Tagirova on Afinogenov, 'Spies and Scholars: Chinese Secrets and Imperial Russia's Quest for World Power'

Review published on Saturday, January 9, 2021


Reviewed by Alsu Tagirova (East China Normal University) Published on H-Diplo (January, 2021) Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55501

At Kazan University, which is one of the leading centers of oriental studies[1] in Russia, future sinologists are taught that the discipline originated with the works of a linguistically talented and prolific scholar who became the forefather of the discipline, Iakinf Bichurin. His revered career continues to inspire awe and admiration among the students of sinology who study at Russian academic institutions. Therefore, the new book written by Gregory Afinogenov comes as a revelation, breaking down every myth about the history of sinology in Russia that the university instructors continue to pass on to the next generations of Russian scholars.

The book, of course, accomplishes much more than just that. It explores the development of the knowledge regime in Russia over the span of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, focusing particularly on Russia’s China policy. Borrowing the term from the works of John L. Campbell and Ove Kaj Pedeson, Afinogenov points out that “knowledge regime” encapsulates the entire complex of state-based, autonomous, and semiautonomous institutions which generate data, research, policy recommendations, and other ideas; these ideas, in turn, allow a state’s policy makers to make decisions (p. 7).

As the reader discovers, Muscovites began to gather intelligence on China very early on, as their privileged relationship with the Qing allowed them greater access to information compared to other European states. That same privileged access rendered the product of Russian intelligence a target for foreign espionage. During the Petrine era, the newly established institutions began to make the distinction between public and secret information. While the Imperial Academy of Sciences oversaw the production of scholarship, the College of Foreign Affairs kept the intelligence-gathering within its purview. Interestingly enough, no exchange of information existed between these two institutions.

In the book, Afinogenov points out that knowledge is a commodity, and in the absence of market mechanisms, the development of knowledge becomes conditioned by the will of bureaucrats to support scholarship and intelligence-gathering. The institutions that no longer produced the kind of knowledge officials considered useful quickly found themselves sidelined. Therefore, when global factors began to influence Russo-Qing relations to a much greater extent, that brought new possibilities for career development for the Russian experts who were literate in Chinese and Manchu languages. As the knowledge regime continued to evolve, these experts found themselves at the...
A refreshingly new body of scholarship on the topic has begun to emerge in recent years. It represents a new generation of scholars who view the history of bilateral relations through a wider lens, bringing both global context and individual lives into the story. The main characteristic of this new scholarship is the departure from state-to-state diplomacy as the main object of scholarly inquiry. The multifaceted nature of the Russo-Qing encounters is finally becoming more acknowledged; therefore, authors like Afinogenov adopt a more complex, transnational approach to their research.

The selection of sources and archival work is highly indicative of this change. The author impresses with his ability to pore over massive amounts of material preserved in Russian, French, and British archives, and at the same time, work with secondary sources in multiple European and Asian languages. The author points out his decision to exclude Chinese sources and Chinese perspectives from the narrative (p. 18). Nevertheless, how the work of spies and scholars was viewed by the Chinese would be an interesting topic to explore in the future. Whether their efficacy was understood and could they, in turn, have served as a source of information about the northern neighbor remains to be further studied. In any case, reading the testimonies to the abominable lifestyle of the priests in the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Beijing, one sees another reason why the Qing were not inclined to perceive Russia as a threat and considered it as nothing but an “unruly border state which was to be pacified” (p. 12).

Another important work, by Sören Urbansky, *Beyond the Steppe Frontier: A History of the Sino-Russian Border*, was published in 2020. In it, he explores the encounters between the subjects of two countries in the Argun basin and reframes the issue of border formation not only as a state-level, top-down process but also as a highly personal endeavor. Similarly, Afinogenov’s book tells the stories of people who were personally involved in the acquisition and production of knowledge, and it is their careers that the reader observes being propelled or crushed by the needs of the bureaucratic machine and the knowledge regime of their time. Both works highlight the role of transborder peoples in facilitating the exchanges between the two empires. Mongols and Manchus, Buriats and Evenki, Bukharans and Tatars were all involved in this elaborate system of intelligence-gathering. Some scholars have argued that such involvement of non-Russian subjects helped bridge the differences between Russia and its Asiatic neighbors. Afinogenov, to the contrary, argues that “in the Chinese context the starkness of Russia’s geopolitical priorities overrode the pluralism of making knowledge in an empire of difference” (p. 16).

The book makes a great contribution to scholarly literature by studying the caravan as an institution. Afinogenov highlights the numerous and often conflicting goals that a caravan was to achieve. Far from being an economically profitable enterprise, the caravan was perceived more as a unique opportunity for intelligence-gathering and accumulating information. Equally important, it had a role as a carrier of correspondence between the Jesuits in China and their counterparts in Europe. In terms of intelligence-gathering, the agents within the caravans focused on strategic goals—they often were tasked with acquiring the details of military provisioning and interethic relations. Many either prepared the maps of Qing territories themselves or secretly obtained them from contacts at the “palace library” (p. 112).
Afinogenov describes how, in 1755-57, the Qing conquest of the formerly independent Junghar Confederation led to the conclusion of the caravan trade. Given the opportunities for intelligence-gathering that caravans provided, the absence of the latter inadvertently led to the rise of frontier intelligence as the main source of information. At the same time, in eastern Siberia, the Russian Empire created an intelligence network that drew on dozens of agents, spies, and informers in Mongolia. Its purpose was both to determine the extent of the Qing threat and to cultivate the likelihood of Mongol defection.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Russia found itself apparently under siege by pinpricks of British encroachment, from spies to naval raiders. A cloud of conspiracy and intrigues which accompanied the foreign policymaking of this period, as Afinogenov rightly points out, soon became a substitute for the deployment of significant armed forces, because no European state had yet the capacity to dominate the region militarily. By the beginning of the reign of Alexander I, this sense of global encirclement became the driving force of Russian policy toward China. Real threats gradually emerged as responses to imagined ones. Soon enough, military domination became an important part of the imperial agenda, so much so that the prospect of newly gained territories and the personal benefits that arose from it invited competition within the bureaucratic apparatus of the Russian Empire.

As the Russian colonial project began to take shape in the northern Pacific, the empire had to formulate rhetoric befitting the ambitiousness of the endeavor. Much the way western European states justified their conquest with the desire to spread the “true faith” and “enlighten the backward peoples of the Orient,” Russians chose to believe that their conquest of the lands of the Qing Empire was, in fact, an attempt to save these lands from British occupation (p. 252). The book tries to estimate to what extent the spies and scholars of the Russian Empire were complicit in creating this rhetoric.

There have been multiple works examining the connections between Russian foreign policy and the formation of the intellectual environment of the empire. Some traced the development of orientalism to the needs of the state in terms of its relations with the neighbors[2]; others connected territorial expansion to the wider debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers about Russian uniqueness (samobytnost’) and the desire for “enlightenment.”[3] Afinogenov’s book touches upon all of these topics, showcasing a complex system of interdependence wherein the foreign policy agenda was formulated based on intelligence and research, but similarly, intelligence and research were either encouraged or disregarded based on foreign policy needs.

Two different evolutionary processes can be traced throughout the book. The first is the gradual change in Russia’s perception of itself. Muscovite Russia vividly understood its proximity to Asia and built its foreign relations accordingly. But starting from the Petrine era, Russian rulers attempted to remodel society after the West. And while the Slavophile movement arose in response to this attempt, the Westernizers’ agenda generally prevailed. Ironically, in the Chinese context, this pro-Western approach ultimately left Imperial Russia unable to make use of the advantage it had over the European powers. Many insightful works of earlier scholars were shelved in libraries, never to be consulted again. And by the middle of the nineteenth century, Afinogenov demonstrates, Russian academia made a conscious effort to forget the legacy of the past in order to build a disciplinary future.
The second evolutionary process is Russia’s changing perception of China. The Far East for a long time was not the main direction for Russian territorial expansion; the Russian colonial project began to include these lands only at a later stage. This was in part due to the widely accepted view of the Qing Empire as a dangerous rival, with which one should maintain border trade rather than engage in war. It was through the territorial encroachment of Western powers that Russia finally realized the weakness of the Qing and chose to reinvent itself as an expansionist power in the region. Most of the conquest came from the desire to renegotiate the relationship; it was almost always driven by an understanding that the Western powers got a better deal in their interactions with the Qing Empire.[4] Both of these evolutionary processes were largely defined by the gradual integration of Russia into the European tradition of governance and the adaptation of the Eurocentric worldview.

The book is undoubtedly a wonderful scholarly accomplishment. The ability to analyze historical texts in a variety of languages and identify the instances of blatant plagiarism is only one of many impressive skills that the author demonstrates throughout the book. His grasp of linguistic intricacies is so thorough that in several cases he is able to identify the probable origin of the source behind the intelligence reports based solely on the use of certain words. Eloquent and skillfully researched, the book is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of Sino-Russian relations.

Alsu Tagirova is Research Fellow at the Academy of History and Documentation of Socialism, East China Normal University, Shanghai. Her research interests include the history of Sino-Soviet relations, the Korean Peninsula, and Central Asia. Her doctoral dissertation was on the history of Soviet public diplomacy in China. Her current project is on the history of the Sino-Soviet border.

Notes

[1]. The term is used here neutrally; in Russia it is a widely accepted generic term that incorporates Asian, African, and Middle Eastern studies.


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.