
Reviewed by Leora Eisenberg (Harvard University)

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Commissioned by Hanna Chuchvaha (University of Calgary)

In *A Woman's Empire: Russian Women and Imperial Expansion in Asia*, Katya Hokanson sets for herself the ambitious goal of “investigating the complex relationship between women and empire in the framework of Russia’s expansion into the farthest of Russia’s eastern frontiers” (p. 5). Through close readings of the previously unstudied texts that these women produced, Hokanson draws attention to three primary ways in which Russian women observed and participated in the empire’s conquest of new territories: the “‘domestic’ domain,” the “context of the ‘Great Game,’” and science/scholarship (p. 31). She devotes the first four chapters to one woman each, while the final one examines four female scholars. The book, then, analyzes the writings of eight women who traveled to Central Asia (and India), whether as part of their husbands’ travel parties, out of spiritual convictions, or for scientific research. Certain factors, however, serve as a common context for their writings as Russian women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as British-Russian competition in Asia, the “topic of safety and security,” “issues of femininity and domesticity,” and, of course, Russia’s status as “European” or “civilized” (pp. 12, 17). Hokanson has written an eminently readable book that makes serious contributions to both Slavic studies and history, not least by foregrounding the previously overlooked voices of women in Russian history.

In her first section, Hokanson looks at Varvara Dukhovskaia (1854-1931) and Elena Apreleva (1846-1923), who both traveled with their high-placed husbands to Central Asia in the late nineteenth century. Dukhovskaia published her first memoir, *From My Reminiscences* (*Iz moikh vospominaniii*) and then *Turkestan Reminiscences* (*Turkestanske vospominaniiia*) about her time in Central Asia in 1913, eventually publishing them in English in 1917. Although her husband was the governor-general of Tashkent, Hokanson argues that “by describing her life both as a private person and the wife of a prominent government official, Dukhovskaia ... asserts that by their nature, her accounts are valuable” and includes tremend-
ous detail about the goings-on of Russian Tashkent (pp. 44-45). She consistently places herself and, by extension, Russian culture, above local subjects, seeing the “little natives” as “being civilized by Russian rule” (p. 67). Apreleva, on the other hand, is a “far more ordinary observer of life in Central Asia” in her *Central Asian Sketches* (*Sredne-aziat‐skie ocherki*), published in full in 1935, after individual stories had been published in the newspaper *Russkie vedomosti* as early as 1893 (though this date is disputed) (p. 71). Although Apreleva, too, generally believes in the rightness of Russian imperial rule, she writes about the many diverse residents of Central Asia (e.g., “Persians, Jews, city residents, nomads, Russians, and others”), thus lending a more ethnographic—and often sympathetic—tone to her stories. (p. 76). Her focus on individuals’ lives means occasionally bearing witness to the downsides of Russian presence in Central Asia, as is especially evident in her story of Dr. Kallinik, a Russian doctor who grows increasingly lonely in the region, eventually killing himself while shaving. While Apreleva's stories evince a pro-imperial bias, they also aim to reflect the realities of life in the region for a variety of people. Dukhovskaia, however, reflects the reality of her life as a woman of high society in a region coming under Russian control.

In the second section, Hokanson discusses the women involved in the Great Game, the nineteenth-century competition between Britain and Russia over power in Central Asia: Madame Elena Blavatskaia (1831-91), the “propagandist of Russian imperialism,” and Iulia Golovnina (birth/death dates unknown), a Russian noblewoman who assisted her husband on an expedition to the Pamirs in 1898 (p. 111). Although Blavatskaia’s writings, such as the *Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* (*Iz peschcher i debrei Khindostana*), a collection of travel letters published in Russian newspapers throughout the 1880s, promote her thoughts on religion and philosophy, these same pieces of work portray her as “a Russian language-writer and pro-Russian propagandist, addressing her audience in Russia and on the Great Game” (pp. 118-119). She consistently compares the Russians favorably to the British living in the area who, for example, “are merely surrounded by India at a proper distance,” while her travel companions “are staying in bungalows in the Indian part of town,” suggesting that she and her colleagues were much keener to get to know locals than their British counterparts (p. 122). She takes an ethnographic approach similar to Apreleva’s, as she “never reduce[s her characters] to their external appearance or to mere clothing”—perhaps in an effort to distinguish herself, a Russian, from the British (p. 148). Golovnina’s 244-page account, *In the Pamirs: Notes of a Russian Woman Traveler* (*Na pamirakh: zapiski russkoi puteshestvennitse*), published in 1902, was meant, on the other hand, to appeal to a more feminine audience, given the inclusion of her gender in the title. Although she writes several specialized articles on hunting, Golovnina does not shy away from womanly matters in her book, such as looking “socially presentable as a woman” while on the road, topics which our prior authors largely avoid (p. 163).

The last section examines “scientific practitioners of empire”—women who, similarly to Golovnina, often wrote about their self-consciousness as women during fieldwork (p. 191). While many of them began as assistants (usually to their husbands), Hokanson is careful to acknowledge that “their role often expanded into that of full-fledged expedition participant, even if they were neither paid for their work nor officially recognized,” an issue persisting today (p. 192). Some, like artist and botanist Ol’ga Fedchenko (1845-1921), gained international renown, as she was the first artist after Vasilii Vereshchagin to portray Russian Turkestan. Two of her renderings are reproduced in the book. But others, such as ethnographer Aleksandra Potanina (1843-93), drew special attention to women’s affairs in her published articles on Russia’s new territories: she “talked to many local women about their lives and recorded the details she learned,” something
which men simply could not gain access to (p. 204). This was Hokanson’s most successful chapter, as it becomes clear how women were not only self-conscious about their presence but able to use their position to be useful to the empire in ways that men could not.

Despite the fascinating life stories of her characters and in-depth analysis of their writings, Hokanson’s scope means that she focuses on elite or middle-class women. While there were relatively few Russian women in Russian Turkestan, the experiences of eight—relatively privileged—women paint a limited picture of broader Russian female engagement with the empire’s expansion. Of course, Russian peasant or working women likely had no access to Turkestan—and many who did travel (such as nannies, servants, etc.) might not have been educated or literate enough to describe their experiences. Nevertheless, by defining the scope of her book as “the women who wrote accounts … depicted Central Asia in memoirs or literature, or helped construct the archive of its people, fauna, and flora,” Hokanson significantly circumscribes the possibilities for female engagement with the project of Russian imperial expansion (p. 16).

All in all, however, Hokanson’s book fills an important lacuna as the first study of how “women took part in the [imperial] project and … saw themselves and their contributions” (p. 16). These women’s names are new to the field, and Hokanson has done us a great service by introducing us to them. Although this book is meant for an academic audience, I believe that it will have a broader resonance as I hope that Hokanson’s close readings of a variety of texts by Russian women will inspire Slavists, historians of the Russian Empire, and women’s history specialists to return to these very texts and perhaps use them as primary sources for their pedagogy and/or future academic work. *A Woman’s Empire* is a welcome addition to the field.
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