

Svetlana Gorshenina, *L'Invention de l'Asie centrale: Histoire du concept de la Tartarie à l'Eurasie* (Genève: Droz, 2014), 704 pp.

This beautifully produced (and therefore quite expensive) book is the second monograph which the franco-uzbekistani researcher Svetlana Gorshenina has published from her ponderous doctoral dissertation. Her first book explored the constructions of frontiers in colonial, Soviet, and post-Soviet Central Asia by questioning the notion of the “frontier” in general, and of the “natural frontier” in particular. In the present book, Gorshenina decorticates the concept of “Central Asia” as it emerged through the stratification of words, knowledge, and ideologies in the Western (especially Franco- and Germanophone cultural traditions) and Russian worlds.

She bravely tries to disentangle what she repeatedly calls the “terminological fog” which has surrounded this concept, and related ones, on the basis of an impressive array of maps, travel accounts, treatises, political pamphlets, *belles lettres*, and modern fiction and media. Some of these sources are accessed directly, while Gorshenina resorts to secondary studies, in particular when she ventures out of her comfort zone into Classical and Oriental Antiquity, the Islamic world, or China. Gorshenina’s endeavor is at its best in the final two sections, where she stands on more solid ground and where she manages to identify broad trends or genealogies of concepts out of the sizeable amount of evidence she chose to handle in quite a persuasive way. For earlier periods, however, her prose resembles a catalogue where these genealogies are buried under excessive detail, and—which adds to the reader’s fatigue—long descriptions of maps that are sometimes positioned a few pages away in the text. The authors of the works from which Gorshenina quotes (sometimes second-hand, especially in the first part of the book) are not always sufficiently inscribed in their context: we know little more than the name of some of their authors, and even less about their audience and agenda.

Nonetheless, Gorshenina should be praised for her attention to the reception and heritage of the terms and ideas those cultural artifacts (books, maps, etc.) put forward, which represent indeed the core topic of the book. It is indeed interesting to learn that the expression *Central Asia* does not come from von Humboldt, or that the term *Transoxiana* is more of an antiquarian re-invention by the French geographer d’Herbelot, than a genuine hand-over from Classic Antiquity. Gorshenina’s reconstruction of the fortunes and misfortunes of the word *Tartaria* and of its relation to the *Tatars* is equally captivating, as—later on—is the comparison between different ideas of *Eurasia* in Russian émigré culture, in the USSR, and beyond, up to present academic usage. It is nonetheless hard to tease out these and other broad development lines. Overall, Gorshenina’s writing is meticulous but lacks agility: it is often only in the introductory paragraphs of the individual chapters and in the conclusions of each of the five sections that make up the book that the “terminological fog” clears and one really sees where the historian—if not the authors she analyses—wants to bring the reader.

In addition, there are many small mistakes in this book that could have been easily avoided if the peer-review process and copy-editing had been more rigorous. First, the attention devoted to the transliteration rules in the introduction and elsewhere looks like spurious precision, while elementary mistakes surface here and there (e.g. *dār al-hard* for *dār al-harb* (183); *al-Mashrik* for *al-Mashriq* (67)). Second, there are imprecisions in the way details of Judeo-Christian culture are presented: for instance, the pelican, rather than the stork, is a symbol of Christ (82); *Paraleipoménōn* is the way

the *Sectanta* Bible calls what are now the two Books of Chronicles (85); *Tartarus* is not eminently “the Christian hell” (109), but was commonplace in Greek and Roman mythology. Overall, one feels that the author is much more at ease (and so is the reader) from Section III onwards.

More generally, there are two shortcomings in the overall design of the book. The first is its limitation to “Western” and Russian culture, where the first is largely limited to works produced in France and Germany, and the second is largely post-Petrine and limited to “high” literature, the academy, and the official mind. This means, for instance, that when Gorshenina talks about the position of Central Asia’s unknown lands in the Middle Ages, she essentially refers to the Roman Christian tradition, rather than to cultural expressions of eastern Christian traditions. Her coverage of non-European (Arabo-Persian, Chinese, etc.) representations of Central Asia is even scantier and largely scattered, to the point that one has the feeling that Gorshenina included them because she “had to.” This delimitation is very legitimate—in its absence, the book would have grown even beyond its already intimidating size—but it is not clearly justified.

The second shortcoming concerns the way Gorshenina justifies her own research on this theme and the book that has resulted from it. In the introduction in particular (29–30), she has quite harsh words for those scholars who “only reserve a few introductory lines to the term ‘Central Asia,’ often on the basis of received ideas, or by blindly relying on an authority,” after which they “feel free to move to their own topic, while they refer their readers—in the best of cases—towards more specific publications” on what “Central Asia” is. In the conclusion this statement is somewhat moderated (if not contradicted), where Gorshenina admits that, all in all, “Central Asia” as a concept and the terms that are used to designate it are nothing more than what, conventionally, one makes of them. This is consistent with the analysis she conducts in the five sections of the book, where we see indeed that terms and ideas are in constant flow, and that they make sense only within a given—but transient—cultural horizon. Nonetheless, it is perhaps unfair to blame the bulk of current scholarship in all disciplines for not indulging more in what can easily degenerate into constant, repetitive, navel-gazing. If historians, anthropologists, linguists, and other specialists limit themselves to “a few introductory lines” for their definitions of “Central Asia” as a region, it is because they are legitimately focusing on their research question. One might even contend that the very idea that one could produce, in the present state of empirical knowledge, overarching interpretations in any discipline on “Central Asia” as such (however defined), remains highly problematic. Gorshenina’s book provides a painstakingly meticulous de- and re-construction of the history of the concept of “Central Asia”: but is the field of Central Asian studies really (still? already?) in need of works on “Central Asia” as a whole?

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