

Vereshchagin's paintings of the Eastern Kazakhstan Borderlands

By Nick Fielding



Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin

During the 1860s and over the following 25 years Imperial Russia, after many attempts, finally conquered vast swathes of land in Central Asia lying to the south of its Siberian border. The patchwork of semi-feudal city-states and territories - Khiva, Kokand, Samarkand, Tashkent, Bukhara, Merv and a host of smaller towns and cities – had only lasted so long due to their extreme isolation. They fell one after another in the face of highly disciplined and ruthless military campaigns, aimed at bringing an end to the despotism that had seen thousands of Russians captured and sold into slavery, major disruption to trade routes across Asia, as well as expanding Russian influence right up to the borders of British India.¹

Most Russians knew little about the newly conquered territory of Russian Turkestan, as it was named in 1867. They relied on accounts from a handful of determined travellers, such as

¹ For a detailed history of Russia's campaign in Central Asia, see Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion 1814-1914*, CUP, Cambridge, 2021.

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Arminius Vambery, Thomas Witlam Atkinson, Chokan Valikhanov and Petr Petrovich Semenov, who risked life and limb to bring back descriptions of these fabled cities and vast open spaces of the steppe where nomads had roamed for thousands of years.

The first governor-general of Russian Turkestan, General Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufman, keen to rectify this situation, had the great foresight to commission Russian Orientalist Alexander Ludvigovich Kuhn to create what has come to be known as the *Turkestan Album*. First published in 1871-72, it comprises six albums holding more than 1,200 photographs, drawings, maps and plans illustrating the architecture, ethnography, industries and Russian military engagements in the region. It remains today a brilliant and unique contemporary record of what the Russians found in Central Asia.

But von Kaufman also had the wit to commission an artist to accompany his troops into Central Asia. The 25-year-old Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin, a former naval cadet who had decided to become a painter and had trained in St Petersburg and Paris, was invited to join von Kaufman's expedition early in 1867 as the governor-general's private attaché. Not required to wear a uniform, he was effectively an official war artist - although he received the rank of ensign and certainly fought bravely in the siege of Samarkand in June 1868, which saw 700 Russian soldiers hold off the Emir of Bokhara's 40,000-strong army for a week and for which he was both wounded and awarded the Cross of St George (4th Class). Doubtless his military training at the Naval Cadet Corps in St Petersburg proved useful.

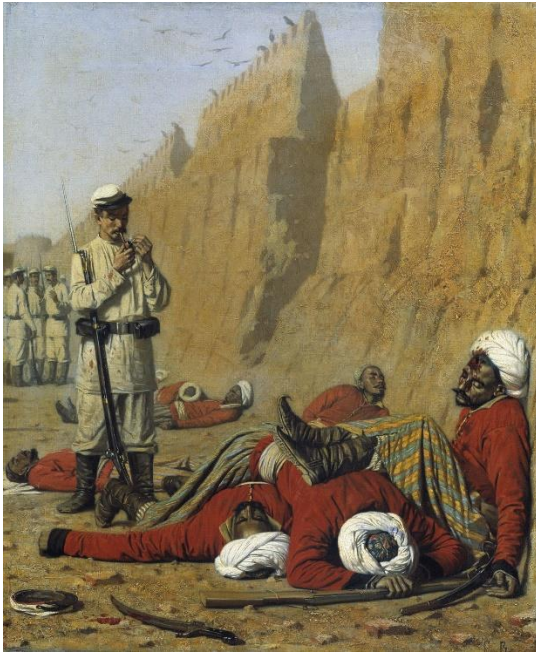
In late 1868 the artist returned to St Petersburg, then travelled to Paris, before returning to St Petersburg in early 1869. During this period Vereshchagin worked on a series of remarkable paintings, mostly of battle scenes, but also depicting the realities of life in Turkestan. Thus, as well as his famous – and controversial - paintings of military attacks and defeats, he also painted opium dens, dervishes, slave markets and the ruins of great Central Asian cities. As he himself noted: "My main purpose [was]...to describe the barbarism with which until now the entire way of life and order of Central Asia has been saturated."² Vereshchagin supported the Russian campaign to invade Central Asia, believing it was vital to 'civilise' the region and bring in Russian settlers. But he was not afraid to criticise the methods used by the Russian military and the sheer brutality of war featured in many of the paintings he created at this time.

Yet despite the underlying anti-war message in many of his works, Vereshchagin was allowed to paint pretty much what and where he wanted, unlike contemporary artists working in Russia itself, who were subject to draconian censorship. His paintings were often met with vehement criticism and calls to ban his work as defeatist and unpatriotic, but initially he was given a comparatively free hand. He allowed his socially progressive views to come through, particularly in his paintings of women, dancing boys, opium addicts, beggars and dervishes, as well as those depicting the horrors of war. This first set of Turkestan pictures was exhibited in three rooms at the Ministry of State Domains in St Petersburg in the spring of 1869.

² Quoted in David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 'Vasilij V Vereshchagin's Canvases of Central Asian Conquest', *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale*, 17/18 2009, p203.

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After Success 1868



After Failure 1868

In April 1869 Vereshchagin decided to make a second trip to Turkestan after General von Kaufman arranged for him to join the staff of Major-General Gerasim Kolpakovsky, governor of Semirechye district, in the east and south-east of what is now Kazakhstan. Although mostly based in Tashkent, Vereshchagin travelled extensively over the province for the next year, at one point even joining a Cossack *sotnia* in a punitive raid across the border deep into Chinese territory.

At this time Chinese Turkestan – now known as Xinjiang - to the east was in turmoil. Chinese Muslims – known today as Hui - and their Uighur allies had risen up against their Chinese rulers. In many towns the entire Chinese garrison had been butchered without mercy. With serious instability on its new borders and raids into Russian territory by Islamic insurgents, Russia sent a substantial force of Cossacks to occupy large parts of the region around the city of Kuldja, which it held onto for more than a decade. In 1881 the uprising was put down with extreme brutality by the Chinese and the Russians reluctantly withdrew.

It is the paintings completed during this second trip that for me are the most fascinating, particularly those that portray subjects in what is now Eastern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang. These are not war pictures (mostly), but scenes from the everyday life of the local people. Unlike many of his Russian contemporaries, Vereshchagin was well aware of the various ethnicities in Central Asia. Most Russians could not easily discern between the words 'Kazakh' and 'Cossack', and instead generally referred to Kazakhs as 'Kirghiz'.

This is what Vereshchagin had to say on the subject in his autobiography: "‘Kirghiz’ is not their proper name, and when they are so called they answer, ‘We are not Kirghiz; we are Kazakhs’.

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'Kazakhs' in fact is their proper name, but they are gradually growing used to the name 'Kirghiz' by which the Russians call them and which probably comes from one of the kindred clans, the Kyrgyz. It would be interesting to know how it was that an insignificant clan, which was wedged in among the gigantic mountains of Tian-Shan, came to give its name to a great assemblage of various tribes, which stretch from the plains of Siberia to the Amu-Daria and from the Ural Mountains to the Tian Shan."³

The simple answer was that to avoid confusion, Russians chose to use the term 'Kirghiz', even though the Kyrgyz were a different people who lived amongst the mountains of the Tian Shan. The Russians called the Kyrgyz either *Kara-Kirghiz* (Black Kyrgyz), *Burut* ('foreigner' in Mongolian) or *Dikokamenniy* (Rus: 'Wild Stone').

Vereshchagin provided a brief description of the Kazakhs in his autobiography: "The Kirghiz (Kazakhs-ed) are recognisable at once by their strongly marked characteristics; their stature is low, the skull broad and somewhat high, cheekbones very prominent, eyes narrow, lips projecting, nose short and flat, beard small and untidy, skin of all shades of colour, from the brown of a South European to the deepest black. They wander with their tents (yurts) over a huge tract which lies partly among the steppes of Siberia, partly in Russian Turkestan, partly in the neighbourhood of Khiva and Bokhara. They number in all perhaps three million souls."⁴

Vereshchagin started his second trip to Central Asia with a six-week journey by *tarantasse* from Orenburg in southern Siberia to the Cossack outpost of Sergiopol (now Ayagöz) in what is now Eastern Kazakhstan, close to the Tarbagatai Mountains. "A dozen poor mud cabins and a little church", is how he described the town.⁵ From here he made his way to Urdshar (Ürjar), closer to the border of Chinese Turkestan. "The road is desolate; to right and left are small hills, behind which runs the snow-capped chain of the Tarbagatai Mountains. We met some mounted Kirghiz. In the autumn when their farm-work in the valleys is done, the Kirghiz move into this district, and at this season their *kibitkas* may often be seen moving slowly along the road."⁶

³ *Vassili Verestchagin, Painter-Soldier-Traveller, Autobiographical Sketches*, Richard Bentley & Son, London, 1887, Vol 1. P132-3. Where Vereshchagin used the term 'Kirghiz' in the titles of his paintings, I have left it that way, even though the subjects are usually Kazakh.

⁴ *Ibid*, p132.

⁵ *Ibid*. p176.

⁶ *Ibid*.

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Migration of the Kirghiz 1870



Central Asia – From the Mountains to the Valley

At Urdzhar, between the Tarbagatai Mountains and Lake Ala Kol, the artist met the superintendent of the region, who was returning from the Chinese border town of Chuguchak (now Tacheng), where he had been receiving the submission of a Kazakh tribe that had recently arrived from across the border. They were formerly Russian subjects but had crossed the border to join Chinese Muslims in the slaughter of the Chinese. When their Chinese allies had later turned on them, they hurried back to the comparative safety of Russian Turkestan.

Vereshchagin also visited nearby Ala Kol lake at this time, noting that the great German geographer Humboldt had believed it to be the centre of a vast volcanic system. Years before, in 1846, Humboldt had asked the British traveller and artist Thomas Wiltam Atkinson to collect

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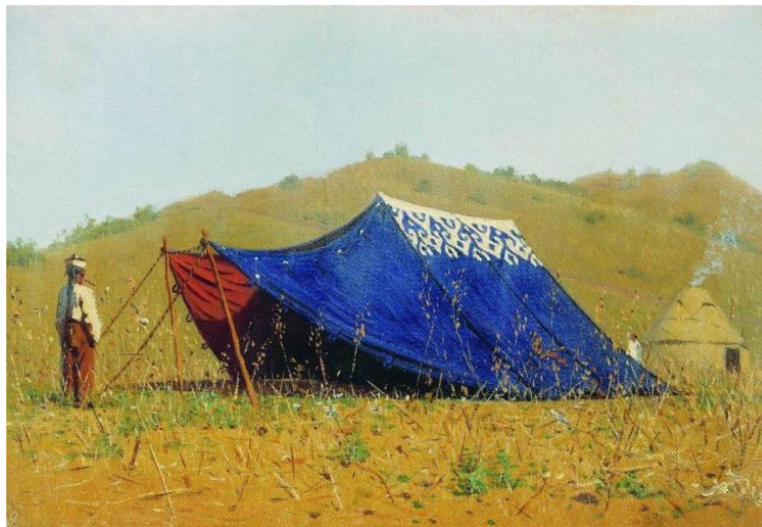
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rock samples from the lake for him to help prove this theory. Atkinson did so, only for Humboldt to discover that his theory was wrong. "It is said that the great savant could not for a long time get over this defeat," wrote Vereshchagin in his autobiography.⁷



Near Lake Ala-Kul 1870

From here Vereshchagin crossed the border with a Cossack raiding party, noting Chinese refugees living in tents on the Russian side. The border town of Chuguchak was in ruins, as shown in the artist's paintings.



Chinese tent 1870

⁷ *ibid*, p202

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Ruins of a theatre in Chuguchak 1871



Ruins in Chuguchak 1870

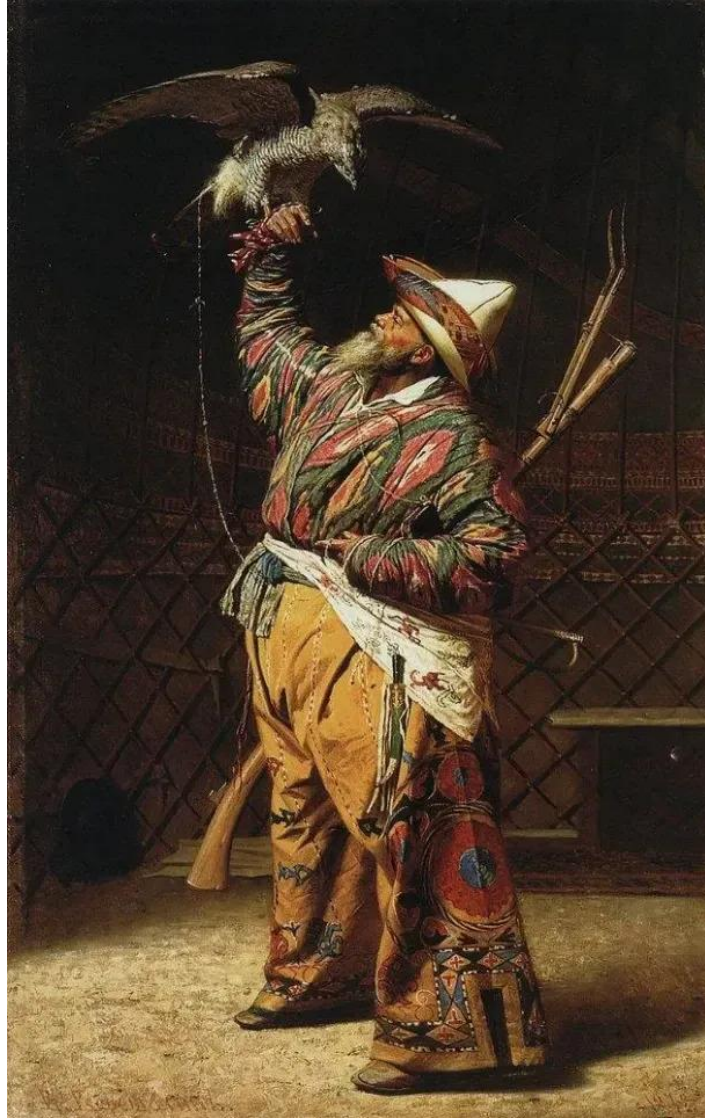
“The town is like a vast tomb,” he wrote, “and the whole impression it produces is terrible.” There were skulls lying around, along with abandoned clothing and household goods. “In the fields round the town, too, lie skulls; as far as the eye can reach, skulls and skulls and again skulls.”⁸ He stayed in the town for three weeks, drawing and painting.

⁸ *ibid*, p203.

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Vereshchagin also visited the regions further south, along the present-day border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, marked by the River Chui and leading up towards Lake Issyk Kol. And it was here that he made sketches for what would turn out to be one of his most memorable paintings.



A Rich Kyrgyz with a Falcon - 1871

A Rich Kyrgyz with a Falcon depicts a tribal leader at the height of his powers, with all the accoutrements of success. The large man is wearing traditional *kandagai* trousers made of doe skin and heavily embroidered. Tucked into the voluminous trousers is an ikat *chapan*, probably made in Samarkand. Around his waist can be seen an embroidered cloth. On his head he wears a felt *bakay-kalpak* hat decorated with an embroidered edge. A knife dangles from his belt, with a horsewhip tucked into the back of his cummerbund. Over his right shoulder is a muzzle-loading musket with a bipod to support it when being fired from a prone position. Held aloft on

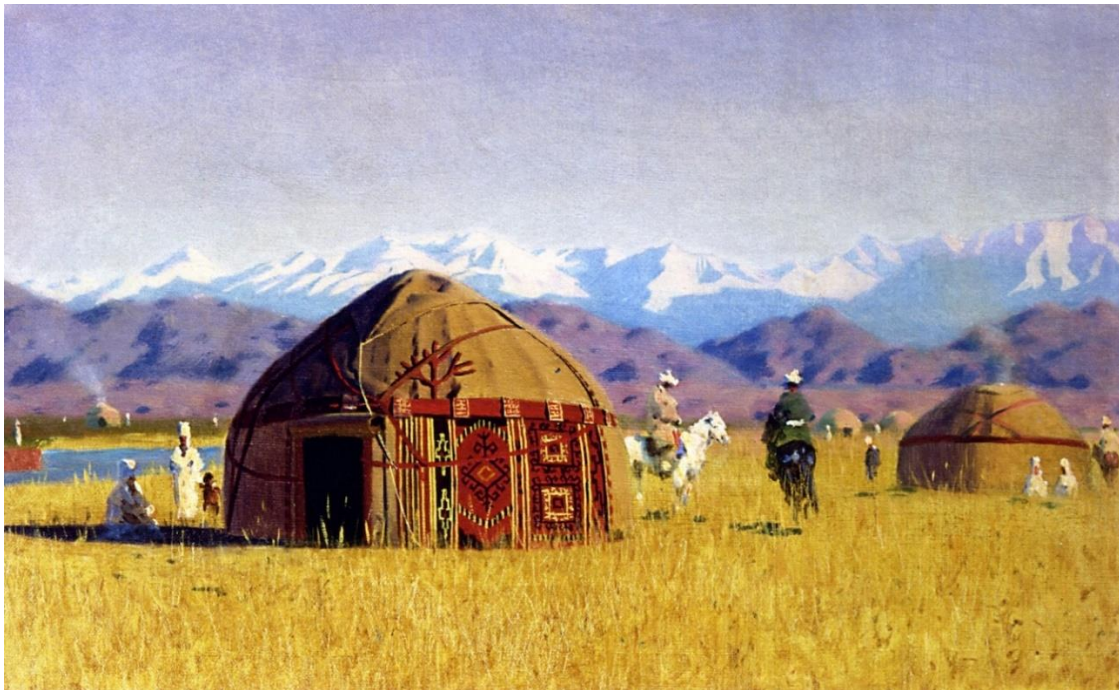
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his right hand, with a leash from its leg attached to its master, a feisty goshawk spreads its wings.

The subject of the painting has been identified as Baytik Kanaev (1823-1886), who was an ally of the Russians in their campaigns against the Kokand Khanate and a leader of the fearsome Solto tribe of Kyrgyz. His father Kanay was a *manap* (local village ruler), but when his uncle, the tribal leader Jangarach, died, Baytik took over his role and immediately began to scheme against the Kokandis. For some years they had ruled the Solto tribal lands and extracted large taxes from their caravans. The Kokandis were also determined to resist Russian expansion into the region and had posted a force of 5,000 soldiers in the Chui Valley and fortified the village of Pishpek – later to become the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek.

According to local lore, Kanaev, in contrast to his vacillating uncle Jangarach, quickly realised that the Russians would sooner or later be able to break the Kokandis' power.⁹ Other Kyrgyz tribes including the Bugu and Sarybagysh were also looking for Russian protection and would soon sign treaties accepting Russian sovereignty over their lands. Their hopes were raised in 1860 when a Russian expedition briefly occupied Pishpek. However, the following year the Kokandis appointed Khan Rakhmatullah as governor of the Chui Valley and rebuilt the citadel. He then imposed additional taxes and the took Baytik Kanaev's son hostage to guarantee peace. It was at this point that the Solto leader decided to act.



Kirghiz nomad tents on the River Chui - 1869-70

⁹ See Daniel Prior (ed), *The Sabdan Baatir Codex: Epic and the Writing of Northern Kirghiz History*, Brill, Leiden, 2013, p40-41.

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The local sources say that in 1862 Baytik Kanaev invited Khan Rakhmatullah to a circumcision feast close to Pishpek. The governor arrived with an escort of 60 horsemen, but as soon as they had taken their places in the tents all their horses' bridles and reins were secretly cut. On a given signal 500 selected *djigits* (horsemen) attacked the Kokandis, killing almost all of them on the spot. Rakhmatullah escaped on horseback, but legend has it that Baytik tracked him down and speared him to death before he could reach the citadel at Pishpek.¹⁰

The Kyrgyz tribes were not strong enough to take on the fortress at Pishpek alone and some accounts state that Baytik sent a messenger to Vernyi (Almaty) to ask for Russian help. Other versions suggest that local Sart traders made an appeal. Either way, in October 1862 a Russian force headed by Colonel Gerasim Kolpakovsky – for whom Vereshchagin later worked - arrived and after a 12-day siege and bombardment, stormed the citadel. The following year another Russian force levelled what was left.

It was the end of Kokandi influence in the Chui Valley. Baytik Kanaev, hence known as Baytik Batyr (hero) in recognition of his military victories, led the Kyrgyz irregulars who supported Kolpakovsky and also participated in the destruction of the Aulie-Ata fortress. For his loyalty towards the Russians, in 1867 he was invited to St Petersburg as part of a delegation of Central Asians, where he was given the rank of captain in the Russian army and awarded the Order of St Stanislaus and a diamond ring. He was also given various positions in the regional government.



Baytik Kanaev (sitting, right of centre) with other Kyrgyz dignitaries in 1882

¹⁰ See, for example <https://www.bishkek.gov.kg/en/history>, which is the official history of the city of Bishkek.

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A contemporary photo of Baytik Batyr

Today Baytik Batyr is revered in Kyrgyzstan, where he appears on postage stamps and has streets and even mountains named after him. His grave outside Bishkek has become a shrine.

Vereshchagin refers to Baytik Batyr as an 'old friend', so presumably he met him on his first visit to Central Asia – although it seems odd that he does not name him on the portrait. The portrait is one of the few contemporary pictures of local tribal leaders painted by Russian artists and although it may be judged by some to be 'Orientalist', in the Saidian meaning of the word, Vereshchagin himself rejected notions of otherness. In a remark which has often been quoted he wrote: "We often hear claims that our century is highly civilised, and that it is hard to imagine how mankind could possibly develop even further. Isn't the opposite really true? Wouldn't it be better to accept that mankind has only made the most tentative steps in all directions, and that we still live in the age of barbarism?"¹¹

Ultimately, the charge of Orientalism is not sustainable in relation to Vereshchagin. He does not celebrate difference, nor does he attribute exotic qualities to the people he paints or caricature them. Although he trained under the famous French 'Orientalist' painter Jean-Léon Gérôme in Paris, there is little in his paintings that can be compared to the 'chocolate box' scenes that characterised the genre. He certainly does not idealise his subjects.

¹¹ Quoted in Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *op.cit.*, p206.

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A Kyrgyz stamp depicting Baytik Batyr

Other paintings by Vereshchagin show that he appreciated the culture and humanity of the inhabitants of Central Asia. Two early portraits of unnamed Kazakhs are striking.



Two portraits of Kazakh men dating from 1867

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His unfinished picture of a Kazakh woman shows her wearing a *saukele*, the traditional marriage headdress. Earlier, during his first trip to Turkestan, he also sketched a Kyrgyz bride wearing a similar headdress adorned with eagle-owl feathers.



Kazakh woman 1867



Kyrgyz bride with headdress covering the face

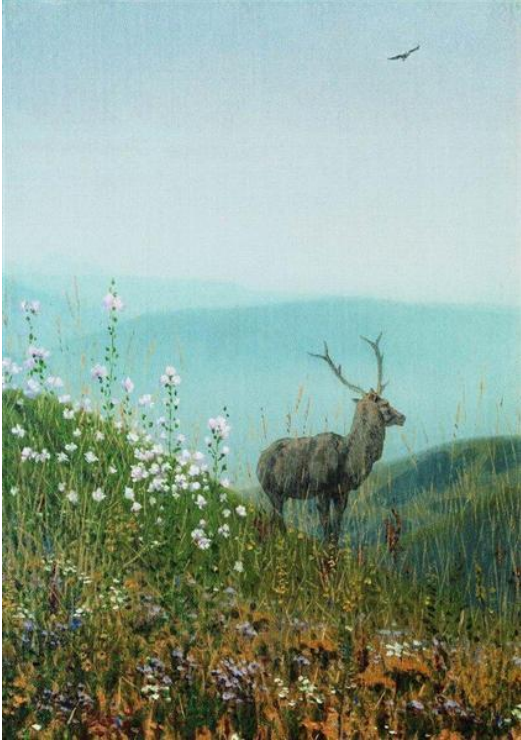
His paintings of the Jungar Alatau Mountains in the Zhetysu region of south-east Kazakhstan are also very evocative, with one showing a maral deer and others depicting typical tracks leading up to the summer pastures, known as *jailau*.

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Nomadic Road in the Alatau Mountains 1870



In the Alatau Mountains 1870



In the Alatau Mountains – 1870

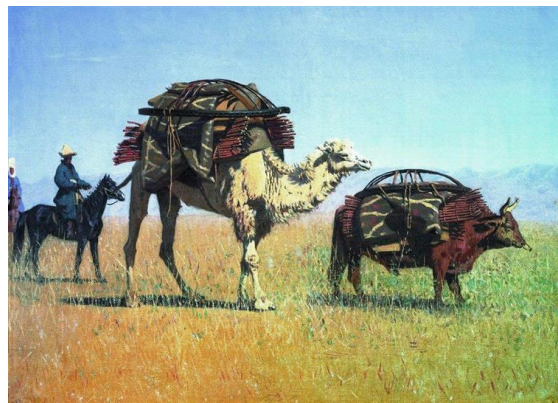
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He also painted scenes at Issyk Kul lake – now in Kyrgyzstan - and further pictures of Kazakh migrations.

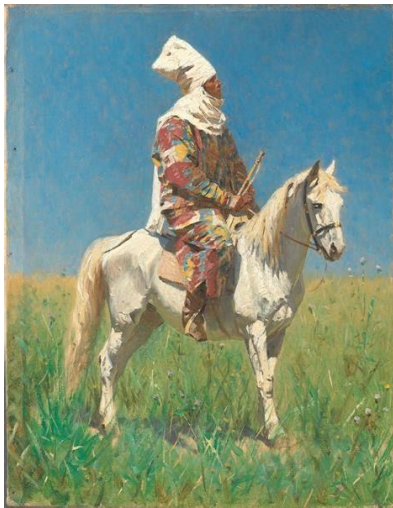


Lake Issyk Kul in the evening 1870

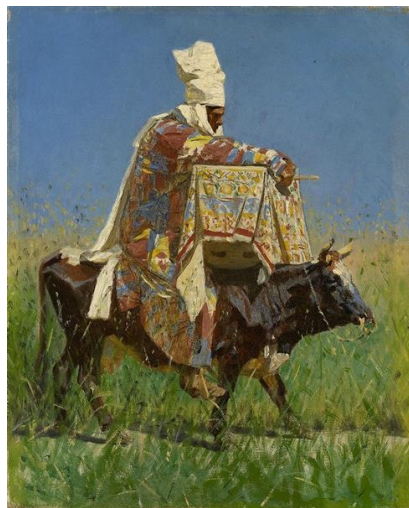


Kirghiz migrations 1870

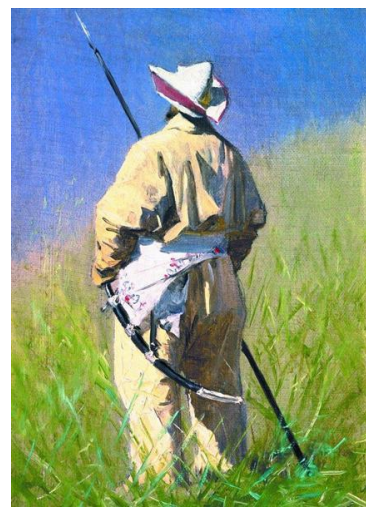
Vereshchagin painted some fine portraits of Kazakhs, including the three illustrated here, although the large white headdresses (*jaulyq* in Kazakh and *elechek* in Kyrgyz) worn by the women make it hard to be sure they are not Kyrgyz.



Kirghiz woman 1870



Kirghiz woman-2 1870



Kirghiz 1870

These more domestic scenes and scenery in Eastern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang are less well-known than the famous anti-war pictures that established Vereshchagin's reputation. Nonetheless, they are amongst the earliest artworks by outsiders that were painted or sketched *in situ*. Only Thomas Witlam Atkinson¹², who spent 18 months in the Jungar Alatau Mountains in 1848-9 and painted many portraits of tribal leaders, and Pavel Kosharov, who accompanied Petr Petrovich Semenov Tianshansky on his travels from 1856-7¹³, had been there before.

¹² See Nick Fielding, *South to the Great Steppe: The Travels of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson in Eastern Kazakhstan, 1847-1852*, First, London, 2014.

¹³ Colin Thomas (ed), *Petr Petrovich Semenov, Travels in the Tian'-Shan 1856-1857*, Hakluyt Society, London, 1998.

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On his return to Munich in 1870, where he had set up a studio, Vereshchagin began work on a set of paintings known as the Turkestan Series. By 1873 he had produced 13 stunning paintings, as well as hundreds of sketches and studies. They were shown that year at the Loan Gallery in Crystal Palace in London with full backing and finance from the Russian state, and specifically from General von Kaufman.¹⁴ Part of the reason for state support may have been that Russia was trying to reassure the nervous British authorities, worried about Russian intentions towards India, that its mission in Central Asia was to 'civilise the barbarians' and not to invade the Raj. The paintings were widely acclaimed.

It was only when shown in St Petersburg the following year there was an outcry over the strong anti-war message of some of the paintings, at least one of which, *The Apotheosis of War*, which showed a pyramid of skulls with carrion birds picking them over, was withdrawn from exhibition. Although ostensibly portraying a scene from the time of the Central Asian despot Tamerlane in the fourteenth century, it was cynically captioned: "*Dedicated to all great conquerors, past, present and to come.*" Another forbidden picture showed Russian soldiers' heads impaled on stakes, while *The Sale of the Child Slave* is chilling as we contemplate its implications.

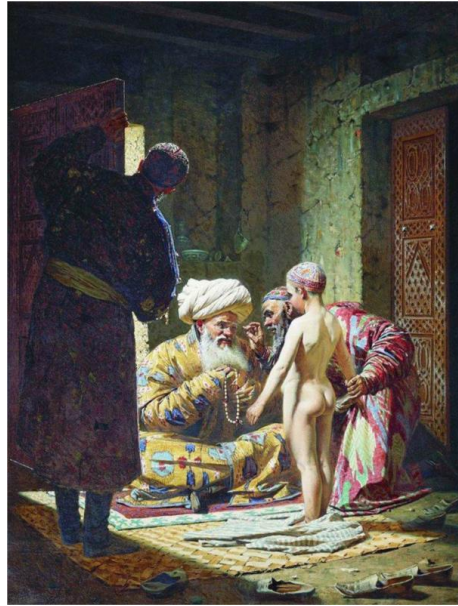


The Apotheosis of War 1871

¹⁴ See Maria Chernysheva, "'The Russian G r me?': Vereshchagin as a painter of Turkestan", *RIHA Journal*, 0096, 18 September 2014. Downloaded from <https://www.academia.edu/8387969/The-Russian-G r me-Vereshchagin-as-a-Painter-of-Turkestan> on 8 March 2024.

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The Sale of the Child Slave 1872

The Russian government later banned Vereshchagin from exhibiting for several years and forbade copies of his pictures from being reproduced in books or periodicals. Such was the criticism that the artist decided as a protest to burn three of his more graphic anti-war paintings.¹⁵ Fortunately, all the remaining pictures from the series were bought by the philanthropist and collector Pavel Tretyakov and later given to the Russian state. Today they can be seen at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. Pavel's brother Sergei also bought many of Vereshchagin's paintings and between them the two acquired 138 paintings and more than 400 drawings.

I have not had a chance to view Vereshchagin's notebooks or sketches, but it is clear, even from this small selection of his paintings, that Vereshchagin, famous for his canvasses depicting the brutality of human conflict, could also present the most intimate moments, as well as capture the beauty of nature. These are not exploitative paintings like those of the Orientalists, but almost of the form later to be adopted by photo-journalism. Vereshchagin called himself a "representative of realism".¹⁶ To my knowledge, no attempt has ever been made to present these more humane pictures from the great anti-war artist (including those from India, Japan and elsewhere) to a modern audience. Perhaps, one day, that may change.

(My thanks to Professor Alexander Morrison, Dr Daniel Prior and Dennis Keen for their very helpful assistance with this article.)

¹⁵ It was neither the first nor the last time that Vereshchagin would burn his own paintings. Just before it was due to be shown in St Petersburg in 1869, he also burned *The Bacha and his Admirers* (1868), which showed a young dancing boy surrounded by a group of fawning older men. It is now only known from the photograph which replaced it at the exhibition.

¹⁶ *Realism: Second appendix to Catalogue of the Vereshchagin Exhibition*, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1889, pp5-6.