

*Russia and Central Asia. Coexistence, Conquest, Convergence.* By Shoshana Keller. Toronto/ Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2020, 346 pp. ISBN: 9781487594350 (cloth); ISBN: 9781487594343 (paper) doi: 10.22679/avs.2020.5.2.011

Shoshanna Keller has written an important book on the history of Central Asia that covers its pre-Russian, Russian imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods, focusing on the imperial and Soviet periods. As she tackles this thorny subject, Keller's most significant contribution is to bring into focus the nomadic perspective that has largely been neglected by earlier scholarship. In her account, the interplay of interactions between the region's nomadic and sedentary populations takes center stage, and she reconsiders and challenges many well-known sources on Central Asian history.

The book's nine chapters, which include an introduction, notes, glossary, bibliography, maps, and index, span the years from approximately the Mongol conquests in the thirteenth century to the early 1990s. In the two opening chapters, Keller provides an overview of the region's ancient and medieval historical periods. The subsequent two chapters deal with the conquest of what came to be known as Russian Turkestan in the second half of the nineteenth century. Chapters five, six, and seven address the Soviet period, while the final chapters, eight and nine, explore the region's transformation over the course of the perestroika period that was followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Due to the scarcity of authentic written sources left by the region's nomadic populations, complicated by the lack of sufficient knowledge of their languages by non-native historians, many historians failed to analyze artifacts of the rich nomadic oral tradition. Subsequently, historians concentrated effort on exploring available written sources produced by the region's sedentary populations, which tended to provide incomplete and often biased information about their nomadic neighbors.

The book also makes the important contribution of acknowledging the complexities of Russia's colonizing agency. Rather than simplistically depicting Russia as a colonizer and oppressor – the approach that until recently has dominated mainstream academic research – Keller assigns a more complex role to Russian officials, illustrating how they operated as arbiters and middlemen, intermingling with nomadic groups in a way that left an indelible mark on local leadership practices, shaping their customary mode of operation. The book has thus painted a fuller and more complex picture of Russian/non-Russian interactions, which defies description in conventional colonizer-colonized terms. In so doing, the author's research significantly contributes to ongoing debates about the nature of these interactions, by questioning, among other things, the epistemological validity of the post-colonial studies when applied to the Russian case.

The book's numerous and very useful maps are highly valuable for professors of Central Asian history. As a teacher in this field at Columbia University since 2004, I should confess that this aspect has been largely neglected by my colleagues.

No academic book is without shortcomings, however, including this one. I find it somewhat disappointing, although not surprising, that Keller overlooks the Bokei Horde (1801-1845), the fourth Qazaq Horde established by Tsar Paul I at the request of Sultan Bokei, the grandson of Khan Abulkhair from the Qazaq Junior Horde. The case of the Bokei Horde is a striking example of Russian officials' preoccupation with safeguarding their country's borders rather than integrating the nomadic populations into Russian imperial structures. The case would have further bolstered the book's argument about the ambiguous nature of Russian imperial rule.

As I mentioned earlier, the author's negligence was unsurprising, because the history of the Bokei Horde has yet to be properly integrated into mainstream Qazaq historiography in the west. One technical error is that the Steppe Statute replaced the Provisional Statute not in 1898, as the author asserts, but in 1892 (114).

Also essential to note is that Sovietized Russian schools for non-Russian children in the 1930s schools refrained from using Russian as a language of instruction (196). According to Peter Blitstein, whom the author cites, although in 1938 the so-called Zhdanov Decree introduced Russian language and history as obligatory subjects in non-Russian schools, "the Stalin regime not only retained native-language instruction in non-Russian schools but sought to extend it."<sup>2</sup> Stalin warned proponents of radical Russification "that attempts to convert Russian from a subject of study to the language of instruction were 'harmful' and could only be temporary."<sup>3</sup> This, in fact, serves as additional evidence for further questioning divide-and-rule explanations for the Soviet regime adopted by some historians and political scientists.

Although Keller covers the topic of the Central Asian delimitation, I wish she had highlighted specific details of debates initiated by the local native Communists who actively participated in the delimitation campaign, and by integrating the research of Francine Hirsh, Arne Haugen, and other historians, showed how Communist identities cut across the nomadic-sedentary divide. An inclusive, comprehensive treatment of this aspect of these revealing dynamics would have reinforced Keller's framework.

In spite of shortcomings, scholars specializing in the field and all those who are interested in Central Asian history will find Keller's book a source of both inspiration and useful guidance.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter A. Blitstein, "Nation-Building or Russification? Obligatory Russian Instruction in the Soviet non-Russian School, 1938-1953," in *A State of Nations: Empire and the Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and*

*Stalin*, eds. R. G. Suny and T. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 253.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 258.