

There are however, two points that are worth raising. During her exploration of the commodities produced in Turkestan, Keating continuously emphasized that cotton was more significant, but that the history of other resources reveals the entanglements of people, places and commodities. Although she wants to question that a commodity is only conferred by the amount of capital it generates (158), one still wonders what the actual significance was of some of the resources such as coal or oil, considering that their exploitation was not very successful. The second remark pertains to the style. Since the book is very rich in information, spans across a large territory and long time-span and is still compressed to only 218 pages, the book loses at times on details of more specifics on individuals or events. One only wished for it to go even deeper into the environmental histories of Central Asia.

Apart from that, *On Arid Ground* is a fascinating study on the entangled relationship between empire and the environment and the commodification of nature. It is recommended for historians of empire, environmental historians, and political ecologists alike.

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***Aleksandr Rodchenko: Photography in the Time of Stalin.*** By Aglaya K. Glebova. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. 256 pp. Notes Bibliography. Glossary. Index. Illustrations. \$65.00 hard bound.  
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Professor Aglaya Glebova is well aware of her expertise in her field, its creative techniques into the relation to the avant-garde and its political context after the fall of Tsar Nicholas II, the Provisional Government, and Aleksandr Rodchenko's role under Lenin and subsequently under Iosif Stalin. Rodchenko's creative career covered the whole period. He liked to say that he was still only one generation away from serfdom.

Glebova is aware of the great range and shifting cultural and political context of his works. As a painter, designer, and photographer, Rodchenko characteristically worked with elements assembled into visual and material constructions, even at the Kazan School of Art. At the same time photographs of cubist works by Pablo Picasso were carried to Russia by Ukrainian painters Alexandra Exter and David Burliuk, who had also seen cubist works by Picasso in the collection of Serge Shchukin in Moscow. In this way the sense of a constructive process, organized into series of works and variations, was confirmed in Rodchenko's thoughts. Other painters including Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin, who equally responded to aspects of Picasso's constructed innovations, though Rodchenko was perhaps the most elemental and systematic. His techniques were increasingly evident in his paintings, material constructions, and his photographs and photomontages. His works were assembled without narrative, without a window space, and without aesthetic taste. He was able to operate in times of rapid cultural change in war and revolution under Lenin and under Stalin. The entire structure of communal culture led to belief in collective ownership by the proletariat. Art as luxury goods for the wealthy was banned. Rodchenko's methods were constructive, materialist, and dedicated to the masses.

Glebova traces this transition carefully, to keep her reader on board with Rodchenko's increasing use of photomontage assembling often second-hand images with texts, poetic, promotional, or political to offer the proletariat advice and propaganda. Surprisingly, Rodchenko was more readily engaged with photomontage than he was with the immense potential of hand-held photography in the living masses of

the crowd. He recorded many sequences of pioneers, sports, parades, extreme viewpoints, building projects, street life, architecture, and industry.

Glebova maintains exquisite control in her analysis of Rodchenko's achievements using various techniques psychologically, in terms of persuasion, and in the materialist world of collective life. In this way his photography of the Vladimir Shchusev Radio tower in Moscow was promoted as an imagery of electrical, engineering, military, and police power.

Glebova's book is precisely argued and unique in its properties. Rodchenko was the leading portrait photographer of many important figures in Soviet culture, including Vladimir Maiakovskii and the theatre director Vsevolod Meierhol'd. After the death of Lenin in 1924, his image became multiplied in repeated devotional images. Devotion to Lenin was sustained by Stalin, to preserve the cult. In 1925 Rodchenko commemorated the image of Lenin, set up in Konstantin Mel'nikov's red *Workers' Club* erected in Paris.

For most of their career, Varvara Stepanova and Rodchenko lived and worked in the *Vkhutemas* [the Higher Technical Studios] in Moscow while their works could be seen in book stands, on stage, in standard clothing, in exhibitions, and many other outlets. Rodchenko remained highly visible. Alongside these photomontages, dynamic lettering, posters, periodicals, and mechanistic constructions embodied the power of political mass movements. Looking down from the studio and living space, an intense concentration recorded photographs of *Looking Down into the Courtyard* and *Gathering for a Demonstration*.

Demands in the State Publishing Houses for serial snapshots, fragments of observation, and images of industrialization served to accelerate further Stalin's first Five-Year Plan. Later, large government sponsored albums were devoted to Stalin's achievement in creating canals in the *White Sea and Baltic Sea*, built with slave and prison labor. It was among the first prison camps photographed in December 1933. While Rodchenko survived the commission, the White Sea canal proved fatal to 175,000 prisoners and 25,000 workers.

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**Nicholas Roerich: The Artist who would be King.** By John McCannon. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022. ix, 616 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Plates. \$50.00, hard bound.  
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It takes stamina to navigate the reams of records that capture a career ranging from bust-ups with members of the Ballets Russes to suspicions of espionage and expeditions by horse and yak through China, Mongolia, and Tibet. Equally challenging is the need to parse the pantheistic mysticism that became a lodestar of Nicholas Roerich's life. John McCannon is more than up to the task, devoting some twenty years to dispel the myths (often self-generated) that accrue to this indefatigable, contradictory, shape-shifting artist, and produce a meticulously evidenced narrative that will be hard to dethrone as the definite account.

The structure of this leviathan endeavor is dictated by the historical record. Sparse information dictates just nine pages on Roerich's first nineteen years. Yet the chapters that follow each cover at most eight years of his life and at times dissect with forensic precision the events that unfold in as few as two. The density of detail would threaten to overwhelm were it not for McCannon's eye for the enlivening moment. We read of