign colleagues. It contained end-of-year financial, membership, publication, and activities data. Each department also produced periodic publications based on its expertise. The society actively distributed both *Izvestiia* and *Otchet* and never turned down a request for these publications—from domestic or foreign institutions—during the 1880s.

The individual reports of expeditions undertaken by society members were hefty tomes. The fruits of multiyear expeditions, their publication was a protracted and expensive affair, frequently necessitating the RGO to petition the tsar for additional financing. When thirty-six copies of Nikolai Przheval'skii's report of his third expedition to Inner Asia were stolen in September 1884, the society swiftly launched an investigation and even questioned its own staff.¹⁹ Published in St. Petersburg in 1883, Przheval'skii's account of this

¹⁹*Izvestiia* (1885): 149

expedition, which travelled through the upper Yellow River in China and eventually reached Tibet, is a 470-page, comprehensive overview of the honorary member's voyage. Authored by Przheval'skii but edited by the RGO's subfield specialists, the work contains an exhaustive account of the voyage. Each ravine and hill is meticulously documented; every physical feature is carefully catalogued. The explorers left no plant or animal unexamined. Przheval'skii punctuated his account with stories of hunting exploits, rare warfare with hostile nomads, and frequent, complicated negotiations with various regional authorities. Such narratives of expeditions were, in the words of one scholar, the "best-sellers" of the era.²⁰ Unlike *Izvestiia* and *Otchet*, publications of the results of individual expeditions were very rarely provided to foreign institutions free of charge or even in exchange for publications. During the 1880s, almost every request for exchange of publications from outside the empire was granted with the stipulation that it be limited to *Izvestiia* and *Otchet*. Individual reports were available for purchase by foreign institutions, and the RGO eagerly welcomed the circulation of these publications as much as of its smaller periodicals, but the cost of publishing these books prohibited the organization from providing them free of charge. Nonetheless, striving to impress Westerners with their scientific studies, the Russians engaged in exchanges of publications with dozens of foreign institutions in the 1880s, including with twenty-eight individual American organizations in 1885.

Preceded by the formation of three other national geographical societies—in Paris in 1821, in Berlin in 1828, and in London in 1830—the Russian Geographical Society early on recognized the importance of international engagement. It made its activities transparent to foreign colleagues, disseminated its scientific findings with alacrity, and kept its members

²⁰Daniel Brower, "Imperial Russia and Its Orient: The Renown of Nikolai Przhevalsky," *Russian Review* 53 (1994): 369.

apprised of European, American, Japanese, and other geographic endeavors. While the RGO saw in Inner Asia a niche for cultivating its nation's geographic credentials and advancing its scientific cachet, it was also captivated by geographical studies of distant regions.

Consequently, the 1880s witnessed active Russian participation in, *inter alia*, international conferences, collaborative projects, and exchanges of literature. Through such endeavors the RGO hoped to attract the attention and respect of the European scientific community.

The plentiful evidence of international collaboration and participation by the RGO during this decade comes mostly in the form of short pieces, fascinating albeit vague, published in *Izvestiia*. For example, at the May 2, 1880, joint meeting of the mathematical and physical geography departments, it was reported that the governor-general of Canada, Sir John Douglas Sutherland Campbell, had sent an official inquiry to the RGO regarding Russia's interest in collaborating on the selection of a universal prime meridian.²¹ The inquiry was forwarded to specialists in the mathematical geography department, who later approved it and supported Russia's participation in the project. The same meeting approved requests for the exchange of publications with the Swiss Topographical Society, the International Geographical Institute in Bern, the Society of Commercial Geography in Porto, the Lisbon Geographical Society, and the Spanish-Portuguese Academic Society in Toulouse.

Through *Izvestiia*, the RGO kept the curious public and its own members informed of major (and not so major) international geographical activities. Editions of the journal in 1881, for instance, provided the latest news on the fate of the steamship USS *Jeannette*,

²¹*Izvestiia* (1881): 73.

feared lost at sea during an American arctic voyage.²² The Russian public closely monitored the search for the *Jeannette* in 1881 and 1882, and the Geographical Society greeted largely with indifference the news that the USRC *Corwin*, in search of the *Jeannette*, had landed a party on Wrangel Island and claimed the territory for the United States.²³ At the council's November 3, 1886, meeting, N. M. Iadrintsev reported that his presentation to the French Academy of Sciences on the drying-up of lakes in western Siberia had resulted in an order by the French director of the military topographical division, Colonel Perrier, for French scientists to carry out similar studies in Tunisian and Algerian lakes.²⁴

The RGO's international prominence continued to grow during the 1880s, as evidenced by the increase in foreign institutions exchanging publications with the society. While in early 1882 the RGO traded publications with 292 institutions, 157 of which lay outside the Russian Empire, by 1889 those numbers had risen to 487 total and 219 foreign.²⁵ These examples of RGO involvement and interest in foreign geographic activities demonstrate the degree of RGO engagement with the international scientific community. Despite the residual animosity between Britain and Russia after the Crimean War and extant political tensions with other European states, the Russian Geographical Society remained no less informed and involved in the international geographic community than any of its foreign colleagues.

²²Ibid., 6.

²³*Izvestiia* (1882): 10. The island remained de facto American territory until imperial Russia claimed it for itself in 1916, a year before its own demise.

²⁴*Izvestiia* (1886): 560.

²⁵*Otchet* (1882): 57 and *Otchet* (1889): 83.

CHAPTER 3

INTO THE GREAT KNOWN: MOTIVATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

In a publication dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the RGO, Petr Semenov-Tian-Shanskii helps us understand the motives behind the Russian Geographical Society's preoccupation with Inner Asia during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. According to his *A History of a Half-Century of Activities of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, 1845-1895*, published in 1896, a number of factors aroused the Russians' scholarly interest in the Gansu province of China.²⁶ From a physical geography standpoint, the province's orographic and climatic features represented all the stages of transition from an arid and severe Tangut highland to the moist and warm valleys and plains of central China. From a biological perspective, the Gansu and Sichuan provinces' diversity of flora and fauna, and particularly the variety of both colder and warmer-climate species, attracted Russian scientists. In addition to natural studies, the RGO was determined to carry out ethnographical surveys in the region, long the gateway of nomadic tribes into the now densely settled central region of China. The Russians viewed Gansu province as China's Caucasus—a threshold crossed by armies and settlers of ethnically Other peoples in search of land and loot, with the Chinese Empire, in turn, persistently pushing them back into the Mongolian steppe. By the late nineteenth century,

²⁶Petr Semenov Tian-Shanskii, *Istoriia poluvekovoi deiatel'nosti Imperatorskogo Russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva, 1845-1895* (Petersburg: Tipografiia V. Bezobrazova, 1896).

this longstanding dynamic had resulted in a kaleidoscope of ethnicities settled in the region, and the Russians were eager to be the first Europeans to investigate and document the inhabitants.²⁷

In the 1880s, the RGO directed much of its attention and resources toward the expeditions of three of its members: Nikolai Przheval'skii, Gregorii Potanin, and Nikolai Miklukho-Maklai. These were not the only society affiliates undertaking voyages beyond the empire's borders during this decade, nor were they traveling to the farthest or most "exotic" locales, as there were parallel expeditions to Africa and the Middle East, but their work enjoyed the society's most attentive gaze during the 1880s. While the RGO leadership eagerly analyzed all three men's reports and missives and read them to enthusiastic crowds at general meetings, the men espoused different objectives, received varying amounts of Geographical Society support, earned uneven approbation, and left separate, if at times opaque, legacies.

No name is associated more closely with Russian exploration outside the empire in the 1880s than that of Nikolai Mikhailovich Przheval'skii. An army lieutenant colonel and future honorary member of the society, Przheval'skii received unparalleled support from the RGO to mount four expeditions into China and Tibet in the 1870s and 1880s. Traversing over 30,000 kilometers during a total of nine years on research expeditions,²⁸ Przheval'skii secured his place alongside Semenov-Tian-Shanskii and his contemporaneous explorer, Miklukho-Maklai, as an icon of Russian geographical exploration.

Born into a noble Polish family in Smolensk, Przheval'skii graduated from the military academy in St. Petersburg. His first taste of geographic exploration came in 1867,

²⁷Ibid., 590-91.

²⁸Bailey, "Travel, Science, and Empire," 188.

when the military assigned him to Irkutsk, in the new Eastern Siberian military region. There he balanced his military duties, which included conducting a census of the local Cossack population, with detailed geographical observations. Returning to St. Petersburg in 1870 with a trove of scientific surveys and measurements, Przheval'skii earned the attention of the RGO.²⁹

Within a few months of his return to the capital, having received a supportive reception from the city's scientific and political elite, and having merited the trust of the society as an adroit explorer, Przheval'skii embarked on his first RGO-sponsored expedition. After spending more than three years exploring the northern and western reaches of Qing China, and having met the Mongol, Turkic, Chinese, Tibetan, and various nomadic peoples of the region, Przheval'skii published his findings and presented his reports to eager RGO assemblies. In the course of the next decade and a half, he crossed into the "wild countries of Asia,"³⁰ as he called them, four times: in 1870-1873, 1876-1877, 1879-1880, and 1883-1885. Each successive mission received greater support—financial and otherwise—from the society. The political elite, too, ensured that Russian emissaries in Chinese provincial centers facilitated Przheval'skii's travels and assisted him in overcoming occasional political obstacles.

The account of Przheval'skii's third expedition provides the greatest insight into his vision of his mission and the role of the society's exploration of Inner Asia. Published in 1883, *Third Journey in Central Asia: From Zaisan through Khami into Tibet and the Upper Yellow River* is a single-authored encyclopedia of the region. Containing route maps, over 100 drawings (skillfully rendered by one of his companions), an abundance of physical and

²⁹Brower, "Imperial Russia and Its Orient," 371.

³⁰Bailey, "Travel, Science, and Empire," 193.

meteorological measurements and surveys, and, perhaps most strikingly, a significant quantity of ethnological and anthropological observations, the report received widespread commendation.

Przheval'skii's goal during his third expedition, as it had been in the previous two, was to reach the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. In charge of a twelve-man outfit comprised of three military officers, three infantry soldiers, five Cossacks, and a Turkic and Mandarin translator, Przheval'skii set out on what he described as a "scientific scouting" (*nauchnaia rekognostsirovka*) of Inner Asia.³¹ His attitude toward the natives of the region is no less abrasive to modern sensibilities than those found in reports filed by his English, Belgian, and French counterparts traveling outside of their continent during the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Przheval'skii's persistent references to his European identity and the attention he devotes to the cultural contrasts between Russians and the inhabitants of the regions he explored are particularly noteworthy and deserve our attention.

A paragon of Orientalist literature, replete with condescending moral comparisons, Przheval'skii's report begins with a reminder to the reader about the *un-Europeaness* of the lands neighboring the Russian Empire: "Once again in front of me was spread a completely different world, nothing like our Europe! Yes, Central Asian nature really is different! Original and wild, it is almost everywhere hostile toward civilized life. . . . Asian conservatism has reached its apogee here!"³² Citing natural factors as contributing to the perceived uncivilized condition of Inner Asia and its denizens, Przheval'skii also provides his explanation for the rapid expansion of the United States during the same period:

³¹Przheval'skii, *Tret'e puteshestvie*, I

³²Przheval'skii, *Tret'e Puteshestvie*, 10.

And for a long time will a large portion of Central Asia remain like this! The nature of the desert will unlikely be fully defeated even with the aid of science. Of course, with time, those locations suitable for culture (*prigodnye dlia kul'tury*) will be settled . . . Here, it is not like in North America, where every prairie is suitable for cultivation and where, because of this, culture progresses [westward] in giant steps. The nature of the Asian desert, better and longer than anything else, will protect the native nomads from the encroachment of civilization.³³

It should be noted that, unlike his colleagues in the West, Przheval'skii did not attribute the underdeveloped conditions that he witnessed to racial or ethnological factors,³⁴ but to the region's inhospitable and frequently inimical terrain. The 470-page report contains no indication of Przheval'skii's subscription to notions of *a priori* limitations to his hosts' aptitude or potential. The dichotomy—which Przheval'skii so forcefully emphasized at every opportunity—was between European geography, of which he believed Russia to be a part, and the territory of the East. It was not between white Europeans and Asiatic Mongols or Chinese.³⁵

Yet, moving deeper into the continent, Przheval'skii found few attributes worthy of praise and a plethora worthy of opprobrium. Criticizing the behavior of several Chinese officers during a stopover at a regional center, the Russian expedition leader was irked by the officers' "undignified" behavior, such as their repeated requests for the Russians to trade or sell watches and weapons, their unchecked fondness for sugar, as well as the regional governor's informal demeanor. Przheval'skii was similarly unimpressed by the elaborate

³³Ibid., 11.

³⁴See Driver, *Geography Militant*, for an overview of interactions between famed West European explorers and Africans encountered by them on expeditions. For a broad but valuable survey of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century concepts of race, and the negative and condescending attitudes toward interracial interaction among Westerners, see: George W. Stocking, "The Turn-of-the-Century Concept of Race," in *Modernism/Modernity* 1 (1994): 4-16.

³⁵The concept of race has always significantly differed in Russian society and ethnography from the West. See Francine Hirsch, "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics," *Slavic Review* 61 (2002): 30-43.

feast (composed of sixty unique dishes, according to him!) organized by the Chinese in honor of their Russian visitors. He noted the absence of wine and the presence of two warm varieties of vodka, each of which he described as a “horrible abomination” (*merzost’ uzhasnaia*).³⁶ Chinese inquiries about Europe “of course, were of the most childish nature.”³⁷

Przheval’skii’s chauvinism reached its apex when, upon viewing a marksmanship demonstration by the visitors and examining their weapons, the Chinese governor exclaimed, “How are we to battle the Russians; these twelve men will scatter a thousand of our soldiers.”³⁸ To such compliments, Przheval’skii replied that Russia and China had no reason for war, and had never fought in the past. “This art [marksmanship] fascinates the Asians,” he concluded.³⁹

Perhaps not surprisingly, locals greeted Przheval’skii’s expedition more often with suspicion than with feasts. Chinese authorities became increasingly vocal in their opposition to the expedition’s aim of reaching Tibet as the Russian convoy advanced to the southwest of the country. Residents at every Chinese outpost encouraged the Russians to turn back, warning them of impassable terrain, arid expanses, and roving bands of hostile natives. At one juncture, two Chinese soldiers informed the Russian officers that they had been notified in advance that the Russian expedition was seeking gold and, under the threat of decapitation, had been ordered to “conceal everything from you and to constantly deceive you.”⁴⁰ Citing a lack of experienced men, regional administrators time and again refused to provide guides to the Russians, and, on at least two occasions when guides did join the party, the Russians

³⁶Przheval’skii, *Tret’e puteshestvie*, 74-75.

³⁷Ibid., 74.

³⁸Ibid., 76.

³⁹Ibid., 76.

⁴⁰Przheval’skii, *Tret’e puteshestvie*, 109. Przheval’skii does not explain why the Chinese soldiers revealed this information to his men.

suspected them of leading the expedition astray and expelled them. Przheval'skii's narrative depicts the determined march of an intrepid leader and his men through such obstacles.

A striking disparity exists between Przheval'skii's writings in the 1870s and those in the 1880s. There is no evidence to suggest that Przheval'skii considered his expedition to be buttressed by Russian artillery, rather than European science, and it is therefore more accurate to view him as a pedantic don rather than a bellicose "conquistador."⁴¹

Przheval'skii certainly was a Russian chauvinist, a military man as much as a man of science, devoted to broadening Russian knowledge and, conversely, the state's influence, sometimes forcefully, in the regions through which he traveled. His writings in the 1870s point to personal proclivity toward imperial schemes and there is evidence that he gave serious thought to military incursions into western China.⁴² In fact, in an 1873 letter to a friend, Przheval'skii's views on Russian expansion into Inner Asia are unambiguous:

Here you can penetrate anywhere . . . with money in your pocket, a carbine in one hand and a whip in the other. Europeans must use these to come here and bear away in the name of civilization all these dregs of the human race. A thousand of our soldiers would be enough to subdue all of Asia from Lake Baikal to the Himalayas. . . . Here we can still repeat the exploits of Cortez.⁴³

His writings from the 1880s, however, contain no explicit indication of his intention to use his work, or that of the society that financed his voyages, for a military takeover of Mongolia or western China or Tibet, as suggest David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Scott Bailey. Why such an ostensibly stark contrast between his position in the 1870s and the 1880s? The answer may lie with the assassination of tsar Alexander II in 1881 and the ascendance of his reactionary, conservative son, Alexander III, although this discussion is

⁴¹David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye employs this moniker for Przheval'skii in *Toward the Rising Sun*, 24-41.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Quoted in Ibid., 34.

outside the scope of this essay. Writes Bailey, “Przheval’skii’s imperial eyes gazed upon the environment, identifying everything that was necessary for future Russian efforts in the region.”⁴⁴ Perplexingly, those who paint Russia as a backward Other also seem more than ready to suggest that it had the capability, in addition to the intent, to occupy large territories held for centuries by the Chinese and others. In fact, Russian military or political expansion into Inner Asia was as unthinkable in the late nineteenth century as it is in the early twenty-first.

Przheval’skii, while enjoying more support from the RGO than his colleagues, was not the only member of the organization to traverse China in the 1880s. Grigorii Nikolaevich Potanin (1835-1920) joined the ranks of the Geographical Society’s most prominent explorers during his expeditions in Mongolia and China in the 1870s and 1880s. Born far removed from either the glamour or the intellectual environment of St. Petersburg, Potanin’s upbringing on the banks of the Irtysh River and later in Omsk, on the southern edge of the empire’s domain, inculcated in the young man a unique appreciation for the academic study of the East.⁴⁵ Taken early under the tutelage of Semenov-Tian-Shanskii, Potanin was educated at the Page Corps in Omsk and later in St. Petersburg in mathematics, physics, and botany. Recognizing the young man’s acumen for scientific observation and exploration, the head of the RGO dispatched him to Mongolia in 1879-1880 and, upon his satisfactory performance during that expedition, to a more ambitious second assignment.

⁴⁴Bailey, “Travel, Science, and Empire,” 225. Bailey’s own research shows Przheval’skii’s recurring references to and reverence of Western science, yet Bailey fails to explore the reasons for Przheval’skii’s obvious preoccupation with European scientific affirmation and instead concentrates on what he considers to be the Russian explorer’s machinations for territorial annexation. See chapter 5 of Bailey’s dissertation, tellingly entitled “Przheval’skii and the ‘Reconnoitering’ of Central Eurasia.”

⁴⁵Bailey, “Travel, Science, and Empire,” 278.

Potanin's scientific accomplishments are all the more impressive in light of his political involvement in Siberian separatist movements and subsequent imprisonment and exile before beginning his career as an explorer. A quasi-political radical from the time of his studies in Omsk, Potanin saw in Siberia the potential for a separate, more pure existence, free of deleterious influences from European Russia. Potanin thus became involved with a radical circle, which resulted in seven years of imprisonment, three of those in Sveaborg, Finland, and an additional four years of exile in Vologda province.⁴⁶ Potanin spent his years of detention becoming *au fait* with geographical scholarship and writing a history of Siberia, and, upon his release and return to St. Petersburg, the intelligentsia and the academic fraternities of the capital welcomed him. His politically radical background, however, may be partially responsible for the reduced financing his expeditions received, or explain why his work, conducted in the same geographical regions, was accorded less fanfare than the voyages of Przheval'skii.

Potanin's second expedition departed from Peking in May 1884 with the aim of carrying out ethnographic studies of the inhabitants of southern Mongolia, as well as standard physical surveys conducted in central and western China. The expedition sought to travel north through Sichuan province into Gansu province before concentrating its efforts on the Mongolian-Chinese frontier, considered by the Russians to be the gateway of nomadic Central Asian and Mongolian peoples into central China.⁴⁷ Initially the recipient of a modest RGO budget of 12,500 rubles, Potanin's expedition was undermanned until it received an unexpected private donation of 15,000 rubles, and later an additional 2,000, from the wealthy

⁴⁶Ibid., 280-81.

⁴⁷Grigorii Potanin, *Tangutsko-Tibetskaia okraina Kitaia i Tsentral'naia Mongoliia* (Petersburg: Tipografiia A. S. Suvorina, 1893), X.

RGO member and avid advocate of Siberian and Asian exploration, V. P. Sukachev.⁴⁸ The additional funding allowed Potanin to bring along a zoologist and botanist who had accompanied him during a previous expedition, M. M. Berezovskii, and a topographer and geodesist, A. I. Skassi.⁴⁹ Potanin's wife, Aleksandra, also joined the men. Although after the private donation the budget of Potanin's 1884-86 expedition matched the 29,000-ruble allowance enjoyed by Przheval'skii during his 1879-80 expedition, it should be noted that Przheval'skii's financing came exclusively from the Geographical Society.⁵⁰

With royal permission, the Naval Ministry authorized Przheval'skii's travel aboard the frigate *Minin* and later the corvette *Skobelev*. Departing from Kronstadt on the Baltic coast, the *Minin* rendezvoused en route with the smaller and shallow-draft *Skobelev*, which delivered the expedition to the Yellow Sea seven months later.⁵¹ This expedition, not unlike Przheval'skii's, also benefited from the support of the head of the mission at the Russian embassy in Peking, RGO member A. G. Vlangali. Mild-mannered yet resolute, Vlangali negotiated an impressive freedom of travel for his countrymen. Under the embassy's aegis, Russian expeditions in China in the 1880s enjoyed relatively unfettered access to all their objectives, save Tibet.

The two-volume, 1,034-page comprehensive report of Potanin's voyage, *The Tangut-Tibetan Periphery of China and Central Mongolia*, is unrivaled by any contemporary scholarship of the region. In striking contrast to Przheval'skii, Potanin's appreciation for the cultural characteristics and peculiarities of each of the distinct peoples that he met along his journey is evident. In addition to exhaustive scientific measurements and observations,

⁴⁸Ibid., 2.

⁴⁹Semenov Tian-Shanskii, *Istoriia poluvekovoi deiatel'nosti*, 1121.

⁵⁰Przheval'skii, *Tret'e puteshestvie*, I.

⁵¹Potanin, *Tangutsko-Tibetskaia okraina*, 2-3.

Potanin's report includes over 250 pages of individual folk tales and legends that he and his team compiled. The ethnographic surveys even touch on aspects of regional culture such as women's coiffures, courtship customs, and the shapes of doors and windows in dwellings. Potanin's observation of Mongolian agriculture led him to suggest that, contrary to prevailing thought, buckwheat was not imported into Europe by the Mongolians. Potanin conceded that he lacked data to verify this conclusion.

The Russians' appreciation of their hosts' hospitality marks a sojourn in the Labrang Buddhist monastery in Tibet.⁵² When offered sour milk by the monks as a traditional welcome gesture, Potanin was, according to his own account, not flustered.⁵³ Moreover, the monastery's surprisingly rapid development and flourishing condition, given its relatively recent establishment (in 1709), impressed Potanin. When he realized that the monks used technology given to the monastery by pilgrims from Peking or the Siberian border, such as watches, stringed musical instruments and samovars, only for decoration, Potanin presented this fact without the moral adjudication found in the writings of Przheval'skii. Even the sight of a monk repeatedly rewinding a Russian clock in order to cause the cuckoo to pop out with its familiar cry elicited no mockery from the travelers.⁵⁴

The final, and perhaps most conspicuous, point of contrast between the experiences of Przheval'skii and Potanin occurred when the latter met the Egury people of southern Mongolia. Called the Khuan-Fan ("Yellow Barbarians") by the Chinese, members of the same ethnic group had stalked and ambushed Przheval'skii's expedition just a few years prior to Potanin's arrival. Then, Przheval'skii's modern weaponry had helped to repel the

⁵²Ibid., 228-34.

⁵³Ibid., 229.

⁵⁴Potanin, *Tangutsko-Tibetskaia okraina*, 234.

attack, leaving four Egury dead. Potanin's encounter with this people, conversely, was peaceful, and he even received from them information about nearby rivers and settlements. It stands to reason that this was not the same contingent of Egury that Przheval'skii had encountered, or that they had learned the imprudence of attacking heavily armed outsiders with swords and flintlocks, or even that Potanin's expedition, unlike Przheval'skii's, did not appear to be in possession of anything valuable. But perhaps Potanin's more benign approach to these people played a decisive role. Potanin's brief narrative of this encounter, unfortunately, does not reveal the reason for the contrasting receptions the two expeditions received from the Egury. His regard for the locals is also evidenced by his request, in May 1887, for the council to send formal certificates of gratitude to some of those individuals who had provided help during his team's travels. Potanin's request mentions occasions when native peoples aided the Russian expedition by repairing decrepit bridges (and in one case actually constructing a bridge anew) and providing a security escort for the group.⁵⁵

The expedition was hailed as a success upon the group's return to the capital, and Semenov-Tian-Shanskii lauded Potanin's report to the general assembly of the Geographical Society on April 8, 1887, as "excellent."⁵⁶ Evidently equally impressed by Potanin's research, the tsar financed the publication of the explorer's account, released in 1893 after lengthy processing by RGO and Academy of Sciences subject specialists. The tsar also decreed a lifetime annual pension of 800 rubles for the traveler upon his return.⁵⁷

Irrespective of his tarnished political history, Potanin enjoyed a high degree of prominence and prestige, overshadowed only by the feats of Przheval'skii and, arguably,

⁵⁵*Izvestiia* (1887): 404.

⁵⁶Semenov Tian-Shanskii, *Istoriia poluvekovoï deiatel'nosti*, 1134.

⁵⁷Potanin, *Tangutsko-Tibetskaia okraina*, XV.

Miklukho-Maklai.⁵⁸ For all his own merit, Potanin's stature was certainly buoyed by the support of his mentor and RGO head, Semenov-Tian-Shanskii. Writing in 1896 about Potanin's travels in the 1870s and 1880s, Semenov-Tian-Shanskii lionizes his protégé:

Potanin combined within himself qualities rarely found in explorers of Inner Asia: a [robust] health hardened by labor and deprivation, incredible unpretentiousness and endurance, a sufficient familiarity with local languages, the ability to get along with natives, a very good comprehension of general geographical and natural sciences, an extensive knowledge of the geographical literature of Siberia and Inner Asia, but above all—a love for the profession and a total, selfless devotion to science.⁵⁹

As final affirmation of Potanin's membership in the gallery of iconic Russian travelers, in January 1887, the council voted to award him the Geographical Society's most prestigious award, the coveted Konstantin medal. Two of his companions were also honored: A. I. Skassi was presented a smaller gold medal, and Aleksandra Potanina, his wife, received a silver medal.⁶⁰

Potanin's expedition reports reveal no desire of territorial conquest on the part of the RGO. The main contrast between his work and that of Przheval'skii is the conspicuously apolitical nature of Potanin's writings, seemingly always trying to provide an objective, scientific account of his travels. A third RGO explorer, Miklukho-Maklai, operating far outside of the RGO's scope of activity and not always with the organization's support, remained much more engaged with European politics and science, although his detractors argued that he did so at the expense of maintaining regular links with his Russian colleagues.

⁵⁸A blemished political past did not necessarily preclude Russian intellectuals from successful careers. For example, see the case of several prominent lawyers who achieved professional success despite past transgressions, in Louise McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian: True Crime and Punishment, 1864-1914* (Unpublished manuscript), chapter 1.

⁵⁹Semenov-Tian-Shanskii, *Istoriia poluvekovoï deiatel'nosti*, 550.

⁶⁰*Izvestiia* (1887): 79. At the same meeting, at Przheval'skii's request, a decision was made to award silver medals to two of his companions on his fourth expedition to Inner Asia.

Even in death, Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklukho-Maklai (1846-1888) could not evade reminders of the crushing debt he had amassed during his travels. A terse obituary in the 1888 *Otchet* makes faint praise but reminds readers of the man's astronomical arrears, which the tsar "graciously" paid upon the traveler's rare return to St. Petersburg. Miklukho-Maklai's relationship with the RGO, as the obituary suggests, was complex. A relentless explorer of truly the farthest ends of the earth, Miklukho-Maklai arguably accomplished the greatest feats of voyage and exploration by *any* Russian explorer. Yet his legacy is as opaque as his activities in Oceania often were to his colleagues in St. Petersburg.

Miklukho-Maklai's infrequent and abbreviated missives, almost always highlighted by requests for funding, vexed the Geographical Society, which was so invested—academically, if not financially—in his explorations. Absent from the capital for an unprecedented twelve years, Miklukho-Maklai's cavalier approach to the procedures of the RGO, lenient as they were by contemporary Russian standards, earned more criticism for the man than his pioneering research could deflect.

Born outside Novgorod to a Ukrainian father and a Russian mother, Miklukho-Maklai had an extensive education in Russia and Europe, studying philosophy, languages, law, and medicine at universities in St. Petersburg, Heidelberg, and Leipzig.⁶¹ He had already journeyed on his own resources to the Isthmus of Suez before being introduced to the RGO in September 1869, at age twenty-three, as an "indefatigable traveler."⁶² The young man's report on the marine life of the Red Sea enjoyed a supportive reception but remained squarely outside the society's scope of activity. Realizing that the council would not meet

⁶¹E. M. Webster, *The Moon Man: A Biography of Nikolai Miklukho-Maclay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 2.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 19.

his hopes of studying tropical waters without a powerful ally, Miklukho-Maklai successfully lobbied Semenov-Tian-Shanskii to support his petitions for RGO financing of an expedition to the North Pacific to study native sponges and other marine life.⁶³

Miklukho-Maklai circulated extensively in European geographical circles, meeting a number of influential colleagues and always seeking new sources of funding, both Russian and foreign. It appears that he left a largely positive impression on his hosts, as evidenced by the Royal Geographical Society's warm reception of the young Russian geographer in June 1869.⁶⁴ The British Royal Navy's chief hydrographer, Thomas Henry Huxley, who spent a significant amount of time with Miklukho-Maklai, concluded that the Russian was "a man of very considerable capacity and energy."⁶⁵ Miklukho-Maklai also enjoyed the support of the Royal Geographical Society's president, Sir Roderick Murchison, who was particularly interested in Russian geographical and geological research.⁶⁶

Drawing largely on his mother for funding, with occasional supplements from friends, and lacking a clear objective or explicit RGO support, Miklukho-Maklai set out from Kronstadt on November 8, 1870, aboard the steamer *Vityaz*.⁶⁷ This would be Miklukho-Maklai's first foray into multiyear, scientific travels, and the young geographer was driven by broad, romanticized notions of exploration more than by any specific scientific goals. At the mercy of the ship's captain, Miklukho-Maklai had little say in the course of the voyage and reportedly kept himself removed from the ship's officers. The *Vityaz* docked at ports in Denmark and England before sailing to Rio de Janeiro in January 1871. Miklukho-Maklai

⁶³Webster, *The Moon Man*, 21.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁶For a brief discussion of the Royal Geographical Society's interest in Russian geographical work, see Ian Cameron, *To the Farthest Ends of the Earth*, particularly p. 111.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 34.

welcomed the opportunity to study the flora and marine life of the South Atlantic, and the ship's slow progress toward the Magellan Strait and later Cape Horn allowed the Russian explorer to collect enough data to occupy himself during months at sea.

The Russian steamer's ostensibly indeterminate route, and news of the presence on board of a Russian explorer who intended to study New Guinea, raised alarm among Australian officials. As the *Vityaz* began to prepare for a crossing of the South Pacific, members of the Australian political elite voiced concerns about Miklukho-Maklai's vague scientific mission. The existence of other Russian naval ships in Australian waters and recent political tension between England and Russia exacerbated their concerns. Some Australians grew increasingly alarmed at what they perceived to be the expedition's intent to reconnoiter New Guinea, just a short distance off the north coast of Australia, for Russian imperial expansion onto the island.⁶⁸ In the words of one scholar,

[Australian] alarmists saw the Russian scientific mission 'establishing a footing for annexation.' Australians, always interested in obtaining New Guinea for themselves, or at least in keeping others out, were urged to be 'up and doing if they would not have the Russian empire extending to their very doors.' . . . It would take time to convince this South Seas hornets' nest that the great Russian expedition consisted of one young man, travelling at his mother's expense.⁶⁹

Miklukho-Maklai spent twelve years in Oceania, engrossed in research on various Pacific islands as well as occasional, and at times lengthy, sojourns in Singapore and Sydney. His main research destination was New Guinea, where he spent a total of two and a half years between 1871-1872, 1876-1877, and 1883. There, a lone outsider at the mercy of the local populations and elements, Miklukho-Maklai gradually developed a mutual trust and

⁶⁸Webster, *The Moon Man*, 39-40.

⁶⁹Ibid., 40-1.

respect with the Papuans, and some of his writings refer to them as his “friends.”⁷⁰ By his third stay on the island in 1883, Miklukho-Maklai had become concerned about possible encroachment on Papuan land by other Europeans. Writing from Sydney in October 1883 to British Secretary of State for the Colonies Lord Derby, Miklukho-Maklai stressed that “the natives of the Maklai coast require political independence under a European protectorate.”⁷¹ Over the course of his stays among the Papuans, the letter explains, the prospect of Europeans “coming” to New Guinea was raised on separate occasions, always alarming the natives.⁷² Having assured his hosts that he would do his utmost to prevent the abuse of the island by “white foreigners” (*belye chuzhestrantsy*), including the possibility of outsiders taking Papuan children into slavery, Miklukho-Maklai requested official help from the British crown, which played a pivotal role in Oceania and the South Pacific in the late nineteenth century. The influence of Miklukho-Maklai on international politics is likely negligible, but it is clear that the Russian explorer had genuine concern for the inhabitants of New Guinea and nearby islands, and his letter to Lord Derby suggests that his promise to the Papuans was more than the vow of an opportunistic scholar.

When the German government claimed northeastern New Guinea in early 1885, following a similar announcement of the British administration of the southeastern portion of the island a year earlier, Miklukho-Maklai dispatched tempestuous letters to Berlin and the Russian Foreign Ministry.⁷³ “Forced by the unexpected and *unjust seizure* by Germany of

⁷⁰B. N. Putilov, ed., *Chelovek s luny: Dnevnik, stat'i, pis'ma N. N. Miklukho-Maklaia* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1982), 286.

⁷¹Putilov, *Chelovek s luny*, 296. Miklukho-Maklai named the northeastern coast of New Guinea after himself during his first stay on that part of the island in 1871-1872. To this day the coast bears the name of the Russian explorer.

⁷²It is not clear from his letter whether he or the natives raised this possibility.

⁷³Putilov, *Chelovek s luny*, 297-98.

the Maklai coast,” wrote Miklukho-Maklai to Russian Foreign Minister N. K. Girs in January 1885,

I sent this morning a telegram to Berlin . . . I believe this step [protesting to Berlin] is *imperative* for the continued security of the Maklai coast natives, and I am convinced that the Russian, English and other European governments will approve [his petition to Berlin] when they learn that it was done in order to protect the natives against the spread of *kidnapping (liudokradstvo)*, *slavery* and the most unconscionable exploitation by German (and other) ‘traders’ in the Pacific Ocean. What I desire for the Maklai coast is *independence under a common European (international) protectorate*.⁷⁴

Miklukho-Maklai’s complicated affiliation with the RGO did not benefit from his quasi-extortion attempts of the organization, as seen in a July 1882 letter to Semenov Tian-Shanskii. Having spent the past eleven years on Pacific islands, mainly on New Guinea, Miklukho-Maklai reported that he was now ready to begin the lengthy editing and formatting of his field notes, with the eventual aim of a large publication. He informed the RGO chairman that he had chosen to settle in Sydney for two years, the projected time for the processing of his raw material. A list of reasons for his choice included the assertion that his lengthy stay in the tropics “*forces*” (emphasis his) him to avoid cold climates, such as St. Petersburg. At the end, almost in passing, Miklukho-Maklai stated that he was prepared to publish his final report in Russian, but with the understanding that the RGO would provide him with sufficient funds to repay his debts. Finally, he preemptively thanked the council for not declining his request and declared that “as a Russian, I rejoice that I, likely, will not have to seek the help of a foreign scholar or publisher.”⁷⁵ The RGO had no choice but to acquiesce to such assertive requests for funding, as publication of one its most prominent

⁷⁴Ibid., 297-98. All emphases in the original.

⁷⁵Putilov, *Chelovek s luny*, 282.

member's pioneering research in a language other than Russian would have been an enormous embarrassment to the organization.

The activities of Przheval'skii, Potanin, and Miklukho-Maklai in the 1880s earned them a standing among both Russian and western scholarly communities.⁷⁶ Yet the three men received conspicuously different degrees of RGO support during that decade, with Przheval'skii securely established as the organization's favorite son, while Potanin's radical political background might have played a role in his inability to emerge from Przheval'skii's shadow. Miklukho-Maklai's pursuit of scientific work in Oceania, far outside the RGO's focus, and his propensity for assuming debt with little ability to repay, blighted the society's relationship with the "Moon Man," as he came to be known, but these traits did not taint his legacy as much as his contemporary detractors assumed. Each man also espoused contrasting attitudes toward the natives of the regions in which he traveled, as this section has demonstrated, thereby evincing the complex and multifaceted nature of Russian interaction with non-Russians. Despite the distinct relationships that each of these men had with the RGO, they enjoyed the society's singular backing during the 1880s. For an organization with 800 members and dozens of active missions to various corners of the empire and beyond, this attention is a testament to the importance the Russian Geographical Society attached to these explorers' work. While all three men were associated with a single organization, the RGO, they demonstrated a remarkable variety of approaches to their work and often contrasting *modi operandi* of exploration. Venturing into the "Great Known," so to speak, the expeditions of Przheval'skii and Potanin, in particular, were not driven by aims of surveying

⁷⁶In Przheval'skii's case, this is partially supported by the fact that the Italian Geographical Society awarded the Russian explorer its "large" gold medal in February 1885.

uncharted, blank corners of the map or contacting previously untouched nations. Nor were they energized by the quixotic fascinations of the intelligentsia.

CONCLUSION

Scholars have leveled the charge of “imperialism” against Russian activities in Inner Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁷⁷ However, there is little evidence that RGO expeditions of the 1880s denoted geopolitical or economic dimensions of classic imperialism. Instead, they constitute attempts to control the means of representation rather than the means of production,⁷⁸ as evidenced, for instance, in Przheval’skii’s discourse of European cultural superiority, and therefore correspond to Edward Said’s, rather than, say, Vladimir Lenin’s, meaning of the term.

Far from conducting reconnaissance for impending territorial annexation, as some scholars have posited, the RGO expeditions of the 1880s represented the intelligentsia’s desperate pursuit of an elusive objective: Russia’s further recognition as a great European power. By virtue of its territory, technology, and population, Russia by the late nineteenth century already constituted a major international power, and its defeat in the Crimean War at mid-century was not as debilitating or humbling as some have averred. What Russia had not yet accomplished, however—and debate endures whether it has, will, or any longer desires to—is acknowledgement as an equal by the Western European order. Despite competition

⁷⁷This premise drives Scott C. Matsushita Bailey’s recent dissertation.

⁷⁸See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin, eds. *Post-Colonial Studies: the Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 36-7.

with Britain for influence in Asia (“The Great Game”), fin de siècle Russian intellectuals were intent on demonstrating Russia’s empirical, sophisticated, and scientific approach to non-European peoples, as opposed to heavy-handed policies meant to amplify their state’s influence.⁷⁹ Attempting to morph in the collective European perception from a clumsy bear into an eagle, a powerful yet refined player on the world stage, Russia did not intend the expeditions of the 1880s as a show of military might or technological prowess. On the contrary, these scientific endeavors served to demonstrate Russia’s ability to emulate and even advance that most European creation: scholarly studies of distant lands. Scientific exploration, documentation, and categorization were viewed as the *sine qua non* of being a European empire in the late nineteenth century.

The three most prominent RGO explorers of the 1880s demonstrated often contrasting brands of imperialism. Miklukho-Maklai turned to Britain for protection of the Papuans, viewing imperialism as a way of managing, more than dominating or ruling, the world. An objective scientist with conspicuously apolitical expedition reports, Potanin served as the face of Russia’s scholarly rise in the latter nineteenth century. Przheval’skii, as aggressive as he was condescending toward the locals, demonstrated fewer inclinations for Russian military incursion into Tibet and China by the 1880s than in the early 1870s, and to a large degree resembled such western counterparts as Livingstone and Stanley. Through their activities, the RGO not only helped Russians understand the array of functions and meanings of “imperialism,” but also evinced the complex and multifaceted nature of Russian interaction with non-Russians.

⁷⁹The Great Game refers to the Anglo-Russian geopolitical competition in Asia in the nineteenth century. See Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (London: John Murray, 1990) and Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows: The Race for Empire and the Great Game in Central Asia* (New York: Counterpoint, 1999).

The work of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society carried importance beyond that provided by its facilitation of cartography or production of ethnographic studies. And while we in the twenty-first century have come to a more empathetic understanding of pre-twentieth-century interactions between Europeans and non-Europeans, few individuals in the late nineteenth century could have summarized the overarching role of the RGO more eloquently than one of Russia's most celebrated novelists, Lev Tolstoy. On September 25, 1886, Tolstoy wrote to Miklukho-Maklai,

I do not know of what importance to science—that [science] which you serve—will be your surveys and discoveries, but your experience of interaction with the savages will become an epoch in that science, which I serve—the science of how people ought to live side by side. Write this story, and you will perform a large and favorable service to humanity.⁸⁰

⁸⁰Putilov, *Chelovek s lunny*, 4-5.

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