

## The Gray Eminence of Kashgar Speaks

N. F. Petrovskii. *Turkestanskii pis'ma* [Turkestan Letters]. Otv. red. V. S. Miasnikov. Sost. V. G. Bukhert. Moskva: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2010. 358 pp. [Available in pdf format at <[http://www.piminfo.ru/catfile/bbook\\_Pdf\\_small\\_266.pdf](http://www.piminfo.ru/catfile/bbook_Pdf_small_266.pdf)>, accessed July 18, 2010.]

As the first Russian consul in Kashgar from 1882–1903, Nikolai Fedorovich Petrovskii earned the reputation (at least in British eyes) of the *éminence grise* who really governed Kashgaria. This valuable collection of his *Turkestan Letters*, the majority of them previously unpublished, should stimulate interest in a still much-needed full-scale biography of this important figure in the history of the “Great Game” rivalry between Britain and Russia. Not the least of Petrovskii’s accomplishments while in Kashgar was his pioneering acquisition of a significant collection of Central Asian antiquities.

The book opens with a short essay by Vladimir S. Miasnikov, a distinguished specialist on Russo-Chinese relations. His focus, curiously, is on Petrovskii as seen by the British, as told principally through reference to Clarmont P. Skrine and Pamela Nightingale’s book on the British consul George Macartney. The more substantial of the introductory essays is by the compiler and real editor of the letters, V. G. Bukhert. Here we find biographical details and a serious, archivally based effort to place Petrovskii’s career on a broader canvas of Russian activity in Central Asia. While Petrovskii may be best known for his two decades in Kashgar, his early career and his concerns after “retiring” to Tashkent involved Russian financial administration in Turkestan, a subject to which he frequently returned in his letters from Xinjiang. One gets the impression that his superiors may well have been happy to keep Petrovskii at a safe distance across the mountains, since he was rather outspoken in his criticism of Russian administration and rarely minced words in characterizing those whom he disliked. He repeatedly voiced concerns that the mountains on the southern borders of Russian Turkestan would turn into another Caucasus for

the Empire — that is, would require costly, long-term military pacification.

Life at the distant outposts of empire cannot have been easy. Petrovskii left his family behind in Tashkent — his wife, two daughters and a son — and visited them perhaps once a year. However, no letters to his family are included in the selection here. Travel over the high passes between Kashgar and Tashkent, often in winter conditions, took its toll. Petrovskii came to be nearly incapacitated with rheumatism and, due to his own carelessness in not taking dark glasses on one of the early trips, suffered long-term effects from snow blindness. He had not been in Kashgar very long before he began fishing for reassignment elsewhere, aiming for another consular job (Trabzon in Turkey would have suited nicely, but it had no Russian consulate) or a minor provincial governorship somewhere in Siberia.

While he recognized that his temperament was best suited to a post where he would have some autonomy and could be his own man, he continually complained of the isolation in Kashgar and the lack of support from his government. Given the emphasis of anglo-centric historiography of the Great Game in which Russian machinations for control of ever larger parts of Asia dominate the narrative, this may seem somewhat surprising. For many years he had to handle all the paperwork of the job with only one assistant and a couple of scribes, and he continually pushed to have the Cossack guard at the consulate increased, as insurance in the face of possible local unrest. When his capable long-time consular secretary Iakov Ia. Liutsch decided to move on, the position was vacant for two years. Liutsch’s eventual replacement, Sergei A. Kolokolov, was ill-prepared, although he would later succeed Petrovskii himself. Of course it is difficult to know whether such complaints are generic for anyone posted in a distant consulate: the British consuls in Kashgar likewise felt underappreciated and ill-served by their governments.

Without the additional evidence from Petrovskii’s intelligence reports and other documentation (he mentions, for example, keeping a diary of events, rumors, news, etc.), the letters here provide little sense of his real influence in Xinjiang. His initial impressions of

Chinese officialdom were positive (in fact he declared [p. 122] the Russians needed to learn from their example), but he rather quickly shifted to a litany of complaints about the faults of the Chinese administration. At the same time, he claimed to be on excellent terms with the local head of the Qing civil administration, even if we learn few details of what this may have meant in policy decisions. When he arrived in Kashgar, he had little guidance about norms of consular jurisdiction and had to request copies of consular statutes for various countries be sent to use as examples. Petrovskii reiterated his impatience with having to deal with the routine of consular paper involving travel by Russian citizens, defending them in the local courts, trying to determine the validity of the claims of spouses left behind by their husbands, and so on. This left him little time for travel outside of Kashgar. He seems not to have had much of a budget to pay political agents and informants, but obviously seized opportunities, such as the time when he obtained a letter of instructions Francis Younghusband had sent to his hapless traveling companion Lieutenant Davison. Petrovskii promptly forwarded it to St. Petersburg (p. 222). He clearly was an advocate of a forward Russian position in the Pamirs, even if he did not always agree with specific actions such as Colonel Bronislav L. Grombchevskii's incursion which led to his famous faceoff with Younghusband and, in Petrovskii's eyes, provoked the British to extend their control in Kashmir.

Petrovskii was intellectually curious, especially, it seems, about religion and history of Inner and South Asia. His reading included: Kalhana's medieval Kashmiri *Rajatarangini*; Monier Monier-Williams on Buddhism; Albert Réville's *Prolégomènes de l'histoire des religions*; James Fergusson on Indian chronology. He read about Manichaeism and on more than one occasion expressed an interest in learning about Nestorianism, given its possible earlier presence in Kashgar. He seems to have been proficient in Central Asian Turkic languages, a knowledge of which he considered essential to the functioning of the consulate. Apparently he also knew some Persian, and at least had use for an Arabic dictionary. It is not clear how the consulate handled dealings in Chinese (the language of the

local Qing administration, which, according to Petrovskii, did not use Manchu). While he turned down a request from Ármin Vámbéry that he record for him local oral literature, Petrovskii did record costume and customs in drawings, with extensive annotations in both Russian and "Kashgarian" (Uighur?). One wonders, have these drawings survived? It would also be of interest if the records have survived from the meteorological station which Petrovskii established by the mid-1880s (with instruments ordered from London). He was proud of having introduced turkeys and American cotton to the local farmers (p. 197).

Petrovskii's letters to the orientalist Sergei F. Ol'denburg and Viktor R. Rozen document his frequent acquisition of antiquities (including early Buddhist manuscripts as well as later Islamic texts), although without much detail regarding specific provenance or the names of his suppliers. If such detail exists, it has to be in any notes he may have appended when mailing the material off to St. Petersburg. Perhaps the most interesting of all his comments on antiquities is in a letter to Rozen dated 27 January 1892. There he laments that his consular duties left him no time to visit ancient sites. Referring to the famous "Bower manuscript" which helped fuel the interest in Central Asian antiquities, Petrovskii writes: "I was truly and deeply incensed that [Lieutenant Hamilton] Bower anticipated my discovery. This was purely by accident, but nonetheless the involuntary thought occurs that I, not a mere tourist, should have been the one so fortunate" (p. 223). Petrovskii indeed aspired to some of the fame that came with discovery: on another occasion, he expressed to Ol'denburg his dissatisfaction with articles (written by the latter?) in which Antoine Jomini and Albert Grünwedel were praised but there was nary a word about Petrovskii's own activity in the collection of antiquities (p. 269). Petrovskii declared himself "deeply touched" (p. 292) by Ol'denburg's later article specifically devoted to the importance of the steady stream of antiquities the consul had been sending in the face of growing competition from Macartney. In a letter to Ol'denburg of 1 August 1894, he writes, "I am awaiting from Kucha a complete manuscript which has already been acquired for me; but I now have competition — the English agent here (in essence

a spy, Macartney), who is attempting to purchase manuscripts for Hoernle" (p. 248). On another occasion he noted having trained his *aksakal* (the native head of the local Russian merchant community) in photography and sending him to photograph some of the ruins beyond Artush and the tower (stupa?) at Khan-Ui (pp. 265–66).

Naturally Petrovskii took an interest in Central Asian exploration. Early in his stay in Kashgar, he expended some effort to have a monument raised to commemorate in Kashgar the murdered Austrian explorer Adolph Schlagintweit. He initiated a correspondence with Nikolai M. Przhevalskii, in part because they seem to have shared the same views on Russian administration in Central Asia. Explorers who came through Kashgar invariably visited the Russian consulate. The Swede Sven Hedin stayed there and received valuable support from Petrovskii. While the Russian seems to have liked him personally, at least at first, he perceptively voiced his skepticism about Hedin's preparation for his adventures and raised serious doubts about the scientific value of some of what Hedin proposed to do, considering it to be little other than "tourism" (p. 273). At the same time though, he could appreciate the corrective to previous knowledge provided by Hedin's exploration of the lower Tarim River region, about which he learned when Hedin shared with Petrovskii the letter he had written to Ferdinand von Richthofen regarding his discoveries (p. 277). On the receipt of Hedin's book in 1899 (presumably *Through Asia*), Petrovskii insisted that the author had in fact praised him to excess at the same time that he had ignored Petrovskii's many corrections regarding such matters as local place names. As a result, the book was full of mistakes (p. 284). When Hedin was back in Kashgar in 1899, he was "worse than ever, gave himself airs, and could talk only about his triumphs" (p. 287).

In 1895, Petrovskii (whose skepticism, he reported, was shared by Hedin) raised serious

questions about the story Fernand Grenard told concerning the murder of his fellow explorer Jules-Léon Dutreuil de Rhins by bandits. Evidence, which Macartney refused to investigate, pointed the finger at members of Dutreuil's own party (notably Muhammad Isa, who would go on to serve Hedin in his explorations of Tibet). Since Dutreuil's own papers perished with him, Petrovskii recognized the potential significance of the apparently extensive correspondence he had had with the French explorer; so he sent the papers on to his superior in St. Petersburg in order that they be deposited in an appropriate archive. Petrovskii groused about the French who came through never having thanked him for his hospitality; the English were beyond mention, since they treated him as a mere supply agent who was (to them) little more than a barbarian (p. 271).

Appendices to the book include a very critical assessment Petrovskii wrote in 1876 regarding a proposed expedition to China by N. A. Maev, instructions Petrovskii compiled to guide agents and spies in obtaining information while in the field, and several letters to Petrovskii. The most interesting are part of an exchange he had with the later famous geographer and zoologist Grigorii E. Grum-Grzhimailo, whose hot-headed intrusion at the border had threatened to create a major incident with the Chinese authorities. There are useful lists of all the Russian consuls in Kashgar, the military officers posted there and the commanders of the Pamir garrison. Bibliographies include Petrovskii's own publications and works about him. There are indexes of personal and geographic names. The annotation to the letters primarily is identification of the individuals to whom they are addressed or who are mentioned in them.

— Daniel C. Waugh