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Deserts, Natives, and Sylvan Cities: Russian Turkestan in American Travel Writing, 1890s – 1910s

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Abstract

The Russian conquest of Turkestan (the territories of modern Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, most of Kirghizstan, as well as the southern and southeastern areas of Kazakhstan), completed within three decades from the mid-1860s, brought controversial changes in the region's economy, administration, and native lifestyle. The gradual emergence of railways and the development of agriculture (primarily cotton growing) attracted American entrepreneurs and travelers. This article covers two travel accounts in book form – parts of *Siberia and Central Asia* (1899) by Ohio businessman and philanthropist John Bookwalter (1839–1915) and *Turkestan: "The Heart of Asia"* (1911), written by journalist, travel writer, and diplomat William Curtis (1850–1911). I use the term "imperial view" to argue that the two Americans, despite their different social background and almost a decade passed between their travels, wrote about Russian Turkestan in a similar manner. They hoped to see the transformation of the "empty" nature of Turkestan for economic development, praised new Russian cities compared to native settlements, and created the image of Russia performing a "civilizing" mission in the region while lauding American economic presence there. However, they wrote differently about Central Asia as a geopolitical region due to the different life experiences of the authors and changes in the stance of both Russia and the U.S. in world politics in the 1900s.

Keywords: The United States, travel writing, Russian Turkestan, John Wesley Bookwalter, William Eleroy Curtis, the Central Asian Railway

Introduction

While Russia experienced its first direct contact with the population of Central Asia in the late sixteenth–early seventeenth century during its conquest of Siberia and expansion toward the Pacific, from the early nineteenth century it began increasing its presence and by the late 1850s gradually acquired most of modern Kazakhstan, encountering three independent entities further to the south: the Khiva and the Kokand Khanates and the Bokhara Emirate. Starting from 1864, during the following three decades Russia dissolved the Kokand Khanate, while the other two states, the Bokhara Emirate and the Khiva Khanate, were turned into protectorates. The territories conquered became known as the Turkestan General-Governorship (see figure 5).

The Russians entered a region that differed decisively from European Russia, above all in terms of climate and geography, with semi-desert and desert areas to the south and

southwest, and the mountains to the southeast where the major rivers (the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya) flow from, creating oases and making nearby areas available for cultivation.[1] Most of the sedentary population was concentrated near sources of water or constructed irrigation areas, but others still retained nomadic or semi-sedentary lifestyle. The inhabitants of Turkestan were also ethnically and linguistically diverse, with rich cultural and historical heritage. Most of the population shared Islam as a prevalent religion, different from mostly Orthodox Russians. These differences altogether contributed to the fact that Russians saw Turkestan as a culturally distinct region, and the local population shared little common cultural ground with the new administration.[2]

The ultimate goal of the Russian approach to Turkestan was to gradually integrate it with the rest of the empire economically, administratively, and culturally. But as the Russian administration introduced economic, administrative, and social changes, from the start it debated the degree of integration and weighed the risks of potential instability.[3] The administration of Turkestan was subordinated to the Ministry of War and was called "the military-popular administration." Combining military control of the region with local traditional and Russian self-government structures, the administration focused on developing a market economy and encouraging irrigation, agriculture, cotton growing, and railroad building. It also tried to establish Russian and mixed Russian-native schools parallel to the traditional Muslim education system, and, following Stolypin's reforms, to encourage Russian settlement in the region.

Scholars offer different opinions on the accomplishments and failures of the Russian Empire in Turkestan, and more broadly, Central Asia. Some Russian and English-speaking academics, while not denying the issues of Russian rule or occasional tensions between Russians and natives, focused on state policy and emphasized positive changes in the region brought by Russia, whether demographic, material, social, or cultural.[4] Others offered a

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[1] Yuri Bregel, *An Historical Atlas of Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 2.

[2] Daniel Brower, *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), ix; Richard Pierce, *Russian Central Asia, 1867–1917: A Study in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 203–4.

[3] Tat'yana Kotukova, "Turkestan v diskurse frontirnoy modernizatsii Rossiyskoy imperii v kontse XIX – nachale XX v. [Turkestan in the discourse of frontier modernization of the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries]," *Islam in the Modern World* 11, no. 1 (2015): 45–46, https://doi.org/10.20536/2074-1529-2015-11-1-43-54; Sergey Abashin, Dmitriy Arapov, and Nailya Bekmakhanova, eds., *Tsentral'naya Aziya v sostave Rossiyskoy imperii* [Central Asia as part of the Russian Empire], Historia Rossica (Moscow: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2008), 87; Ulrich Hofmeister, "Civilization and Russification in Tsarist Central Asia, 1860–1917," *Journal of World History* 27, no. 3 (2016): 413–15, https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2016.0115; Paul Georg Geiss, *Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia: Communal Commitment and Political Order in Change* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 156, 181.

[4] Yuliya Lysenko, ed., *Tsentral'noaziatskiy region Rossiyskoy imperii v usloviyakh frontirnoy modernizatsii (vtoraya polovina XIX – nachalo XX v.)* [Central Asian region of the Russian Empire under conditions of frontier modernization

more critical evaluation of imperial rule, arguing that Russian administrators saw Turkestan as colonizers seeking to bring "civilization" to natives who were perceived as inferior. Critics see the imperial efforts in developing agriculture, education, railways, encouraging colonization, and, no less importantly, transforming the nature of the region, perceived as "lifeless" and alien by Russians, with the help of irrigation, changes in water use, forestation, and modern infrastructure as essentially colonial policy.[5] They argue that the regional policy was often inefficient and inconsistent and reversed the role of the local population who was an active force rather than a passive actor and showed both accommodation and resistance to the actions of the Russian administration.[6]

Nevertheless, scholars agree that Russia gradually began to pay more attention to the economic potential of Turkestan, specifically cotton growing for the domestic textile industry. Since the U.S. was the major cotton producer in the world at the time, Russia looked at it as a reference for establishing cotton cultivation in Turkestan, adopting American cotton seeds and actively purchasing agricultural machinery and cotton gins from the U.S. This eventually led to a cotton "boom" in Turkestan which before the First World War was able to cover almost half of Russian cotton demand. Nevertheless, some scholars emphasized that the growth happened primarily because of the development of market relations and the initiatives of local cotton growers and administrators and questioned earlier accepted claims about the significant role of the state in promoting cotton growing.[7] Besides, despite this progress, Russia still depended on American cotton exports which remained the major article of Russian-American trade. In turn, American entrepreneurs showed increasing interest in local agriculture, irrigation, and mining.[8]

(the second half of the nineteenth – early twentieth centuries)] (Barnaul: Izdatel'stvo Altayskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2021), 375; Abashin, Arapov, and Bekmakhanova, *Tsentral'naya Aziya*, 27; Pierce, *Russian Central Asia, 1867–1917*, chap. 20.

[5] General contemporary critical works on the period include: Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Shoshana Keller, *Russia and Central Asia: Coexistence, Conquest, Convergence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020). Other scholars look at the region and imperial policy through the lens of environmental history: Julia Obertreis, *Imperial Desert Dreams: Cotton Growing and Irrigation in Central Asia, 1860–1991*, Cultural and Social History of Eastern Europe 8 (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), chap. 1; Maya K. Peterson, *Pipe Dreams: Water and Empire in Central Asia's Aral Sea Basin*, Studies in Environment and History (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jennifer Keating, *On Arid Ground: Political Ecologies of Empire in Russian Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[6] Keller, *Russia and Central Asia*, 130–31; Albert Kaganovich, "Nekotoryye problemy tsarskoy kolonizatsii Turkestana [Some problems of the tsarist colonization of Turkestan]," *Tsentral'naya Aziya*, no. 5 (1997): 117–20.

[7] Obertreis, *Imperial Desert Dreams*, 100, 113; Beatrice Penati, "The Cotton Boom and the Land Tax in Russian Turkestan (1880s–1915)," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 14, no. 4 (2013): 773–74, https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2013.0060.

[8] Norman Saul, *Concord and Conflict: The United States and Russia, 1867–1914* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas,

The development of railroads and tourist infrastructure in Turkestan, economic interest, and awareness about growing cotton cultivation in the region based on American know-how naturally prompted some American travelers to come specifically to Turkestan. Some of them wrote accounts for the home audience based on their travel impressions.

The Authors and Their Travelogues

This article focuses on two American travel accounts. I chose them specifically since they were written by authors from different social groups and with more than a decade difference between their trips. These facts should suggest different takes on the region. Also, they are among the few American travelogues about imperial Turkestan published in book form. The first represents a part of *Siberia and Central Asia* (1899), written by John Bookwalter (1839–1915), a prominent Ohio businessman and philanthropist born in Rob Roy, Indiana. He was involved in banking, the steel industry, and publishing and managed to accumulate considerable wealth, which made it possible for him to engage in philanthropic work in Ohio. Bookwalter was also interested in agriculture, buying up to 65,000 acres of land in Midwestern states and setting agricultural experiments in an attempt to attract people to farm life.[9] He traveled extensively around the world before his trip to Russia, collecting art. He donated a part of his collections to the Cincinnati Art Museum.[10] He undertook a trip along the emerging Trans-Siberian Railway, the Caucasus, and into Turkestan in the summer and autumn of 1898, publishing articles for local newspapers that eventually would be turned into a book.

The other travelogue, *Turkestan: "The Heart of Asia,"* was published in 1911 by journalist, writer, and diplomat William Curtis (1850–1911). Born in Akron, Ohio, he was a reporter, working as an editor and travel correspondent for major Chicago newspapers for most of his life.[11] In the mid-1880s and the early 1890s, he was simultaneously involved in Latin

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1996), 573–75; Viktoriya Zhuravleva, *Ponimaniye Rossii v SShA: obrazy i mify, 1881–1914* [Understanding Russia in the United States: Images and myths, 1881–1914] (Moscow: Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyy gumanitarnyy universitet, 2012), 927; Aleksandr Savoyskiy, *Rossiya – SShA: 200 let ekonomicheskoy diplomatii (1807–2007)* [Russia – United States: 200 years of economic diplomacy (1807–2007)] (Moscow: RIA-KMV, 2011), 155.

[9] Musetta Gilman, "Bookwalter, Agricultural Commune in Nebraska," *Nebraska History*, no. 54 (1973): 91–105. He wrote a couple of books related to the subject, including *If Not Silver, What?* in 1896, arguing for silver coinage, and *Rural versus Urban* in 1910, where he warned against excessive city building and discussed agriculture in different countries and the principle of "organic" human living.

[10] See John Bookwalter, *Catalogue of Objects Loaned by Mr. John W. Bookwalter, to the Cincinnati Museum Association* (Cincinatti: C. F. Bradley, 1890).

[11] "Curtis, William Elleroy," in *Men and Women of America: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporaries* (New York: L.R. Hamersly, 1910), 437–38.

American affairs.[12] As a travel correspondent, he traveled regularly around the world and published a dozen book-length travelogues. Among them was a travel account titled *The Land of the Nihilist. Russia: Its People, Its Palaces, Its Politics* (1888). Curtis explored Moscow and St. Petersburg with his wife in 1887 and wrote for the *Chicago Daily News* about the Russian army, religion, education, censorship, police, the exile system, and the private life of the imperial family, concluding that compared to Western Europe the overall condition in Russia "is that of oppression, solemnity, and distrust."[13] From spring to autumn of 1910 he visited Turkestan on assignment for the *Chicago Record-Herald* as part of a bigger trip across the Caucasus and the southern areas of European Russia.[14]

Both Americans traveled by train on the Central Asian Railway (see figure 5). Initially designed for military purposes and called the Transcaspian Railway, the construction began in 1880 and went from the city of Krasnovodsk (present-day Türkmenbashy in Turkmenistan) on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. By 1888 the railway reached Samarkand, going through Ashkhabad, the ruins of ancient Merv and the new Russian settlement next to it, Chardjuy (present-day Türkmenabat in Turkmenistan), and Bokhara. Bookwalter crossed the Caspian Sea and traveled all the way to Samarkand. Later the railway was extended to Andijan, with additional lines to the north to Tashkent (the capital of the General-Governorship) and from Merv to Kushka on the Afghan border. In 1899 it was renamed the Central Asian Railway, and that same year its control was transferred from the military to civilian authorities.[15] Curtis traveled across the extended railway from Krasnovodsk to

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[12] Following his public support for the renomination of Chester Arthur at the 1884 Republican convention, Curtis was appointed a member of the Latin American Trade Commission in 1884–1885. This allowed him to visit numerous Latin American countries, and he published his *The Capitals of Spanish America* in 1888, which made him prominent as a specialist in Latin American affairs. He became the executive officer of the first International Conference of American States, the first director of the Bureau of the American Republics, and the manager of the Latin American exhibition at the Chicago World's Fair. As argued by Coates, his activities and writings implied shared Pan-American identity, but at the same time hinted at the U.S. superiority and the possibility to "uplift" Latin America, forming an imperial ideological dimension: Benjamin Coates, "The Pan-American Lobbyist: William Eleroy Curtis and U.S. Empire, 1884–1899," *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 1 (2014): 22–48, https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht067.

[13] William Curtis, *The Land of the Nihilist. Russia: Its People, Its Palaces, Its Politics. a Narrative of Travel in the Czar's Dominions* (Chicago: Belford, Clarke, 1888), 323.

[14] As a result of his travels, he published his travel account on Turkestan and the book titled *Around the Black Sea*, which included his impressions during the rest of the trip.

[15] Irina Bochkareva, "Zheleznodorozhnoye stroitel'stvo v strategii Rossiyskoy imperii po osvoyeniyu Turkestana [Railway construction in the Russian Empire's strategy for Turkestan development]," *Izvestiya of Altai State University*, no. 5 (2019): 35–37, https://doi.org/10.14258/izvasu (2019)5-04. Along with the construction of the railroad from Orenburg to Tashkent in 1901–1906, the significance of the railways in the region gradually changed from military to economic.

the east. Since Turkestan was bound by restrictions on foreign travel, both Americans needed permission from the Ministry of War.

Unlike Curtis, Bookwalter was welcomed in all major cities by Russian officials who tried to secure comfortable travel conditions for him, which had a likely influence on his impressions.[16] Neither author knew Russian or any of the native languages, so both hired interpreters or guides (who are barely mentioned in the text) to collect information. This, in turn, limited their understanding of the region. While Curtis had established himself as a popular travel writer, and his account was published by the prominent George H. Doran Company, Bookwalter's book was published privately and intended primarily for his friends, limiting the potential circulation.

Travel Conditions and the Natural Landscape of Turkestan

Bookwalter was assigned a train compartment all for himself and his guide by the officials who expected him to enter Turkestan. In his travel account, he pointed out that the train was painted completely white and consisted of cars of second, third, and fourth class, the latter two for the increasing number of immigrants and native passengers. While its outside appearance was attractive, the interior offered little comfort overall.[17] Curtis took a new first-class car and found it just as comfortable as Pullman sleepers, applauding the railroad's quality and management. However, he complained about the train's slow speed and criticized the restrictions on foreign travel and Russian suspicion toward English-speaking tourists:

> The conductor, porters, and the policeman who accompanied the train were all very attentive, some of them for political and the others for pecuniary reasons. We were under suspicion from the start. The Russians have a delusion that the British government is possessed of an insatiable curiosity to know what is going on in Turkestan, and no Englishman can cross by the Caspian steamers without being subjected to most annoying espionage.[18]

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[16] Curtis got his permit from the Ministry of War with the help and introduction letters by Roman Rosen (Russian ambassador in the U.S.), Nikolay Charykov (Russian Ambassador in the Ottoman Empire) and William Rockhill (American Ambassador in Russia). At first abandoning the idea of traveling to Turkestan, Bookwalter received his permission "in a wonderfully short space of time" allegedly from the Ministry of the Interior with the help of American Ambassador in Russia Ethan Hitchcock after finishing his journey across the Caucasus. He also met with the Governor-General of the Caucasus Grigory Golitsyn to discuss the subject. Unfortunately, so far, I cannot say decisively why Bookwalter was given such a favorable reception.

[17] John Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia* (New York: J. J. Little, 1899), 386.

[18] William Curtis, *Turkestan: "The Heart of Asia"* (New York: George H. Doran, 1911), 29.

In their thoughts on the region's landscape, both Americans focused on deserts and steppe areas traversed by nomads and irrigated areas and oases with water that supported the settled population. For Bookwalter, the oases of Turkestan often reminded him of those of the Nile area that he had visited before, and he believed that in the past there were more water sources and cultivated areas in the region.[19] Curtis shared this reflection by describing the ancient and medieval history of the region, arguing that huge armies like that of Alexander of Macedon would not have been able to go so far to the north without a constant source of water among the many rivers that existed in the past.[20] The entire region reminded Curtis of the southwestern U.S. states as well as certain areas of Latin America, on account of his previous experience.

Both authors often rejoiced about their arrival in an oasis area after a long and exhausting journey through the desert, even though it was done by modern means of transport. Upon seeing an oasis for the first time, Curtis compared it for his readers to the way Americans would feel when they crossed from the "dusty desert" of Southern California into an irrigated "paradise of orange groves."[21] On the way from ancient Merv to Chardjuy, Bookwalter emphasized the desert's emptiness by claiming, "scarcely a vestige of vegetation exists through this long and dreary waste; the flight of a solitary bird or the sight of a lone shrub in the distance only emphasized the horrible desolation."[22] He created a noticeable contrast upon arrival in Chardjuy thanks to the city's location near the Amu Darya:

> The magician's art can scarcely produce an effect more startling than that which followed our sudden transition from the desert, with its torrid heat and blinding sands, to the cool shady groves, the lovely gardens and smiling landscapes in the charming valley of the Amu-Daria. So abrupt was the change that it seemed the work of enchantment.[23]

Both travelers expressed their belief in the potential of the region due to the high fertility of the soil, even in the desert, and claimed that Turkestan would benefit greatly as soon as water was made more accessible and irrigation was expanded. They discussed the possible

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[19] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 398.

[20] Curtis, *Turkestan*, 53. To strengthen his argument, he cited the results of the Carnegie Institution expedition in Turkestan in 1903–1904 led by geologist Raphael Pumpelly, whose aim was to study the region's archaeology and find traces of ancient civilizations in Turkestan and the reasons behind their decline.

[21] Curtis, 31; For connections between travel writing and the desert, see: Roslynn Haynes, "Travel Writing and the Desert," in *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing*, ed. Nandini Das and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 315–29.

[22] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 452–53.

[23] Bookwalter, 454.

redirection of the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya and the construction of a canal between the Aral and the Caspian Seas. Bookwalter was hopeful of the rapid future agricultural development in the region and was informed that the Russian government had plans to connect the Aral and the Caspian Seas. He imagined the results of such an undertaking:

> The contemplation of cosmic changes so vast, wrought by the erosions of time, suggesting the ultimate removal of the earth's inequalities, teaches anew the lesson that all things seem to be travelling toward a final, and perhaps an eternal, equilibrium.[24]

Curtis also lauded the potential of the soil, calling it "one of those inexplicable mysteries of nature" when the repulsive desert turns into a beautiful area thanks to water.[25] He hinted that Turkestan might experience the same changes as the southwestern states after Americans arrived and worked hard to make those lands ready for cultivation. Early in the journey, he summarized his impressions, elaborating on the region's settlement similarly to that of the closed American frontier:

> Excepting the enormous adobe fortifications which the Turkomans thought would enable them to resist the Russian invasion, the camels, and the fantastic costumes which the people wear, Central Asia looks exactly like Arizona; and the similarity is emphasized now and then when the train passes through an oasis with orchards like the orange groves around Riverside, and fields of grain and alfalfa, and vegetable gardens wherever water has been brought. … There is room for many millions of people upon land within twenty miles on either side of the railway track, and the bright green spots on the landscape show what they might do.[26]

Both authors thus create a dichotomy between empty steppes and deserts as opposed to irrigated and cultivated areas in favor of the potential increase of the latter, emphasizing and justifying the need for the appropriation and cultivation of land, similarly to some of Russian imperial administrators.[27] They also invite American readers to look at Turkestan through the lens of the settlement of the North American continent, especially the American West.

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[24] Bookwalter, 461.
[25] Curtis, *Turkestan*, 42.
[26] Curtis, 39–40.
[27] David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 31, 160–61.

The Cities of Turkestan

The Central Asian Railway, with its growing economic significance, eventually connected major cities of the region. Some of them were built from scratch by Russians (such as Krasnovodsk, Ashkhabad, and the new city near the old ruins of Merv), while in ancient cities like Tashkent and Samarkand they created a separate district with European urban planning and design next to the native settlement.

Both authors first arrived in Krasnovodsk on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. Bookwalter was enchanted by the local railway station which combined Western and Eastern design. This combination made him think of the ultimate synthesis of the West and the East and a "neutral state of races," where "the softening idealism of the East will give a soul to the inflexible materiality of the West, which in return will impart a substance to Oriental dreams and abstractions."[28] Curtis, in contrast, compared this city with mining towns in the southwestern states and those in Chile. And, in his view, while this city was important as a major transportation hub and had no vulgar places like saloons in the American West, it was deemed to be uninteresting.[29]

In their descriptions of Ashkhabad, both authors made comments that they would repeat for all other Russian cities, whether new or next to native settlements. Bookwalter took note of the high amount of foliage in the urban design and access to water and outlined the positive economic role of the city:

> Like all new Russian towns in these regions, it has wide, well-paved streets, and beautiful avenues of trees, with a stream of running water on either side of the streets. Having an abundance of water, supplied by a stream descending from the adjacent mountains, most of which is used for irrigation, Askabad has become the centre of a large and highly productive agricultural region.[30]

Curtis too described Ashkhabad as "a splotch of green upon the desert" and mentioned all that was perceived as modern in his mind: wide paved streets, schools, museums, theaters, newspapers, retail shops, and other urban features. He similarly emphasized the gardens, groves, and rows of trees, concluding that the population here was prosperous.

Later both authors contrasted the new city of Merv and the nearby abandoned ruins of the ancient city. They again lauded the design and the greenery of the recently established

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[28] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 383–84.
[29] Curtis, *Turkestan*, 17.
[30] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 417.

town. While Curtis claimed that the ancient ruins did not contain any notion of Eastern romance immortalized in Thomas Moore poem *Lalla Rookh,* Bookwalter, as if in contrast, visualized the former significance of ancient Merv as follows:

> It baffles the imagination to conceive, or the tongue to describe, the wide prospect of ruin and desolation that spreads before the view. Extending in all directions as far as the eye can reach, there is nothing but great heaps of rubbish, crumbling walls and buildings, broken arches, with here and there the half-preserved ruins of some majestic edifice towering over all, and standing like a solemn, solitary sentinel to guard the sad remains of former splendor and greatness.[31]

Bokhara was the only major city on the railway where, due to the protectorate status of the Bokhara Emirate, there was no distinctive Russian quarter. Bookwalter found little of interest in the town except massive walls that surrounded it and strange local customs like prohibiting the population from entering or exiting the city during the night. However, he admitted that there also were multiple merits in Bokhara, including few crimes in general as well as the temperance of the population, which he linked with the prohibition efforts in his home country.[32] Curtis also praised some of the habits of the population, their tidiness, and colorful clothes, and showed a notable interest in the city's bazaars. However, he was sarcastic about the Bokhara's identification as "the Noble, the Sublime" by the locals in the past in view of the degradation of its mosques, neglected buildings, and the lack of foliage that he saw in person:

> But if anybody should start out to search for the sublime in Bokhara to-day he would become more and more disheartened as he proceeded. It is in all respects the most antiquated, the most depraved, the ugliest, and the least progressive city in Turkestan, although there are fascinations in such places that more enterprising and attractive cities do not possess.[33]

Both Americans described major mosques, squares, bazaars, and dwellings of the population in Samarkand and Tashkent, again contrasting the new and the old. Bookwalter finished his narration with Samarkand, where he saw the Russian part filled with green spaces, claiming that "in fact, a more perfect sylvan city would be hard to imagine."[34] Concerning

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[31] Bookwalter, 439.
[32] Bookwalter, 487–88.
[33] Curtis, *Turkestan*, 119.
[34] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 494–95, 498.

the ancient city, he witnessed some ruins that evoked only its glorious past. Still, he believed that some of the major mosques, the local madrasa, the buildings of the city's Registan (public square), the famous mausoleum of Tamerlane (Gur-e-Amir), and other architectural masterpieces could "produce an indescribably charming effect" upon a foreign traveler.[35]

Curtis lauded the richness of the Russian part of Samarkand in trees, groves, and all kinds of modern establishments. In his opinion, it was the "finest of all the Russian settlements in Asia," surpassed only by Tashkent. The ancient city, however, reminded him of "a crippled giant fallen helpless by the wayside," where many buildings and almost all places of interest except the Gur-e-Amir were in decay, the bazaars were not so interesting, and the locals were indifferent to their city's development. His general thoughts read as follows:

> There is not a trace of ancient splendour in the old city. I did not see one decent looking building, nor one which seemed to have been erected or repaired by the present generation. … Everything is dilapidated and filthy, but, oh, how picturesque! The riot of colour in costumes, the Oriental types of faces, the camels, the donkeys, the *droskys*, the highwheeled carts, and the peasants loaded with the produce of their farms and gardens, which they bring to market on their backs. … No matter how humble or hungry a man may be, and even if he have but a single garment, that is made of the most brilliantly coloured material he can find.[36]

Later, while visiting Kokand, Curtis again praised the new part of the city and stated that it was more interesting than the old "because it represents life and progress" and since "there is something doing every day in the development of natural resources and in extending the wealth-producing capacity of the country."[37] Only in Tashkent was he attracted to native districts, and the major reason for his positive evaluation was the city's foliage and the accessibility of water.[38]

In conclusion, both authors see the cities of Turkestan with a clear distinction between ancient and modern. The development and "progress" are equated primarily with new Russian cities or districts that had visible economic growth, Western urban facilities, modern infrastructure, and, no less importantly, greenery and water supply. They mostly contrast the favorable image of these new settlements with either stagnation or outright devastation in ancient native cities despite occasional curiosity about the places of interest and the local population.

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[35] Bookwalter, 506.
[36] Curtis, *Turkestan*, 230.
[37] Curtis, 314.
[38] Curtis, 296.

Turkestan's Native Population

Both authors describe the same major ethnic groups, namely the Kirghiz (or more precisely Kirghiz-Kaisak, an earlier name adopted by many Russians for contemporary Kazakhs), Uzbeks, Turkmens, as well as Sarts in their travelogues.[39] The two American authors focused on the status of the native peoples as settled or nomad, their activities, appearance, accommodation, character, religion, and occasionally on the position of women.

Both authors were impressed by the appearance and physical strength of the Turkmens, whom they saw as Muslim nomads and cattle breeders. Bookwalter admired their physical power, their beautiful tents, and their strong character and linked them with the impact of the desert.[40] In his observation, Turkmen women liked colorful rich clothes, but Bookwalter also outlined their acceptance of polygamy and wife purchasing. These two customs signified "the ancient patriarchal traces of the Eastern races."[41] For Curtis, Turkmen men looked fierce, while their faces resembled those of the Chinese and the Koreans. Though they were illiterate, some of them were wealthy; and though loyal to their wives, the Turkmens often saw them as "slaves." He compared them to Bedouins in Arab countries in their lifestyle and praised their bravery, with Russians employing them as a cavalry militia after the conquest of the region. He admired the personal traits of Turkmens but did not go beyond the "noble savage" stereotype:

> In their fights with the Russians the Turkomans have shown marvellous bravery but no military skill, and it is acknowledged that on equal terms, among semi-savages of their own class, they are masters of the art of war, resembling the North American Indian more than the Eastern races to which they are related. And, while they have no codes of morals or standards of honour to advertise, travellers who have passed much time among them and people who have employed their services testify to their loyalty, hospitality, and truth.[42]

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[39] The term "Sarts" was often used since the Russian conquest of Turkestan, but it presented considerable definition difficulties for contemporaries and still causes debates whether they were a separate ethnicity, a synonym to Tajiks or Uzbeks, or a term used to identify the majority of the settled population of the region, see: Sergey Abashin, "Problema sartov v russkoy istoriografii XIX – pervoy chetverti XX v. [The problem of Sarts in Russian historiography of the nineteenth – first quarter of the twentieth centuries]," in *Natsionalizmy v Sredney Azii: v poiskakh identichnosti* [Nationalisms in Central Asia: Searching for identity] (St. Petersburg: Aleteyya, 2007).

[40] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 404; Bookwalter's perceptions corresponded to many Western notions about the inhabitants of the desert, see: Rune Graulund, "Deserts," in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Carl Thompson (London: Routledge, 2016), 435–36.

[41] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 407.

[42] Curtis, *Turkestan*, 43–44.

Americans wrote similarly of the Kirghiz (Kazakhs) that they were mostly pastoral people who lived in yourtas, and that they were hospitable, courageous, and respectful to women and their families. Bookwalter interacted with them earlier during his trip on the Trans-Siberian Railway, whereas it is questionable that Curtis saw them in person. While Bookwalter considered them to be dignified and called them "a splendid race," Curtis thought of them in a way as children, affectionate and easy-going, but untruthful and unreliable in their words. In his view, they also lived the lifestyle of Arab Bedouins but rarely engaged in religious activity. He also claimed that they had "no history, no literature; scarcely a written language," concluding that they were "a dying race."[43]

Both authors barely mentioned Uzbeks but focused instead on Sarts. Bookwalter believed that Sarts were the population of Samarkand and nearby areas. For him, they seemed to be a mix between the Tartars and the Chinese and excellent sedentary farmers. Nevertheless, he visibly separated himself from their culture and, overall, from the native "Other" after he was invited to a dinner in the company of Sart and Russian officials in Samarkand and experienced local music and dances. He went as far as comparing their arts to those of African Americans:

> I wish I were sufficiently versed in music to make an effort to determine wherein lies the charm of the music of the East, since it certainly has a decided charm for the Oriental ear, as they always listen to it in a dreamy silence. I am inclined to think that it is due to its rhythm, producing a sort of hypnotic spell upon the hearer. To the influence of rhythm is evidently due that strange entrancement displayed by the dancing and howling dervishes of the East, and the somewhat similar mental and emotional state shown by the negro in America on certain occasions of high religious excitement.[44]

Contrary to Bookwalter, Curtis was impressed by Sarts whom he defined differently throughout the text.[45] He applauded their cleanliness, behavior, and desire for education, in which they reminded him of the Japanese. His impressions of the young Sart residents

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[43] Curtis, 98.

[44] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 538–39.

[45] Curtis, *Turkestan*, 78, 293. At one point, he claimed that they were the inhabitants of Samarkand, whereas later believed that this term described the population of all cities, but was more precisely applied to "inhabitants of the former khanate at Samarkand to distinguish them from the people of Khiva, Bokhara, and other neighbours" (even though the Samarkand Khanate never existed, and Samarkand was part of the Bokhara Emirate before the Russian conquest). Such volatile descriptions and mistakes can be attributed to the fact that his book is a compilation of articles that were evidently poorly edited.

in Tashkent complemented his positive evaluation of the native city, primarily because he saw natives adopting Western values:

> They [children] are clothed like grown people, wearing the same pattern of garments, and imitate them [their parents] in their manners. Their gravity is amusing. You never saw anything more solemn than a Sart baby, unless it is a Japanese infant, and instead of running after strangers and clamouring for "backsheesh," as the children of other Eastern cities do, the boys and girls of Tashkend return your greetings with the grace of a Chesterfield and are as serious as undertakers.[46]

Nevertheless, Curtis attributed the perceived degradation of buildings and mosques in other native cities, passive and ignorant inhabitants, and the lack of modern education among the Muslim population to religion. He came to a derogatory conclusion about Islam:

> You would think there would be sufficient pride, piety, and patriotism in the Mohammedan world to perpetuate monuments and institutions chiefly ecclesiastic in their origin and purpose, but the same conditions appear in every country where Islam prevails, except in Constantinople, Cairo, and one or two other cities. Islam is a dying religion. It has reached a hopeless stage of decay, if the appearance of its mosques and meddresses, its shrines, the mausoleums of its saints, its cemeteries, and other public institutions may be accepted as evidence.[47]

In sum, both authors entertain the stereotypical image of the Orient based on the discourse of race, character, and the "civilization"/savagery dichotomy. Though at times they do write about some of the natives sympathetically, they do not associate themselves with the native "Other." They tend to compare the local population to Arabs, Asians, and African or Native Americans depending on their lifestyle. Unless the natives were trying to look and behave Western-like, both authors implied their exoticism or inferiority. In contrast, as shown in the next section, Russia is presented by both authors as a "civilizing" and creative force.

[46] Curtis, 296.
[47] Curtis, 226.

The Colonial and Economic Policy of Russia

Naturally, both American authors described and evaluated the local economy and the regional policy of the empire. Early in his account, even before he entered Turkestan, Bookwalter argued that he did not see Russia as a passive or "non-progressive" country. In his view, the economic development both in Siberia and Central Asia demonstrated a considerable advance. Writing in the 1890s, Bookwalter believed in the gradual emergence of cotton culture in the region, based on what he saw in the Merv oasis and Bokhara. He noticed that much of the agricultural machinery used by the locals was imported from America. He expressed hope for friendly Russian-American relations and urged further participation of his home country in the economic development of the Asian regions of Russia:

> Considering the immense population of this country, its long and steadfast friendship for America, and the still further fact that in order to develop her own incalculable resources and those of the other Asiatic nations into which she is carrying her influence, there must be created wants far in excess of her own ability to supply, thus necessitating extensive purchases from other nations, it seems evident that, by a proper effort on our part, this, of all countries in the world, could become the most important and profitable field for American enterprise.[48]

Curtis gave a more detailed evaluation of the subject matter two decades later. He dedicated a considerable portion of his account to cotton growing and observed that the government and individuals alike did much to promote it so that soon Turkestan cotton might rival American production. He was similarly content to see American machinery in use in Turkestan, and more broadly American influence in the region, noting the episode when he allegedly saw the portrait of Theodore Roosevelt in one of Tashkent's villas on the Fourth of July. While Curtis applauded the progress of cotton cultivation, he criticized the restrictions set by the Russian government on foreign capital that resulted in slower development of heavy industries. Similarly, because of the state restrictions any foreign prospector of natural resources "is apt to perish before he gets very far."[49] He used the occasion to add a remark on the relations between local Russian entrepreneurs and Jews, claiming that "the persecution of the Jews in Russia has never been due to religious prejudice, but to professional and commercial jealousy."[50]

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[48] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 385.
[49] Curtis, *Turkestan*, 310.
[50] Curtis, 175–76.

The authors differed in their assumptions on the Russian policy toward natives. Bookwalter applauded the fact that in Turkestan the railway stations and Russian quarters were at a distance from native ones. In his view, this would make the local population adapt to "civilization" more gradually and voluntarily, relying on what he called the "Oriental process of slow absorption, rather than the more modern one of pressure and compulsion."[51] He concluded that the Russian policy was beneficial and assumed that the natives might be fully assimilated:

> It seems to be her policy to allow the older communities and cities the fullest possible freedom to enjoy and exercise their ancient rights, customs, and habits; and to this end she seeks to avoid those violent shocks, changes, and disturbances that must inevitably result from bringing into an unduly near position the influences of a new and too often incongruous civilization. By this precaution the two will ultimately, insensibly, and peacefully merge, the one by gradual decline, and the other through a steady advance.[52]

The views of Curtis on the subject are more ambivalent. He stated that Russia brought peace to the region and acknowledged the natives' traditions and customs. He applauded the Russian goal to settle down nomads, while the railway that Curtis took represented for him a major "civilizing" tool, with apparent parallels to the influence of the railways in the American West. He believed that in material terms Russians also brought benefits to the native population. By improving the welfare of natives and imposing certain restrictions on Russians in their business interactions with them (such as a ban on alcohol sales), the Turkestan administration set a favorable example compared to the British rule in South Africa and India and the attitude of his compatriots to Native Americans.[53]

However, in his view, Russian rule also rested on the display of force, considerable garrisons in major cities, and the memories of brutal military victories against the natives. Further comparing Turkestan to nearby British India, Curtis believed that, unlike the Viceroy in India who was a constant victim of British public opinion and was restricted in his authority, the General-Governor of Turkestan had autocratic powers, even if he used them as an effective imperial administrator. And while the British appealed to "moral suasion" in India, the Russians, after ruthlessly defeating the natives and ensuring their obedience, offered the best of them to integrate into the ranks of the military and state

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[51] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 425.
[52] Bookwalter, 425.
[53] Curtis, *Turkestan*, 38, 114, 131–32.

elite. Curtis connected this policy to the character of the native population, arguing that the superstitious locals accepted the Russian approach as "the all-powerful will of Allah."[54]

While Curtis recognized and approved Russian administrative reforms, general material development in the region, as well as irrigation and forestation efforts, he criticized the Russian government for the absence of improvements in education and overall "enlightenment" of the population, leaving their (native) lifestyle at their discretion. In concluding remarks, Curtis questioned the benefits of the absence of direct state interference in the lives of the locals:

> I suppose the people of Turkestan in their habits of life and costumes are not much different to-day from what they were at the time of Tamerlane. There has been little change since the Russian conquest, and it seems to be the intention of that government to keep them as they are. This will afford an interesting and unique experiment in civilization. The question is, what will happen to those ten millions of people, who are permitted or required to remain in their ancient condition, while the rest of the world is developing so rapidly?[55]

Thus, both authors see the Russian conduct in the region as a "civilizing mission" that improves the living conditions of natives, with varying degrees of success for Curtis. Yet considering his previous negative conclusions about Russia in his late 1880s travelogue, the fact that Curtis changed his view is noteworthy. Both authors also deny the natives themselves the opportunity to develop their economy and culture on their own and are visibly satisfied with the degree of American economic influence in the region. The topics discussed so far showcase what I designated as the "imperial view." It incorporates the American desire to transform the nature of distant foreign lands for economic development, the acknowledgment of the empire's "civilizing" role and its capability for modernizing its remote regions, and the hopes for increasing American economic presence in Russia.

Russia in Asian Geopolitics

Both travelers offered their take on the role of Turkestan in foreign affairs. The two Americans shared the opinion that the conquest of the region created more tension between Russia and Britain and pointed out Russian plans to build additional railroads in Turkestan

[54] Curtis, 55.
[55] Curtis, 337.

with potential access to British India, Persia, and Afghanistan, which would ensure Russian supremacy in Asia. Bookwalter was glad that America pursued the policy of neutrality *vis-à-vis* European empires. He argued that in case of an all-out conflict, the advantageous geographic position of the U.S. would help it "escape the deplorable consequences that are certain to grow out of the entangling relations and alliances that harass and plague less fortunate nations."[56] He accepted the rising influence of Russia in Asia, while the "appointed destiny" of his country was to dominate in the Western Hemisphere. However, he evaluated Asian geopolitics based on solely Russo-British rivalry, without mentioning other important powers like Japan. Accordingly, he regularly ridiculed British imperial policy:

> The extreme sensitiveness displayed by this great nation – which upon all other questions preserves such an admirable equipoise – whenever Russia makes the least movement eastward, presents a strange spectacle. No matter what that nation may do, she seems to regard every incident and event, however remote, to which Russia is related, as a direct menace to India.[57]

While Curtis compared Turkestan and British India earlier, he indicated the mutual distrust between Russia and Britain despite the formation of the Triple Entente by 1907. In his view, the British Empire was frustrated by Russian railroad building plans in Asia and "almost frightened out of her wits whenever she sees the cap of a Russian soldier approaching boundary lines," whereas Russians were suspicious of any English-speaking traveler in Turkestan.[58] Unlike Bookwalter, he saw Russian foreign policy as aggressive and expansionist and claimed that even the agreement with Britain and the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War "has not caused any change in the Czar's determination to annex Persia, Manchuria and ultimately India, to his empire."[59]

Visual Materials and Factual Errors

While Curtis published a selective range of around thirty photos taken by another American correspondent, John McCutcheon, who visited the region in 1906, Bookwalter's book is filled with around a hundred photos taken personally throughout the trip in Turkestan. In

[56] Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia*, 278.
[57] Bookwalter, 290.
[58] Curtis, *Turkestan*, 17.
[59] Curtis, 336–37.

Russian cities or districts both authors included general views with foliage and Western-like streets, presenting them from a favorable angle (figure 1).

Figure 1. "Street in the Russian City of Ashkhabad," in William Curtis, *Turkestan: "The Heart of Asia"* (New York: George H. Doran, 1911), 49.

In native towns both books show photos of the daily life of its inhabitants like trade or prayer, major places of interest like mosques or bazaars, but also their more neglected parts and ruins, including those of ancient Merv. The authors included pictures of natives in their traditional costumes, and while Bookwalter took many pictures in the street, Curtis published several full-size portraits where the entire dress and facial features can be seen (figures 2 and 3). All of the published images of natives were taken at a distance and not a single one shows the authors themselves together with the locals, allowing the readers to "gaze" at them from a comfortable gap.

Figure 2. "Market Scene in Samarkand," in John Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia* (New York: J. J. Little, 1899), 529.

Figure 3. "Guardian of the Tomb of Tamerlane," in William Curtis, *Turkestan: "The Heart of Asia"* (New York: George H. Doran, 1911), 272.

Bookwalter presented numerous images of landscapes, ranging from empty and uninhabited deserts to irrigated areas with agricultural activity. While Curtis did not showcase the natural landscape of the region, he incorporated several pictures of cotton warehouses and the transportation of cotton instead. With this, both Americans showed a clear interest in the economic development of the region. The authors also included one or two pictures of Muslim women in public. Curtis presented a picture of a woman riding independently with her veil covering everything but eyes, while Bookwalter showed a photo of several women sitting on a cart driven by a man. The author saw this as a custom of wealthy natives taking their wives outside "on an airing" (figure 4). Overall, the photos included by both authors seem to complement the imagined contrast between the exoticism of the Orient and the "civilization" that Russia is bringing.

Figure 4. "A Queer Equipage. A Mohammedan and His Wives Out for a Drive," in John Bookwalter, *Siberia and Central Asia* (New York: J. J. Little, 1899). 527.

Both accounts have factual errors that demonstrate the superficial knowledge of the authors about Turkestan. As an example, Bookwalter wrongly claimed that the Tilya Kori Madrasa in Samarkand was the creation of Tamerlan (in reality it was built in the seventeenth century). Also, while he correctly assumed that the Bibi Khanum Mosque in the same city

was built during Tamerlan's reign and named after his wife Saray Mulk Khanum, he called the latter a "Chinese Princess" which she was not. Curtis made even more mistakes, both related to dates (including the construction of the Central Asian Railway, the Sher-Dor Madrasa, and the Tilya Kori Madrasa in Samarkand), as well as more general historical facts, such as confusing Khiva Khanate with the Kokand Khanate when writing about the Russian conquest of the region. He often gave contradictory information, such as the definition of Sarts mentioned earlier or presenting Genghis Khan as a Mongol early in the account while later noting that he was Chinese. These flaws demonstrate that his account is a compilation of articles that were rather poorly edited.

Conclusion

A businessman and an established travel writer and diplomat, regardless of social background and more than a decade gap between their journeys, wrote about Turkestan in a strikingly similar manner. Their views were influenced by social Darwinism and beliefs in the worldwide progress of "civilization" and the hierarchy of peoples of the world, common among many Americans at the turn of the century. The rapid economic and social development of their home country also gave them confidence as travelers in their perceptions of the outside world. Both take an open "imperial view" of the region akin to some of the Russian administrators and intellectuals of the time and present the Russian Empire as a creative force and part of the Western world. Russia received praise from both authors for its ability to transform the "empty" natural landscape of Turkestan into economic development by encouraging agriculture and irrigation. Their claims invoke in the American readership the creation of major waterways like the Erie Canal and the irrigation of deserts in the southwestern states. The two Americans also recognize Russia's ability and willingness to establish modern Western cities (which are preferred over ancient ones) as well as to "elevate" the natives. The description of the latter explicitly reflects the prevailing belief in the superiority of Anglo-Saxons and the West over the East as well as the importance of Christianity for Curtis as a more "progressive" religion, in light of his Islamophobic comments cited above. Briefly, both travelers projected the settlement of the North American continent and America's own imagined ability and right to "civilize" regions and peoples deemed inferior (including Native Americans and the population of Cuba and the Philippines after the Spanish-American War) on the Russian presence in Turkestan.

Although both travelers take the "imperial view" of Turkestan, their insecurities and criticism of the U.S. are also present. Both authors outlined the sobriety of natives as a positive trait in view of the struggle for temperance (prohibition) at home, while Curtis

conceded that the treatment of natives by Russians was at times more preferable to the way the British governed in India and to the treatment of Native Americans. Thus, the authors use Turkestan as a "mirror" to reflect Anglo-Saxon colonialism and Progressive reforms.

Yet there is a major difference between the two accounts. As a businessman, Bookwalter offers rather simplified conclusions about the geopolitics of the region while displaying anti-British sentiments (popular among some Americans on account of the Alaska boundary and fishery disputes at the turn of the century) rather than a serious take on the affairs in Asia. In a travel account that he published in 1899, he did not even mention Japan. Curtis possessed considerable diplomatic experience and viewed the U.S. as a potential imperial force in East Asia and Latin America. He was keenly aware of Anglo-Japanese and Anglo-American rapprochement in the 1900s, and the cooling of Russian-American relations after the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. Unlike Bookwalter, he takes a pro-British stance in foreign affairs and is more critical of Russian policy in Turkestan, especially when comparing it to British India.

Their praise for Russia's "civilizing role" in Turkestan is similar to the conclusions of those Americans who took a train along the Trans-Siberian Railway and wrote about Siberia. However, the presentation of Russia as a creative force in the Asian regions of the country is in striking contrast with other American travel accounts of the time, including the ones penned during and after the 1891–1892 famine, when Russians, especially the peasants, were themselves presented as backward. Yet, whether in European Russia or elsewhere, Curtis, Bookwalter followed other American travelers at the turn of the century in acting as self-appointed heralds and supporters of increasing the economic influence of the U.S. in the empire.

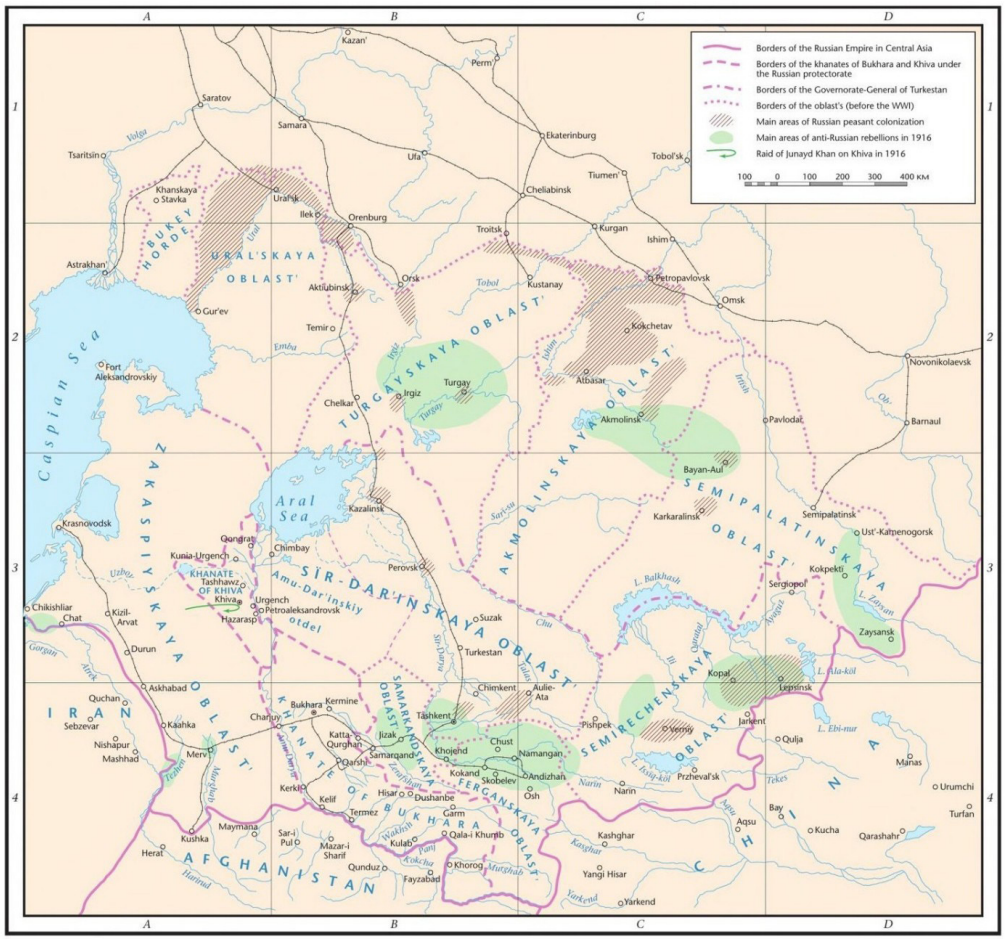

Figure 5. Bregel, Yuri. *The End of the 19th and the Early 20th Centuries: Western Turkestan Under Russian Rule* [map]. In: Yuri Bregel, *An Historical Atlas of Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 91.

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