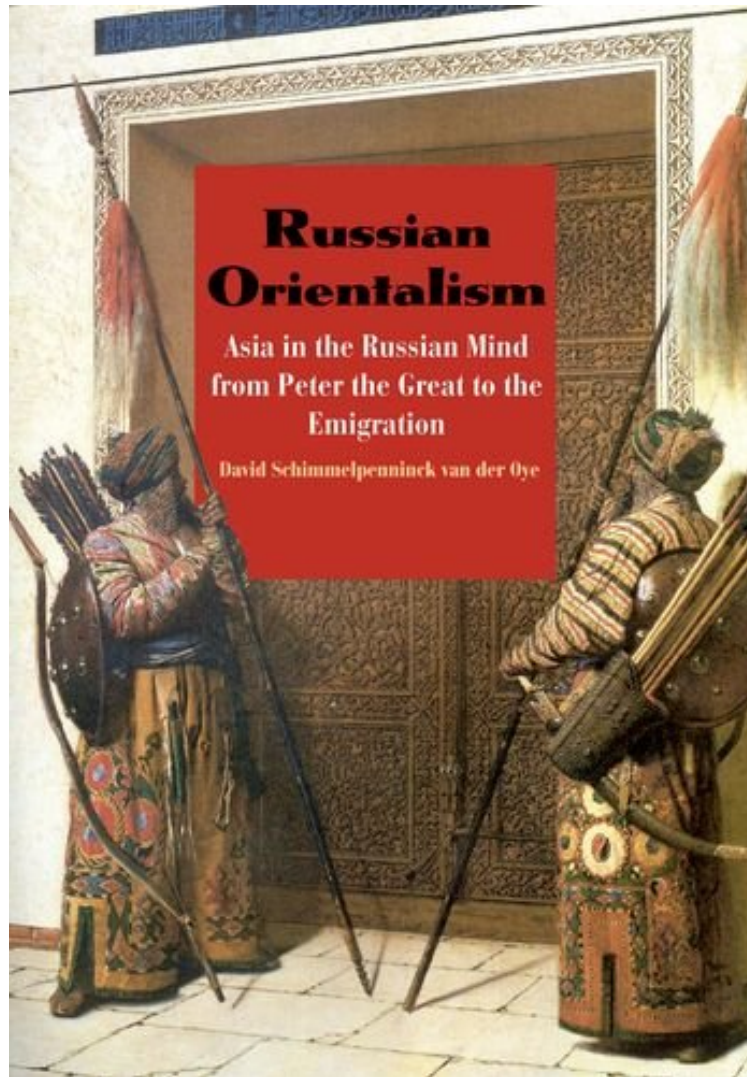


Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration

David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye
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David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye : Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Neither East nor WestBy reader 451Russian Orientalism is one of many works belonging to the introspective wave that was unleashed by Edward Saïd critique of Western writing about the Orient. These books, it must be noted, while each contributing valuable research on their topic, are in danger of becoming a little formulaic. In the introduction, the author criticises Saïd without daring to contradict him outright,

caricatures his argument at the edges to make it seem more generalising than it is, then explains that, at least as concerns his or her region / period / discipline, there are many exceptions. In short, 'it is more complicated', and off we go describing the achievements and the Orientalists of the said region / period / discipline. Van der Oye's book is no exception, though to be fair it does explore the point that Russia was partly Asian in its own self-conceptions, and therefore its discourse on the Orient must have been different. Saïd himself may have been unwittingly influenced, so Van der Oye writes, by Soviet criticism of Western colonial-era literature. The book could have pushed farther, though, its examination of Russia's Asian identity and the crossed lines this created with the long-running Slavophile-Westerniser debate. Progressing through different chapters from before Peter the Great to the era of the last Tsar, it looks at the productions of Russian literature, academia, and the arts period by period. The result is somewhat disjointed, and it leaves the impression that Russian Orientalism was really quite European and not all that different after all. Nevertheless, there are good sections, such as on the Kazan university, to this curate's egg, and plentiful source information. This remains moreover the book to read on the topic, the other volumes on Russia and Orientalism being edited books with multiple authorial contributions, and therefore lacking even Van der Oye's coherence.⁷ of 9 people found the following review helpful. Informative and well-researched book

By Igor Biryukov
 In my 12-year tenure as a Russian émigré in the West I have learned that the Western intellectuals and ruling elite look down its nose at Russia and consider it semi-civilized. It was true during Lord Curzon's times (who said that Russia's conquest of Central Asia was a conquest of orientals by orientals) and it's still true today. So, does this book justifies Western "Orientalism" by saying "Look - even the Russians had Orientalism"? Not so. Dr. Schimmelpenninck is not a defender of parochial attitudes. His thought-provoking book is actually a nuanced look into history of Russia since the times of "the Golden Horde" and an Odyssey into the area of Russia's long and turbulent relations with the non-Russian peoples on the fringes of the Empire and its artistic manifestations, which defined the Russian culture and tradition. Was the Russian Imperial state behind "Russian Orientalism"? Sometimes, the author answers, but often the Russians who cared about "Orient" were the scholars, linguists, artists, and writers who didn't share an agenda of the Russian state. They often defied it. One of such Russian writers was Leo Tolstoy. He entered Kazan University's Faculty of oriental languages in 1844. When Tolstoy was born in 1828 the faculty had professorships in Persian, Arabic and Turkish, when he applied to enter the University, chairs in Mongolian, Mandarin Chinese, Sanskrit and Armenian had been added. The teaching of oriental languages at Kazan University in Russia was at that time of the highest quality and unsurpassed anywhere in Europe. It was a very demanding program and after failing his first-year exam, Tolstoy decided to transfer to less rigorous Law faculty. Later in his life he joined the Russian army in the Caucasus, where he made friends with the Chechens which was unusual for Russian officers. He defied the Russian Imperial state and the notion of "Orientalism" by portraying the Chechen people in positive light in his prose. So there is a lot to like about the book and so I did, with a caveat. Perhaps it is not a task of a historian, but I wish the author would explore more the relationship between the ideas of "Russia" and "Orient". Clearly "Orient" is not a geographical term, though it looks like one. "Orientalism" is a gap, a cultural chasm, which separates the ideas of Europe and Asia in the western mind. The gap has been filled with projections, myths and theories, some of them invented by BIEN-PENSANT thinkers, some by imperialists to justify their more sinister aims. Many of these projections and tropes are applied to Russia even today - just open the "Economist" where Russia is always pictured as a bear and described as "oriental despotism". So, does it apply to Russia itself? Is Russia part of "Orient" or "Occident" for the West? If Russia is "Orient" for English speakers, which I think it is, then "Russian Orientalism" sounds like a joke, like "American Americana". The Europeans defined "Orient" as an antithesis of "Occident". Civilization versus barbarism. The West is home of freedom, reason and dynamism; while its obverse (Asia, and its subcategory- Russia) is a realm of despotism, obscurarism and stagnation. In "The Times" of London in the 1850s the land of Russia and all its inhabitants, including the Tsar, were pictured like a kind of living "Tableaux of Queerness". IN today's "Economist" magazine Russia is still part of "Orient", a trope in the shape of a disheveled brown bear, still a subspecies of "Oriental despotism". Perhaps not. May be it is all comes down to rivalry between Imperialisms: British, Russian, French, etc. We are fortunate that there are some Western historians like Schimmelpenninck who have the guts to point out that in their treatment of indigenuous people of Asia, the Russians were often less cold, less arrogant, less money grabbing, and less evangelizing than other imperialists. Contrary to the widespread Western opinion. This is at least how I understand his book.² of 4 people found the following review helpful. Russia's roots from the East

By J. David Williams
 Very esoteric look at Russia's self image derived from Mongolian heritage as counterpoint to the post Peter the Great's European make-over -- van Der Oye's exposure of the Saïd's shallow, derogatory attack on "orientalism" -- reminiscent of Bernard Lewis -- is refreshing--

The West has been accused of seeing the East in a hostile and deprecatory light, as the legacy of nineteenth-century European imperialism. In this highly original and controversial book, David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye examines Russian thinking about the Orient before the Revolution of 1917. Exploring the writings, poetry, and art of representative individuals including Catherine the Great, Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Borodin, and leading orientologists, Schimmelpenninck argues that the Russian Empire's bi-continental geography, its ambivalent

relationship with the rest of Europe, and the complicated nature of its encounter with Asia have all resulted in a variegated and often surprisingly sympathetic understanding of the East among its people.

"Set against the controversies of Edward Said's book on Orientalism, this book brilliantly reveals how one Eastern people looked at its own Eastern fellow subjects and at the Eastern world beyond its borders."?Richard Stites, author of Serfdom, Society and The Arts in Imperial Russia