Encapsulate everything, grasp nothing:
Russian imperialist discourse in Uzbekistan

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This idiosyncratic book explores Russian language discourses in Uzbekistan. MacFadyen is one of those unusual writers who packs vast conceptual territory into a small text: a 43-page bibliography contains but a mere 188 pages. But while MacFadyen quotes some of his sources at length, he also has a lot to say himself, and effectively crafts much of his exotica argument.

From the ideas of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek to the ‘island’; MacFadyen develops the theme of absence and nothingness, hence the ‘nowhere’ of his title. From the unknown of Islam against which Russia defines itself, through the Russian and Soviet imperial projects, to the loss of Russians from post-Soviet Uzbekistan, he leads us through discursive rhetoric that attempts to encapsulate everything but gaga-not just as in Žižek summaries. ‘When I simply see you I simply see you – but it is only by naming you that I indicate the abyss in you beyond what I see’ (pp 24, 118). Emptiness in Russian discourse on the other arises from the effort to narrate a future for that other that will converge with and legitimate Russian reality. MacFadyen thus investigates the projective and prospective logic of imperialist discourse.

From Russian imperialism in Uzbekistan to 9/11

In fact, MacFadyen takes on a far larger project than merely describing the prediscursive Russian and Russian culture in Uzbekistan. Those who seek the latter in this volume will be somewhat disappointed, because in the author’s attention to tests he loses the sense of experience. He only briefly evokes Russian life in Uzbekistan over the past 15 years, at one point calling it a ‘mess’ (pp 77-80). Because his argument revolves around distortion and loss, he grounds his analyses in the socialist and nationalist texts that most distort lived reality, which leaves the book largely devoid of representations of experience.

Instead of Russian experience, MacFadyen analyzes state and imperial projects (American, Russian, Uzbek), terrorism, Soviet discourses about Uzbek and Russian music, literature, and culture, and post-colonial cultural changes in Uzbekistan perceived through the Internet. He follows Malise Ruthven and John Cullon in suggesting that the ideas and techniques of Muslim terrorists developed from radical European thinking and revolutionary practices (pp 110-11). Many may disagree with this narrow lineage for political and symbolic purposes, or feel it makes little difference. But MacFadyen and his intellectual colleagues argue that European and American violence and imperialism created current horrors. I find little point in finding a determinate path of responsibility from forebears to heirs, but it matters to these scholars that lineages for present problems start in Europe.

Somewhat paradoxically, MacFadyen also quotes Žižek’s advice not to ‘praise Islam as a great religion of love and tolerance that has nothing to do with disguising terrorist acts’; but to see within it productive sources of resistance to the ‘liberal-capitalist world order’. (pp 49-50). This recalls other discussions of the projected emptiness and uniformity of empire-making, such as that found in the essay by Cuy Jiménez.

An overarching narrative

Because he does not mark his voice clearly, some readers may miss his critiques of discourses. Believes in the moral benefits of European elite culture will not see Soviet Russian chauvinism hiding in talk of Euro-American music as the most universal, developed and fertile for the cultivation of an authentically creative national musical tradition (pp 61-2). Likewise, some may agree that Pushkin, Lermontov, Nezakov, Gogol and Chekhov embody the romanticism and realism that Uzbek writers need to reform their literature (pp 66-7).

The sweeping narrative that MacFadyen tells can be difficult to grasp. Over a two-page span, for example: ‘colonialist literary discourses must deal with the newness of truth that is always supplement to their presumably stable norms; despite seeking “the indecipherable and risky,” the Soviets “installed huge institutions” to attain “intellectual certainty”, particularly over religious expression, when the Soviet period ends, there is a new openness to literary possibilities and “run of the mill notions of time and space are being jettisoned”, which leads to a “radical step from real geography and tangible events that pushes the operation of culture into the virtual world” (pp 35-45). Out of context, I would have read this final line as a description of the unreal operations of culture in the Soviet period as well. MacFadyen’s writing promisses much and often delivers, but it also demands an attentive and forgiving reader who can switch easily among stories and interpretations.

Notes
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The Limits of Inner Asia

Warwick Anderson’s fascinating new book is at once a critical intellectual history and an empirical research into the relationship between colonisation and medical practices in America’s administration of the Philippines, 1898 - 1930s. The author argues that as Americans sought to maintain their own corporal and psychic health during this imperial encounter, colonial medicine gradually came to represent Filipinos as a ‘contaminated’ race, and so attempted to ‘civilise’ and ‘reform’ them through a focus on personal hygiene and social conduct. This is a history, therefore, of the development of ‘biomedical citizenship’ (p 3).

Colonialism, race and medicine

To some extent, the book is firmly embedded within the traditions of the ‘history of medicine’, and tells us more about the relationship between often unstable perceptions and representations of race and disease. However, it is further depths which constitute an important intervention into the historiography of colonialism, race, and medicine. First, Anderson studies everyday practices such as the management of human waste and the control of crowds. Second, he traces the relationship between medical practices and the development of particularly colonial perceptions of whiteness and in a particularly interesting manoeuvre - masculinity amongst American doctors and scientists themselves. Third, the book makes an original attempt to grasp the continuities between colonial and post-colonial practices, and to show how U.S. interventions provided the basis for later policies, both in the Philippines and internationally. As such, Anderson speaks to growing concerns within emergent historiography about the intimate effects of empire, and the configuration of America as a colonising or imperial power. It breaks further ground in creating ‘a specific genealogy of metaphors, practices, and careers that links the colony with the metropole’ and, in an often neglected enterprise, in linking experiences in and of the Philippines with other colonies (p 7).

I would like to focus briefly here on Anderson’s fascinating account of the Cullon lepers, which I find to be an isolated outpost in the far west of the Philippines archipelago (p 158), and became the site for the isolation, therapy, and socialisation of lepers for across the islands. Unlike missionary-run leper colonies elsewhere, this was an experiment in citizenship for a ‘contaminated’ community of Eurasian workers. The Cullon lepers lived in houses, worked, voted in elections, and engaged in approved forms of leisure like theatre, music, and baseball. Cullon had its own form of currency, and there were even bakeries and an ice-cream parlour. Exile to Cullon was not, as Anderson explains, represented as the deprivation but the creation of liberty (p 178).

‘Diaspora formation’ was always underpinned with colonial brutality, however. For instance, both leprosy and non-leprosy children were being removed from their parents at an early age. One is left pondering how the Cullon lepers themselves and also their descendants represented their experience of social extinction and civic transformation in this and other respects.