

# Imperial Russia and Its Orient: The Renown of Nikolai Przhevalsky

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The Russian Empire raised grandiose monuments to its heroes. One of these, standing over fifteen feet tall in the very center of St. Petersburg, is dedicated to the memory of Nikolai Przhevalsky, the explorer of Inner Asia. At his death in 1888, his admirers and colleagues in the Imperial Russian Geographical Society launched a public subscription for the construction of what they originally intended to be a life-sized bust in front of the building housing the society. Within two years they had collected thirty thousand rubles from thousands of contributors throughout the country, a response to rival that of the subscription for the Pushkin monument a decade earlier. As support grew, so did the sculpture, ultimately placed in the Alexandrovsky Park (see Figure 1). Like other great works of public art of that age, the monument tells a story as much about those who backed the commemorative project as about the explorer himself.<sup>1</sup> Imperialism enjoyed widespread popular support in post-reform Russia. Who it appealed to and how Przhevalsky's exploits managed to arouse such an enthusiastic response from the Russian public is the subject of this essay.

Western expansion into vast territories of Africa and Asia in the nineteenth century constitutes an important chapter in the history of European imperialism. Its study has evolved substantially, however, from the period when historians examined this subject primarily in terms of military conquest and colonial domination. The peoples of both colonies and metropolises have new roles to play in our expanded history of empire-building in the modern era. Cultural history offers a fruitful new approach to the encounters, real and imagined, between imperialists and subject peoples. This cultural approach has increased our appreciation of the power of popular images of colonialism to legitimate imperial rule in a manner peculiar to each Western country, and to perpetuate the demeaning stereotypes of colonial peoples.

In exploring the production of these images, historians have examined an array

<sup>1</sup> The story of the monument can be found in the brochure *N. M. Przheval'skii. O nem* (St. Petersburg, 1890); and in A. V. Zelenin, *Puteshestviia N. M. Przheval'skogo*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1899, 1900), 2:346–47.



**FIG. 1. Monument dedicated "To Przhnevsky, First Explorer of Inner Asia." Formally opened on 5 October 1892, the fourth anniversary of the explorer's death, in Alexandrovsky Gardens, St. Petersburg. Artist A. A. Bilderling.**

of new sources that include artifacts at world's fairs, travel tales and adventure stories, and the findings of geographical expeditions. Their studies have given us a much deeper and subtler understanding of the diversity of publics drawn to imperialism and the importance of their role in fixing the pattern of interethnic relations between metropole and colonies. To study their perception of empire introduces into the story of colonialism the self-images and political aspirations of Europeans.<sup>2</sup> The story behind Przhevalsky's monument contains important clues to the popular appeal in that country of Russian imperialism on its Oriental borderlands.<sup>3</sup>

Its presence in the center of St. Petersburg reveals the influential role played in the middle and late nineteenth century by the Geographical Society in supporting and promoting exploration of the eastern reaches of the empire. When Przhevalsky began his career as an explorer, he turned to the society for backing. Upon his death, its leaders were instrumental in commemorating his deeds in honorary meetings and in organizing the public subscription to finance his monument. But his exploits would never have turned him into a national hero had they not appealed to a much larger public than the circle of specialists who gathered in the society.

Przhevalsky first won great popular acclaim in the mid-1870s after a three-year expedition through Inner Asia. His story of the expedition, published a year later, became by the standards of his time a best-seller. His biography is well known, but certain personal details from his earlier life are helpful in explaining his ability to achieve such extraordinary public renown.<sup>4</sup> He was educated first in a gymnasium and, after several years of service as an officer in the Russian infantry, entered the St. Petersburg General Staff Academy. During this period he seems to have read widely, familiarizing himself with the literary idiom of Russia's "Golden Age." The most revealing clues to this artistic side to his personality come from his first published work, an autobiographical story entitled "Memories of a Hunter." It appeared in print in 1862 when he was twenty-three years old, shortly after he had left his regiment to begin studies at the General Staff Academy.

Its setting recalls Ivan Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches*, but its most vivid autobiographical section turns on nostalgic memories of an idyllic childhood spent on his parent's country estate. The author-narrator begins to explore the "depths of my

<sup>2</sup> Recent works relevant to my study include Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Man: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, NY, 1989); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York, 1992); and William Schneider, *An Empire for the Masses: The French Popular Image of Africa 1870-1900* (Westport, CT, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Literature on Russian popular attitudes toward imperialism is virtually nonexistent. The subject is missing from Dietrich Geyer, *Russian Imperialism: The Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policy, 1860-1914* (New Haven, 1987). Two studies that do touch on the topic are Louise McReynolds, *The News under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press* (Princeton, 1991), which examines briefly the response of the Russian commercial press to imperialist expansion; and Seymour Becker, "The Muslim East in Nineteenth-Century Russian Popular Historiography," *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 5, no. 3/4 (1986): 25-48, which looks at the historical reconstruction of Russia's encounter with Oriental peoples, as told by nineteenth-century Russian historians.

<sup>4</sup> The standard biography remains the work of one of his army colleagues, N. M. Dubrovin, *N. M. Przhval'skii. Biograficheskii ocherk* (St. Petersburg, 1890). See also Zelenin's two-volume *Puteshestviia N. M. Przheval'skogo*. A brief biography in English is Donald Rayfield, *The Dream of Lhasa: The Life of Nikolai Przhevalsky (1839-1888), Explorer of Central Asia* (Columbus, OH, 1976).

soul” through reminiscences of his childhood, the precious moments of which “will live eternally in my memory.” His hunting interlude frees him for a moment from his army life, and he contrasts the purity and idealism of his youth with his current life spent with fellow officers completely lacking in “selfless and noble actions” and “high ideals.”<sup>5</sup> The author’s inspiration is clearly Tolstoy’s *Childhood*, which after its appearance in 1852 spawned abundant literary imitations in a style described by one scholar as the “myth of Russian gentry childhood.”<sup>6</sup> Przhevalsky occasionally referred in subsequent writings to his youthful ideals in explaining his commitment to a life of exploration. To a Russian audience attuned to sentimental reminiscences, this personal theme sounded a familiar note and placed his explorer’s quest within a popular literature of romantic self-fulfillment.

His career of explorer became a reality only by dint of prolonged personal effort. A scholarly treatise on the geography of the Amur basin, written as part of his studies at the military academy, helped to earn him a post in 1864 as geography instructor at the new Warsaw Junker school. There he continued his writing by preparing a textbook in geography, which proclaimed that the science of geography sought nothing less than “an understanding of nature and people.”<sup>7</sup> But exploration was his goal, and after repeated requests he finally received an appointment to the new Eastern Siberian military region. He reached Irkutsk in 1867 and spent the next two years struggling to explore the Ussuri river basin while on army assignment. He had the nominal backing of the geographical society, but had no financial support and had the time-consuming official duty of taking a census of the Cossack populations of the Ussuri region.

Still, he accomplished a prodigious amount of scientific observation and measurement of the topography, geology, botany and zoology of the area. Przhevalsky rightly claimed on his return to St. Petersburg in 1870 that he had proven himself a competent, productive geographer. Beyond that, in the eyes of the educated public he had acquired some of the qualities of a representative of the new generation of Russians dedicated to progress through science and the spread of knowledge. Their message echoed the views widely shared by educated Europeans that, in the words of a recent study, “science offered the only viable way of thinking correctly about human affairs.”<sup>8</sup>

This positivist message resounded during Alexander II’s reign in speeches by educational and scientific leaders. The tsar’s first minister of education argued that “the greatest need” of the country was for “science,” since “our enemies possess a superiority over us solely by virtue of knowledge.”<sup>9</sup> His patriotic exaltation of the

<sup>5</sup> “Vospominaniia okhotnika,” *Zhurnal konnozavodstva i okhoty* (August 1862): 116–17. The story of the hunt leading up to this modest epiphany extends through the June and July issues of the journal.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Wachtel, *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth* (Stanford, 1990), esp. chap. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Zapiski vseobshchei geografii po programme iunkerskikh uchilishch* (Warsaw, 1870), preface (no page).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Dale, *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture: Science, Art, and Society in the Victorian Age* (Madison, 1989), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in K. Timeriazev, “Probuzhdenie estestvoznaniia,” in *Istoriia Rossii v XIX veke* (St. Petersburg, 1909), 9:2.

pursuit of learning found a sympathetic audience among educated Russians. Joseph Bradley has recently spelled out in some detail the plethora of cultural activities devoted in those years to the diffusion of scientific knowledge through the creation of museums, special exhibitions and public meetings.<sup>10</sup> New frontiers to scientific understanding of the world opened up when the debate over Darwinian biology focused attention among Russian scientists on evolution and the origin of species. Public interest appears to have been high, judging from the success of the new Society of Amateurs for Natural Science, Anthropology, and Ethnography, a bastion of Darwinianism in the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>11</sup> Positivism, understood in this broad cultural sense, fit well the needs and hopes of supporters of reform, whatever their calling. It was an article of faith among the new leaders of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society. The popularity of scientific knowledge in those years assured Przhevalsky a receptive audience to his exploits as explorer.

He proved in his Ussuri work and in his subsequent speeches and articles that he spoke the language of positivism. In later years, his renown as explorer rested partly on the responsiveness of audiences to his romantic tales of adventure, partly on the prominence accorded his contributions to scientific knowledge of Russia's Asian borderlands, and partly on the aura of triumphant nationalism that he intentionally cultivated on his expeditions and in his speeches and writing. In all these respects, his reputation embodied key elements of what we might loosely term a Russian imperialist ideology.

When he returned to St. Petersburg in 1870 his immediate and most important audience consisted of the small scientific-military circle of the geographers and their patrons in the War Ministry. He had been invited to speak of his discoveries at the Irkutsk branch of the Geographical Society, and then addressed the St. Petersburg society itself. He submitted two lengthy articles on his discoveries to the society's journal. These very scholarly treatises appeared shortly afterward in book form, published at his own expense.<sup>12</sup> His determination to bring knowledge of his exploits to the public at large followed the example of other Russian explorers who had traveled in those years through Asian lands. They too had reported their scientific findings to the Geographical Society and had prepared popular accounts of their travels. Przhevalsky, like them, attracted only passing attention from the public. Popular renown as an explorer-hero demanded considerably more of him.

That fame came as a consequence of his next expedition. Having proven his skills in his Ussuri travels, he found himself, as he later recalled, "close to people keenly interested in [geographical] affairs and directly involved in them."<sup>13</sup> The new project that he proposed in early 1870 to the Geographical Society was clearly calculated to win the patronage of scholars and tsarist officials alike. The territory he

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Bradley, "Voluntary Associations, Civic Culture, and *Obshchestvennost'* in Moscow," in *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. E. Clowes, S. Kassov, and J. West (Princeton, 1991), 144–46.

<sup>11</sup> See Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought* (Berkeley, 1988), 33–34.

<sup>12</sup> N. M. Przheval'skii, *Puteshestvie v Ussuriiskom krae, 1867–1869 gg.* (St. Petersburg, 1870).

<sup>13</sup> "Avtobiografiia Przheval'skogo," *Russkaia starina* (November 1888): 538. This "autobiography" consists in fact of notes taken by an admirer, M. I. Semevskii, during a conversation with the explorer in 1881.

wished to explore was that part of Inner Asia on the southeastern borders of the Russian Empire, among Turkic and Mongol peoples nominally subjects of the Chinese Empire. Many of the Muslim peoples in the areas where he would be traveling were at that time participants in the Tungun uprising. The disarray of the Chinese Empire extended to territory close to the new Russian lands in Turkestan, but little news had reached Russia since the disorders had begun in the mid-1860s.

In his letter requesting the backing of the society, Przhevalsky described these lands in dispassionate geographer's terms as "a region almost unknown to Europeans and presenting great interest for geography and natural science."<sup>14</sup> He must have known, however, that the Ministry of War was extremely attentive to the weakening of Chinese rule in those borderlands. From the War Ministry's perspective, the expedition touched on interests of state. The Geographical Society was aware of the political ramifications of his expedition. In its memo approving his project, it stressed the importance of "our task . . . to throw some light on the current events in the center of China."<sup>15</sup> The geographers were placing their tools in the service of empire as well as in the cause of international science. Przhevalsky was useful to both projects. On a personal level, he had chosen (incidentally or intentionally) to launch a dangerous expedition, the tale of which would be certain to appeal to the public's taste for adventure in exotic lands.

His goal was the Tibetan plateau and Lhasa, which he planned to reach by traveling through Mongolia and Sinkiang from his point of departure in Kiakhta. He was wildly optimistic in his plans. He had no tedious or extraneous military activities to distract him, as had been the case during his Ussuri travels, but he confronted daunting obstacles. Faced with difficult mountainous terrain and an extremely harsh climate, he ought to have been in charge of a major expedition. But he apparently was still "on trial" in the Geographical Society, on which he depended for financing. Its cautious backing left him with funds (half his own) sufficient only for the bare minimum of equipment and two companions. Departing in late 1870, he traveled in the next three years over eleven thousand miles through areas where few European explorers had ever set foot (though he never reached Lhasa). His return to Russia began his consecration as national hero.

His expedition won him the acclaim of both the scientific world and the Russian public. He arrived in St. Petersburg in early 1874. In his half-year stay there, lecture halls and newspaper articles echoed with references to his adventurous travels and heroism. His arrival was greeted in the liberal newspaper *Golos* with a front-page, four-column article devoted to "one of the most daring expeditions of our time." In its telling of the story, this Russian explorer had demonstrated extraordinary courage and determination in accomplishing a "private, scientific expedition" through mysterious, dangerous lands without the customary "official, military" protection.<sup>16</sup> Inner Asia was from its perspective a territory open to daring explorers; this liberal press (and presumably the public) preferred a heroic Przhevalsky serving the cause of positivism.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Dubrovin, *N. M. Przheval'skii*, 90–91.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>16</sup> *Golos*, 9 January 1874.

The tendentious manner in which *Golos* interpreted Przhevalsky's achievement began the process by which his words and deeds became incorporated in larger political and ideological causes. To judge by the welcome given his speeches, his words struck responsive chords among audiences with differing views of empire and Russia's mission in the Orient. He first presented his findings to the Geographical Society, where the talk attracted an overflow audience and became a feature topic for all the major newspapers. The journalist who recorded his speech for the conservative *Novoe vremia* told the paper's readers of the explorer's courage in confronting a hostile environment and threatening natives, and recorded the "thunderous applause" from the audience on hearing of his heroic deeds.<sup>17</sup> The explorer whose presence was welcomed in this patriotic paper was an empire-builder.

His public presentations of his expedition sounded the dual themes of imperial might and scientific progress. He spoke of himself both as the instrument of Russian empire and the "agent of civilization." The most detailed account of his talks that spring comes from the journalist writing for the official Turkestan provincial newspaper, the creation a few years earlier of Governor-General von Kaufman. Its editors shared a keen interest in winning for the eastern borderlands a prominent place on the mental maps of educated Russians. Przhevalsky served them well. He moved the area of Great-Power rivalry to Inner Asia, warning particularly of the conflict with the British "in China and the depths of Asia." The Great Game was in his opinion a struggle in which, if given a chance, the English "will destroy [*otob"iut*] our influence in all lands and countries inhabited by the Chinese and Mongols." By implication, he was speaking as the explorer of vast territories that had to be taken under Russian protection.

His identification of Western civilization with Russian imperialism was as important to the telling of his exploit as was his defiance of the British Empire. Echoing a theme that Western defenders of imperialism had made a common motif in their writing, he proclaimed "Christianity, trade, and education" to be the means "by which we can influence our Asian neighbors." Russia was in his account the bearer of civilization to its Oriental neighbors, for whom "historical circumstances" left no choice but "to enter the realm of civilized peoples." He asked his listeners in a concluding rhetorical flourish to decide what Western people should take in hand this task.<sup>18</sup> His message made a forceful appeal that Russian imperialism in the East include both military dominance and scientific study of new lands; General von Kaufman had incorporated this dual approach into his occupation policies in Russian Turkestan. The explorer's talk presented to Russian audiences two substantially different, though related projects for Russian expansion into the Orient.

Russians were well prepared for stories of Asian peoples and places on their country's eastern borderlands. The reform years were a time when interest in exotic lands flourished. Our best indicators of the scope and character of that public are the emergence of organizations, publications and activities focused on those distant peoples and places. Exhibits of artifacts gathered by geographers, ethnographers and

<sup>17</sup> *Novoe vremia*, 8 February 1874.

<sup>18</sup> *Turkestanskie gubernskie vedomosti*, 18 June 1874.

other specialists of the Russian Orient appeared at world's fairs in the 1860s and 1870s. Later, at the first Russian national exposition in 1882, the organizers placed the empire's borderlands (including Turkestan and Siberia) on prominent display by the simple device of creating separate classifications (and special exhibits) for each area.

Russians could satisfy their curiosity at home if they chose to subscribe to new popular journals that catered to armchair travelers. One publication, proudly proclaiming itself *The Global Traveler* (*Vsemirnyi puteshestvennik*), made a special point to follow the adventures of Western explorers such as Livingstone and Stanley in their travels through Africa; another, *The Illustrated World* (*Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia*, closely modeled on *The Illustrated London News*), included a special section every week on ethnography. The reading public for popular magazines such as these was growing rapidly in size and was prepared to welcome its own heroic explorers with as much enthusiasm as the English had acclaimed David Livingstone.

The recent translation of the works of this famous British explorer and missionary had introduced Russians to a tale of adventure in non-Western lands presented in the condescending moral terms of Orientalist literature. Livingstone's most successful book, *A Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambezi*, was published in the late 1860s in Russian translation just one year after its English edition appeared. The British explorer's "simple account of a mission" was a plain yet absorbing story of a "sojourner in the wilderness," as he described himself. He appealed directly to the altruistic sentiments of readers, whom he called on to share their "social and religious blessings and innate love of liberty" with "our fellow-men in Africa," whose "position and character" he proposed to improve. In his tale, he was Christian missionary, Victorian antislavery reformer, and African explorer.<sup>19</sup> It is a fair assumption that Przhevalsky was an avid reader of Livingstone's *Narrative*; his formulaic call in 1874 for spreading "Christianity, trade and education" in Inner Asia could have been copied straight from the Scotsman's book.

Some of Przhevalsky's Russian admirers promoted him immediately into this glorious company of great Western explorers. Speakers at the 1874 celebratory meetings in St. Petersburg began the process. Livingstone, who had just died, received glowing testimonials, followed by flattering comparisons with Przhevalsky's achievements. Both, in the opinion of the secretary of the Imperial Geographical Society, enjoyed the "equal awe and sympathy of the entire educated world" by their capacity to put the "human mind and will" in the service of "science."<sup>20</sup> Educated Russians who hoped that positivism marked the path of their country's progress had found a prominent exemplar.

Przhevalsky's imperial stature was enhanced by the current popularity in those years of Russia's Oriental borderlands. New lands to the east and southeast of the Russian metropole had in previous decades become part of the empire, but only certain places and events caught public attention. Russian annexation of the Ussuri

<sup>19</sup> David Livingstone, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambezi and Its Tributaries* . . . (New York, 1866), 1–2. The two-volume Russian edition was entitled simply *Puteshestvie po Zambezi* (St. Petersburg, 1867).

<sup>20</sup> *Golos*, 8 February 1874.



basin in the 1850s had aroused scarcely more public interest than the occupation of Russian America a half-century before.<sup>21</sup> It found no symbolic place in the Russian frontier epic. But Turkestan did belong; the conquest of Central Asia in the mid-1860s began a flurry of publicity and organized activities that prepared the ground for Przhevalsky's triumphal reception.

This nearby Orient acquired a tangible presence in the shape of ethnographic artifacts and artistic images. The Society for Amateurs of Natural Science, Anthropology, and Ethnography had organized the country's first Ethnographic Exhibition in Moscow in 1867, which promised visitors "models of the diverse peoples of Russia and related countries." The three hundred life-sized models, six hundred photographs, and six hundred skulls (including the first trophies from Turkestan) placed science in the service of ethnicity for Asian as well as European peoples. The society's effort at scientific popularization (Darwinian as well as ethnographic) proved a successful formula, attracting an estimated ninety thousand visitors that year.<sup>22</sup> The Orient was even more prominently displayed at the 1872 Polytechnical Exhibition, organized by the same society. Its new Tashkent branch sent to Moscow over three thousand items that were used to create at the exhibition a microcosm of Turkestan's flora, fauna, ethnography and geology.

Artistic illustrations appeared at both these exhibitions, but the most impressive array of images of the East came two years later at the exhibit of Vasily Vereshchagin's Turkestan paintings. He had accompanied General von Kaufman to Turkestan in 1867 as official artist-ethnographer, painting dramatic scenes of the conquest and recording on canvas images of the peoples and monuments of the new Russian colony. Shortly before his departure for this Russian Orient he had studied for a year in the Paris studio of the most famous French orientalist artist, Jean-Léon Jérôme. He brought back to Russia the flamboyant style and fascination for exotic, sensual subjects that this artistic movement had for several decades popularized in the West.

His 1874 exhibit presented to the public artistic works that included both the dispassionate observations of the ethnographer-artist and the action-filled story of the Russian conquest. Its over two hundred paintings, lithographs and drawings contained many portraits of Central Asian peoples, landscapes of oases and deserts, and studies of the ruins of Tamurlane's fallen empire. The artist gave special prominence to his series of paintings entitled "The Barbarians: A Heroic Poem." They told in vivid, story-like pictures of the life-and-death struggle of Russians and Turks, and of the strange and repellent customs of Russia's age-old Oriental enemies. The exhibit, held both in St. Petersburg and Moscow, was by all accounts a popular triumph.<sup>23</sup> Vereshchagin gave his audience an encapsulated epic tale of Russia's new

<sup>21</sup> Abortive efforts to make conquest of the Far East a popular scientific cause are discussed in Mark Bassin, "The Russian Geographical Society, the 'Amur Epoch,' and the Great Siberian Expedition of 1855-1863," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73 (June 1983): 240-56.

<sup>22</sup> V. V. Bogdanov, ed., *Piatidesiatiletie Imperatorskogo obshchestva liubitelei estestvoznaniia, antropologii, i etnografii, 1863-1913* (St. Petersburg, 1914), 8-11.

<sup>23</sup> See my article, "Images of the Russian Orient: Vasily Vereshchagin and Russian Turkestan," *Working Papers Series of the Center for German and European Studies* (University of California-Berkeley), no. 3.5 (March 1993).

Oriental borderland. Przhevalsky offered the Russian public a story equally as dramatic of his travels through the exotic lands of Chinese Turkestan.

Przhevalsky turned his first encounter with the Orient into a fully developed adventure story in his book on the expedition. All great explorers had produced dramatic stories of their journeys, and Przhevalsky set out to perform the same rite. He presumably had learned from his mistakes in his unimpressive Ussuri book. His newly acquired fame of 1874 proved its usefulness in creating the literary opportunities that had been lacking five years previously. This time, the geographical society agreed to publish in two volumes the record of his expedition. The first volume was his own story, while his scientific findings were relegated to a second volume written in collaboration with academic specialists. He must have written at a furious pace, for in late 1875 the public could purchase a new four-hundred-page book entitled *Mongolia and the Country of the Tanguts: A Three-Year Journey in the Highlands of East Asia*, written by "N. M. Przheval'skii, Lieutenant-Colonel of the General Staff, Member of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society."

His readers found that the expedition was essentially a personal adventure. Przhevalsky asserts his presence throughout the fourteen chapters principally as the story-teller of his own exploit, but he also emphasizes his role as the agent of higher forces driving him on and protecting him from the omnipresent dangers. The step-by-step description of his remarkable journey through exotic lands peopled by strange tribes is seen through the eyes of the narrator-hero, with other members of the expedition visible only when they are at his side.

The tale begins and ends with the travelers' passage from one world to another. The tone is optimistic as they set out from the old Siberian town of Kiakhta for "the alien lands" of Mongolia and Inner Asia. The opening paragraphs present the reader with images of Asia in the shape of "strings of camels" and "dark, high-cheeked faces of Mongols and the pig-tailed Chinese."<sup>24</sup> These are signs that the explorers are "on the eve of that step that would for long separate us from our homeland and everything that is dear to us." That step would take them to places of "unimaginable adversities and threatening nature," of "a population usually suspicious or hostile toward the European." In language that any fan of contemporary travel literature could understand, he highlights his leap into the unknown, to the "savage lands of Asia" which are "as little known as Central Africa or the interior of the island of New Holland [Australia]."<sup>25</sup> The spirit of Livingstone accompanies him on his foray into darkest Asia.

At the conclusion of the story the narrator stresses the cultural distance traveled, commenting that "we had become completely estranged during our wanderings" from "civilized life." Their arrival near the end of their expedition at the Russian outpost in northern Mongolia represents the passage from the unknown world back into the known, made manifest in "those minutes when we first heard the mother tongue, saw Russian faces, and found European conditions."<sup>26</sup> In Przhevalsky's tale

<sup>24</sup> N. M. Przheval'skii, *Mongoliia i strana Tangutov: Trekhletnee puteshestvie v vostochnoi nagornoj Azii* (St. Petersburg, 1875), 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

the eastern borderlands of the Russian Empire are the gateway opening directly onto a mysterious, awesome Oriental world, a land of extraordinary perils and alien peoples where he, like some legendary hero of Greece, has been tested and has returned triumphant. To an educated Russian public familiar with ancient legends, Przhevalsky's story could easily recall Jason's epic tale of heroic travel and miraculous return. No account of Western explorers in Africa could so closely juxtapose within the covers of a travel story East and West, civilization and barbarism. In these terms, Przhevalsky's readers discovered an explorer's adventure in a class of its own.

The peoples whom he describes along his path are either potential enemies or objects for ethnographic description. Traveling through areas of Muslim insurgency, he observes sporadic clashes and concludes that the Muslim fighters "are just as cowardly as the Chinese."<sup>27</sup> Without ever stating the point explicitly in his book, his manner of minimizing the Chinese (and the Muslim) presence frees Inner Asia for Russian expansion.

His ethnographic descriptions resemble travelogue tales of exotic peoples. Their manner, dress, food and customs occupy a place in his story alongside his descriptions of the perils of the journey, the extraordinary landscape of mountains and deserts, and the flora and fauna of the area. He casts a jaundiced eye on the filthy bodies and clothes of the Mongol nomad, who "in the course of an entire life never washes his body." He does credit the Mongols with being "good, unsophisticated people unspoiled by either the neighboring Chinese or by lama [Buddhist] morality."<sup>28</sup> When he reaches the mountainous country along the northern reaches of Tibet, he is intrigued by the religious practices of the Tangut tribes, "devoted Buddhists and at the same time extremely superstitious."<sup>29</sup> As in his speeches, Przhevalsky's book describes territory and peoples fit for imperial conquest and for scientific description. But it also presents a story of personal adventure in a distant, exotic land. For readers drawn to an imaginary Orient, Przhevalsky's tale presents an enthralling narrative of heroic trials and the quest for the unattainable dream.

The enthusiastic welcome given his book indicated that his message appealed to a large audience, both in Russia and in the West, where it was translated into English, French and German. The most popular magazine among the Russian reading public, *Niva*, greeted the appearance of this volume with a front-page, feature article complete with a full-length portrait of Przhevalsky. It acclaimed him as "one of the most outstanding Russian explorers" and welcomed his "marvelous" work on nature and the peoples of Inner Asia, "depicted extremely carefully and with great mastery."<sup>30</sup> To judge by this magazine's response to Przhevalsky's tale, the Russian public considered the Orient an unknown place suitable for scientific exploration but had no particular taste for imperial conquest (the second volume, which appeared the next year, received no attention at all from the mass-circulation periodicals). The heroic stature of Przhevalsky emerged in *Niva* from his individual qualities of courage and daring and from his devotion to the cause of science.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>30</sup> *Niva*, no. 20 (1876): 346–48.

The years following his return from this expedition marked Przhevalsky's emergence as a national hero. The Geographical Society sponsored without question four separate expeditions which he proposed in the next decade. Its leaders, especially Peter Semenov (Tianshansky), looked upon him as a national treasure. This judgment was confirmed by the prestigious awards accorded him by western geographical societies. In backing his 1877 expedition, the society's executive council lauded his "brilliant natural gifts, fundamental scientific preparation, and rare energy" and foresaw (mistakenly) the "complete success" of the enterprise.<sup>31</sup> After this and the two subsequent expeditions the explorer offered to Russian readers increasingly ornate and abundantly illustrated books recounting his adventuresome trips, each distinct yet all emphasizing the same themes of dedication, heroism and adventure that had appeared in his 1875 volume. In print and in public speeches, Przhevalsky remained a visible and significant public figure bringing tales of the Orient and detailed accounts of the peoples and places of Inner Asia.

During another major expedition to that area in 1879–80, the press (both Russian and Western) created a public sensation by reporting Przhevalsky missing. Rumors circulated that he either had been captured by or had died at the hands of the Chinese. One journal protested that "they searched for Livingstone, but no one is thinking of searching for Przhevalsky."<sup>32</sup> When he reappeared in Russia after a seven-thousand-mile expedition, he was welcomed with speeches, festivities and celebrations all along his return journey to St. Petersburg. One magazine greeted him in the capital with the accolade of "true giant" who had "won for himself an honored place among the great explorers of the world."<sup>33</sup>

The praises heaped upon Przhevalsky after these expeditions foretold the public response to the news of his death in 1888 in Turkestan, where he had traveled to launch yet another foray toward Tibet. The various interpretations of his role in Russia's imperial expansion, coming from distinctly different audiences, emerged in those years with a clarity produced by two decades of military, scientific and cultural encounters with the Orient. Peter Semenov, his principal supporter in the Geographical Society, spoke for Russia's positivist Westernizers when he honored the explorer in 1886 as "a pioneer gathering the scientific material that is necessary for the definitive conquest of these [Asian] lands for culture and civilization."<sup>34</sup> In his own fashion Semenov had turned Przhevalsky into a representative of a country that had become (or ought to be) a bastion of Western civilization.

The implications for Eastern lands of this scientific spirit of conquest were ominous; its meaning for Russia turned Oriental exploration into a demonstrative marker of the triumph in Russia of Western positivism. Semenov's judgment was not idiosyncratic; Przhevalsky himself had sounded a similar note in speeches as early as 1874. But Semenov's 1886 speech reiterated the message at a moment when political reaction made educated Russians such as he doubt Russia's place in the West.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Dubrovin, *N. M. Przheval'skii*, 205–6.

<sup>32</sup> *Istoricheskii vestnik* (May 1880): 215.

<sup>33</sup> "N. M. Przheval'skii: Deiatel' nauk v Rossii," *Ogonek*, 1881, no. 3:256.

<sup>34</sup> "Zhurnal torzhestvennogo sobraniia Imperatorskogo russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva" [IRGO], 29 January 1886, *Izvestiia IRGO* 22 (1886): 184.

The exploits of Przhevalsky were in these terms of considerable importance to Russian liberals. His political usefulness was apparent to intellectuals such as M. I. Semevsky, editor of the liberal historical journal *Russkaia starina*. In his capacity as Petersburg municipal deputy, Semevsky brought before the city дума the Geographical Society's proposal in 1881 to make Przhevalsky an honorary citizen of the capital. He cited the explorer's illustrious "service . . . to various branches of knowledge in the scientific sphere and to various aspects of the political way of life [byt'] of our homeland."<sup>35</sup> Immediately accorded, the honor undoubtedly eased the way a few years later for the construction of Przhevalsky's monument in the city's Alexandrovsky Park. Russian liberals had great need of support in those years. The explorer was a useful, albeit unwitting, ally.

The diverse readings of his place in Russia's imperial expansion were apparent in the speeches and articles that followed his death. The least controversial rhetorical flourishes paid homage to his role of solitary, adventuresome wanderer. The eulogy given at the commemorative meeting in St. Petersburg compared him to a "Titan" who "traveled through the Asian continent" discovering lands closed to Europeans since Marco Polo's time.<sup>36</sup> The judgment of the most popular commercial newspaper of the time, *Novoe vremia*, carried this heroic image to new heights. One of its reporters extolled his "reckless zeal" and courage to proclaim "I wish and I can."<sup>37</sup>

Two days later, the same theme was transformed at the hands of Anton Chekhov, a new writer for the paper, into a proto-Nietzschean panegyric. Chekhov, soon to set out on his own quest across Asia to Sakhalin, extolled Przhevalsky's "exploit" (*podvig*), which set an exalted moral example of "high principles, honor, and . . . faith in Christian civilization." The explorer's exemplary behavior was "worth tens of schools and hundreds of good books." In the young Chekhov's opinion, the explorer's courage and dedication were "needed like the sun in our sick time when European societies are overwhelmed by laziness, boredom, and lack of faith."<sup>38</sup> Years before Nietzsche's vision of the superman captured the imagination of Russian intellectuals, Przhevalsky became for *Novoe vremia* readers the model of the hero whose solitary deed set him apart from ordinary mortals. In Chekhov's imaginative hands, science was a pretext for action, and the Orient became the stage on which the heroic individual transcended Western decadence.

What is notable about the eulogizing is the message of the testimonials, not the effusive praise in itself—mourning of public figures of that era invariably called up the rhetorical talents of a very rhetorically inclined age. At the very time that the Geographical Society was organizing the subscription for the Przhevalsky monument, the process of constructing an abiding cultural image of the explorer was under way. The public for whom his renown echoed most loudly (at least in theory) in the years after his death was the mass reading public. His sponsors were public organi-

<sup>35</sup> "N. M. Przheval'skii. Predlozhenie Glasnogo M. I. Semevskogo sdellanoe v zasedanii Sankt-peterburgskoi Gorodskoi Dumy," *Russkaia starina* (November 1881): 651–54.

<sup>36</sup> "Nekrolog," *Pamiatii N. M. Przheval'skogo* (St. Petersburg, 1889), 4.

<sup>37</sup> A. Eliseev, "Pamiatii N. M. Przheval'skogo," *Novoe vremia*, 24 October 1888.

<sup>38</sup> [A. Chekhov], "Nekrolog," *Novoe vremia*, 26 October 1888. Lengthy excerpts from this are included in Rayfield, *The Dream of Lhasa*, 203–4.

zations in need of inspirational subjects for pamphlets intended to spread literacy and learning with stories of a lofty moral tone. The Ministry of Education had organized a major public reading campaign by editing pamphlets with subjects of appeal to a nationwide audience. Voluntary societies encouraging adult literacy needed dramatic narratives capable of arousing the interest of their mass public. Both found in Przhevalsky's life a story worth telling the masses.

State officials in the Commission on Public Readings turned his heroic deeds into the symbol of Russia's power in the East. In one of only two biographies they offered (Lomonosov's was the other), their text pointed to his Petersburg monument as the symbol of a "tireless" officer-explorer. His entire life was devoted to carrying Russia's progressive influence to the backward East, and his tragic death came fittingly on "a distant borderland, on the borders of Russia and China."<sup>39</sup> He acquired in this pamphlet the stature of Homeric hero in the service of a great empire.

He was a national hero also to progressively inclined Russians active in the literacy movement. But for them, he assumed a distinctly different role as defender of Russia's rightful place in Western civilization. The editorial board of the Kharkov Literacy Committee, one of the most active provincial societies encouraging adult education, judged his life story a suitable subject for diffusion among literacy committees. Its biography painted a picture of the explorer's "carefree" childhood and youthful dreams of travel that led naturally to "outstanding work" dedicated to "the cause of science." In a conclusion that echoed Semenov's earlier praise for Przhevalsky's role in spreading civilization, it judged his quest for knowledge to be successful since, thanks to his exploration, "scholars of the whole world have learned of Inner Asia."<sup>40</sup> To the activists in the literacy committee and to their public, Przhevalsky had become a paragon of scientific dedication, and the Orient the testing grounds for Russian enlightenment. Through its progressive deeds, their country occupied a worthy place among Western empires.

Przhevalsky remained in death as ambiguous an image of Russian imperialism as he had been during his lifetime. He fit well the role of scientist and emissary of positivist inquiry thanks to his work as indefatigable collector in an age when taxonomy appeared the foundation of all biological sciences. His zeal at collecting specimens, combined with his meteorological and topographical observations in the territories he explored, placed the mark of scientific legitimacy on Russia's unwanted presence in Inner Asia. On another level, the Russian public, with a taste for extraordinary deeds, found ample grounds to elevate him to the rank of hero; for this purpose, exotic lands had to remain the place of testing, not conquest. In other words, the Orient had to remain Oriental.

Przhevalsky's uniform remained an inextricable part of his reputation—for geographers prepared to collaborate with the Ministry of War, and for writers such as Chekhov attracted to dangerous, heroic exploits accomplished outside Russia's

<sup>39</sup> *Znamenitiy russkii puteshestvennik. N. M. Przheval'skii* (St. Petersburg, 1894). The pamphlet went through at least four printings. Perhaps this expansionist aspect to Przhevalsky's story appealed particularly to Stalin, who was a latter-day admirer of the explorer and was responsible for a revival of Przhevalsky hero-worship that included in 1952 a very flattering film version of his life.

<sup>40</sup> E. E. Sno, *Zhizn' i puteshestviia N. M. Przheval'skogo* (Khar'kov, 1901).

borders. In the picture gallery of Western empire-builders, his portrait fits somewhere between George Custer and David Livingstone. The marble bust of Przhevalsky, in his general's uniform adorned with military medals, told of an empire held by force of arms that would collapse when Russian arms no longer dominated the borderlands.