

Dmitry Shlapentokh

**The Mongol Conquests  
in the Novels of Vasily Yan**

*An Intellectual Biography*

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## Introduction

There are several reasons to write this short book. Some of them are rather obvious. Vasily Yan was a writer of historical novels whose popularity survives the test of time. He was widely read throughout the Soviet era and continues to be popular in the post-Soviet era; at least, his works have been reprinted up to the present.<sup>1</sup> This is a rare feat. Most official/semi-official authors of Soviet historical novels were absolutely forgotten. Yet, despite his apparent popularity among Russian readers and numerous translations into other languages, nothing has been written on Yan in any non-Russian language and no detailed analysis of his works in the historical context exists.

What was the reason for Yan's popularity? One might state here that he was a talented and educated author with broad life experience, who could bring to life events from bygone eras. But he was not exceptional: there were several Russian writers who were equally talented and dealt with similar dramatic events in Russian and world history. Thus one could assume that a major reason for Yan's popularity was the nature of the novels' subject. His writing on the Mongol invasion dealt not only with the perennial problem in Russian history—perpetual conflict with foreign powers—but also extensively with Russia's conflict with Asia. Moreover, it dealt with periods when Russia was not victorious. The Mongol inva-

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<sup>1</sup> The last edition of one of his novels was published in 2009.

sion was in fact the only period in Russian history when the country was taken over by foreign forces; moreover, these invaders were not Europeans but Asians. And this situation possibly perplexed Russians more than anything else.

There were a few periods—the early Soviet and, curiously enough, early post-Soviet era—when quite a few Russian intellectuals regarded Russia as a mostly Asian power, or at least saw in Asia not just an economic and geopolitical partner but a place of true kindred people. Still, through most of modern Russian history Asia was rejected or plainly ignored. Susanna Soojung Lim demonstrated well that China and Japan, major Asian powers, were marginalized in Russian intellectual discourse from the 17th century to the end of tsarist regime.<sup>2</sup> If they occasionally reemerged in Russian intellectual narrative it was mostly to demonstrate their cultural backwardness and economic and military weakness. Some Russian writers such as Grigorii Petrovich Danilevsky (1829–1890) did envisage an era when China would be a great power. But even in these cases China’s rise was mostly due to Russia’s encouragement and help. Interest in Asia was usually a reflection of Europeanism. For example, as Lim demonstrated, the interest in Chinese culture in the 18th century was simply a reflection of European, mostly French interest in China, viewed by protagonists of the European Enlightenment as the ideal monarchy ruled by a “philosopher king.” While Russian intellectual elites might be fascinated by a Europeanized version of Asia, they had neither interest nor fear

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<sup>2</sup> Susanne Soojung Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian Imagination, 1685–1922: To the Ends of the Orient*, London: Routledge, 2013.



with regard to Asia per se. Indeed, St. Petersburg looked at Asia as an easy object for conquest, following the pattern of European powers. Asians were clearly marginalized in the nation's narrative, at least in comparison with Europeans. Even Slavophiles regarded Europe as the point of departure and target for their barbs and mostly ignored or at least marginalized Asia.

Mongols and their struggle with Russians fared better in discourse in the sense that they often emerged in narratives of Russian writers of the 18th and early 19th centuries. But the focus was Russian victories, also implicitly connected with Euro-centrism. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Russian intellectual elites, especially those called Westernizers, were concerned that Russia was not accepted as an equal by the West. They emphasized that by defeating Asiatics such as Mongols, Turks, and even Muslims of the Caucasus Russians saved Europe, or at least followed the general footsteps of Europeans dealing with Asians. It is true that Asia emerged as a Russian ally in the writings of such conservative intellectuals as Konstantin Leont'ev (1831–1891) and Nikolai Danilevsky (1822–1885). Both found in Asians—Leont'ev was especially fond of Turks—kindred spirits. Russians and Asians, in their view, were a people who loved strong power, collectivistic arrangements, and what Eurasianists—with whom we will deal briefly in the future—called the “ideocratic” way of life, that is, supposedly to live for high goals. Yet even in these arrangements Russians were the leader. One might add that these elements of interest in Asians as partners were fleeting.

Indeed. Russians were just following European fashion. From the 19th century Romantic reactions reshaped Europeans' view of the Orient. It became not just an object of plunder and expansion, where Europeans exercised their "civilizational" mission and carried the "White Man's burden," but also a place of mysterious knowledge and insight. Vladimir Solov'ev's "Pan-Mongolism" was in a way a response to the German Kaiser's notion of "Yellow Peril." Thus interest in Asia per se and, even more so, appreciation of Asia, regardless of European allusions and influence, was rather rare in modern Russian thought, albeit it did exist in one way or another. Russian intellectuals were even less interested in studying situations when Russians were defeated by Asians. The study of Mongols and Tatars and their struggle with Russians was mostly framed in the context of Russian victory over Asiatics, or at least in events leading to victory. Not Asia but Russia itself—or the West—was the point of departure for the majority.

Even for Russian Slavophiles of all stripes the West was the point of departure. They castigated the West and displayed its intellectual and existential shallowness, the one-dimensional mind of Western man, and so on. And they noted that Russians had geopolitical and intellectual and existential alternatives in the East. Still even this "Turn to the East" implied a "Turn to the West," for the East emerged as a bargaining chip in dealing with the West, as would be noted by Vadim Tsimbursky later. This general marginalization of the East in Russian minds and culture is what made Yan's work special. Its idiosyncratic feature is underscored by the fact

that Yan's work deals not with Russian triumphs but with defeats by Asiatics. It might be this specificity of Yan's work that made it possible for his books dealing with the Mongol invasion to enjoy such popularity for such a long time. This aspect of his works provides a reason for dealing with him as a person and with his works on Mongols in detail. Still Yan's importance in Russian intellectual life is not the only reason he and his works on Mongols require special attention.

This book is not just a biographical sketch of an important Russian/Soviet writer basically unknown to the Western public. The focus on Yan and his work demonstrates the role of ideology in totalitarian society. One should not, in our view, overestimate the role of ideology in totalitarian societies, especially those of "Oriental" type, where the power of the state was absolute and private property as an institution was eliminated. The rough power of the state was the key element of social arrangements. With the weakening of this power the entire social order or the order itself could fall apart, as the post-Soviet era demonstrated clearly. But one should not disregard the role of ideology completely in "Oriental" totalitarian societies such as Stalinist USSR; the evolution of ideological patterns should be examined.

Totalitarian ideology was not stable; it changed in the course of time, which affected historical images. This notion is well known. But another aspect of the totalitarian system is not usually accounted for. Not all parts of the totalitarian machine changed in unison. The 1930s were the period when the totalitarian machine of the Stalinist state reached its terrorist climax. At the same time it was a period of comparative ideo-

logical laxity, when Yan was able to publish or at least conceive most of his works.

There was another aspect of totalitarian ideology and its relationship with historical images. The same could be said about any ideology, including Western society. Censorship exists in any type of society. It exists in the Western democracies, including, for example, the USA, where elite and populace alike are proud of the absence of formal censorship. This, however, is hardly the case. One could hardly find a respectable publication in the USA that would present views on racial or gender matters sharply different from the views of the majority. Moreover, some areas of scholarship are practically closed to serious investigation. Take, for example, the Jewish role in the Soviet regime. Jews, here taken as an ethnic not religious category, played a considerable role in the Bolshevik Revolution and Soviet regime. This fact is acknowledged by Western scholars and a huge amount of literature on the subject exists. Anyone who studies the Jewish role in the revolution and Soviet regime would discover that Jews played a considerable role in Soviet secret policy and thus participated in the "Red Terror" of the Civil War and Great Purge.<sup>3</sup> Yet not a single scholarly work in the respectable Western press exists on this subject, at least to this author's knowledge.

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<sup>3</sup> Also it was acknowledged by some historians (Oleg Budnitskii, an leading Russian historian, noted "The number of jews in the OGPU-NKVD continued to grow in the first half if the 1930s as well, reaching a peak of 39 percent (forty-three individuals) in the upper level of NKVD in 1936." (Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews Between the Reds and the White, 1917-1920*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, p. 116)

Not just an entire subject of research and particular approaches to certain subjects are practically closed to academic research, but censorship exists in the language of the narrative. One could be hard pressed to find an academic work with a phrase such as “erudite Nazi.” The reason is simple. “Erudition” is clearly a positive definition; “Nazi” is a negative characteristic. In fact, it is mostly used as a way to render moral judgment rather than to present peculiar socioeconomic and political systems. The combination of negative and positive became implicitly forbidden in the narrative. Consequently all Nazis became ignored idiots, regardless of the well-known fact that Nazis and their sympathizers included such brilliant minds as, for example, Martin Heidegger. One of course could argue that there is no formal restraint in the West and one can publish anything. This is true. But such publications could at best be placed in the marginal press. They are not bought for libraries, not reviewed, and thus play no role in shaping intellectual discourse.

While this particular form of censorship exists in the West, totalitarian regimes, at least some of them, are not absolutely uniform in their cultural output. The greatest freedom was enjoyed by intellectuals who lived in “capitalist Western” totalitarian regimes such as, for example, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The existence of Heidegger demonstrated it clearly. But even in “Oriental” Stalinist USSR, intellectual discourse was not absolutely uniform. And the possibility for intellectual maneuvers, so to speak, was especially clear at the beginning of the regime’s history, when the ossification of cultural space was not completely finished. In addition, Rus-

sian intellectuals—similar to Chinese—acquired the skills to “read between the lines.” This provided the opportunity for some intellectuals, Yan among them, to send prohibited messages in the form of historical images. In some cases, the regime itself employed this penchant for reading between the lines to send messages to the educated public. It was apparently assumed that an indirect way of sending message would be more convincing than a direct appeal.

The study of Yan’s novels demonstrates the ability of Russian intellectuals to engage in a peculiar cat and mouse game with the regime. The reason for presenting the book to the reader can be reduced to the following: it is the first account of the life of a Russian/Soviet writer who is well known and still popular in Russia yet basically unknown in the West. In addition, his novels on the Mongol conquest are rare treatises in the Russian intellectual tradition that deal with the Orient/Asia. Russia itself or the West was the point of departure for the majority of Russian intellectuals. The West was the point of departure even for Russian nationalists who juxtaposed Russia to the West.

While Asia was generally marginalized in Russian intellectual discourse, Russian intellectuals have been even less prone to discuss cases when Asians overwhelmed Russians. The very notion of a Mongol/Tatar conquest of Russia became

increasingly challenged in historical narrative.<sup>4</sup> Yet it clearly exists. The Mongol conquest was the only period when Russia was conquered by Asiatic forces and the only true defeat in its long history.

This is another possible reason why Yan's works deserve attention. We should also note that while dealing with the Mongol conquest, Yan displayed an image of Russian culture quite popular in philosophy and literature. In this image, Russia emerged as a "collective Christ" whose suffering provided him with mystical forces and the ability to be much more powerful than all his enemies. This mystical suffering—one can find similar images in Shia Islam—made it possible for Russia to save not just itself but the entire humanity. This aspect of Yan's narrative indicates how the totalitarian regime with its revolutionary legacies integrated the ideological blocks from pre-revolutionary past and how ideological continuity was reaffirmed.<sup>5</sup> The work demonstrated the peculiarities of formations of totalitarian regimes where different blocks of society do not work in unison with each other. One could see that, whereas the intensity of terror reached its peak in the 1930s, the period provided more opportunity for intel-

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, G. V. Nosovskii and A. T. Fomenko, *Tataro-mongol'skoe igo: kto kogo zavoevval*, Moscow: Astrel', 2008; Aleksandr Bushkov, *Mirazh' velikoi imperii', Poiski drevnego goroda Karakorum, ili byo li tataro-mongol'skoe igo?*, Moscow: Olma-Media Grupp, 2009; Iurii Elkhov, *A bylo li na Rusi tataro-mongol'skoe igo*, Moscow: Astrel', 2008; Konstantin Penzev, *Rus' tatarskaia: igo, kotorogo ne bylo*, Moscow: Algoritm, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Lev Razgon, *V. Yan, Kratkii biograficheski ocherk*, Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1969, pp. 7–8.

lectual freedom than post-World War II period when the terror had subsided.

Consequently this book is divided in roughly two parts, each with several chapters. The first deals with Yan's biography; the second focuses on analysis of his works, mostly those which dealt with the Mongol invasion.