

The Expeditions of the Russian Geographical Society to Mongolia, at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

T.I. Yusupova

(Institute for the History of Science & Technology, Russian Academy of Sciences)

1. Several preliminary comments

Russia and Mongolia are neighbors, so it is natural that there was always an interest in Russia to study Mongolia, its geographical features, and peoples.

The closed-door policy of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) had kept Mongolia as a closed territory for foreigners, including Russians, until the middle of the nineteenth century. The possibility to explore Mongolia appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century, when several interstate and commerce agreements which regulated both territorial and trade issues between Russia and China were signed (the Aigun and Tianjin agreements of 1858, the Beijing Treaty of 1860, and the Trade Rules of 1862).

The second important condition for studying Mongolia was the establishment of the Russian consulate in Urga (Ikh-Huree), the most important town, in 1861. This circumstance provided an additional impetus to the expeditionary activities in the region.

The Russian consul-general, Yakov Parfenievich Shishmariov, who had held this post for almost half a century (1864–1911), assisted travelers and was their actual caretaker. He himself was an enthusiastic explorer of Mongolia and developed considerable expertise the country – its population, administrative system, trade, etc.

Of the many expeditions and individual trips of Russian researchers to Mongolia, I will briefly talk only about the expeditions of the Russian Geographical Society (RGS) in Central Asia, the route of which passed through Mongolia, and which used photography to identify and memorialize geographic and architectural objects and ethnographic types.

It should be noted that Russia's exploration of Central (or Inner) Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a unique, multidisciplinary undertaking, namely geographical, topographic (cartographic), and ethnographic, and it also contributed prominently to several branches of natural science and regional geography. The RGS expeditions can also be seen in a somewhat broader context of Russian-Oriental cultural and civilizational interface and as well as a part of Russia's geopolitical expansion to this region, a result of specific competition between Great Britain and Russia – the so-called Great Game for domination in Central Asia.

But I would also like to emphasize that the RGS supported expeditions that had only scientific purposes in the study of Central Asia. All these expeditions had official permission from the Chinese government to

operate in China. As P.P. Semenov, vice-chairman of the RGS, explained, “the Geographical Society, despite its enterprising spirit, always organized its expeditions on the initiative of the travelers themselves, by regulating their activity with a view to yielding the greatest possible benefit for science”.

2. Nikolai Przhevalskii - a pioneer explorer of Central Asia

The Russian Geographical Society started sending its exploratory missions to Central Asia and Mongolia in 1870, the first one being led by Nikolai Przhevalskii. Western researchers speak of him, mainly, only as the greatest representative of Russia's imperial ambitions in Central Asia without noting the enormous scientific merit in his travels and research.

It should be noted that Przhevalskii was a pioneer explorer of Central Asia and opened this vast region of the Asian heartland for Europeans. Besides, Przhevalskii set an example for many other travelers; he outlined an extensive program of explorations, penetrated deep into unknown lands where no other European had walked before, worked out methods of field work, and obtained considerable and accurate data, which substantially increased our knowledge of Inner Asia.

In 1881 and 1887, the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences organized an exhibition of his natural history collections. It attracted much attention among the general public and fostered considerable interest in Mongolia and China in Russia.

Przhevalskii made four expeditions to Central Asia, three of them (the first, third and fourth), began in Urga.

Przhevalskii has published the following books on the results of his travels:

1870-1873 - **Mongolia and the Country of the Tangut** (1875)

1876 - **From Kulja to Tian-Shan and to Lobnor** (1878)

1879-1881 - **From Zaysan through Hami to Tibet and to the Upper Reaches of the Yellow River** (1883)

1883-1885 - **From Kyakhta to the Sources of the Yellow River** (1888)

Przhevalskii used a camera only in his last expedition. Photos (mostly views) were made by his student V.I. Roborovsky. Przhevalskii used photographs in his latest book.

Among his students and followers are famous Russian researchers of Mongolia, China, and Tibet – M.V. Pevtsov, V.I. Roborovsky, P.K. Kozlov, and M.E. Grumm-Grzhimailo. These travelers were army officers, with the exception of Grumm-Grzhimailo.

M.V. Pevtsov and Roborovsky did not leave a photo archive (Roborovskii – except for photos for Przhevalskii in 1883-1885)

Among the Russian researchers, A.V. Adrianov was the first who made photographs of Mongolia (in 1878-1879). He was a member of the Mongolo-Uriankhay expedition of N.G. Potanin of 1879-1880 .Maria

Matveeva will discuss them, as well as about Grumm-Grzhimaylo. The Archive of the RGS has their photo collections.

3. My hero is Peter K. Kozlov (1863-1935) - the most successful pupil of Przhevalskii.

Pyotr Kuz'mich Kozlov (1863–1935) was another Russian pioneer explorer of Central Asia. He was a close assistant and friend of Przhevalskii. According to British historian and archeologist Ewart Barger, both Przhevalskii and Kozlov rank among the most outstanding Western travelers, including Sven Hedin, Paul Pelliot, Edouard Chavannes, Ferdinand von Richthofen, Aurel Stein, Albert Grünwedel, Albert von Le Coq, Raphael Pumpelly and Ellsworth Huntington.

Kozlov started his exploration of Central Asia as a member of the last of Przhevalskii's expeditions in 1883-1889. After Przhevalskii's sudden death in 1888, Kozlov traveled as the assistant to Pevtsov on his Tibet journey in 1889-1891, and then he took part in the Roborovskii's expedition into the region in 1893-1895. Subsequently, Kozlov headed three more very successful journeys to Mongolia and Eastern Tibet, in 1899-1901, 1907-1909, and 1923-1926, which earned him world fame.

In his expeditions Kozlov crossed the Gobi Desert six times in three different directions.

His most outstanding geographic expedition was the Mongolian-Kham expedition in 1899-1901. Its route passed through Central Mongolia and northern Tibet. In this expedition Kozlov made photos for the first time. He used them in his book **Mongolia and Kam** (1906), which described the results of this expedition. His photos are stored in the RGS Archive. Most of the photos are views of the Tibetan Plateau.

For this expedition, Kozlov received the highest award of the RGS – the Golden Constantine Medal (1902).

Kozlov's next expedition was the Mongol-Sichuan in 1907-1909. It began and ended in Urga. This expedition was marked by the discovery of the ancient town of Khara-Khoto in the southern Gobi. During the excavations of Khara-Khoto, Kozlov made extraordinary archaeological discoveries. In one of the sacral buildings – “suburgan”, that afterwards was called “celebrated” – Kozlov was fortunate enough to discover the richest collection of books and manuscripts in Tangut, Chinese, and Tibetan, hundreds of sculptures and icons, and sacred objects from Buddhist temples.

Materials from the “celebrated” suburgan allowed the scientists to reconstruct the history of the forgotten Tangut state Xi Xia, that had flourished for almost 250 years (982-1227) on the territory of modern North China.

Numerous photographs were also taken (personally by Kozlov) of views and types in the places the expedition passed through.

Kozlov's account of his Mongol-Sichuan Expedition was published in 1923 as **Mongolia I Amdo I mertvyi gorod Khara-Khoto (Mongolia and Amdo and the Dead City of Khara-Khoto**, which would

become his most successful book. The best photos were published in this book. The travelogue was also translated in several other European and Asian languages in subsequent years: German (1925 and 1955), Czech (1929), Slovak (1951), Japanese and Chinese (2000s), and **The Diaries of the Mongolia-Sichuan Expedition, 1907-1909** were recently published (Saint-Petersburg, 2015).

In early 1910 the ethnographic collections of this exhibitions were displayed to the general public in RGS. An album with 24 wonderful photos, which was made by the famous St. Petersburg photographer K. Bulla, was displayed in this exhibition. The album is stored in the RGS Archive.

At present, the collection of Tangut painting from Khara-Khoto is preserved in the State Hermitage, and the Oriental book collection is housed the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences.

The most “Mongolian” was the last, the Mongolian-Tibetan expedition of Kozlov, which almost entirely was on the territory of Mongolia. Approved by the government as “Tibetan” in 1923, it never reached Tibet and had to change its plans to travel to Mongolia.

For three years (from October 1923 to September 1926), the expedition carried out enormous work on the exploration of Mongolia. Its results are well-known from the publications of Kozlov himself and his colleagues and experts who investigated the collections, gathered by the expedition. Undoubtedly, the most important achievement of the Mongolian-Tibetan expedition was archaeological finds in the Noyon-Ula mountains.

The objects extracted from the mounds were fragments of decorative silk and woolen tissues, carpets, wooden items, some fine Chinese lacquer cups, etc., of the first century A.D., belonging to the Hun (*xiongnu*) high nobility. There were many discoveries, most of them in very good condition, even though they had stayed in the ground for 2000 years. They stirred up a real sensation in the scholarly circles world-wide, especially the carpets, decorated in the so-called “animal style”. The Noyon-Ula archeological excavation in 1924–1925 added to Kozlov’s stature, as the unearthed artifacts shed light on the history of peoples of this part of Inner Asia, their artistic tradition, as well as the history of ancient handicrafts.

At present the collection from Noyon-Ula is preserved in the State Hermitage

In Mongolia, the Kozlov expedition worked in close contact with the Mongolian Scientific Committee. At the invitation of the Scientific Committee, Kozlov arranged an exhibition of the Noyon-Ula collection in November, 1924, which attracted the attention of a wide audience in Urga. According to Kozlov's agreement with the Scientific Committee, part of the Noyon-Uls collection was left in Mongolia.

Though as a geographer Kozlov was more attracted by Tibet, at the end of his last travels he confessed that he had also fallen in love in Mongolia. Many pages of his publications are devoted to the description of its nature, landscapes, climate, soils, fauna and flora, its peoples, their way of life, customs, and religion.

He wrote in his journal: “Air, dawn, expanses and jurts of Mongolia <...> I’ll recollect and miss”.

In this expedition Kozlov photographed a great deal. In his report, P.K. Kozlov pointed out that up to 300 photographic plates had been made. His photo archive is kept in his personal collection in the RGS Archive and in the P. Kozlov Memorial Museum in St. Petersburg. The museum also stores negatives.

Kozlov usually had several cameras, along with glass plates and chemicals provided by RGS, the main sponsor of his expeditions. He is known to have developed and printed his photographs himself, but sometimes he handed over his glass plates to photographic workshops in Urga. In his diary he commented on the people and objects he photographed, gave the names of the Urga photographers, and evaluated the quality of their work.

In the photographs of P.K. Kozlov, the Mongolia of the early twentieth century comes to life: here are typical landscapes, ethnic types, Buddhist monasteries and ancient monuments, views of Urga, portraits of Mongolian figures, events in which participated Kozlov (meeting with the expedition of N. Roerich, flight over Urga by plane, etc.) Unfortunately, only a small number of photos were signed by P.K. Kozlov or his wife E.V. Kozlova, also a participant in the Mongolian-Tibetan expedition. Most of them have no signatures and present a great difficulty for identification.

Some of the photographs were published in the lifetime editions of Kozlov, as well as in books about him in recent years, including mine. During the expedition, P.K. Kozlov kept diaries, the full text of which was published in 2003 as **Diaries of the Mongolian-Tibetan Expedition, 1923-1926**, which also used photographs from his archive.

4. Some conclusions

The Russian expeditions to Central Asia in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century had significant value for studying of this region by Europeans. The proof of the universal appreciation of the activities of these Russian pioneer travelers was the awards they received from the leading European geographical societies. Thus, Przhevalskii and Kozlov were awarded the gold medals by the Italian Geographical Society and the Royal Geographical Society of London and received a prize from the French Academy of Sciences.

Travelers' books strongly influenced the formation of interest in Mongolian nature and culture in Russian society and have become one of the important ways to broadcast the image of other cultures to a Russian audience.

The natural and archaeological collections brought by these expeditions acquainted several generations of Russians with the nature, culture, and history of Central Asia in general and especially Mongolia.

