

Russian–Turkmen Encounters: The Caspian Frontier before the Great Game, S. Peter Poullada, trans. Claora E. Styron, London: I. B. Tauris, 2017 ISBN: 9781784537012; 192 pages

There is not much else like S. Peter Poullada's *Russian–Turkmen Encounters*: an English translation (by Claora E. Styron) of a Soviet-published, eighteenth-century Russian archival source, introduced and contextualized by a fully developed historiographical essay. Not quite a monograph, not exactly a standalone translation or source study, Poullada's investigation of Turkmen political formations before colonization is a welcome contribution to the field, and the innovative format could serve as a fruitful model for future publications.

The primary texts that form the core of this book are indeed riveting, and Poullada was right to seize upon them. The sources in question are eighteenth-century journals by Russian captains Tebelev and Kopytovskii, detailing their respective diplomatic encounters with Turkmen tribal leaders in Mangyshlak, a Caspian peninsula now located mainly in Kazakhstan. These reports provide evidence of trade relations, Turkmen social organization, and emergent concepts of sovereignty. Significant portions of the content are in the words of the Turkmen leaders themselves, as mediated by various Turkic (often Tatar) interpreters employed by the Russians. As Styron points out in her preface to the translation (p. 74), this provides a fascinating window into the creative role of the interpreter in early Turkmen–Russian encounters.

The panoply of voices active in these sources pose challenges as well. Styron opts for a fairly literal English translation over a more interpretive style. On the one hand, this faithfully captures the flow-of-consciousness form of the journals. On the other, the English sometimes seems more stilted than archaic, and determining whose words are being conveyed in a given moment often demands re-reading (particularly in the case of Tebelev's 1741 log).

The translated journals are preceded by a lengthy introduction by Poullada, constituting five chapters and around half of the total pages in the volume, as well as a translation of the Soviet scholar V. Razumovskaia's original 1939 introduction. Poullada's essays are wide-ranging, and do an admirable job of making the Turkmen of the Caspian region the protagonists. In fact, the first section of this book may be the *only* sustained treatment of Mangyshlak in English to date.

There are no Turkmen-language dynastic chronicles, and scant written evidence of the language at all before the twentieth century. This means that Poullada's five introductory chapters by necessity peer into Mangyshlak from the territories surrounding it. After a stage-setting initial chapter, the book surveys the nature of overland Eurasian trade in the early modern period. Subsequent chapters then review the political history of the post-Timurid Central Asian dynasties, and then proceed to connect that history to recent work on Qing imperial expansion (e.g. by Peter Perdue). In the eighteenth century, Kalmyk tribes were pushed toward the Russian border following the destruction of the Oyrat/Junghar confederacy of which they had previously been a part, and for a time held authority over the Turkmen of Mangyshlak. This con-

flict in particular is one that many readers will never even have heard of, but Poullada manages to convey the catastrophic impact of Kalmyk raids into Turkmen territory—even though specific evidence is largely conjectural (pp. 47–49). Later chapters detail Peter the Great’s turn toward Central Asia (especially the famously ill-fated Bekovich-Cherkasskii expedition), as well as Nāder Shah Afshār’s (r. 1736–47) conquest of the region.

These introductory chapters are intended to provide context for the primary texts, and do not advance a thesis per se, nor do they overtly intervene in historiographical debates. However, one might consider the unit of analysis itself—Turkmen as an ethnic category—to be an implicit argument of sorts. What was a Turkmen in the eighteenth century, precisely? Poullada is not setting out to answer that question, and the paucity of sources would likely frustrate attempts to do so. Yet it is worth considering how making an ethnic group the dominant organizing principle—as opposed to, say, the place of Mangyshlak, or Tatar intermediaries as a social group—shapes our understanding of the region’s history. This emphasis would seem to support scholarship on Turkmen in the twentieth century, such as that of Adrienne Edgar, which highlights the importance of pre-Soviet understandings of lineage to the formation of the Soviet Turkmen nationality. Even so, one senses that there is a deeper history of the term “Turkmen” itself, and what it meant throughout this period, that has yet to be untangled.

Ultimately, Poullada’s historical overview is fluid and engaging, serving as a sort of “greatest hits” of the body of scholarship that is settling into a canon of Central Asian studies. The author also skillfully intertwines this historiography with direct reference to major Central Asian chronicles available in translation. Scholars of Iranian studies will find fewer touchstones, beyond references to the standard works on Nāder Shah. Even so, Mangyshlak was as much an Iranian frontier zone as a Russian one, and so scholars of Iran will find the material of intrinsic interest.

Oftentimes the book’s disparate elements combine to lead the reader toward fascinating insights. For instance, the translated primary sources provide some of the only direct Turkmen testimonies of a mass exodus from Khorezm to Mangyshlak as a consequence of Nāder Shah’s conquests (p. 104). Yet non-specialists reading the journals absent the accompanying apparatus—both Styron’s gloss and Poullada’s introduction—might have otherwise missed this entirely. In an essay preceding the primary source, Poullada assembles translations from Persian Afshārid chronicles detailing the Turkmen migration (p. 66), thus allowing the reader to fully appreciate the impact of respective Russian and Iranian imperial advances on the Turkmen from both sides of the frontier.

Through no fault of the authors, the historiographical overview is destined to become dated very soon, as a number of major studies on related topics were released just after this work, or will be published very shortly. On page 21 the author calls for a “comprehensive” study of the Central Asian slave trade—perhaps something like the monograph published by Jeff Eden this year. In her preface to the translated text, Styron rightly emphasizes the importance of native intermediaries in the steppe frontier zone (p. 74)—intermediaries functionally similar to the ones detailed in Ian

Campbell's 2017 book. Also absent is new research by Paolo Sartori and Ulfatbek Abdurasulov on Khorezm, some of which has already been published in article form. One wonders how conclusions in these new works might affect the synthetic narrative assembled by Poullada and Styron.

Overall, this work will be a useful resource for scholars and students of Central Asia alike. One can easily imagine sections of the translated journals—conveniently coupled with the excerpts from the explanatory narrative—being assigned in an undergraduate class on either Central Asia or the Russian Empire. The work will likely prove more dispensable for Iran specialists, though scholars of the Iranian frontier or Nāder Shah specifically will certainly find much to interest them.

This reviewer for one hopes that Poullada's work will inspire other authors to similarly render the substantial achievements of Soviet-era scholarship legible to a new generation of scholars. The journals of Captains Tebelev and Kopytovskii are remarkable sources, but in a different sort of publication would have been accessible to a narrower range of specialists. By jam-packing the first half of the volume with the historical context necessary to appreciate the documents, Poullada has achieved something special: combining insights of imperial Russian travelers, their Central Asian interlocutors, Soviet orientalists, and modern scholars all in a single, digestible format.

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