

## IN THE RUSSIAN IMPERIAL CONSCIOUSNESS:

# EARLY PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE POETICS OF THE CHINESE- EASTERN RAIL- ROAD

by **Viktoriya Sukovata**

**T**he empire was one of the key concepts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century consciousness and of contemporary cultural studies. Images of the empire were reflected in many of the philosophical and artistic works at that time – including literature,<sup>2</sup> painting,<sup>3</sup> and photography,<sup>4</sup> the latter was a new kind of art in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The leading European empires of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were France, Russia, and Great Britain; these empires struggled for dominance in politics, economics, and culture, and also worked to widen their borders. The famous theorists of postcolonialism and nationalism (Eduard Said,<sup>5</sup> Homi Bhabha,<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson,<sup>7</sup> and others) have insisted that empire, race, and nation are artificial constructions, whose purpose is in part to create a positive image of the “self” (i.e., the nation or empire), and a negative image of the “Other”. The “Other” is a central figure in the formation of an empire or nation; this is particularly true of the European image of the Orient, in which “the Orient” does not have a geographical meaning (i.e., the East) but is rather used in a symbolic sense (i.e., as cultural and political opposition toward white, Christian Europe). The concept of the Orient was given important symbolic meaning from the beginning of the formation of the European empires, and from the development of Romanticism and Orientalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Contemporary Western scholars have analyzed the imperial consciousness in the works of Charles Dickens,<sup>8</sup> Arthur

Conan Doyle,<sup>9</sup> and Rudyard Kipling.<sup>10</sup> Orientalist ideology, according to Said, was formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a romantic image of the mysterious, exotic, and rich lands that were presented as the racial and cultural “Other” to Europe. “Oriental plots” with exotic people and volcanic passions became essential sources in the formation of the self-consciousness of the European empires in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because they fulfilled the role of the Other to whom the European subject was opposed. Said argued that the creation of the image of the exotic or hostile Orient was an effective tool of the imperial European consciousness to confirm its own positive identification and to mark the symbolic borders of European normative culture. The most powerful instruments in the construction of the imperial consciousness were European Romantic literature and the Oriental paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the “Oriental plots” with the depiction of the fatal “Oriental” passions, exotic sexuality, insidious beauties,

and wild animals were to emphasize the chaotic, unpredictable and illogical nature of the “Orient” that needed to be disciplined by the logical and rational “West”, that is, Europe. Such an approach asserted the inequality of races and cultures at a symbolic level and thus justified the colonial aggression of the European empires.

Many scientists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century searched for evidence of racial hierarchies in biology, medicine, anthropology, and other natural sciences.<sup>11</sup> I argue that the image of the Orient in the European mass consciousness was founded not on real knowledge

### abstract

This paper is devoted to the semantics of the visual images of the Chinese-Eastern Railroad (KVG D)<sup>1</sup> and the “Oriental Other” in the Russian public consciousness of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A study was carried out on early photographs of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that contained images of the eastern borders of the Russian Empire – the Far East, Manchuria, and the KVG D. I argue that the construction of the KVG D was intended to be a symbol of the technological progress and spiritual strength of the Russian Empire in the Russian mass consciousness.

**KEYWORDS:** early Russian photography, empire, “Oriental Other”, technical progress, Chinese-Eastern Railroad (KVG D).



The wild and powerful landscapes of the Amur region before the KVG D: the River Shilka in the Trans-Baikal region of Russia, a left tributary of the Amur.

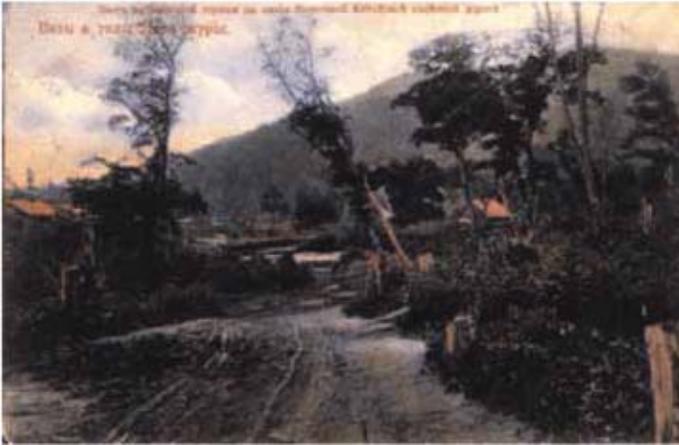
about the economic and cultural life of the Eastern peoples, but on the visual metaphors of the Orient that were created in European painting and photography. The Orient was often represented in Western European painting as a selection of exotic boundary effects, such as the *harem* as a metaphor for the sexual subordination of women, the *bazaar* as a metaphor for economic backwardness, and *opium dens* as a metaphor for moral depravity.<sup>12</sup> “Oriental plots” in the works of European artists visualized the phenomena that appeared strangest in comparison with Western Christian culture: images of Oriental masculinity were symbolized in the European visual mentality in images of Turkish *scimitars*, Arabian racing horses, and tiger or lion hunts, while Oriental femininity was imagined as Oriental harems and beautiful *odalisques*; these images played a leading role in the exoticization and eroticization of the East (as presented in Western European painting of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in works by Eugène Delacroix, Jean Léon Gérôme, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, John Frederick Lewis, and others).<sup>13</sup> A similar situation existed in European photography of the Orient of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the people in those photos symbolized the exotic to the same extent as Oriental temples and tombs, bright Eastern bazaars, and rare wild animals.<sup>14</sup> Although photography became an independent art form in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, early photographs followed the artistic canons and ideological traditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were concentrated on the unconscious wishes and expectations of European viewers.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the symbolism of the Chinese-Eastern Railroad (KVG D) in the Russian imperial consciousness, and to assess how the Russian Empire constructed and visualized its borders within its cultural self-image. I develop these ideas based on early Russian photographs of the Far East and of Manchuria, locations that represented the most distant

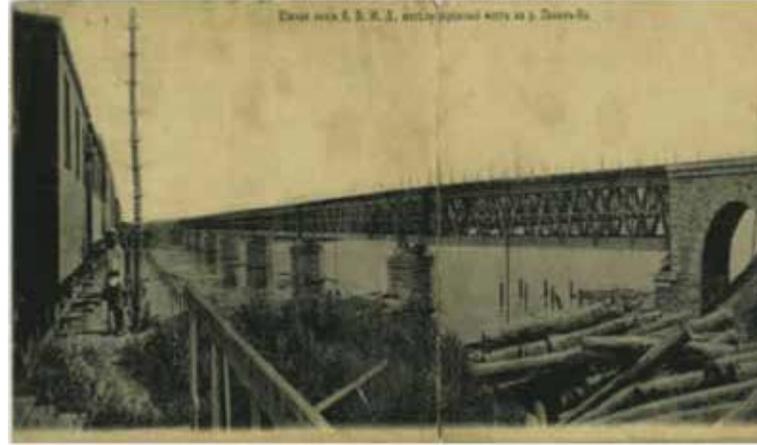
Eastern borders of the Russian Empire. The first photographs of the Far East and Manchuria were taken during the construction of the KVG D – an event that had significant political and cultural importance in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a connection between the European territories of the Russian Empire, and Manchuria and the Amur River. I want to determine what position the KVG D occupied in the Russian imperial consciousness and in the frames of Orientalist ideology, and to identify how the KVG D was reflected in earlier Russian photographs: was there a difference in the perception and visual constructions of the “Oriental Other” in Western Europe and in Russia?

**THE ENTIRE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY** was a time of active expansion of the Russian Empire to the East – not only to Central Asia, but also to the Far East and the Amur region. Cultural evidence of Russian expansion and of the new Russian imperial borders was reflected in the paintings, diaries, and literature of the time. The Russian Empire began “collecting” Eastern lands in the 15<sup>th</sup> century: the movement of the Muscovy Kingdom to the Urals, Siberia, Central Asia, and the Far East began in the times of Ivan the Terrible. The combined territories of Central Asia and Siberia were already inhabited by ethnic Russians and other Slavic peoples, and many mixed marriages had occurred between the Slavic peoples and the ethnic Siberian tribes. As a result, the integration of these parts into the Russian Empire was comparatively peaceful.

The peculiarity of the Russian expansion to the Far East in the 19<sup>th</sup> century lay in the fact that many enthusiasts from different circles of the Russian intelligentsia actively participated in the reclamation of the new lands: mining engineers and geologists, school teachers and university professors, army and navy officers, doctors, and political exiles were among the first explorers.



The natural power and severity of the Russian Far East and the Amur region. The title of the photograph: "Forms and Types of Manchuria".



KVGD: the new technological landscapes of the Far East. The title of photo: "KVGD: South Line; Bridge on the River Lyakin-Ho".

Many of these had not only military, political, or economic interests, but also research and cultural ambitions. Scientific management missions were carried out by the Russian Geographical Society. Siberian merchants and industrialists were interested in studies of the natural resources of the Far East and the Amur region, and provided logistical and financial support to those expeditions. It is notable that, in the Russian public consciousness of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian movement to Siberia and the Far East was considered to be a type of territorial extension of the empire; rather than being seen as a capture or conquest of "others" (i.e., Eastern peoples), it was considered as a kind of joining of stateless lands and ungoverned tribes. The perception of the advancement of Russian researchers and military engineers into Siberia and the Far East in the cultural consciousness of the Russian Empire had much in common with the perception of the movement of America into the West in the American consciousness of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: both poeticized human will, the technical progress of the motherland, the development of new spaces, and the concept of "wild nature".

Does this similarity mean that the Far East and Manchuria did not play the role of the "Oriental Other" in the Russian cultural consciousness? According to the Canadian scholar Shkandriy,<sup>15</sup> Ukraine and the Caucasus played the role of the metaphorical Orient in the Russian national consciousness for a long time; for example, the Crimea was ethnically and culturally linked with the Turks, the Tatars, and the Greeks, all of whom were perceived as culturally other (i.e., foreign) in the mentality of the Russian Empire. However, the Siberian, Northern, and Far Eastern peoples of Russia (i.e., the Evenks, Chukches, Buryats, Saami, and other populations) were not considered to be totally foreign to the Russian Empire; rather, they were considered to be the inhabitants of the outskirts of the Russian Empire.<sup>16</sup> The well-known Norwegian researcher Iver Neumann pointed out<sup>17</sup> that Russia itself was often depicted as the "Eastern Other" by the European West. Neumann insisted that the discourses of the "Russian Other", "Russian coldness", and "Russian unpredict-

ability" in Western mass culture were a psycho-symbolic defense of the Western consciousness against the phobia of Russia's possible superiority to the West.

**EUROPEAN WRITERS** and painters often imagined southern and eastern lands as places of European dream fulfillment – that is, as a sort of eternal paradise. Paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, followed by early photography, created a "catalogue" of Oriental motifs in which young, beautiful, and partially clothed women played a significant role. However, Russian Oriental images were largely determined by the paintings of Vasily Vereshchagin, one of the most famous Russian Orientalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and a representative of critical realism in art.<sup>18</sup> Vereshchagin's poetics of the Orient differed from the Western European Orientalism of Delacroix and Jerome: Vereshchagin did not personify humanity as a particular national or cultural group, whether European Westerners or exotic Easterners; rather, he critically depicted both the cruelty of the British Army in India and that of the Russian Army in Central Asia. Unlike Western European Orientalism, which was based on unconscious escapism by Europeans from everyday bourgeois contradictions, Vereshchagin tried to depict the East not as an exotic place in which naked odalisques were held in harems, but as an independent culture with its own spirituality and ethics. Although Vereshchagin never used gender metaphors to represent the opposition of the East and the West, he created many ethnographic sketches of the different Asian ethnic groups and of traditional Asian sacred buildings that evidenced the spiritual life of the Eastern peoples. At the same time, he actively painted not only the locals of the Russian Far East, but also typical Russian settlements and Russian peasants. The same approach – both an ethnographic and a spiritual one – toward the Eastern peoples and their life can be seen in the early photographs of the Russian Far East and the Amur region, which were intended to portray life in those regions in a naturalistic style.<sup>19</sup> On studying these early Russian photos, I believe that one of the semiotic purposes of the early photos of



The Chinese Eastern Railroad transformed the space of taiga into an “urban space”. A line of the KVGД on the banks of river Mae-ho.



Between mountains. A locomotive leaving the Khingansky tunnel near the station Hinggan, KVGД, 1903.

the Russian Far East and the Amur region was to emphasize that Russian life was similar everywhere, for all Russian citizens and in all parts of the Russian Empire: despite their distance from the center of the empire, Russian locals in the Amur region lived in the same manner as Russian peasants in the central provinces. I consider that the Far East and the Amur region were not understood in Russia as the exotic or hostile Orient, or as something alien, unpredictable, and hostile to the traditional culture of the Russian Empire. According to the concept of Benedict Anderson,<sup>20</sup> *maps, censuses of populations, and museums* played very important roles in the construction of empires: the map of a country is the political symbol of the “body” of a nation or an empire; the census of population asserts the existence of the nation or empire in terms of the physical bodies it contains; and museums represent the history of the nation or empire in the form of visible artifacts in order to establish the ontological right of that nation or empire to exist within generational memory. For this reason, photographs of the distant parts of the Russian Empire performed not only geographical and cognitive functions but also political ones in the imperial struggle for dominance. From this perspective, photography was an important tool that transformed the everyday life of the empire into visible and documented facts. What kind of reality was reflected in the images of the KVGД?

The last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of active development of photography. The first Russian photographers, beginning with Maxim Dmitriev and Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky, used photography to display the everyday life of different ethnic groups and professions in the Russian Empire, along with images of nature and the cities of this huge empire. For example, Dmitriev was the creator of the famous “Volga Collection” of

photographs, which included unique images of the cities and natural environment of the Volga River, from its sources to its mouth (1894–1903). Prokudin-Gorsky became famous by undertaking the first major photography trip around the Russian Empire (1905); during this trip, he took about 400 color photographs of the Caucasus, the Crimea, and Ukraine. In 1907, he also created color photographs of Samarkand and Bukhara. Prokudin-Gorsky conceived the project of capturing Russia’s culture, history, and modernization in photographs of modern Russia. In 1911, he twice performed photography expeditions to Turkestan, and filmed monuments in the Yaroslavl and Vladimir provinces.<sup>21</sup> The goal of early Russian photography was to be scientifically accurate in recording the humanity of the Russian Empire: photography as ethnography was used to examine and position the different lifestyles in the various parts of the empire.

In 2001, the Library of Congress in the United States opened an exhibition titled “The Empire which Was Russia”, for which 122 color photographs were selected from Prokudin-Gorsky’s collection.

Since the development of photography, images of the Far East and the Amur region occupied a significant place among early photographs of the Russian Empire. The first photographic images of the powerful nature

of the Amur region and the Far East amazed the inhabitants of Central Russia and acted as visual evidence of the vastness of the Russian Empire. Many of the early photographs of the Far East belong to the landscape genre and depict the forests, rivers, volcanoes, and hills that formed a background to the geographic or military expeditions in those locations. On the one hand, photographs of the natural environment in the Far East were seen as very exotic by Russians in the central parts of the Empire; on the other hand, these same photographs inserted the natural envi-

**“PHOTOGRAPHY AS ETHNOGRAPHY WAS USED TO EXAMINE AND POSITION THE DIFFERENT LIFESTYLES IN THE VARIOUS PARTS OF THE EMPIRE.”**



KVGD as a hymn to technical progress and order. Harbin Railway Station. A new Russian city which was one of the achievements of the KVGD.



The lounge car of an express train, 1909.

ronment of the Far East into the concept of Russia's "homeland" in Russian mass culture. Early Russian photos of the Far East and the Amur region created the image of "our great and powerful country" in the Russian public mentality, and similarly created public reasons for national pride. For this reason, I consider the photographs of the KVGD to be a construction of Russian cultural mythology and a project aimed at establishing a new "image of the Empire".

**BEFORE TURNING** to an analysis of the early photographs of the KVGD, I will briefly describe its position as a cultural and historical phenomenon, along with its place in the Russian national mythology of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The KVGD was begun in 1897 and was completed in 1903. The railway seems to have had an extremely romantic image that was in keeping with the optimistic philosophies of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century: the KVGD was imagined as a part of the Great Trans-Siberian Way that would establish a direct rail link between the Western European countries and the countries of Eastern Asia (between Russia and China). It was built at a record pace for those times, despite problems which included the extremely difficult construction in the mountains, gorges, and canyons; a lack of roads for technical equipment; a severe climate for Russian workers; and an extremely ethnically diverse local population, with whom Russian engineers interacted.

In its symbolic position within the Russian Empire, and in the way in which the KVGD connected the two continents of Asia and Europe and the nations of Russia and China, the construction of this railway was consistent with the 19<sup>th</sup> century belief in

the possibilities of universal progress, transatlantic traffic, and the universalization of social and human values.

The photographs of the KVGD can be divided into four major groups: the first group is devoted to the wild nature of the Amur River, the KVGD region, and Manchuria; the second group comprises images that are devoted to the railway itself, the new tunnels in the mountains, stations, and other results of hard work; the third group comprises photographs of the trains themselves, and includes internal and external views of carriages, locomotives, passengers, and conductors; and the fourth group is devoted to photographs of ethnic communities that were located within the KVGD region, and of their national and religious lives.

**“THE KVGD WAS IMAGINED AS A PART OF THE GREAT TRANS-SIBERIAN WAY THAT WOULD ESTABLISH A DIRECT RAIL LINK BETWEEN THE WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AND THE COUNTRIES OF EASTERN ASIA.”**

The first group of the photographs contained the images of the Siberian primeval forest, the mountain rivers of the Amur region, the Far Eastern mud volcanoes which were posted in many postcards which were distributed all over Russian Empire. These photos of the Russian Far East played several roles in the imperial consciousness: for one thing, they had an "educational" function and introduced the images of the far boundaries of the Russian Empire to a broad public audience, as it were symbolically

"domesticating" the wild and exotic nature of the Far East in the Russian cultural consciousness. That Far Eastern natural landscape was very unusual in comparison with the typical natural landscape of the Central Russia and the knowledge about the extreme variety of Russian landscapes and imperial borders encouraged the national myth about the "illimitable space" of the Russian Empire. For other thing, the photos of the Far Eastern natural landscape were intended to stimulate national pride



Chinese workers on the construction of the KVGd.



Inside the luxury carriage of the KVGd train: advertising a "pleasant journey" for wealthy people.

among the ordinary Russian citizens in their "great and powerful country" whose territory was so diverse and vast. The postcards with the photos of the far-flung corners of the empire served as of visual evidence of the natural wealth of the Russian Empire.

**THE SECOND GROUP** of photographs depict the railway as an embodiment of the romantic spirit of technical achievement in the Russian Empire. It should be noted that very few Russian urban photographs were taken of the Far East and the Amur River in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This situation reflected the reality of that time – that is, the absence of cities or even large settlements in these regions. However, the lack of urban development aligned with the way in which the inhabitants of Central Russia viewed the Far East as a kind of "natural kingdom" – as opposed to the urban environment of the European part of the Russian Empire. The famous scholar Uriy Leving wrote<sup>22</sup> that the emergence of trains, airplanes, and cars had a profound impact on the cultural consciousness of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a concept that was reflected in many literary texts of the era. These phenomena, along with the introduction of electricity into the domestic sphere, became cultural sensations. The train became a "hero" in the early cinema of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a symbol of the industrialized world. Examples include the famous silent French documentary by the Lumière brothers, *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896), the American cinema adventure titled *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), and the American documentary *Northwestern Pacific Railroad* (1914). In particular, the *Northwestern Pacific Railroad* spends 18 minutes representing the landscapes of California: images filmed from the moving train encompass the new tunnels in the mountains, wild forests, mountain rivers, and canyons that the train passes on its journey. The railway, which ran along the severe and formidable natural environment of the American Western coast, is the main focus of the visual effects in that film. However, the main idea of the film represents the admiration of the director for the achievements of the American workers and engineers

who built tunnels and laid rails in such inaccessible places. The triumph of this achievement is analogous, in my opinion, to the triumph that is present in the first photos of the KVGd, because many of the latter photographs depict the newly discovered and little-known Far Eastern lands, with their grandiose landscapes of taiga and great mountains, along with the rails and trains that were built to pass through all of nature's obstacles.

**THE AESTHETIC PARADIGM** of the time also had a definite impact on the aesthetics of the early KVGd photos, which show the influence of the industrial and urban aesthetics of modernism that were the style of the epoch, and which romanticize the technological achievements and growth of cities (similarly to futurist aesthetics).

Upon analyzing the gender symbolism in the photographs of the technological achievements of the KVGd, it is apparent that nature was not given connotations of femininity or passivity in these photographs, as it was in the traditional European metaphors of the East (the Orient). On the contrary, the nature of the Amur River region could be considered to have a "masculine" character (because of its severe climate), while the Russian workers and engineers of the KVGd achieved their success in laying tunnels and roads using characteristics traditionally associated with femininity: patience and perseverance. Despite the difficult and unusual climate, the summer heat and the severe winter cold, the Russian workers continued to construct the railway and build stations and settlements through the most difficult terrain; the triumph of their labor is shown in the photographs. For this reason, the optimistic triumph of the noble human spirit through the technological achievements of the KVGd was not simply a cultural myth of the Russian Empire, but was also a fact of the construction that was achieved. The construction of the KVGd and its accompanying photographs were expected to stimulate pride among the citizens of the Russian Empire regarding the new opportunities and achievements that had been obtained thanks to the KVGd. Thus, the photographs no doubt increased



Manzhouli Station, China bazaar.



Chinese mortuary buildings in Even-Ho.

national and imperial patriotism, as well as demonstrating the possibility of managing life as a Russian on the eastern borders of the empire.

The construction of the KVGД was an ambitious project that involved connecting the Siberian and Eastern cities of the Russian Empire, from Chita to Vladivostok and Port Arthur, with Khabarovsk. In addition, the construction of the KVGД yielded many positive achievements for the region: in particular, the completely new city of Harbin (now a Chinese city) was founded by the Russians in 1898 as a railway station on the Transmanchurskaya Railway. The old districts of contemporary Harbin are still marked by the typical architecture of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian Siberia. Thus, the Russian Empire expanded its cultural, political, and financial influence in China, Manchuria, and Mongolia; this expansion acted as a kind of “soft power” of the Russian Empire in the Far East and the Amur, because hundreds of Chinese and Manchurian workers obtained jobs thanks to the KVGД construction. In fact, the KVGД was the first successful joint Russian-Chinese implementation of a large-scale industrial and financial project, and provided an impetus to the development of the whole region for many decades.

**THE THIRD GROUP** of photographs of the KVGД can be associated with the poetics of trains themselves as the new achievement of European civilization.<sup>23</sup> These photographs show views of luxurious carriage interiors, which were designed for rich passengers who were accustomed to travel with the comfort that had been adopted in Western Europe at that time. These images of traveling on the KVGД acted as a kind of advertising for travel from the center of Russia to the Far Eastern borders of the empire. Other photographs depict dining cars in long-distance trains, in which the table settings and the level and quality of the dishes correspond to the highest European standards of the time. For the culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the trains symbolized the modern world of speed and industrial progress simplifying connections between rural and urban areas. The train, along with the car and the telegraph, symbolized the changing cultural notions of time

and space, and travel itself was considered as a special chronotope: a number of works by the classical authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were devoted to different types of travel by train (for example, the novels of Jules Verne and Charles Dickens). The first public railway opened in 1825 in England, an event that was reflected in paintings. The largest railways in the world – the American Transcontinental and Russian Trans-Siberian Railways – were built in the United States and Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I argue that the symbolism of the KVGД in this group of photographs is comparable with the symbolism of a famous European train, the Orient Express, which has connected Asian Istanbul with the capital cities of several European countries (London, Paris, Milan, Belgrade, Sofia, and Bucharest) since 1883. The train was a symbol not only of fast and transcontinental travel, but also of “comfortable travel”, the space and time of “luxury”.

In this way, the idea of luxury travel seems to erase the mythological contrast between “civilized Europe” and “wild Asia”. The dominance of railway stations in the photographs devoted to the KVGД demonstrate human victory over the severe climate and over nature, and gave optimism to the observers of the time regarding the successful labor and conquest. Thus, the aesthetics of the KVGД included the triumph of human transformation of nature, scientific achievements, and technological optimism.

The factual history of the KVGД was more complicated and more tragic than was presented in the historical photographs of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Russian government decided to build a railroad from Chita to Vladivostok, not along the Amur River, which was a natural border between the Russian Empire and China, but within Chinese territory, in order to consolidate Russian influence in China. As a result, although the KVGД belonged to Russia (according to the contract), it partly ran through Chinese territory, making it defenseless: in the spring of 1900, the Chinese religious revolt started in an area close to the KVGД construction, and Russian workers became involved in Chinese affairs against their will; Chinese rebels killed some Russian engineers and workers as foreigners. The Russian Navy and the Cossacks came to the Far East to help the Russian working groups,

and Manchuria was drowned in blood. The revolt was not suppressed until 1901. However, the KVGД began to operate in 1903, and the development of Manchuria progressed so rapidly that within a few years, Harbin, Dalny, and Port Arthur had surpassed the population and progress of the Far Eastern Russian cities of Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk, and Vladivostok.

Nevertheless, my aim in this article is not to consider the real history of the KVGД, but rather to examine the image of this railroad that was created in early Russian photography in accordance with the needs of the aging Russian Empire and the traditional understanding of “the East” that existed in Russian culture.

The last significant group of KVGД photographs was devoted to the everyday life of the Eastern workers of the KVGД, and to the Mongolian and Manchurian settlements, religious shrines, and places of prayer. The East that is represented in these photos is a hard-working region, depicted in the aesthetics of naturalism. The photographer drew a symbolic parallel between the work days of the Russian workers in the construction of the KVGД and those of the Chinese workers; both groups appear to have shared similar lifestyles. The Eastern worker was represented not as a stranger, savage, or alien to the Russian spectator, but as a person sharing a common task and a common goal with the Russian worker, thus stimulating unity and solidarity.

In fact, the idea of social justice was implemented in the KVGД in reality. More than 200 000 Chinese workers were employed in the construction of the KVGД, and their income was significantly higher than that of agricultural workers. The board of the KVGД even provided free medical care for workers of all nationalities and citizenship, paid temporary disability benefits, and paid benefits to families in cases of workers’ deaths.

Chinese markets (“Oriental bazaars”) are also present in the KVGД photographs, but these appear to have more an ethnographic function than a decorative one; that is, these images depict the traditional life of people in the Far East. Some images depict the different physical appearances and traditional clothes of the people living around the KVGД and building it. Some photographs show a very naturalistic style, and demonstrate the poverty of the local Chinese and Manchurian people. In my opinion, the underlying message of such images was that the KVGД was bringing civilization to the most distant regions of both China and Russia, and that the poverty of the local ethnicities was being transformed into progress by the urban and technological achievements of the KVGД. Thus, the KVGД, which connected the center with the outskirts of the empire, was regarded as being of the highest benefit to the far-flung population.

The photographs of Chinese, Mongolian, and Manchurian temples among the KVGД photos depict the traditional way of life of the Far Eastern peoples and were ethnographic in nature, aimed at a wide Russian audience.

**IN SUMMARY,** I can draw several conclusions regarding the photographs of the KVGД. First, the principles of visual representation of the Russian Far East were different from the Oriental paradigms of Western painting and photography: the Russian



The Chinese Eastern Railroad from Chita to Port Arthur and Vladivostok.

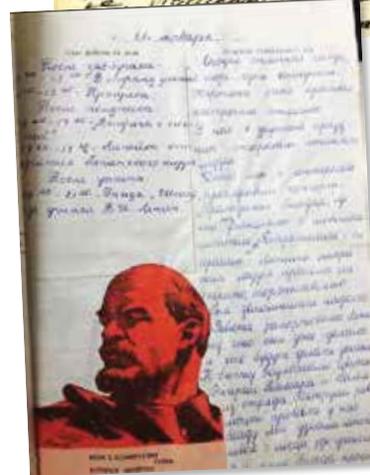
Far East, despite its location in the geographical East of the Russian Empire, never played the role of a symbolic “Other”, of “the Orient”, or of a symbol of the “Eastern colonies” in the Russian imperial consciousness of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Second, the early KVGД photographs had several main purposes: their primary was the glorification of the empire and of its technical, technological, and spiritual capabilities, while their secondary was to establish the borders and “body” of the empire, including its multi-religious population, its powerful and diverse natural landscapes, and its multinational cities with ethnographic and political functions. The third purpose was to depict and invoke admiration for the spirit of the people who were involved in the construction of the KVGД – a spirit that was manifested through perseverance, endurance, and triumph over the difficulties of construction. The KVGД photographs also carried an underlying purpose: to support the idea of the multinational Russian Empire, and to promote progress, both technical and social, and the unification of different peoples to achieve great goals. ✖

Viktoriya Sukovata, PhD in philosophical anthropology and professor of the Theory of Culture and Philosophy of Science Department of Kharkiv National Karazin University, Ukraine.

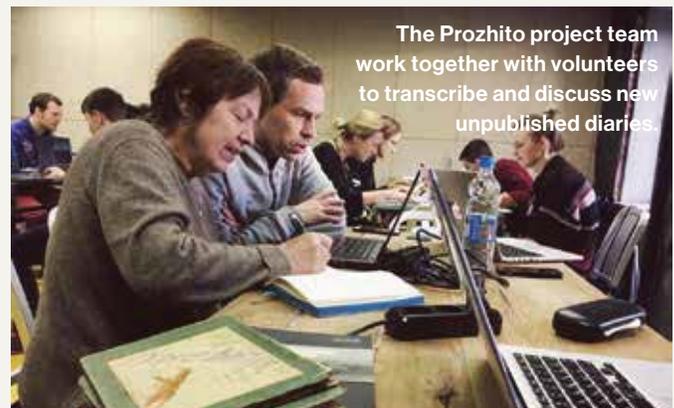
## references

- 1 The Chinese Eastern Railroad (KVGД) (referred to as the Manchurian Road until 1917 and as the Chinese Changchun Railway after August 1945), passed through the territory of Manchuria and connected the Russian cities of Chita, Vladivostok, and Port Arthur. The railway was built in 1897–1903 as a southern branch of the Trans-Siberian Railway. It belonged to Russia and was serviced by Russian subjects. The construction of the railway was a step toward increasing the influence of the Russian Empire in the Far East and strengthening the Russian military presence near the Yellow Sea.
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Examples of diaries handed in to Prozhito by the public.



The Prozhito project team work together with volunteers to transcribe and discuss new unpublished diaries.