

The Alien Republic: Narratives of Deterritorialization in Imaginations of Turkmenistan from the Late Nineteenth to the Late Twentieth Century

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To classify the Turkmen landscape and in particular the Karakum Desert, which we would refer to today as a desert, under the encompassing term “steppe” was still common at the end of the nineteenth century.¹ Aleksandr Voeikov’s pioneering 1884 study *Climates of the Earth*, for instance, in his overview on Central Asian geography, still subsumes the Karakum under the broader characterization of “Central Asian steppes,” divided into merely the southern and northern steppe.² Vladimir Obruchev, a geologist who later became famous as a science fiction writer, in his article “Peski i stepi Zakaspiiskoi Oblasti,” differentiates different types of steppe geography but does not, however, systematically differentiate between steppe and desert.³ In political terms, the question of whether the steppe should be perceived as a part of the Russian empire had been debated since the very beginning of colonial expansion in the eighteenth century. According to Willard Sunderland, the steppe was perceived as a “peculiar periphery (*okraina*), at once of Russia and yet distinct from it at the same time.”⁴ This paradoxical simultaneity of affiliation and alienation gave rise to a specific image of this area, one I want to trace in the following pages using the cultural imagination of Turkmenistan as example.

To approach this imagination, it is crucial to acknowledge its pre-history. Here, the republic was seen through a wider lens of steppe imaginations that conflated geographical features. Authors, as well as many scientists, did not build their arguments and narratives on climatological differences and geographical qualities alone but on a long heritage of imaginations of the imperial

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1. Aleksandr Chibilev, Ol’ga Grosheva, “Evolutsiia vzgliadov na stepnoi landshaft v otechestvennoi geografii,” *Vestnik Voronezhskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya Geografii. Geoekologiya*, no. 1 (2004): 53.

2. Aleksandr Voeikov, *Klimaty zemnogo shara, v osobennosti Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1884), 534–47.

3. Vladimir Obruchev, “Peski i stepi Zakaspiiskoi Oblasti,” *Izvestiia Russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva* 23, no. 1 (1887): 174–90.

4. Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, 2004), 173.

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periphery in nineteenth-century Russian literature.⁵ They drew upon an array of features and stereotypes like vastness, monotony and flatness of space, the extreme climate or the menace of barbarian and beastly forces, widespread in many texts on the steppe.⁶ The imaginations of particular republics in the region and their landscape deserve consideration at this point. Looking at single case studies can help to differentiate more general notions of Russian orientalism and its imaginations of Central Asia. Turkmenistan is not one out of many examples, but it serves, in many cases, as the “odd one out republic.” In this way, the Turkmenistan texts analyzed here resonate and radicalize a trope already present in writing about the steppes since the nineteenth century.

I argue that notions of political integration and arduously achieved climatic transformations were constantly countered by alternative imaginary boundaries, developing an “imaginative geography” of the republic that influenced the public’s perception.⁷ After a short introductory part on late nineteenth-century imaginations of Turkmenistan, three such Russian and Soviet⁸ narratives shall be traced.⁹ Firstly, the image of Turkmenistan as an “arctic desert,” which subverts the Stalinist mythologization of the Arctic and externalizes the southern republic in terms of geography and identity. Secondly, the image of Turkmenistan as a republic whose southern border is constantly threatened by various forces that can never be defeated. Thirdly, the image of Turkmenistan as a “republic from outer space,” which made the country an alien object in the Soviet cosmos. I try to approach this history chronologically, but since the longevity of the narratives differ and some

5. For this heritage, see F. P. Fedorov, “Stepnoe prostranstvo v russkoi literature,” in A.G. Prokof’eva, O.M. Skibina, V. Iu. Prokof’eva, eds., *Gorod, Usad’ba, Dom v Literature* (Orenburg, 2004), 6–19; and A.A. Storozheva, “‘Stepnoi’ tekst v proze N.V. Gogolia i A.P. Chekhova: Sopostavitel’nyi analiz,” *Vestnik Riazan’skogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta im. S.A. Esenina* 65, no. 4 (2019): 145–56.

6. For the Russian discourse on “Asia” in the nineteenth century, see Ol’ga Maiorova, “A Revolutionary and the Empire: Alexander Herzen and Russian Discourse on Asia,” in Mark Bassin, Sergey Glebov, Marlene Laruelle, eds., *Between Europe and Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism* (Pittsburgh, 2015), 13–26. For the “poetics of empire” in eighteenth and nineteenth century Russia see Harsha Ram, *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison, 2003). For a more general approach to the relationship between nationalist imagination and geography, see Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999).

7. The term “imaginative geography” was coined by Edward Said and later developed further by Derek Gregory. Both link the emergence of imaginative geographies to synchronous processes of colonization; see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), 49–73; Derek Gregory, “Imaginative Geographies,” *Progress in Human Geography* 19, no. 4 (1995): 447–85. The paper leans on these approaches as well as on recent other Russian imagination histories like Susanna Soojung Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian Imagination, 1685–1922: To the Ends of the Orient* (London, 2013).

8. There are only a few non-Russian and non-Soviet accounts on Turkmenistan. A very interesting early example of western views on the area can be found in Jules Verne’s adventure novel *Claudius Bombarnac* (Paris, 1892), which depicts a train ride on the Trans-Caspian railway from Tbilisi to Beijing.

9. I limit myself to these three narratives, although further narratives such as the archaization of Turkmenistan, linking the republic with transhuman time-scales, or the depiction of Turkmenistan as an experimental field for alternative economic production, particularly in the field of energy, could be discussed.

thematically and temporally overlap, a strict chronological order cannot be maintained in the sections.

Within these sections of my article, I will point to intertextual references from a wide body of texts and films in order to extrapolate shifts and continuities within these narratives.¹⁰ To conceptualize the contested belonging of Turkmenistan to the Russian and Soviet empires, Iurii Lotman's concept of the semiosphere is helpful. Lotman argues that signs belong to a "specific sphere" and are "assigned to [an] enclosed space."¹¹ Within this enclosed space, boundaries have a crucial function, "giving substance" to the functional mechanism of the semiosphere and internalizing external communication through translation.¹² To map this notion onto the "border state" of Turkmenistan helps us to understand its significance for the construction of the Soviet empire of signs and its oscillation between narratives of belonging and deterritorialization.

Katharine Holt, in her dissertation about "Visions of Soviet Turkmenia," has already given an encompassing account of writings about Turkmenistan in early Soviet literature and film. She extrapolates a "rise of insider iconography" and—by analyzing works by Dziga Vertov, Nikolai Tikhonov, Petr Skosyrev, Andrei Platonov, and others—demonstrates "how the space of Turkmenia was gradually transformed into Soviet landscapes and places in Russian-language literature and film in the 1920s and 1930s."¹³ Instead of questioning her reading, I want to draw the reader's attention to another thread of Turkmenistan's imagination. By looking at a time frame from the late nineteenth century to the late Soviet era and by focusing on a wide corpus, I want to show how precarious it was to keep Turkmenistan within the geographical, imaginary, and political borders of the Soviet empire throughout the twentieth century.

Imaginations of Turkmenistan in the late Nineteenth Century

In January 1881, the Russian army conquered Gök-Tepe, a fortress near today's capital of Turkmenistan, Ashgabat. This historical event inspires Fedor Dostoevskii to devote one of his last entries in his *Writer's Diary* to the principal question, "What is Asia to us?" He is less interested in the concrete social, economic, and geographic conditions of the area, rather, he is inspired by the event as a source of inspiration for collective imagination. Gök-Tepe serves

10. Beyond open intertextual references, my methodology also draws on Elizabeth Bronfen's hermeneutics of "cross-mapping." Cross-mapping refers to motivic, textual, and symbolic analogies between cultural works and allows us to draw trans-historical and trans-medial lines of connection beyond explicit intertextuality (Elizabeth Bronfen, "Crossmapping: a Hermeneutic Practice," in Hartmut von Sass, ed., *Between/Beyond/Hybrid: New Essays on Transdisciplinarity* (Zurich, 2019), 133–46.

11. Iurii Lotman, "On the Semiosphere," *Sign System Studies* 33, no.1 (2005): 205–29, 207.

12. *Ibid.*, 210.

13. Katharine Holt, "The Rise of Insider Iconography: Visions of Soviet Turkmenia in Russian Language Literature and Film, 1921–1935" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2013), 25. Other studies have followed a similar trajectory in examining the imagination of the Soviet periphery: see Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven, 2003); Oksana Sarkisova, *Screening Soviet Nationalities: Kulturfilms from the Far North to Central Asia* (London, 2017); Sabin Diullen, *Uplotnenie Granits: K istokam sovetskoi politiki 1920–1940s* (Moscow, 2019).

him as an opportunity to raise the general question whether Russia should align itself with the European powers or gather its strengths to appropriate the frontier territories on its southern border. For Dostoevskii, frustrated by the superficiality of European civilization and their hypocritical denial of Russian imperial claims, the answer is clear: throughout and within Asia, “a new Russia will be created that will restore and resurrect the old in time and will clearly show her the path to follow.”¹⁴ Surprisingly fast, Dostoevskii incorporates the recently conquered territories, which were still unfamiliar for the Russian public, into his narrative of a new “Russian idea.” This idea epitomizes a “civilizational mission” to provide infrastructure and spiritual guidance, through which Russia could complement itself with its long neglected “Asian side.”¹⁵

In his essay, Dostoevskii refers to Central Asia and the area around Gök-Tepe as “a steppe, bare as the palm of your hand.”¹⁶ Asia becomes a frontier space like America, which Dostoevskii compares, considered open for appropriation and “total restructuring” that Dostoevskii endorses at the end of his essay.¹⁷ His transformative vision reduces the vast space to its territorial qualities while the local population, their traditions and cultural habits, remain unrecognized. The only cultural meaning associated with the territory is its prospective future as a cornerstone of a new Russia.¹⁸ Dostoevskii’s contribution shows how at the end of the nineteenth century, the steppe and desert areas of Central Asia become one of the key imaginative resources in the search for ideas of statehood and civilization by Russian intellectuals.

Whether the geography of Central Asia is as easily modifiable as Dostoevskii’s diary entry suggests became a controversial issue as early as the late nineteenth century. An important turning point of the debate was the drought of 1891. The ensuing desertification engendered fear of the advancing steppes threatening European Russia, which Dostoevskii shares

14. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer’s Diary 1877–1881. Vol. 2*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, 1994), 1375.

15. Framing colonial activities as “civilizational missions” was common in the nineteenth century, see Jürgen Osterhammel ed., *Zivilisierungsmissionen: Imperiale Weltverbesserung seit dem 18. Jahrhundert* (Konstanz, Germany, 2005); Adeeb Khalid, “Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 231–51.

16. Dostoevsky, *A Writer’s Diary*, 1374.

17. For the conceptualization of late Tsarist frontier discourse, see Mark Bassin, “Turner, Solov’ev, and the ‘Frontier Hypothesis’: The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces,” *The Journal of Modern History* 65, no. 3 (1993): 473–511; Terry Martin, “The Empire’s New Frontiers: New Russia’s Path from Frontier to Okraina, 1774–1920,” *Russian History* 19, no. 1–4 (1992): 181–202; Susi Frank, “‘Innere Kolonisation’ und frontier-Mythos: Räumliche Deutungskonzepte in Rußland und den USA,” *Osteuropa* 53, no. 11 (November 2003): 1658–75; Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*.

18. Dostoevskii’s perspective was, however, not the only one in late tsarist discourse on Central Asia. Vera Tolz has shown how the emerging discipline of Oriental Studies constructed a colorful picture of Central Asian languages, cultures, histories, and heritages. Their representatives, to some extent postcolonial predecessors of today’s critique of eurocentrism, later also contributed to the nation-building process in the Central Asian republics in the 1920s, see Vera Tolz, *Russia’s Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford, 2011).

in earlier writings.¹⁹ Vladimir Solov'ev calls the dry desert winds the “enemy from the east” penetrating the Russian heartlands: “Central Asia is advancing on us with its elemental force of the desert, it is breathing on us with its withering eastern winds, which, not encountering any obstacles in the felled forests, carry whirlwinds of sand right up to Kiev.”²⁰ Here, the efforts of “civilizing” Central Asia collide with the counter-culture of *Panmongolizm* (the title of a famous poem by Solov'ev from 1894), threatening to recapture Russia. Cultural borders are broken by natural forces, establishing a counter-geography where the distant whirlwinds of the Central Asian steppes and deserts retake Russia, evoking earlier Mongolian invasions. Although not all voices were equally apocalyptic, Solov'ev's concerns were shared by scientists like Nicholas Vereshchagin, an agricultural specialist, who also “linked the ‘harmful influence of the hot, Asiatic winds’ to the devastating Mongol invasion.”²¹ Foregrounding natural forces and referring to earlier Mongolian invasions charged the steppe regions of the Russian empire with archaic features. Michael Kunichika has identified a “steppe archaism” in Russian modernism, where travelers encountered traces of ancient civilizations and were confronted with time models radically different from the linear modern temporal regime. The most important example for this archaism is the modernists' fascination with kurgans and stone babas, which, according to Kunichika, “stratify the steppe, opening up temporal and archaeological layers that had not been sensed before and that challenged notions of sheer, timeless horizontality.”²²

The 1881 and 1891 cases show the ambiguity of debates about the area's geography in late tsarism. This ambiguity is marked by a threefold dialectic that becomes crucial for the imaginative histories of the following century: firstly, between a concrete, evidence-based geography that gains its momentum through international collaboration and competition and an imaginary geography of vast free spaces open for symbolic and environmental transformation.²³ Secondly, between a rhetoric of appropriation in which Russia and Asia become a symbiotic new entity and a rhetoric of alienation in which steppe and desert areas and their cultural and environmental features are

19. In his novel *The Adolescent* (1875), steppization is perceived as a threat and connected to the “Asianization” of Russia, when the hero warns: “Now they're deforesting Russia, exhausting her soil, turning it into steppe, and preparing it for the Kalmyks.” See Fedor Dostoevskii, *The Adolescent*, trans. Richard Pevear, Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, 2007), 63.

20. Solov'ev quoted after Mieka Erley, “The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum: Andrei Platonov's Dzhana as the Environmental History of a Future Utopia,” *Slavic Review* 73, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 734.

21. David Moon, “The Environmental History of the Russian Steppes: Vasilii Dokuchaev and the Harvest Failure of 1891,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 15 (2005): 160.

22. Michael Kunichika, “*Our Native Antiquity*”: *Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Culture of Russian Modernism* (Boston, 2015), 106. This modernist reevaluation of archaic elements against modern civilization is an important trope formative for later Turkmenistan texts, for instance by Andrei Platonov, which will be analyzed below.

23. For a good overview on the international character of the climatological endeavors in Central Asia, see Deborah Coen, “Imperial Climatographies from Tyrol to Turkestan,” *Osiris* 26, no. 1 (2011): 45–65.

othered and externalized from the Russian state. Thirdly, between the present time in which infrastructural projects are realized and administrative structures are institutionalized and a mythical time in which the newly acquired borderlands become epitomes of eternal struggles between life and death, nature and civilization.

The Arctic Desert

The transformation of Turkmenistan gained momentum in the early 1930s and was part of the wider transformation of the imperial peripheries in early Stalinism. In these years, a narrative took shape that was a direct offspring of the times: the narrative of the Arctic Desert. Climatically, the cold Arctic and the hot sandy desert could hardly be further apart, but geographically there are parallels. For example, geographers speak of the “Arctic Desert Ecoregion” in northern Russia, which, like the Karakum Desert in Turkmenistan, is characterized by the virtual absence of vegetation and human habitation. Already in pre-Soviet times, writers dreamed of changing the climatic conditions of these regions. In his fantastical story *The Republic of the Southern Cross* (1908), Valerii Briussov mentions a gigantic roof built above a fictitious city in the Antarctica to overcome the rough climate of the pole regions. Such notions of climate-engineering flourished in the 1930s and were also applied to the Arctic. Writers like Il’ia Sel’vinskii or Aleksandr Beliaev, as Susi Frank has shown, wrote utopias about a hot arctic and described a future that was “completely independent of real environmental conditions.”²⁴ Detaching literary imagination from existing climatic conditions was a prerequisite for bringing the Arctic and the Karakum together, a topos pertinent to the literature of high Stalinism.

In the early 1930s, the mythologization of the Arctic was at its peak. Since the late 1920s, the Arctic had become a frontier region for Soviet efforts to transform the country and appropriate its peripheries. These efforts were accompanied by wide journalistic coverage and many literary adaptations.²⁵ The Arctic was, however, not just any frontier among others but “conceptualized as a synecdoche, as a microcosm of Soviet space as a whole.”²⁶ The Arctic space was closely linked to the Soviet center and seen as a testing ground on which the qualities of the Soviet *Übermensch*, his heroism, fearlessness, and spirit of discovery were visible in pure form.²⁷ The region served as a prime

24. Susi Frank, “City of the Sun on Ice: The Soviet Counter-Discourse of the Arctic and its Western Equivalents in the 1930s,” in Anka Ryall, Johan Schimanski, Henning Howlid Waerp, eds., *Arctic Discourses* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010), 106–132, 115.

25. John McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1929–1939* (New York, 1998) and “Tabula Rasa in the North: The Soviet Arctic and Mythic Landscape in Stalinist Popular Culture,” in Evgeny Dobrenko and Erik Naiman, eds., *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle, 2003); Pier Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic* (London, 2003); Elena Penskaya, “Investigating the Laboratory of Popular Arctic Narrative in Russian Literature from the 1930s to the 1950s,” in Susi Frank and Kjetil Jakobsen, eds., *Arctic Archives: Ice, Memory and Entropy* (Bielefeld, Germany, 2019): 253–68.

26. Frank, “City of the Sun On Ice,” 119.

27. Hans Günther, *Der sozialistische Übermensch: M. Gor’kij und der sowjetische Heldenmythos* (Stuttgart, 1993).

example of how a life-threatening environment could be transformed into a Soviet Arcadia. The Arctic discourse established a counter-geography where Soviet heroes subverted and transgressed natural and geographic borders.

Part of this mythologization and analogization of the Arctic in the 1930s was the establishment of an analogy between the Arctic and the Karakum Desert. A key representative of this stream was Leonid Leonov, who linked the Arctic and Turkmenistan in his texts of the early 1930s. Leonov had worked on his first production novel, *Sot'*, in the late 1920s, which revolves around the building of a paper mill in northern Russia. *Locusts*, Leonov's povest' about a fight against the plague in Turkmenistan builds on *Sot'* and was published after Leonov's participation in the first writer's brigade to Turkmenistan in 1930.²⁸ Its title refers to a novel by Sergei Budantsev, written between 1925 and 1927, documenting a fight against a locust plague in Soviet Azerbaijan in the early 1920s.²⁹ As in Budantsev's novel, the fight against the locusts is rather unsuccessful in both cases, as the creatures appear and disappear faster than any efficient defense can be launched. *Locusts* deals with the romantic hero's fight against a locust plague in Turkmenistan. One of his geo-poetical storylines is marked by the opposition of Novaia Zemlia and Turkmenistan. Maronov, the main hero of *Locusts*, is a meteorologist who comes to Turkmenistan after a longer stay in the Arctic. When the protagonist crosses the border at the Amu Darya River, the apocalyptic background of the plot is foreshadowed: "The wind was destroying the clouds in the west and the evening was bleeding out like a sacrifice on an altar. Incorporeal red juice was splashing over the sky and, for a moment, Maronov thought that the Amu was a rusty sword infiltrating the dried-out heart of the Karakum."³⁰ The entering of the republic is vividly semanticized, implying that Turkmenistan is not just another republic but a place with its own internal logic. From the beginning, the Turkmen republic is characterized by apocalyptic imagery. The desert is a devil's area (*chortovaya kulichka*³¹) and, as the locusts invade the republic, everything is plunged into darkness and eternal night. Later, the misery is even compared to the Verdun battlefield.³² Maronov's ultimate confrontation with the locusts culminates in vivid rhetoric, reminiscent of epic plagues: "Torrid air-streams were plunging next to him, he swung between them like a flame is swung by its own heat."³³ The imagery of a locust invasion can be traced to the plagues of Egypt described in the Book of Exodus (Ex 10:1–20) and the Book of Revelation,³⁴ a tradition Leonov is explicitly invoking by calling the animals a

28. For the background of this brigade, see Holt, "The Rise of Insider Iconography," 112–27; Zakhar Prilepin, *Podel'nik epokhi: Leonid Leonov* (Moscow, 2012), 312–21.

29. In her introduction to Budantsev's *Collected Works*, L. Polosina explains the later renaming of Leonov's povest' from *Sarancha* to *Saranchuki* through the existence of Budantsev's work that Leonov was aware of, see L. Polochina, "Literatura sdelalas' professii. . .," in *S.F. Budantseva: Pisatel'nitsa: Romany, rasskazy* (Moscow, 1988), 6.

30. Leonid Leonov, "Saranchuki," in *Turkmenistan vesnoi: Al'manach* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1932), 4.

31. *Ibid.*, 13.

32. *Ibid.*, 38.

33. Leonov, "Saranchuki," 50.

34. The later reference is also recognized by Prilepin, *Podel'nik epokhi*, 320–21.

“biblical plague” (*bibleiskaia papasta*).³⁵ Besides the bible, the locust motive also played a prominent role in Solov’ev’s poem *Panmongolizm* where the fear of an Asian invasion of the Russian heartlands is characterized by the imagery of the locust invasion: “Let it be so! God has not yet / Emptied his wrathful hand. / A swarm of waking tribes / Prepares for new attacks.. . .Countless as locusts / and as ravenous, / shielded by an unearthly power / The tribes move north.”³⁶

By referring to these traditions, the povest’ establishes a threatening geography questioning the integration of Turkmenistan into the Soviet cosmos. The locusts in Turkmenistan are closer to their home in the Sudanese steppes than to Russia. The republic is compared to Cairo and Madagascar throughout the story, evoking competing notions of geographical belonging. By presenting the transgression of the northern Turkmen border on the Amu Darya River in apocalyptic rhetoric, the impression arises that the hero is leaving the safe haven of the Soviet Union and entering a hostile environment. Against the locust threat, Soviet map making is powerless. Their migration routes lack any logic and—in contrast to the Basmachi mutineers and the pre-Islamic caravans—they cannot be located. Without clearly defined demarcations, the republic’s borders cannot be defended. Turkmenistan, fighting on several fronts at the same time, is overrun by the locust invasion and Maronov feels his “powerlessness as a border guard who had to defend the borders of the republic alone.”³⁷ Maronov, exhausted by his fight, starts hallucinating and, although the plague has finally passed, it is unclear whether this is due to human efforts or only a caprice of nature. In the end, Maronov decides to leave Turkmenistan for Novaia Zemlia. While the reason for his return remains vague in the povest’’s first version, it becomes clearer in the reworked edition as his friend Mazel explicitly asks him:³⁸ “‘You are leaving us early, comrade.. . .Apparently, Asia didn’t appeal to you?’—‘It’s better on Novaia Zemlia,’ laughed Maronov. ‘Warmer.’”³⁹ The story concludes with the counter-geographical statement that Turkmenistan has turned cold. The metaphor of coldness symbolizes a civilizational coldness that cannot be overcome. While the Arctic has become a Soviet territory in which the fight against nature was successful, Turkmenistan remains a foreign entity for Soviet geography, a republic that cannot be transformed.

35. Leonov, “Saranchuki,” 23. Catastrophes had already been figuring prominently in *Sot’*, a novel that abounds in allusion on pre-Socratic cosmogony, biblical and historical events, and contains a complex semantics of elementary forces shaping the human and geographical world.

36. Translation taken from “Pan Mongolizm,” trans. unknown, *From the Ends to the Beginning: A Bilingual Anthology of Russian Verse*, at max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/mdenner/Demo/texts/panmongolizm.html (accessed March 29, 2022).

37. Leonov, “Saranchuki,” 49.

38. Boris Thomson dates the revision of the text to 1945, see Boris Thomson, *The Art of Compromise: The Life and Work of Leonid Leonov* (Toronto, 2001), 123.

39. Leonid Leonov, “Sarancha,” in *sochineenii v desiati tomack. Tom Chetvertyi* (Moscow, 1970), 296.

In his essay *The Hot Arctic* from 1934, Andrei Platonov follows a more conciliatory approach towards geographical extremes of the Soviet Union.⁴⁰ In Platonov's text, the dry and sandy Turkmen republic is represented by metaphors of water, the Turkmen people live on sandy shores amid an "ocean." The Arctic serves as a role model for the future development of Turkmenistan, be it geographically, where the resources of Turkmenistan (oil, coal, cotton) must be exploited like in the Arctic, or be it anthropologically, where the courage of the "Cheliuskinites" was to inspire the "ironic" reason of the Turkmen people.⁴¹ The Arctic has now become the "school for the Soviet and northern people."⁴² By appropriating the enormous potential of the desert, the Karakum means "even more for the Soviet Union than the Arctic."⁴³ In Platonov's literary works on Turkmenistan, however, severe doubts are raised about the applicability of the lessons learnt in the north to Turkmenistan in the south. Particularly in his story *Dzhan* (1935), the eponymous desert people of the Dzhan are untouched by the Soviet modernization efforts and inhabit a "spatiotemporal refuge from history and historiography."⁴⁴ The deserts of the republic are no longer the subjects of a transformation striving for the climatic and economic assimilation of the Soviet Union's periphery. In Leonov's and Platonov's case, they become heterotopias in republican form, questioning the possibility of converging the social and ecological climate of the empire.

The Arctic analogy, however, was also developed in a different way. While Leonov and Platonov were distinctly pessimistic about modernization efforts, there were, at the same time, more enthusiastic perspectives that imagined utopias made possible by climate engineering in the desert. Such an account was given, for instance, by M. Il'in, a writer of scientific-fictional literature who was very popular in the 1930s but is today mostly forgotten.⁴⁵ In 1934, Il'in gave a short speech on the First Soviet Writer's Congress about literature's role in the transformation of nature and introduced the Karakum as a

40. Andrei Platonov participated in the second writer's brigade to Turkmenistan in 1934 and published three texts about the republic. Takyr was included in the almanac *Aiding-Günler* (1934, 46–59), *Goriachaia Artika* and *Dzhan* (the result of Platonov's second journey to Turkmenistan in 1935), however, did not pass censorship and could only be published later. For the background of the second brigade, see Holt, "The Rise of Insider Iconography," 185–98.

41. Andrei Platonov, *Goriachaia Artika*, in *Fabrika Literatury: Literaturnaja kritika. Publicistika* (Moscow, 2011): 648. For Platonov's "ironic" view on the republic, see Natal'ia Kornienko, "Andrei Platonov: Turkmeniia—strana ironii: Obraz Turkmenii v sovetskoi i russkoi literature 30-kh," in *Natsiia. Lichnost. Literatura, vypusk 2* (Moscow, 1996), 98–122.

42. Platonov, *Goriachaia Arktika*, 645.

43. Ibid.

44. Erley, "The Dialectics of Nature," 747; For further analysis of the story and its context, see the other contributions by Nariman Skakov, Philipp Ross Bullock, and Eric Naiman in the same special issue. For further research on the story, see Nariman Skakov, "Prostranstva 'Dzhana' Andreia Platonova," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 107 (2011): 211–30; Holt, "The Rise of Insider Iconography," 222–72; Anne Hartmann, "Unzeitgemäß und eigensinnig: Andrej Platonovs Blick auf Zentralasien," *Osteuropa* 8–10 (2016): 165–89; Jens Herlth, "Andrej Platonov: Džan," in Bodo Zelinsky, ed., *Die Russische Erzählung* (Cologne, 2018), 496–514.

45. For Il'in see Matthias Schwartz, "Factory of the Future: On M. Il'in's "Scientific-Fictional Literature," *Russian Literature* 103–5 (2019): 259–81.

prime example on which this literature could test itself.⁴⁶ A year later, a collection of literary essays by him entitled *Mountain and Men* was published, opening with a text about the transformation of the desert (perestroika pustyni).⁴⁷ Crucial for Il'in's considerations was the scientific character he applied to them. His goal was to "overcome [the] opposition between science and the artistic imagination" by claiming a new self-understanding of the writer who should "envision the future" and inspire scientists.⁴⁸ Il'in's idea of geography was a "living map," where climate, soil, and temperatures could be modified by human engineering.

Within this conception, the Arctic climate and the Karakum Desert were similar, not oppositional. One of the subchapters is entitled "The Arctic close to the Sahara," and dreams about using the water resources of the southern Kopet Dagh Mountains for irrigation. Interestingly, Il'in does not write about Karakum and Kopet Dagh but used the Arctic and the Sahara as substitute toponyms.⁴⁹ The same phrase about the interchangeability of the Arctic and Africa was later repeated by Il'ia Sel'vinskii, who summarized the attitude of one of his heroes: "But it was all the same to Zverev—Africa or the Arctic."⁵⁰ While the Arctic could at least be regarded as a part of the Soviet cosmos, the Sahara rarely could. By equating the Karakum with the Sahara, Il'in was de-territorializing the desert in a similar way as Leonov's heroes had in *Sarancha*. Another example of the fragile semantic autonomy of the Karakum in Il'in's text is the approximation of steppe and desert geography. Il'in reminds the reader "that only a hundred years ago, in the place of today's sand deserts were sand steppes."⁵¹ For Il'in, the steppe is the defining point of reference for the transformation of the desert. On the one hand, the steppe serves as a successful role model for the future transformation of the desert, as in the case of the Kazakh "hungry steppe" Il'in references.⁵² On the other hand, steppe geography can degenerate into nomadization⁵³ and desertification. That the desert could have a climatic or cultural value of its own did not come into Il'in's mind.

Such phantasies of climate engineering reemerged with the building of the Main Turkmen Canal, one of Stalin's "Great Constructions." Numerous *ocherks* and documentaries were written about the undertaking, which was ceased shortly after Stalin's death. Some of them revived the Arctic analogy so present in the early 1930s. Vasilii Zakharchenko, in his children's book *Travel into Tomorrow* (1952, published under the pseudonym V. Dmitriev), imagined the future of a Soviet geography after the Stalinist climate engineering projects in the desert had successfully been implemented. In his vision, the water-rich

46. Mikhail Il'in, "Rech' M. Il'ina: In I. Luppol, M. Rozental' and S. Tret'iakov, eds., *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s"ezd sovetskikh pisatelei 1934: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moskva, 1990), 214–16.

47. M. Il'in, *Gory i liudi* (Leningrad, 1935).

48. Matthias Schwartz, "Factory of the Future: On M. Il'ins 'Scientific-Fictional Literature,'" *Russian Literature* 103–5 (2019): 259–81.

49. Later, Il'in gives the example of an ice machine fueled by sun energy as the ultimate example for the triumph over the desert climate.

50. Frank, "City of the Sun On Ice," 112.

51. Il'in, *Gory i Liudi*, 45.

52. *Ibid.*, 30.

53. *Ibid.*, 51.

Soviet north was connected through huge channels with the Central Asian steppes, enabling deep-sea vessels to travel all the way from the Caspian Sea to the Arctic.⁵⁴ Such phantasies echoed the idea of the “Northern river reversal,” which planned to divert Siberian rivers into Central Asia. This idea was promoted by Vladimir Obruchev in a 1948 letter to Iosif Stalin.⁵⁵ This was the same Obruchev who had, some sixty years before, participated in the exploration of the desert. Now, he reminisced upon his experience and dreamed of a bright future in the developed desert. In sketching this time, he again accentuated the steppe character of some parts of the Karakum and stated “that the Karakum cannot be called a desert in the actual sense of this word.”⁵⁶ As a role model for the future development of Turkmenistan, he pointed to Kazakhstan,⁵⁷ again, analogizing Turkmenistan with the steppe geography of the northern republics.

The strong imaginative link between the Karakum and the Arctic was specific to the Stalinist time. Pursued by the idea of the “living map” and the utopias of climate engineering, Turkmenistan’s climate was imagined as malleable. The Arctic and the Karakum Desert as the utmost extremes of Soviet climate became subjects for Soviet propaganda to demonstrate the ability and power of the empire.

Following Katerina Clark, the Arctic epitomized the idea of an imperial sublime taking shape in images of “remote and dramatic nature.”⁵⁸ In the struggle with this nature, the Soviet nation was forged. Writers like Sel’vinskii, Il’in, Platonov, or Zakharchenko followed the idea and, in their writings, analogized the Arctic and the desert—a move that can be read as an attempt to include Turkmenistan into a narrative of imperial appropriation. The Karakum, however, never gained the popularity and visibility of the Arctic. The flat desert lacked the vertical dimension, so crucial for the symbolic geography of high Stalinism,⁵⁹ and thus could not be staged as an epitome of a “Russian landscape,” as which the Arctic prefigured.⁶⁰ Mirroring such reservations, writers such as Leonov and Platonov, in their fictional works, questioned the transformability of Turkmenistan and demonstrated the limits of the analogy. Turkmenistan here was alienated from Soviet geography, it became a gateway for evil forces from the south that could not be tamed. Their protagonists leave before they manage to approximate Turkmenistan to the climate of the Soviet heartland.

Danger from the South

With the Bolshevik victory in the post-revolutionary civil war, the reorganization of Central Asia became one of the crucial means to secure Soviet rule

54. V. Dmitriev, “Puteshestvie v zavtra,” *Tekhnika—Molodezhi* 6 (1950): 25–28.

55. S. Iakutseni, A. Burovskii, *Politicheskaia Ekologiya* (Moscow, 2015), 359.

56. Vladimir Obruchev, “Preobrazovanie Pustyni Kara-Kumy,” *Priroda* 11 (1952): 27–38.

57. Obruchev, “Preobrazovanie,” 37.

58. Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, 2011), 290.

59. *Ibid.*, 287.

60. *Ibid.*, 291.

there. Building Soviet-style socialism in the region required raising a new political elite, forging new economic connections, overthrowing old social structures dominated by religion and tribalism, introducing literacy throughout the country, and much more.⁶¹ The key imperative after the civil war was to build an “empire of nations” in “revolutionary alliance” with local elites and experts of the area.⁶² The Turkmen republic was a “textbook case” for these efforts, as Adrienne Edgar has shown in her seminal study.⁶³ One of the first steps to succeed in this plan was the delimitation of national borders, a process that was far from undisputed.⁶⁴ Most Turkmen were nomads wandering hundreds of kilometers every year with their livestock. To them, the idea of state borders was alien. Conflicts arose, for example, on the Kara-Bugaz lagoon in north-western Turkmenistan, but were most delicate on the southern border to Persia.⁶⁵

The Soviet state was facing many challenges there, reaching from contraband trade over unregulated flows of migration to the military threat of the rebelling ‘Basmachi’ mutineers, a pejorative term, which propagandistic overtones disguised the economic, cultural, and political problems behind rebellion.⁶⁶ This instability of the border area, where Basmachi as well as migrants were crossing the borders into Iran and Afghanistan, contributed to its conceptualization as a “threshold area.”⁶⁷ Authorities in the area relied on the assistance of local cadres to supervise the borders, a precarious arrangement for the authorities, who questioned the loyalty of people in the borderlands.⁶⁸ Unregulated trade and a high level of uncontrolled emigration further

61. Victoria Clement has recently researched Soviet cultural policies of literacy and language formation in Turkmenistan, see Victoria Clement, *Learning to Become Turkmen: Literacy, Language, and Power* (Pittsburgh, 2018).

62. Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005).

63. Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, 2004), 5.

64. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 12–14. For an encompassing account of changing border regimes in Soviet Russia, see Robert Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation: Border Controls in the Soviet Union and its Successor States, 1917–1993* (Montréal, 1998); Diullen, *Uplotnenie Granits*.

65. Alun Thomas, *Nomads and Soviet Rule: Central Asia under Lenin and Stalin* (London, 2018): 85–92.

66. For the history of the Basmachi movement in Central Asia, see Marco Buttino, *Revolutsiia naoorot: Sredniaia Aziia mezhdū padeniiem tsarskoi imperii i obrazovaniem SSSR* (Moscow, 2007); Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 2007): 54–55. For the Basmachi rebellion in Turkmenistan, see Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 38–9. Several Central Asian republics were concerned with fights against the insurgents until the 1930s, when the border areas were finally consolidated.

67. I borrow this term from Leah Feldman’s study on intercultural exchange in Azerbaijan for which she characterized the threshold as a “Eurasian” contact zone, creating a “diverse intertextual topography” shaping “political and historical transformations.” Leah Feldman, *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus* (Ithaca, 2018), 22.

68. Charles Shaw, “Friendship Under Lock and Key: The Soviet Central Asian Border, 1918–34,” *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 3–4 (2011): 333–35. For a discussion of the broader context of the Central Asian borders in the 1920s, see Fedor Sinitsyn, “Transgranichnoe kočev’e v SSSR v 1920-e gody,” *Vestnik RUDN. Serii Istorii Rossii* 18, no. 3 (2019): 589–604.

contributed to the notion of a security threat. Tensions aggravated during collectivization persisted throughout the 1930s, as “progress remained slow in building what might be considered a socialist border society.”⁶⁹ Thus, the Turkmen border remained a troubling issue for Soviet state building efforts.

In the analysis of Leonov’s *Locusts*, we have already seen how the Afghani border became a gateway for hostile forces, which could not be controlled by border guards. The locusts figure as an elementary force, introducing a mythological threat into Turkmenistan by evoking a rich set of intertextual and intercultural associations. Another “invasion” from the southern border is depicted in Andrei Platonov’s short story *Takyr* (1934), which also begins with the crossing of the southern Turkmen border, when a group of fourteen kidnapped slaves is brought to Turkmenistan.⁷⁰ Although the Russian border guard is ready and actively looking for the kidnappers, he is unable to stop the southern invaders.⁷¹ Set in pre-revolutionary times and marked with the unspecific, fairy tale-like date “long ago” (*davno*), the setting, with its hundred-year-old trees, appears mythological, time-transcending. This is particularly true for the motive of home, exile, and return. The story abounds with people out of place, like the story’s hero Dzhumal, a slave’s daughter who was born in Turkmenistan and begins rebelling against her tormentors. The female hero is not the only person looking to return home. Stefan Katigrob, an Austrian prisoner of war whom she befriends, is another hero out of place in the Turkmen desert hoping for a stable existence. Against the backdrop of the futile nomadism of Dzhumal’s ancestors, animals represent a positive vision of freedom. Dzhumal’s mother dreams of a little bird, which embodies a positive vision in contrast to the world of the “caravans and the whistling trains.” Sarrin-Tadzh, her depressed mother, only perks up once as she shows her daughter the birds in the sky, telling her: “They are happy... They can fly over the mountains into the country with the rivers, where leaves are growing on the trees and the sun is as cold as the moon.”⁷² Birds are happy, because they can overcome borders and mountains to escape the burning heat of the desert.⁷³ Geographically, the birds belong to the fertile Iranian world they are

69. Shaw, “Friendship Under Lock and Key,” 342.

70. *Takyr* has become a frequent object of detailed narratological and contextual analysis, see Jan Peter Locher, “Rasskaz Platonova ‘Takyr’ i tema vostoka,” in Natal’ia Kornienko, ed., *Strana Filosofov: Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva, Vypusk 4* (Moscow, 2000), 289–95; Holt, “The Rise of Insider Iconography,” 227–41; Philipp Ross Bullock, *The Feminine in the Prose of Andrey Platonov* (London, 2005), 117–23.

71. The perils of capture also play a role in *Dzhan*. Geographically, however, the sites are reversed. Nur-Mohammad, the antipode of Nazar Chagataev, the hero of the story, threatens to kidnap the Dzhan people and to enslave them in Afghanistan. The name of the country here stands metonymically for the regression of the Dzhan to ancient, pre-socialist forms of life. Chagataev is able to prevent these plans and keeps the Dzhan within the Soviet borders.

72. Platonov, *Takyr* (1934), 51.

73. Platonov’s prose exhibits heavy bird symbolism, particularly in *Dzhan*. Michael Leetz gives an overview of the motive’s use in the story and interprets the birds as an elementary mythological force, closely connected to the power of the light. Light is the main energetic force in Platonov’s cosmology, see Michael Leetz, “Auf der Suche nach Platonows verlorener Utopie,” in *Andrej Platonow: Dshan oder die erste sozialistische Tragödie. Prosa, Essays, Briefe* (Berlin, 2019), 362–67.

longing to return to; symbolically, they belong to the kidnapped Persians. While the animal's ability to cross borders is conceptualized as a threat in Leonov's locusts, it becomes a utopian vision in *Takyr*. The civilizational threat here comes from the north, from where invaders—who can be read as an allegory to the Soviet conquerors of Asia—enter the south. This constellation is a mythological one, for there is an eternal opposition between “Ormuzd,” the positive, Iranian force and “Ahriman,” the negative, destructive Turkmen force, which Platonov alludes to more strongly in his later story *Dzhan*.⁷⁴ While Leonov's story tells us about an inversion of power, Platonov's *Takyr*, in the end, represents an inversion of morals, where the superiority of the north over the south is questioned.

While both stories depict unsuccessful border protection, Mikhail Romm's *The Thirteen* (1936) signals a shift in how the southern border is imagined. In the 1930s, space and borders were sacralized and became part of the Stalinist mythologization of space.⁷⁵ This became most visible in the various border guard films and narratives popular throughout the 1930s in which Soviet border patrols defended the homeland and helped build a new civilization on the periphery.⁷⁶ Romm's piece, alongside with Vladimir Shneiderov's Tajikistan-bound *Dzhul' bars* (1936), became a classic of the newly emerging genre of the Red Western (*Krasnyj western*).⁷⁷ *The Thirteen* centers around a group of ten red army soldiers supported by a border guard official with his wife and a geologist, who fight insurgent Basmachi in the Karakum. As the multinational division is looking for water wells, they are involved in a conflict with a group of Basmachi who once sank the well. The Soviets entrench themselves on a Basmachi water place and heroically oppose the attacks of the Basmachi who are in the overwhelming majority. They manage to defend the well until Soviet reinforcements are finally able to make a diversionary attack.

In an intertitle at the beginning of the film, the threat of the mutineers is linked to natural forces of the south: “From the south, the desert was frequented by the Basmachi and a burning hot wind, the Afghani.” This evokes the very similar announcement of the locust's invasion in Leonov's story: “From deep inside Afghanistan, on the ways of the Basmachi and the winds, the locusts launched their attack.”⁷⁸ Animalistic, climatic, and terrorizing threats are mutually interchangeable and enhance the imagination of a hostile hot-spot behind the border. While the crossing itself cannot be prevented in either narrative, the Soviet soldiers, in contrast to Leonov's story, are indeed able stand their ground in the film. They have gained the geographical

74. Erley, “Dialectics of Nature,” 739–40.

75. Evgeny Dobrenko, “Do samykh do okrain,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 4 (1996): 101; Katerina Clark, “Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space,” in Evgeny Dobrenko, Erik Naiman, eds., *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle, 2003), 5.

76. See Diullen, *Uplotnenie granits*, 27–43.

77. For a history of the “Red Western,” see Sergei Lavrent'ev, *Krasnyi western* (Moscow, 2009). The genre in general, and Romm's film in particular, was heavily influenced by American predecessors, which provided the script for the fight of a civilized force from the center against the savages of the steppe and the desert.

78. Leonov, “Saranchuki,” 19.

knowledge enabling them to fight the dangers from the south successfully. While their previous attempts to fight the Basmachi were unsuccessful because they did not know their wells and retreat areas, they have now turned the tables due to their improved knowledge of Turkmenistan's geography. The fight for a clearly demarcated territory is at the heart of the film. The Soviets enclose themselves and erect a border that can be protected against attackers. The story's plot thus gains broader metonymical significance. If the Soviet regime acquires geographical knowledge of the desert and its treasures, it will finally be able to erect permanent borders from which the Soviet people can defend themselves against the archaic threats of the wind and the insurgents. Moreover, the first half of the film already bears various idyllic features: the soldiers care for each other, they sing songs and make fun of each other. The Turkmen desert no longer appears as a threatening place but as an already conquered space.

Behind the recurring topos of the danger from the south in Soviet Turkmenistan texts from the 1920s and 1930s lies a principal opposition. The fight against locusts, rapists, winds, and mutineers is the fight of a sedentary civilization against the uncontrollable forces of nomadic migration. While the Soviet approach towards nomadism was more ambiguous throughout the 1920s, the sedentarization campaign of the first five-year plans prevented any form of peaceful co-existence. It culminated in the politics of collectivization during that time. The "threshold" character of the southern borderlands, where different forms of hybridization (man-animal, mythology) took place, was gradually substituted with the idea of a strict border. Aiding Turkmenistan, in all these examples, relies on the precondition of establishing a border regime and locating the potential objects of help.

While the early Soviet years were a time of literary Persophilia, still echoed by Platonov in his Turkmenistan texts, the south now became a hotbed for dangers against which the empire must be defended.⁷⁹ Salvation was no longer imagined as establishing a hybrid, open border zone, but as erecting a barrier against evil influences. This corresponds with a larger change in Soviet border thinking. In the early Soviet years, they were still regarded as contact zones and "exciting spaces of transition," while, in later years, understanding them as clear demarcation lines separating the empire from evil forces predominated.⁸⁰ This semantic shift also meant questioning the logic of the frontier. Whether Soviet rule could be expanded into Persia or Afghanistan gave rise to lively and agitated debates from the 1920s until the 1980s. By imagining the southern border as a breeding ground for mutineers and climatic threats, interest in conquering this area diminished. Instead, all efforts were concentrated on defending that which had already been accomplished: the colonization of Turkmenistan. The border chosen as a defensive

79. Sergei Dmitriev discusses Persophilia on the examples of Nikolai Gumilev, Sergei Gorodetskii, Sergei Esenin, and Velimir Khlebnikov, see Sergei Dmitriev, *Russkie poety i Iran: Persidskaia struna russkoi poezii ot Griboedova i Pushkina do Esenina i nyneshnikh dnei* (Moscow, 2020).

80. Widdis, *Visions of a New Land*, 8. Oksana Sarkisova, "Grenzprojektionen: Bilder von Grenzgebieten im sowjetischen Film," in Karl Kaser, Lojze Wieser eds., *Europa und die Grenzen im Kopf* (Wien, 2003): 453–54.

line, however, was a political border, not a natural or semiotic one. Thus, natural threats, people, and myths continued to migrate freely across this threshold area, making it very difficult to fully integrate Turkmenistan into a static geopolitical logic.

The *Basmachi* genre experienced a revival in the 1960s, appealing to the Soviet audience with its orientalist perspective, historical heroism, and parodistic elements. Its most famous descendant is Vladimir Motyl's *White Sun of the Desert* (1968), also set in Turkmenistan. Motyl, whose career was partly indebted to Mikhail Romm's support for him, intertextually refers to Romm's film.⁸¹ References include parallels in structure but, even more vividly, explicit quotations of scenes and dialogues. Both films play in the post-civil war era and depict the fight of a brave commander against rebels in the Turkmen desert. While, on the surface, Motyl's film does not depart from the tradition of the Red Western, the film is, in fact, a "parody of the stock Central Asian historical-revolutionary drama."⁸² The division of soldiers, which Romm's hero commander Zhuravlev counts proudly, is replaced by a group of liberated indigenous women. Their presence is regularly controlled by Fëdor Sukhov, the hero of *White Sun*. Sukhov's famous line "Any questions? No questions," which became a well-known Russian saying, can also be traced back to Romm's film, although Zhuravlev's self-questioning lacks Sukhov's self-given answer. In contrast to the heroism of *The Thirteen*, Sukhov's efforts at fighting the Basmachi are futile. Despite his ultimate military triumph, he loses his best friend Vereshchagin and is doomed to stray further into the desert. Sukhov, a deeply melancholic character longing to return home, is consumed by nostalgia and trapped in the Turkmen desert. The desert stands in sharp sensual contrast to Sukhov's native Russian home, which remains unreachable. While this nostalgic element is already present in Romm's film, where the young soldiers are nostalgically singing about their fiancés back home, it is radicalized in Motyl's "eastern."⁸³

Geographically, the border between the eternal sands of the desert and the greenness of the Russian river landscapes is insurmountable. Emotionally, the revolutionary enthusiasm of the 1930s is replaced by the melancholy and nostalgia of the beginning years of stagnation. Politically, the peaceful Sukhov and the aggressive mutineers belong to different civilizations, unable to find common ground. Through these denominators of alienation, the setting of the film once more leads to the externalization of the republic, which is as far away from the Soviet Union as it can be imagined. Despite its military backlash, the invaders from the southern border have triumphed symbolically in

81. Sergei Grachev, "Chernye piatna na belom solntse: Za shto travili rezhissera Motylya?" *AiF.ru*, last modified June 26, 2017, at aif.ru/culture/person/chernye_pyatna_na_belom_solnce_zheto_travili_rezhissera_motylya (accessed March 29, 2022).

82. Alexander V. Prusin, Scott C. Zeman, "Taming Russia's Wild East: The Central Asian Historical-Revolutionary Film as Soviet Orientalism," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 23, no. 3 (2003): 265.

83. For an analysis of the affectual poetics of the film's songs, see David Gillespie, "The Sounds of Music: Soundtrack and Song in Soviet Film," *Slavic Review* 62, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 473–90.

their dominance of the Turkmen imagery. The republic, here, loses any prospect for transformation.

That the Soviet Union was an empire under threat was a common perception throughout Soviet history. Most of these threats were located on the western and, to a lesser extent, on the southeastern borders of the empire, while danger from the south played a minor role in Soviet imagination and could not be narrated with the same tropes as American, German, or Chinese menaces. Dangers like locust swarms, hot winds, or desertification could not be personalized and ideological categories did not fit to describe its perils. While the Soviets controlled and defined the battleground in the east and west, natural perils dictated the southern territories. Platonov's, Romm's, and Motyl's characters act on a territory they never wanted to be on. They cannot choose freely when and whether they return to their homes. In this respect, they are unsovereign characters representing the lack of Soviet sovereignty over Turkmenistan. Although they fight mutineers successfully, they do not get their sovereignty back again, they remain trapped in an area hostile towards them.

A Country from Outer Space

At the beginning of Georgii Danieliia's famous late Soviet science-fiction film *Kin-dza-dza* (1986), the two main protagonists find themselves on the desert planet *Plyuk*, having been mysteriously teleported there from the streets of Moscow. Not knowing where they are, they try to make sense of their situation by logically analyzing their surroundings. They argue: "There's the sun, there's sand, there's gravity. Where are we? We're on earth. Or. . .No, let's take it we're on Earth, in some desert. . .So? Karakum? Eh? What other deserts do we have?. . .So that means. . .The sun's in the west. . .so, Ashgabat is this way. Understood? Let's go!" When they see a spacecraft landing, the heroes start to understand that they are on a foreign planet, but the initial notion of being in a Soviet republic remains. The film further elaborates the Turkmen analogy: the desert planet is struggling with water shortages and its ecology has severely suffered from the overuse of water. These problems remind Soviet viewers of the pressing ecological problems in Central Asia triggered by excessive infrastructure projects, such as the Karakum channel in Turkmenistan, which resulted in the drying out of the Aral Lake. *Kin-dza-dza* is a biting satire on late Soviet society, alluding to a number of its problems in Aesopian language.⁸⁴ It was, however, not so much Soviet society as a whole but the

84. For Aesopian readings of the film as a critique of Soviet reality and its propagandistic narratives, see Julia Gerhard, "Post-Utopian Science Fiction in Postmodern American and Russian Literatures" (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 2018): 227–42; Margarita Georgieva, "Kin Dza Dza (1986): Christianity and its Transformations across Space," in Regina Hansen, ed., *Roman Catholicism in Fantastic Film: Essays on Belief, Spectacle, Ritual and Imagery* (Jefferson, NC, 2011): 183–95; Jillian Porter, "Alien Commodities in Soviet Science Fiction Cinema," in Jennifer Feeley, Sarah Ann Wells, eds., *Simultaneous Worlds: Global Science Fiction Cinema* (Minneapolis, 2011): 251–54. *Kin-dza-dza*'s instance of civilizational backwardness, technical progress, and political authoritarianism had its Soviet predecessors, most importantly the Strugatsky brothers'

republic of Turkmenistan in particular that triggered these associations as the cited conversation shows. Imagining the republic as an alien planet produced an ambiguous relationship toward the Turkmen reality, as the following paragraph shows. Daniellia's film is the last one in a long line of cultural works in which Turkmenistan is associated with planets from outer space. The hero's immediate comparison of Turkmenistan with alien planets is one so deeply rooted in the Soviet imagination that it seemed obvious to most readers.

One of the earliest literary analogies between the geography of Turkmenistan and outer space goes back to the pre-revolutionary utopian writings of Alexander Bogdanov. A philosopher and a close ally of Lenin, whose interests ranged from systems theory to blood transfusion, Bogdanov published two utopian novels shortly before World War I, *The Red Star* (1908) and *Engineer Menni* (1912), in which he described the transformation of the red planet Mars into a flourishing industrial society governed by communist ideals.⁸⁵ Libya, one of the Martian provinces, is the setting of *Engineer Menni*. Bogdanov's choice to take the prototypical desert state of Libya as the novel's setting reminded Russian-Soviet readers of the Central Asian republics in general and particularly Turkmenistan, the empire's only desert state.⁸⁶ Libya's geography in the novel resembles Turkmenistan, creating a realistic setting. Its transformation drew on contemporary discussions about transforming Turkestan through large water channels.⁸⁷ The analogy is manifested by scientific expeditions in which the characters try to map the region and look for possibilities for economic exploitation that in reality were organized by the *Russian Geographical Society* at that time.⁸⁸ The geographical data about Libya given in the novel also allude to Turkmenistan: high mountain areas in the south-west and large deserts in the northern and eastern part are distinctive features of the Kopet Dagh mountain range and the Karakum Desert

Hard to Be a God (1964), which also took an alien, backward planet as a foil for a critique of Soviet society and history.

85. For an analysis of Bogdanov's utopian writings in the context of its time and philosophy, see Wladislaw Hedeler, "Alexander Bogdanow als Utopier," in Stefan Plaggenborg, Maja Soboleva, eds., *Alexander Bogdanov: Theoretiker für das 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2008): 141–50 and Mark Adams, "Red Star: Another Look at Aleksandr Bogdanov," *Slavic Review* 48, no.1 (Spring 1989): 1–15.

86. There was a "Mars mania" at the turn of the century initiated by the alleged discovery of the Martian channels by Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli, see Robert Crossley, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History* (Middleton, 2011), ix. It triggered literary narratives about Mars by Kurt Lasswitz and H.G. Wells, which were also of importance for Bogdanov, see Georgii Gloveli, "Bogdanov as Scientist and Utopian," in John Biggart, Georgii Gloveli, Avraham Yassour, eds., *Bogdanov and his Work: A Guide to the Published and Unpublished Works of Alexander A. Bogdanov (Malinovsky) 1873–1928* (Aldershot, Eng., 1998), 43.

87. For the development and implementation of these visions of irrigation see Maya Peterson, *Pipe Dreams: Water and Empire in Central Asia's Aral Sea Basin* (Cambridge, Eng., 2019).

88. For the development of Turkmenistan during late tsarism, see Julia Obertreis, *Imperial Desert Dreams: Cotton Growing and Irrigation in Central Asia* (Göttingen, 2017). An early Russian account can be found in I.V. Mushketov, *Turkestan: Geologicheskoe i orograficheskoe opisanie po dannym, sobrannym v puteshestviach s 1874–1880* (St. Petersburg, 1886).

rather than of real-life Libya's geography. The depiction of Libya as an abandoned desert space also mirrors the iconography of Turkestan as a vanished ancient empire, which was established by the influential Turkestan series by Russian painter Vasilii Vereshchagin.⁸⁹

The most influential analogy, however, arose from the ambitious plans to restructure the Turkmen geography through aspiring geo-engineering, which is the book's main topic.⁹⁰ The surface of Mars is represented as a *tabula rasa*, a large area with rich natural resources open for ambitious geo-engineering. "All this will change if we succeed in creating an island sea in Libya. . . . If agriculture is organized on a scientifically correct basis, the country will be able to feed 20 million persons."⁹¹ After finishing the first projects, Menni develops a work project that aims to restructure the whole planet. In the end, the arable land is doubled, the desert having been reclaimed through canals. From a single desert state, the projects expand globally, even cosmically. Bogdanov's novel echoes contemporary popular imaginations of Mars as a border territory thought of in analogy to the colonial appropriation of the United States' western frontier and Africa.⁹² It was highly influential for the future Bolshevik imagination and can be read as a prototype for the Stalinist five-year-plans. Libya's desert geography, so similar to Turkmenistan, is neither displaced by any concrete cultural imaginations nor by an already existing infrastructure interfering with the plans of transformation. As in Dostoevskii's case, Asia/Turkmenistan is an ideal template for scenarios of total restructuring and "civilizing" uncharted territories.

With the advent of Bolshevik power, the ambitious pre-war plans of restructuring the Central Asian periphery were waiting to be implemented. In literature, it was the genre of the production novel, gaining prominence in the late 1920s, that took on the role of describing and projecting the immense changes in the country during the first five-year plan. Konstantin Paustovskii was among the writers documenting such projects in Turkmenistan in his povest' *Kara-Bugaz* from 1932. It tells the story of a group of deported communists who build an industrial plant for the exploitation of Glauber salt in the Kara-Bugaz lagoon in northeast Turkmenistan. Although it is uncertain whether Paustovskii ever actually made it to the lagoon, he mystified his Turkmen experience in his post-war autobiographies. In *The Golden Rose* (1955), Paustovskii recounts an anecdote from his childhood. Together with his father, he had tried to find Schiaparelli's Martian channels by observing the planet with a telescope. When the young boy allegedly finds them, his father tells him that "Mars is a dying planet that has transformed into a huge

89. While the physical geography bears an analogy to Turkmenistan, the social geography of Libya is a different one. The desert state in the book is controlled by a small capitalist elite and financial enterprises, against which the workers start to rebel later in the book. This stands in sharp contrast to Turkmenistan's tribalistic pre-war social structure.

90. For a discussion of pre-revolutionary plans of climate and geo-engineering regarding the Karakum Desert, see Vladimir Kunin, *Karakumskie zapiski* (Moscow, 1952).

91. Alexander Bogdanov, "Engineer Menni," in *The Red Star: The First Bolshevik Utopia*, trans. Charles Rougle (Bloomington, 1984), 154.

92. Crossley, *Imagining Mars*, 149–67.

desert.” This moment triggers a “desert phobia” for the young Paustovskii and can be read as an echo of the apocalyptic discussions of the 1892 drought described above.⁹³ At the time, the advancement of the desert was regarded as a natural law, inevitably extending even to the Russian heartlands as Paustovskii’s father feared. This autobiographical epilogue establishes a strong contrast between pre-war and Stalinist geography. The povest’ takes up the motives that Paustovskii had been exposing some twenty years later and inverts them. The paralyzing desert phobia turns into “desert disease” (*pustynnaia bolezni*), which is no longer a pathological but a projective force inspiring dream-like future visions of a totally transformed geography. The natural laws determining the struggle against the desert, so present in his father’s words, are finally overcome in the povest’: “Kara Bugaz and the deserts, cursed by men, will overthrow the law of entropy. The earth emits its heat energy futilely to outer space—Prokov’ev (one of the story’s characters prone to utopian thinking) pointed southward, where the universe was flaming and smoking in the fire of the stars—but we must make the Karakum Desert and Kara-Bugaz into the first reservoirs to catch sun energy, the energy we receive from outer space.”⁹⁴ Putting Turkmenistan in cosmic relations allows the narrator to suspend natural laws (like entropy) and to push beyond the boundaries of time and space.

While such visions of transformation were understandable in the early 1930s, when literary imagination extended what was humanly possible, contextualizing them retrospectively with the Schiaparelli myths puts the whole story in an altogether different light.⁹⁵ At this later point, it had become clear that Schiaparelli’s discovery was a hoax and that the visions of the early 1930s were over-ambitious and could never actually be realized in Turkmenistan. The precariousness of this dream is already insinuated in the povest’ where the most ambitious plans for transformation are told by lunatics, such as the geologist Shatskii, limiting their trustworthiness. Having been linked to the trauma of a late tsarist childhood, the entire construction enterprise of the five-year plan, including the desert dream, was discredited as a cultural pathology.

Drawing a conclusion from these examples, the Martian topos is highly ambiguous. First and foremost, the Mars narratives by Bogdanov and Paustovskii are part of a discourse of transgressing frontiers. In literary tradition, Martian metaphors are often linked to the colonization of unchartered areas, thus, the planet is not one frontier among many others but the ultimate frontier. Being able to conquer such territory suggests the possibility of overcoming any limitations in the Soviet project of transformation. Although it

93. Konstantin Paustovskii, *Zolotaia roza*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh: Tom vtoroi. Povesti* (Moscow, 1957), 531.

94. Konstantin Paustovskii, *Kara-Bugaz*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh: Tom Pervyi. Romany i povesti* (Moscow, 1957), 524.

95. Another, albeit not cosmic narrative on the appropriation of the desert can be found in the novels of Mikhail Zuev-Ordynets (*The Treasure of the Black Desert* and *Story about the Karakum Sulphur*, both 1933). For a comparison with Paustovskii, see Matthias Schwartz, *Expeditionen in andere Welten: Sowjetische Abenteuerliteratur und Science-Fiction von der Oktoberrevolution bis zum Ende der Stalinzeit* (Cologne, 2014), 319–30.

inspires creative imaginations, Turkmenistan thus becomes an alien object in the Soviet cosmos. By equating its geography, particularly the desert, with other planets, the texts “other” the Turkmen landscape, which cannot be conceptualized as a part of the “natural” order. This “othering” also applies to the protagonists of the transformation, the number of lunatics and freaks appearing to be particularly high in Turkmenistan. Its society is as un-Soviet as can be. The boundary between anticipation and exaggeration is narrow, the imaginative resources needed to transform the country are so immense that worldly standards do not suffice. Regarding borders, the Martian topos has a strong tendency towards expansion: Turkmenistan, after all, can only flourish if the state is able to overcome its national borders. Paustovskii’s story relies on the establishment of new production chains throughout the Caspian Sea, while Bogdanov’s vision only makes sense if the Libyan channel project is globalized. Without powerful help from beyond its borders, Turkmenistan is unable to develop and will remain isolated. Therefore, the conception of Turkmenistan itself remains precarious, relying on constant input from outside and on the disposition to integrate signals from outside.

It is exactly this disposition that will change in late Soviet imaginations of Turkmenistan. In films such as *Kin-dza-dza* or Aleksandr Sokurov’s *Days of Eclipse* (1988), Turkmenistan becomes a trap, a gateway for evil forces from outside, which capture its protagonists in their hopelessness. In Sokurov’s film, based on the novel *Definitely Maybe* (1976) by the Strugatsky brothers, the main hero, Malianov, is inexplicably prevented from fulfilling his duties as a doctor. The odd occurrences hindering him from doing so, ranging from mysterious mail items to cases of death, seem to be the work of an evil force from outside, one that is beyond human control. The Turkmen landscape of the Krasnovodsk area, where the film was shot, is hostile and underlines the alienation of the protagonist from his environment. Impulses from alien forces are uncontrollable and eventually lead to the disintegration of Turkmenistan and the empire.⁹⁶ The narrative in *Kin-dza-dza* is similar. The desert planet seems to be technologically advanced but culturally backward. Its inhabitants have only rudimentary speech skills, eat plastic, and are dressed in a primitive way. Although the film only initially creates an explicit association with Turkmenistan, the implications remain throughout the film. The exotic sci-fi background becomes an allegory for the failed Soviet civilization project.

How do the narratives discussed above relate to each other? On the one hand, imaginations of Turkmenistan were the result of concrete historical circumstances like the “Mars mania” of the early twentieth century, Stalinist utopias of ecological transformation in the 1930s, or allegorical critiques of multi-national coexistence in the last Soviet years. On the other, they had a long pre-history, going back to nineteenth-century literature and orientalist views of Central Asia that provided them with a set of tropes that were used to defy and transmute historical circumstances. In some cases, this heritage was

96. For Jeremy Szaniawski, “the film parallels and announces the chaos of reactions (immigration, bankruptcy, suicides) that would come with the dissolution of the Soviet Union” and becomes readable as a parable for the end of the empire, see Jeremy Szaniawski, *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov* (New York, 2015), 65.

activated through direct intertextual references, in others through an implicit participation in myths and imaginations.

The question of the transformability of Turkmenistan interestingly corresponded with the signification of its geography. As we have seen, the most ambitious visions for a changed Turkmenistan sought to make readers perceive its landscape, at least to some extent, as a landscape similar with the steppe areas farther north. In contrast to such readings, narratives accentuating Turkmenistan's otherness foregrounded the desert and its uninhabitability. If humans did exist here, they were wandering nomads with no fixed abode. These conditions produce a seemingly unbridgeable gap between the Russians and the local inhabitants, one that was filled by a cultural imagination *sui generis*.