

The Colonial Train

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Chapter 6

“Ostap Bender Meets Turksib: Il’f and Petrov on the Sovietisation of Central Asia

Sara Dickinson

Abstract

The Little Golden Calf (*Zolotoi telënok*, 1931), a still popular comic novel by Soviet writers Il’ia Il’f and Evgenii Petrov, culminates at the festivities marking the completion of the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad, or “Turksib”, a monumental achievement for Soviet industry and another step towards the Soviet domination of Central Asia. This chapter examines the ambivalent views on Central Asia’s modernisation that are expressed by the novel’s protagonist, Ostap Bender and whether his regret for the inevitable fate of traditional cultures before Soviet expansion is shared by the novel’s authors. In order to better understand the extent to which Il’f and Petrov themselves had doubts about Turksib’s mission, we contextualize *The Little Golden Calf* in their other writings that address the Soviet encounter with Central Asia, namely newspaper articles, diaries and postcards from Il’f’s first trip to the region in 1925 and the two authors’ joint reportage on traveling to the opening festivities of Turksib in 1930.

shaitan – devil,
arba – wagon,
shaitan-arba – Central Asian Railroad.
— *The Little Golden Calf*¹

Trains played a key role in Russian expansion into Central Asia, a process that began with tsarist military conquests in the 1850s and concluded with the consolidation of Soviet power there in the 1930s.² Tsarist and Soviet regimes agreed on the strategic and economic importance of this region, once also

¹ Ilf and Petrov (2009: 347); subsequent page citations of *The Little Golden Calf* refer to this same source and will be flagged with “TLGC”. Elsewhere in this article we adopt conventions of scholarly transliteration that render the names of the two authors as “Il’ia Il’f” and “Evgenii Petrov”, the pseudonyms, respectively, of Il’ia Arnoldovich Fainzil’berg (1897-1937) and Evgenii Petrovich Kataev (1903-1942). For the Russian text, see Il’f and Petrov (1961a, vol. 2: pp. 7-386).

² Svetlana Gorshenina and Sergej Abashin put the beginning of the conquest at 1853, when tsarist troops took a fortress in the khanate of Kokand (2009: 7).

known as “Turkestan”, which bordered on China and Afghanistan (British India) and had long been crisscrossed by the transcontinental trade routes collectively known as the “Silk Road” from which Russia could profit as both intermediary and direct recipient. Turkestan was also a source of raw materials, ranging from fish to cotton, and a potential market for goods of Russian manufacture. That said, the administration of this distant territory offered “daunting social and political problems” to the Russian state: when the area first came under tsarist control in the 1860s, Central Asia was home to over three million Muslim and primarily Turkic-speaking natives, “partly nomads, partly settled townspeople and farmers [...] ruled by, but isolated geographically and culturally from, the Russian core of the empire” (Brower 1997: 115). Railroads were key in the process of tightening the imperial grip on this region and its people.

The apogee of railway construction in Central Asia was the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad or “Turksib”, a line first conceived under the tsars, but completed only in the Soviet era. A true feat of engineering and labour, Turksib comprised roughly 1450 kilometres of track laid through sparsely inhabited desert land and employed nearly 50,000 workers at the peak of construction (Payne 2001a: 1, 11); it quickly became a showcase project of the ambitious young USSR and its First Five-Year Plan. The line was built by two separate squads of workers who moved from Turksib’s endpoints towards an established midpoint (Aina-Bulak) in the Kazakh desert, competing to arrive first. Their convergence at that spot in April 1930 – 17 months ahead of schedule and 13.5 million rubles under budget – occasioned a massive celebration in which “700 honoured guests and 20,000 workers”, including both Soviet and foreign journalists, watched together as the final, silver spike was driven in (Payne 2001a: 288).

Turksib was widely fêted in Soviet culture, producing a number of noteworthy tributes, such as Viktor Turin’s elegant documentary film, *The Steel Road (Turksib)* (*Stal’nyi put’ [Turksib]*, 1929). The rail line also appears as a setting in *The Little Golden Calf* (*Zolotoi telënok*, 1931), a still popular comic novel by Soviet satirists Il’ia Il’f and Evgenii Petrov, whose railroad subtext has received relatively little scholarly attention.³ This novel is more familiar simply as a continuation of the escapades of protagonist Ostap Bender, first elaborated in *The Twelve Chairs* (*Dvenadtsat’ stul’ev*, 1928), but Bender’s picaresque-style adventures culminate deep in Central Asia, where he finds himself at the opening festivities of the “Eastern Main Line” (*vostochnyi magis-*

³ Rare attempts to treat the Central Asian theme in *The Little Golden Calf* include Shcheglov (2009, especially 593-615), and Myers (2010).

tral'), the novel's name for what is clearly Turksib.⁴ In fleshing out this scenario, Il'f and Petrov make good use of the fact that they themselves had attended the Turksib joining ceremony in April 1930 in the capacity of professional journalists. In the wake of that trip, they published "Caution! Immersed in the Ages!" (*Ostorozhno! Oveiano vekami!*), a set of journalistic "travel sketches" (1930b) containing various notions and even entire passages that were later transferred to the novel. Still more ideas of the region and its railroads may be found in Il'f's jottings from an earlier trip to Turkestan in 1925, including four newspaper feuilletons, several diary entries, and a handful of postcards to his wife.⁵ Considered together with *The Little Golden Calf*, these writings on Central Asia illustrate a varying and contradictory approach to the iron horse and, more generally, to the modernisation (and Sovietisation) that it drew in its wake.

This chapter explores the views of Il'f and Petrov on the general project of modernising Central Asia, a broad-scale endeavour epitomized by the construction of Turksib. Slender notes of ambivalence towards Sovietisation appear in *The Little Golden Calf*, but how are these best evaluated? Are these the views of Bender alone or shared by his creators? It is tempting to consider them commonly held. While the suggestion of misgivings about Soviet power is admittedly slight in the novel, we know that all texts produced in this period, whether official or private, were subject to repression in some form – ranging from state bans, to virulent criticism in the press, to self-imposed censorship. Moreover, and somewhat paradoxically, we often expect Il'f and Petrov to challenge Soviet power. Certainly, their enduring popularity derives in part from an irreverence towards the conceits of Soviet Russia that has been regarded as their trademark since the 1950s, when they were rediscovered following Stalin's death. As Liudmila Saraskina explains, such lack of deference does not in and of itself indicate opposition to official policy, however: satire was widely used in early Soviet Russia to critique and check inappropriate public and private conduct (1993: 47-48). Later readers, often unaware of

⁴ Fisher translates *vostochnyi magistral'* as "Main Eastern Line". For other examples of Soviet literary texts addressing Turksib, see Kleespies (2018: 366n).

⁵ Il'f's visit occurred eight months after Uzbekistan had become a Soviet republic. For his diaries and postcards from that trip, see, respectively, Il'f (2001) and Il'f (2004); on his four journalistic essays, first published in the journal *Gudok*, see Il'f and Petrov (1961, vol. 5: 23-39) and Il'f (2009). These essays were: "The Moscow-Asia Line" (*Peregon Moskva-Aziia*, in *Gudok* n. 154, 9 July 1925), "Clay Paradise" (*Glinianyi rai*, in *Gudok*, n. 156, 11 July 1925), "Asia Unveiled" (*Aziia bez pokryvala*, in *Gudok*, n. 161, 17 July 1925, and "Enver the Bandit" (*Enver-basmach*, in *Gudok*, n. 162, 18 July 1925).

how different Il'f and Petrov's historical and artistic context had been from their own, were quick to equate their impertinent approach to official discourse and institutions as an expression of bold resistance to the regime, but neither Il'f nor Petrov was an anti-Soviet dissident. Il'f was even "predisposed [...] to Soviet loyalty", Alice Nakhimovsky reminds us, insofar as attracted by the opportunity that Bolshevism offered to transcend various kinds of provincialism, tribalism, and backwardness – including that which he felt to be inherent in his own Jewish background (1999: 96). Indeed, a current of endorsement for the promise of Sovietisation may be seen in a number of minor, but positive characters in *The Little Golden Calf* who espouse Bolshevik ideology and go unchallenged. While such personages are often less than memorable amidst the books' satiric fireworks – and even, as Iurii Shcheglov notes, "obviously stupid" (2009: 615) – a certain ambivalence towards modernisation and Sovietisation is nonetheless built into both novels so that "a Soviet reading of the Ostap [Bender] books was always possible, [and] so was the kind of interpretation that valued Ostap's deprecating laughter positively and ignored the books' Soviet ideals" (Nakhimovsky 1999: 106). Neither of the Bender novels was warmly embraced by the increasingly conservative Soviet literary establishment, although both were published – a fact that is astonishing in retrospect⁶ – and their authors made quite respectable, even brilliant careers: "in just a few years they rose from newspaper time-clock punchers [...] to special correspondents for *Pravda* traveling across America" (Saraskina 1993: 50). In short, Il'f and Petrov did rather well in Soviet Russia and if each died prematurely, neither was purged.

How can we reconcile the doubts about modernisation and its possibly negative side effects found in the novel with the views expressed by Il'f and Petrov in their other texts on Turkestan? We find decidedly fewer misgivings about Soviet power in their journalism, for example, which tends to follow official policy and present the rail network in Soviet fashion as a carrier of technological and industrial advancement and herald of the modern future towards which the Bolshevik state directed much of its energy and rhetoric. Here Il'f and Petrov argue that Soviet modernisation will bring key improvements to Turkestan, such as technology, increased educational and employment opportunities, the reduction of poverty, and the emancipation of women. Should we interpret such avowed support of modernisation as careerist palaver and conflate the skepticism about Sovietisation voiced by Ostap Bender with the true views of his creators? But perhaps Bender's misgivings themselves are little more than rhetoric? After all, regret in the face of modernisa-

⁶ On the novel's publication history, see Alexandra Il'f's "Introduction" and Anne O. Fisher's "Foreword" in *The Little Golden Calf* (9-12, 13-21).

tion was a fairly standard element in European discourse and even a literary trope. The invention of the railroad provoked numerous comparisons between the ‘iron horse’ and the traditional cart, for example, often tinged with alarm or sorrow for the cart’s imminent obsolescence. In Russian tradition, anxiety about the deleterious effects of railway expansion was famously expressed in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1877), as well as in the sharply critical portrait of Western Europe found in Dostoevsky’s “Winter Notes on Summer Impressions” (*Zimnie zametki o letnikh vpechatleniakh*, 1864), an angry rant inspired by the new “high-speed” rail connection between Petersburg and Warsaw (Dwyer 2011: 69-70).⁷

In order to determine Il’f and Petrov’s views on Turksib and the modernisation of Central Asia, we begin here with a review of the history of the Turksib’s construction, then consider the railroad subtext in *The Little Golden Calf* with its representation of ambivalence towards Soviet power. This chapter then contextualises the novel in Il’f and Petrov’s other writings on Central Asia.

1. *Building Turksib*

By the mid-nineteenth century, railroads were increasingly seen as necessary for the Russian Empire’s military and economic modernisation. More and better tracks not only promised improved links between raw materials, industry, and potential markets, but also had military advantages, a point of special interest after the lack of an adequate rail network had contributed to Russia’s defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856). Railroad construction thus became a state priority and “track mileage rose nearly sevenfold during the 1860s, and doubled again in the following decade” (Hosking 1997: 340).⁸ Despite the numerous practical difficulties of laying track across the Empire’s vast expanses, the tsarist government completed several notable projects. The most famous of these was the monumental Trans-Siberian railroad, or “Transsib”, built largely in 1891-1903 and connecting European Russia to Siberia and the Pacific. Another milestone was the Trans-Caspian, which served as the basis for the rail system of Central Asia, including the later offshoot represented by Turksib.

⁷ On the “troika vs. train” debate, see also Baehr (1989).

⁸ On railroad growth in Russia, see also Riasanovsky (1984: 344-345, 388-389); Bill (1956). The outcome of the Crimean War also encouraged Russia’s expansion into Turkestan by stimulating the geopolitical contest with the British Empire sometimes known as the “Great Game” (see, e.g., Hopkirk 1994: 283-287).

While it is tempting to imagine Russian railroad building as methodically extending outward from Moscow toward the frontiers, the rail system actually developed in fits and starts with spur lines and groupings of track laid ad hoc according to specific and often local needs, and only later linked to an overarching system. The Trans-Caspian network is a case in point. Begun as a military line in 1880, it moved slowly eastward from the Caspian seacoast through difficult terrain and politically hostile territory to reach the cities of southern Turkestan as they fell one by one to tsarist troops: Bukhara in 1887, Samarkand in 1888, and Tashkent in 1894. These tracks were soon employed for commercial uses as well, and later incorporated into the more extensive transport network that was already bringing increasing numbers of European settlers into the region.⁹

General enthusiasm for the modernisation that railroads would bring to Turkestan was widespread among European newcomers. In circa 1880, a leader of the growing Russian community in Vernyi (now Almaty) declared that “The railroad is that magical wand of Moses, a single touch of which will produce water from stone and bread from the earth, transforming savage desert into a populated land” (quoted in Proskurin 1996).¹⁰ When imperial-era Cossack journalist Pëtr Krasnov visited Vernyi roughly thirty years later, the promise of the railroad had not yet been realised, but “the railway will come, God willing”, he predicted,

and with the railway – culture. Life in Vernyi will begin to bubble and pulse; hotels and sanatoria will appear along the Almatinka river and on the wondrous, turquoise Issyk Lake; a Vernyi Alpinist club will begin its activities; a funicular will run up Mount Talgar; local Narzans and Essentuks will be discovered and an abundant land will flourish. (Krasnov 1911-1913)¹¹

Turksib emerged from plans first floated in the tsarist era for a link between Turkestan and the Siberian city of Semipalatinsk (today’s Semey) to the northeast, a project mulled over “for decades” before its realization (Payne

⁹ Before the opening of the Orenburg-Tashkent line in 1906 (which brought a sharp increase of settlers from European Russia into the region [see Matley 1994: 328; Sahadeo 2007: 146-153]), the Trans-Caspian was unconnected to other rail networks. In that era, European-bound freight was taken westward to the Caspian rail terminus, loaded on ships for passage across the sea and then inserted into the Volga’s riverine transport system (Gorshenina 2003: 103; Lantz 2009: 306, 313).

¹⁰ Proskurin (1996) credits this same community leader, the merchant I. D. Lushmanov, with having originated the idea for a Turkestan-Siberian railroad.

¹¹ The well-known mineral springs of Narzan and Essentuk are located in and north of the Caucasus, respectively.

2001a: 17-18). Actual study of the terrain began shortly after the completion of the Orenburg-Tashkent line in 1906.¹² Track laying proceeded slowly before and during the First World War, however, and was virtually halted by the Great Steppe Revolt in 1916 and the tumultuous period of revolution and civil war that followed. Indeed, more than one segment of track was destroyed in these conflicts, and only when they subsided could building activity began anew.¹³

The Bolsheviks, who worked hard to reconquer former imperial territories and incorporate them into their own centralised economy, approved a version of the rail project linking Central Asia to Siberia in 1926. Like their tsarist predecessors, the Soviets understood that an improved and expanded Central Asian rail network would have military uses (improved access to border areas and control of potential unrest in Turkestan), but Turksib's primary purpose was economic. The Soviet textile industry – like the tsarist before it – needed domestic cotton and turned to Central Asia as an obvious, if unenthusiastic, source. After the devastating famine of 1916-1917, the farmers of Turkestan were more interested in producing food for their own consumption than in raising cotton for Russian or Soviet industry. In order to redirect Kazakh agriculture towards cotton, the Soviets needed to supply farmers with food and believed that a cheap supply of grain brought in from other parts of the empire – via a rail connection with Siberia – would resolve this problem.¹⁴ Turksib would also provide a back-up for the Orenburg-Tashkent line, then the single existing connection between Central Asia and the rest of the Soviet rail network, damage to which during the Civil War had created the disastrous “Orenburg Bottleneck” (Il’f 2009; Kupriianov 2015: 68).

Although post-1917 railroad construction in Central Asia displayed numerous continuities with the tsarist era, it moved forward under ideological banners of a very different stamp. The Bolsheviks eschewed the term “colonialism”, for example, using it solely to discredit the imperialist ambitions of the

¹² By 1906, insufficient railways had also contributed to the Russian defeat in Japan in 1904 (Riasanovsky 1984: 403).

¹³ See Payne (2001a: 18); Zinov’ev (2000-2005); Kupriianov (2015).

¹⁴ In fact, Central Asian fields had been dedicated to cotton production since the 1890s. As Alexander Morrison points out, “[b]y 1914 seventy percent of arable land in Fergana [the most fertile area in Central Asia] was under cotton, meaning that the region was increasingly dependent on imported grain. In 1916–17, when grain imports from Semirechie and Siberia dried up, this led to devastating famine” (2012: 934). The “somewhat convoluted economic rationale” (Payne 2001b: 39) behind Turksib also aimed to liberate the Soviet Union from a dependence on imported (often American) cotton. See Payne (2001a: 11, 15-23); Morrison (2012: 933).

previous regime and celebrating Turksib as the *undoing* of tsarist colonization. The line's promise, as Matthew Payne puts it, was to "end ethnic inequality and uplift formerly exploited colonies", to function as the "forge of the Kazakh proletariat", and to demonstrate "that socialism could emancipate nations from the chains of backwardness and imperialist exploitation" (2001a: 2). Nonetheless, much of the language that Soviets used to describe their activity in Central Asia was grafted onto pre-existing paradigms.¹⁵ Both the tsarist and the Soviet state tended to view their interventions in Turkestan as a *mission civilisatrice*, for example, and to see railroad building as the realization of a means for much desired cultural renovation in a deplorably backward region, inhabited largely by Kazakh nomads, who for centuries had been regarded by the Russian state as problematically anachronistic.

The popular imagination of European Russia clung resolutely to the idea of the nomadic savage as Turkestan's representative, ignoring other sectors of the region's diverse indigenous population, such as yeoman farmers, townspeople, and, with Turksib, many railroad navvies.¹⁶ The figure of the nomad emphasised the exoticism and primitiveness of the region and, after the October Revolution, helped to cast the magnitude of Turksib's modernising achievement into dramatic relief. As Ingrid Kleespies argues, notions of primitiveness in the steppe were quite valuable for state discourse: the "image of a 'primitive other' experiencing a 'first encounter' with socialist modernity worked as a convenient metaphor for the Soviet experience more generally" in showing "[t]he 'outer edge' of Soviet space" to be "the site of spontaneous production of a socialist, rather than capitalist, society" (2018: 363, 362). That this process often had recourse to well-worn nineteenth-century notions of the "primitive" may also be seen in the continued use of scenes depicting the native population responding to both the motorcar and steam locomotive with the horrified cry "*shaitan-arba!*" or "devil wagon!", a term found in discussions of Central Asia from the late nineteenth century and recurring in both Turin's film and *The Little Golden Calf*. In evaluating the bias of such scenes, it is useful to recall that by the Soviet era most nomadic Kazakhs had arguably

¹⁵ For a discussion of ideological and narrative continuities between the tsarist approach to Turkestan and Turin's film, including standard and well-entrenched notions of the "primitive" and the "Oriental" that are also found in *The Little Golden Calf*, see Payne (2001b, especially 38-42); more evidence of the international appeal of such paradigms may be found in Kleespies' comparison of Turin's film with the cinematic Western (2000). That Il'f and Petrov had seen and appreciated Turin's film is clear from their 1929 review of it (1961, vol. 2: 475-477).

¹⁶ It is true that in Eastern Turkestan, where Turksib was constructed, ninety percent of the population was nomadic (Payne 2001a: 20).

seen trains before, and that European peasants were also known to associate the advent of the train with devilry (Payne 2001b: 54; Bill 1956: 18). Nonetheless, Il'f and Petrov's humour as a rule traffics heavily in cultural stereotypes and frequently relies on the dependable lure of caricatured portraits and Orientalising exoticism, fully exploiting clichéd contrasts between the "primitive" and the modern or "the old and the new" that were stirred up by the project of building a railroad through the steppe.

It is true that many Central Asians had serious misgivings about the railroad. The initial military use of the Trans-Caspian had done little to endear the iron horse to the Turkestani population, nor was local enthusiasm improved by the railroad's use in transporting European settlers into the area or troops during the Steppe Revolt of 1916 and the subsequent Civil War (Payne 2001b: 54). Nonetheless, Central Asians were not simply the passive victims of European modernisation, nor did they uniformly oppose it. Many were enthusiastic about what Western technology might bring to their impoverished region and collaborated directly in projects of railroad planning and construction. Soviet policy makers were keenly aware of such groups and worked actively to expand them, even attempting through Turksib to create a Central Asian "proletariat" by means of "nativisation" (*korenizatsiia*), an "ethnically based Soviet affirmative action program" that encouraged members of the steppe population to seek employment laying track (Payne 2001a: 10).¹⁷ If work as a railroad navy was not quite equivalent to joining an industrial proletariat, it did offer many a way out of poverty and at times Kazakh workers constituted up to as much as forty percent of the Turksib workforce (Payne 2001a: 133). It should be noted that Central Asians were also *culturally* inspired by the European train, which stirred creative imaginations on the steppe even in tsarist times, leading to the composition of songs about the "iron wagon" and the "rattle-rattle" (*gumbur-gumbur*). In "Steam Locomotive" (*Parovoz*), a response to Turksib by Kazakh bard Manarbek Erzhanov, the train "with its victoriously thumping wheels" stands as "a symbol of new life coming to the Kazakh steppe" (Zhubanov 1967; see also Proskurin 1996; Dzhumaev 2008).

¹⁷ As potential agents of European-based modernisation, both the tsarist and Soviet regimes targeted the indigenous population of Central Asia's more densely populated areas rather than rural agriculturalists (Brower 1997: 22).

2. The Little Golden Calf

Ostap Bender, a trickster aiming to get rich in the dawn of the Soviet Era, is an unusual literary protagonist and an outlandish figure in the context of the young USSR. Bender's implicitly Jewish ethnicity as well as his vocation (the profession of thief and confidence man tying him to "capitalist" values) render him an outsider.¹⁸ As Bender himself candidly admits, "I've developed very serious differences of opinion with Soviet power. It wants to build socialism, and I don't" (*TGLC* 58). In a series of picaresque-style adventures, he moves through the length and breadth of Soviet Russia, inventing and executing various schemes to get rich, all while cherishing the dream of escape to Rio de Janeiro, home of "[o]ne-and-a-half-million people, each and every one of them in white pants" (*TLGC* 58). The pursuit of wealth, which he fondly (and portentously) refers to as "the little golden calf", ultimately leads Bender to Central Asia as he follows the trail of Aleksandr Koreiko, an "underground millionaire" hiding there as an employee on the Eastern Main Line construction project. Bender sets out for Turkestan by car, but when mechanical mishaps force him to abandon that vehicle, he adroitly jumps aboard a passing train – which just happens to be carrying Soviet and foreign correspondents, diplomats, and labor heroes from Moscow directly to the joining ceremony in "Roaring Spring", the novel's playful name for the desert station of Aina-Bulak.¹⁹

This chartered train travels first along the tracks of the Moscow-Orenburg-Tashkent line, then along the newer tracks extending from Tashkent to Almaty and on to Roaring Spring. In order to reach Central Asia, the train must "cut an impressive arc along the globe": "it would go through several climatic zones, moving from the cool central region to the roasting desert, it would go past many cities, large and small, and end up four hours ahead of Moscow time" (*TGLC* 323). The train thus represents the Soviet command over space and even time²⁰ – as do its passengers, a bevy of international and domestic

¹⁸ On Bender's apparently Jewish identity, see Nakhimovsky (1999). Bender himself professes to be son of a "Turkish subject" (*TLGC* 58), a detail that contemporary readers took as yet another hint that he was actually Jewish (Fitzpatrick 2002: 546); the claim to Turkish citizenship also has precedents in Russian bandit literature (Brooks 1985: 212).

¹⁹ "Aina-Bulak", meaning "mirror brook", was an appellation invented by bureaucrats precisely for the occasion of the joining ceremony (Zinov'ev 2000-2005).

²⁰ Payne describes the Turksib construction project in similar terms: "The railroad would annihilate this stubborn, 'empty' space to connect Turkestan with Siberia, but it would also conquer time – the camel-gaited time of the old caravans" (2001b: 40).

journalists, who snap photos with their huge cameras, clack away on their typewriters, and cable news back home for worldwide distribution at every opportunity – in short, simultaneously documenting modernisation's inroads and embodying them.

Posing as a journalist, the mimetic Bender briefly and fraudulently represents the extension of Bolshevik power into the steppe. The most impressive of his many skills is the ability “to ‘speak Bolshevik’ with total assurance and fluency” (Fitzpatrick 2002: 537), as demonstrated in *The Complete Celebrator's Kit*, a manual that he quickly drafts and sells to a fellow journalist for pocket money.²¹ *The Celebrator's Kit* offers examples of how to properly report on the monumental railroad construction project with a jumble of inflated and empty words that relate to festivals, workers and competitive triumphs, as illustrated in his template for a lead article:

The Eastern Main Line, that iron steed, which, flinging up the sands of the past with its steely bound, guides the tread of history, revealing the slanderous enemy's latest grinding of teeth, the enemy onto whom the tenth wave is already being flung, which threatens to usher in the twelfth hour, the final hour for the lackeys of the imperialist Moloch, that capitalist Baal; still, regardless of our mistakes, let the banners of the beacon of industrialization, blazing under the cries of workers, who are revealing the dawn of a new life with singing in their hearts, glow, and, in like manner, soar. Onward! (TGLC 346)

Il'f and Petrov's novel laughs repeatedly at journalistic clichés. Even the reporters on the chartered train debate about how best to avoid hackneyed ideas of “the East” in their writing, although they also prove incapable of resisting cherished stereotypes of life on the steppe and thrill at the sight of “their first camel, their first yurt, and their first Kazakh, who wore a pointed fur hat and held a whip”. In short order, “no fewer than twenty cameras latched onto the camel's snout. The exoticism had begun, with its ships of the desert, freedom-loving sons of the steppes, and all those other draft animals [tiaglo] of the romantic imagination” (TGLC 333). The journalists similarly exult at the opportunity to photograph tractors juxtaposed with camels, “framed perfectly in a shot that could be entitled *The Old and the New* or *Who'll Beat Whom?*” (TGLC 334).²² Almost identical scenes had first ap-

²¹ The full title of Bender's pamphlet is *The Complete Celebrator's Kit: An Irreplaceable Aid for the Composition of Jubilee Articles and Timekeeper's Feuilletons, As Well As Ceremonial Poems, Odes, and Troparia* (TLGC 345).

²² This remark is also a jab at two Soviet films, Eisenstein's *The Old and The New* (*Staroe i novoe*, 1929), which Il'f and Petrov had panned in a review (1961, vol. 2: 463-466), and *Who Will Beat Whom* (*Kto kogo?*, 1925), the work of director E. S. Petrov.

peared in Il'f and Petrov's journalistic travel sketches, where they show the predictable impact of Orientalising clichés on real-life correspondents.

In "Asian Ornamentation", another section of *The Celebrator's Kit*, Bender provides Turkic vocabulary items for writers wishing to incorporate local colour into their work, including *shaitan* (glossed as "devil"), *arba* ("wagon"), and the resulting compound *shaitan-arba*, glibly translated as "the Central Asian Railroad" (TGLC 347). Bender's example of poetry based on Turkic terms arguably offers a glimpse of ambivalence towards the effect of Soviet expansion into Central Asia:

The *uryuk* [apricot tree] blooms to the din of days,
The *kishlak* [nomad village] trembles like the dawn.
And out on the *aryks* [canals] and pathways
A capricious *ishak* [donkey] goes for a stroll.²³

Here ominous rumblings threaten village life as tradition "trembles" before the coming of modernisation, yet the "capricious *ishak*" seems to ignore them. Does the *ishak* represent native indifference to the Soviet advance? The nomad's freedom, mistrust, and/or ignorance? Perhaps the donkey also represents Bender himself? As will become apparent, Bender is indeed closely linked with both donkey and nomad.

Central Asian nomads enter the novel as the epitome of the exotic Other, an incarnation of alterity that fascinates the visitors in its stark contrast to their modern worlds. Most of the nomads maintain an aloof distance from the visitors. One herdsman patiently submits to the visitors' photography, before "laugh[ing], mount[ing] his shaggy little steed, and trott[ing] off into the steppe" (TGLC 334), for example, thus slipping out of the frame and beyond the reach of the Europeans. Similarly, at the joining ceremony, "A few of [the nomads], shy and proud, wound up looming from the hilltops all day, never quite able to come any closer to the humming, roaring crowd" (TGLC 353-354). In short, at least some of Il'f and Petrov's indigenous steppe dwellers are unwilling to participate in their own modernisation and even granted the possibility of physically evading it. Others are more enthusiastic, however, and at the festivities in Roaring Spring, Bender sees

that the clear horizon over the rugged terrain had suddenly gone dark from explosions of dust. Sharp, pointed hats were coming out from behind the hills in every direction. Thousands of horsemen, sitting in their wooden saddles and

²³ I have altered the verb in Fisher's rhymed translation ("A capricious *ishak* travels on", TGLC 347) to illumine the random quality of the donkey's movement suggested by the Russian "*idët guliat*".

urging on their hairy little horses, were hurrying toward the wooden arrow marking the [...] site of the joining of the rails. (*TGLC* 351-352)

At this celebration, the Kazakhs swarm in primordial chaos, arriving “not singly, but in whole villages” and thronging in disorder among the instruments of Soviet engineering: “Mounted groups ran this way and that in the dust, raced along open stretches with red banners, stood in their stirrups, and turned their horses to the side so they could sit and gaze curiously on the wonders” (*TGLC* 352). Some of the nomads presumably listen to the speeches, which are “all given twice, in Kazakh and in Russian” (*TGLC* 354), but the formal meeting is broken up when a small plane takes off and startles the indigenous riders, who “scatter in all directions” like buffoonish savages then attempt to pursue the plane’s shadow along the ground, “shouting and raising their whips” (*TGLC* 356).²⁴ The novel does not explain that the speeches in Kazakh actually given at the joining ceremony were intended for Turkestani dignitaries and railroad navvies: no such personages appear in the festivities described in *The Little Golden Calf*, where Central Asians are depicted exclusively as nomad onlookers.

Despite indigenous mistrust of Soviet technology, there is little doubt that the railroad is here to stay. Indeed, railroad construction reinforces the nomads’ alienation from the process of renewal that Soviet power brings to the steppe and renders them fascinating precisely because they have been targeted by modernisation and are doomed to perish. The novel “mak[es] the threat of extinction explicit” in Kleespies’ terms, and offers “elegiac contemplation of the Native plight in which a ‘primitive’ people are in the process of being displaced, even extinguished, by a device of urban mobility and domination” (2018: 375-376).²⁵ The nomads’ destiny thus resembles that of Bender himself, whose path towards inevitable demise comes into sharp focus at the joining ceremony. It is true that Bender locates Koreiko in Aina-Bulak and successfully takes his money, but he also loses his ability to steer narrative outcomes. After having robbed Koreiko, Bender magnanimously invites him to a banquet on the chartered train, for example, but since neither miscreant has a ticket, they are refused entry and can only watch helplessly as the iron steed of Soviet progress departs for Moscow, stranding them in the Central Asian desert.

²⁴ It is interesting to note that two scenes which first appeared in Il’f and Petrov’s travel sketches without the detail of Kazakh whips had these appendages added upon being transferred to the novel, presumably in order to make the nomad’s gestures both more comical and more ‘characteristic’.

²⁵ Kleespies, writing about Turin’s film, identifies this phenomenon as a feature shared with many American Westerns.

Bender has no further contact with nomads in the remainder of the book, although he comes to resemble them more and more. He even usurps nomadic identity in a resourceful plan to escape from Central Asia by “converting to Islam and making the trip by camel” (*TGLC* 370). Generally speaking, Bender’s mobility, like that of the nomads, is an ambivalent feature. His unceasing peripatetics may be linked to the novel’s picaresque structure, but they also bring to mind the random and erratic movement of the nomadic population – or of the donkey – and contrast unambiguously with the power and purposeful direction of the socialist project and its iron rails.²⁶ In a parodic masquerade of nomadism, Bender and Koreiko set out on camels attired like “latter-day sheiks”, carrying flasks of mare’s milk, and leading rams on tethers. Here Bender adopts the role of “Colonel Lawrence” or “Emir-Dynamite” (*TGLC* 371-372) – otherwise known as Lawrence of Arabia – though unlike Lawrence, who had exploded European-built rails, Bender relies on their “steely bound” to lead him out of Central Asia. Nor is Bender a champion of the indigenous population (as Lawrence was): he even blatantly misrepresents the nomads, who are primarily equestrian, with his camel charade, suggesting that Central Asia is more or less Saudi Arabia and Turkic nomads basically Arabs.²⁷ A similar humorous blurring of exotic geographies may be found in Il’f’s 1925 postcards.

Bender’s trip by camel concludes in an unnamed town reminiscent of Almaty that he, as an experienced Central Asian traveler, claims “can hold its own against Baghdad”.²⁸ Here the romantically inclined trickster hopes to once again experience the fabulous side of the East; his pleasurable anticipation is further stimulated by the prospect of being subsequently carried out of the steppe by a Soviet train:

Flat roofs, native orchestras, nice little restaurants in the Eastern style, sweet wines, legendary damsels, and forty thousand skewers of Turkish, Tatar, Karian, Mesopotamian, and Odessan shishkebab. And, last but not least, the railroad. (*TGLC* 373)

And Bender is eager to go, for Soviet Baghdad turns out to be a mirage.

²⁶ Il’f’s 1925 diary credits similarly resolute and unswerving movement to representatives of Turkestan’s younger generation moving through a disordered marketplace: “Young Uzbeks cross the bazaar in rows. They cut through the old market like a wedge” (2001: 14).

²⁷ On such blurring, see also Payne (2001b: 53).

²⁸ Shcheglov points out that the description of Almaty in *The Little Golden Calf* pools traits that Il’f and Petrov elsewhere associate with Bukhara, Samarkand, and Batumi (2009: 613-614).

Thanks to the rail terminus, the entire town is undergoing the upheaval of Sovietisation. "I knew your city once," Bender comments with restraint, "but it seems to have changed a bit" (*TGLC* 375). He tours the city's innumerable construction sites with an enthusiastic young townsman who, "inhaling the alabaster dust with pleasure" exclaims: "Socialism Prospect! [...] Ah! What wonderful air! Just think what's going to be here a year from now! Asphalt! A bus! An irrigation institute! A tropical institute!" (*TGLC* 375). When Bender anxiously inquires about "the situation here with those... with little Asiatic-style taverns, you know, with tambourines and cymbals?", the response disabuses him of all hope:

"We got rid of them", the youth answered indifferently. "It was well past time to destroy that infection, that breeding ground of epidemics. We just choked out the last den of iniquity this spring. [...] But we opened an industrial-scale kitchen instead. European cuisine. The dishes are washed and dried using electricity. Statistics show a drastic reduction in stomach disorders". (*TGLC* 375-376)

The colourful local market is also intended for destruction. "Won't you miss the exoticism?" Bender asks, "It's Baghdad, after all!", to which the guide replies in anger: "It's nice for you, for people just passing through, but we have to live here". Forgoing shishkebab, they lunch in the new industrial kitchen on "pearled barley soup and little brown meatballs". As for beverages,

Ostap inquired after wine, but was enthusiastically informed that recently, just outside town, a mineral water spring had been discovered whose gustatory qualities exceed those of the famous Narzan. To demonstrate, [the guide] ordered a bottle of the new water. It was drunk in deathly silence. (*TGLC* 376-377)

The Little Golden Calf thus confirms the prediction for Almaty made in circa 1911 by Pëtr Krasnov, who foresaw a flourishing steppe with its "Narzans and Essentuks". Bender is decidedly less enthusiastic about the expansion of imperial power than Krasnov, however. The romantic Orient that he seeks no longer exists in part because the "Orientals" themselves, or at least the spirited younger urban generation, are in the process of happily casting traditional identity to the winds in favour of Sovietisation. Il'f and Petrov depict this outcome as inevitable not only because it was increasingly required by the Soviet literary establishment, but also because it was more obvious at the time of the novel's writing: Central Asia *was* vulnerable and Soviet policy, like its tsarist forebear, held that it *should* be transformed. If the railroad was the primary instrument in 'rescuing' the region from primitiveness, the collateral effects of such development were not unambiguously agreeable, however. The changes Bender sees resemble those that Anne Lounsbery describes as playing out in a

prerevolutionary scenario from Chekhov, in which the “tracks [...] have succeeded in physically linking the steppe region to the far-off centres, but the result has not been the magically animating energy of true connection that was long anticipated by Russia’s various apostles of railroads” (2019: 224). The transformation at hand, in fact, is a Soviet reshaping of territory that levels any particularities to produce the characterless uniformity of provincialness: “while the steppes might once have been a frontier, they are now just the provinces – thanks largely to the train on which [the protagonist] has arrived” (2019: 223).

At the beginning of the next chapter, Bender has returned to Moscow, and though he steps off the train exuding ostensible triumph – “His trousers poured like a waterfall onto his patent-leather shoes”, his face “bronzed with a colonial tan” (*TGLC* 379-380) – his victory is Pyrrhic. The New Soviet Order has made being rich completely irrelevant, and the money that Bender has worked so hard to acquire brings him no happiness or improvement. Out of countenance, he decides to head for Brazil, although an abortive altercation with Romanian border guards forces him to flee back into the Soviet Union, where he will assimilate and look for a job.²⁹

It is no surprise that *The Little Golden Calf*, published in Stalin’s Russia, shows Soviet power besting the shady trickster. Nor is it unexpected, insofar as Il’f and Petrov undertook in their novel to demonstrate that “money has no moral value”, that the protagonist’s luck sours when he gets his hands on Koreiko’s riches.³⁰ Bender’s defeat is certain. More noteworthy is the fact that this outcome is locked into place at the joining ceremony, where Bender’s fateful similarity with the Central Asian nomad is put forward. The indigenous steppe dweller in this novel not only serves the traditional function of symbolically representing Turkestani primitiveness, in other words, but also highlights Bender’s own anachronistic nature, underlining the obsolescence of his ostensibly pre-Soviet attitudes and inclinations, among them capitalistic greed, selfish individualism and general lawlessness. The parallel between Bender and the nomad both lends an aura of doom to his personage and increases our compassion for him. And when the novel ends with what looks and feels like Soviet power exacting victory over the protagonist, crushing his aspirations and curtailing his freedom of movement, we wonder Il’f and Petrov themselves don’t regret the passing of “little Asiatic-style taverns” and more generally share Bender’s mistrust of Soviet power.

²⁹ Koreiko remains behind in Central Asia, where he plans to resume working as a clerk while awaiting the return of capitalism (*TGLC* 378).

³⁰ Evgenii Petrov mentions this as the novel’s theme in the outline for an unrealized book that he had hoped to write about his friend Il’f (2001: 206).

3. *Other Turkestan Texts*

As noted, Il'f and Petrov were less ambivalent about the Sovietisation of Central Asia in their official journalism, as they practised a profession that was deeply embedded in the modern world with its rapidly changing technologies, transport networks, and communication infrastructures. Both men even worked for a time at *The Train Whistle* (*Gudok*), a daily paper published by the Ministry of Transportation and dedicated in part to the expanding Soviet rail network. Il'f had first travelled to Central Asia on behalf of *The Train Whistle*, in fact, and the four articles that he published from that 1925 trip express unambiguous support for the modernisation of Central Asia and demonstrate that he knew how to write about railroads in an orthodox Bolshevik manner. Consider his critique of tsarist-era track laying on the historic line between Tashkent and Samarkand, for example. Here cliffs adjacent to the rails had once borne a plaque pompously asserting that "In 1895 Nicholas II ordered 'Let there be a railroad.' In 1898 this was fulfilled". But times have changed and the workers have now asserted their dignity: "During the February Revolution this bronze stupidity was ripped down by the hands of labourers about whom no one had ever written on porphyry cliffs", Il'f declares, "although it was none but they who roasted alive while laying the roadbed for the Central Asian Railroad" (Il'f and Petrov 1961, vol. 5: 27).

In these essays, modernisation is exclusively positive and Il'f does his best to dispel the myth that indigenous culture is somehow quaint and charming. Contradicting the views later espoused by Bender, he argues instead for sweeping reforms. "The country (*strana*) knows almost no machine", he writes:

For people who dream of "the good old days when everything was so wonderful", a visit to Central Asia is useful.

They will see there the paradise painstakingly described in the Koran, the red clay, the idyllic herds, the farmers who submit to the land, to the prophets, and to the mullahs of the prophet.

But, besides that, they will also see the wooden plow – the primordial *omach* – with which the Kazakh farmer works his field. Next to the *omach*, the Russian wooden plow is a technological achievement. This clay paradise is tilled by backbreaking [*katorzhnym*] labor. (Il'f and Petrov 1961, vol. 5: 32-33)

Multiple references to both the Koran and the Bible underline the antediluvian and change-resistant nature of Central Asian lifeways, whose "mullahs, bearded turban-wearers, madly howl at every innovation and [at] the tractors, as yet small detachments of Soviet iron that have difficulty passing along the roads of biblical width" (Il'f and Petrov 1961, vol. 5: 33).³¹ He looks

³¹ An allusion to Central Asia's persistent antiquity appears again in the title of Il'f and Petrov's 1930 travel sketches, "Caution! Immersed in the Ages!".

forward to the introduction of still more Soviet materials and technology, lending his support to the pro-Soviet faction, the “young, hot Asia” that “takes the side of the Soviet machine in this struggle against a thousand years of inertia, and is now laying the most difficult road – from ancestral tradition [*rodovoi byt*] to the soviets” (Il’f and Petrov 1961, vol. 5: 32-33).

It is interesting to see Il’f working through his own expectations and discoveries on this first trip in 1925. When he attended the Turksib joining ceremony five years later, he, like Bender, was a more sophisticated veteran tourist, but much of his earlier commentary resembles (albeit playfully) the naïve and stereotypical reactions to Turkestan later made fun of in *The Little Golden Calf*. Il’f revels in highlighting the contrast of old and new, for example, that is later characterised as a hackneyed cliché, and experiments with the conflation of predictable Oriental tropes in associating Samarkand with Baghdad, referring to a camel as a “ship of the desert” and declaring to his wife that:

when I crossed the desert (a real one, Marusia, without embellishment, how hot it was) and saw the Tashkent oasis, surrounded by poplars and fig trees, I was rather stunned. It’s an extraordinary place “from a Western view”. *The Bible* and Egypt. Some half-naked Nubian slaves are walking around and talking about the same things as 100,000 years ago. The whites of their eyes gleam. And their teeth. And everywhere donkeys, calves and other Biblical armature. Even Esau and Jacob. [...] All in all, it’s the Old Testament. It does not resemble “The Thief of Baghdad”. I’ll be in Baghdad itself tomorrow morning. (2004: 316-317)

Il’f refers here to the popular 1924 silent film directed by Raoul Walsh and starring Douglas Fairbanks, but his words also bring to mind the yet unborn Ostap Bender, another much-beloved showman and grafter. Indeed, it is tempting to see Bender’s genesis in this offhand remark penned after visiting the Tashkent oasis, where Il’f was struck by the stark contrast between romantic expectations of the “East” and its everyday reality, whether that of ancient lifeways or Soviet modernisation.

Interestingly, Il’f in 1925 comments on various subjects that do not get repeated in his later travel writing on Central Asia or in *The Little Golden Calf*, some of these are politically sensitive and others simply irrelevant to constantly mutating Soviet policies. He associates Islam with ignorance, for example, and describes local markets as full of unpleasant smells, unappetizing foods, and swarming flies, details that might indeed incline one towards little brown meatballs. He also explores issues of women’s emancipation, indicating that women condemned to a traditional Muslim lifestyle are subject to ritualized ignorance, to exploitative arranged and polygamous marriages, and sometimes to the appalling requirement to wear a *chachvan*, whose only opening is a “horsehair grate” over the eyes. Emancipation is slowly being made available

through the access to education granted by Soviet institutions, however, and some of the young women that he describes have chosen to leave the village for vocational courses (Il'f and Petrov 1961, vol. 5: 34-39).³² In another essay (Il'f 2009), Il'f touches upon religious, political, and economic questions, including the treacherous political machinations of Enver Pasha, who pretends to collaborate with the Soviets and then cites "the Islamic cause" in an attempt to install himself in Turkestan as an anti-Soviet potentate. All of these themes are absent in *The Little Golden Calf*, indeed, the essay on "Enver the Bandit" was even omitted from Il'f and Petrov's five-volume *Collected Works*, published in 1961 during the era of a not overly warm Thaw.

Il'f and Petrov's 1930 travel sketches are less reductive than *The Little Golden Calf* in portraying Central Asia's indigenous population, here shown to encompass a broader range of Turkestani "types", including local religious leaders, women, students, and workers. The sketches also give a fuller account of the joining ceremony, with its speeches and specific participants, such as Kazakh political leader, Turar Ryskulov. As noted, many of the topics raised here later appear in *The Little Golden Calf*, such as the critique of journalism's predictable response to Turksib and Central Asia, shown in reporters who parrot one another and repeat clichés of the "East" (Il'f and Petrov 1992: 7-8). In making fun of these standard approaches to Central Asia and Turksib, Il'f and Petrov raise questions about their validity, but also exploit them for effects ranging from the comic to the rhetorical. Clichés are not always condemned, in fact. Their travel sketches even articulate a defence of Soviet journalism's most hackneyed set pieces:

Our photographers are often reproached because the shot of "The Old and the New" is itself no longer new and because the photo of the camel sniffing Turksib's rails is nothing but vulgarity.³³

The photographers snarl angrily in return. And they're right. This cannot be a bad theme. Simple truths must be repeated relentlessly. Yes, a tractor is better than a camel, a car is better than an *arba* [wagon], friendly collaborative work is better than working alone, and as long as there are people who don't wish to understand this, these simple truths will have to be repeated daily. Where there is a need, there can be no vulgarity. (1992: 8)

³² We do not find commentary on the emancipation of Central Asian women in Il'f and Petrov's 1930 travel sketches or the *Little Golden Calf*, although an essay on this theme (Il'f and Petrov 1989) was published separately in 1930 on the pages of *The Women's Journal* (*Zhenskii zhurnal*, no. 9), a fact suggesting the increased marginalization of feminist issues since 1925.

³³ The camel sniffing Turksib's rails is an image from Turin's film.

Here we see the emphatic and sober tone that Il'f and Petrov use in their journalism to underline important official truths. We see this again later in their account of the speech given at the joining ceremony by Turksib's renowned chief engineer, Vladimir Shatov:

Shatov usually spices up his speeches with a large dose of high-quality humour. This is always successful. Shatov knows that one who has laughed will then grasp the serious parts of the speech even better than the funny ones. But now he had to make do without humour. (Il'f and Petrov 1992: 14)

Shatov "has to make do", the article suggests, because the impelling and serious nature of Turksib's achievement trumps even an otherwise recognized need for levity – also defended here, it is worth noting, in a political climate that was quickly losing its sense of humour. This topic may be seen as part of an ongoing debate about the possible rhetorical uses of humour. In January 1930, Il'f and Petrov had participated in a spirited public event addressing the question "Do we need Soviet satire?" (*A nuzhna li nam satira?*), about which they later wrote an article. This event involved talks by writers of different political stripes, including their friend and colleague Vladimir Mayakovsky, who defended humour in a "brief and seething speech" (1961, vol. 2: 486) and took his life four months later on what was virtually the eve of Il'f and Petrov's departure for Aina-Bulak.³⁴ Mayakovsky's death, which was inspired at least in part by political frustrations, goes unmentioned in Il'f and Petrov's writings, although it undoubtedly cast a pall over the trip and their views of Sovietisation.

4. Conclusions

To what extent did Il'f and Petrov themselves have doubts about Turksib's mission? As it turns out, the Turkestan-Siberian railroad was a mixed success: it carried far more freight than had been anticipated, helped to build both a Kazakh proletariat and a Stalin-era managerial class, contributed fundamentally to the economic modernisation of the Turkestan region, galvanised the growth of various cities along the rail line (most notably Almaty), and, with the addition of new spurs, "became one of the largest railroads in the Soviet Union" (Payne 2001a: 288-291). Turksib was also one of the weapons deployed by the Soviets in their ongoing "war on the primitive"

³⁴ Mayakovsky committed suicide on April 14, 1930 and the joining ceremony in Aina-Bulak took place on April 26.

(Payne 2001a: 297), however, and helped to effect the large-scale economic restructuring of Turkestan in which the republics of Soviet Central Asia “were converted to monoculture production of raw materials, a process that made a mockery of the regime’s anticolonial rhetoric” (2001a: 291-292). Nor was it used to ferry grain to Turkestan’s farmers in order to help convince them to grow cotton: under Stalinist policy Kazakh farmers were simply collectivized and then told what to grow, a process that, together with the 1931-1932 campaign to coercively settle the nomadic population, was disastrous for Central Asia’s rural and nomadic residents: “[o]ver half a million nomadic and semi-nomadic households were forced to abandon their traditional pastoral economies” and as many as 1,750,000 Kazakhs died.³⁵

Although the repression and collectivization of Turkestan’s native population was already underway in 1930, Il’f and Petrov do not explicitly discuss the fate of the rural steppe population in either their novel or their journalism. This aspect of Soviet modernisation was evident enough to appear in a *New York Times* article written by an American reporter who had travelled with them to the joining ceremony, however: “DEBATE AMID THE STEPPES”, his headline reads, “Collectivization Finds Peasants Petulant as Mighty Change Envelops Their Lands” (Duranty 1930).³⁶ In their own journalism, of course, Il’f and Petrov cast their ballot in Bolshevik style with the steppe’s urban population in favour of modernisation, and *The Little Golden Calf* only indirectly raises concerns about possible connections between the construction of Turksib and the destruction of indigenous local culture. We see the iron steed closing in on the wandering donkey and threatening old-world Bender with his romantic view of the East, and we may intuit that nomadic steppe dwellers are doomed, but the narrative does not dwell on the railroad’s threat to Central Asian lifeways. Despite vague regret for “the good old days”, Bender does not seem to fully grasp the ramifications of the Soviet-Turkestan encounter whose rhetoric he so ably parrots in his *Complete Celebrator’s Kit*. Nonetheless, we are able to see that Turksib’s steely bound will connect Central Asia with Europe, end Turkestani isolation and also eradicate the unstruc-

³⁵ The clear divide in *The Little Golden Calf* between the young Kazakh town dwellers who support modernisation and the mounted nomads calls to mind the “radical bifurcation” of the effects that Sovietisation had upon them, “urban social mobility” for the former and “rural genocide” for the latter (Payne 2001a: 292-293).

³⁶ As Abarinov (2022) points out, Il’f and Petrov also omit mention of a political debate that seems to have taken place at the Moscow train station before the chartered train’s departure for Central Asia and was headlined by Duranty (1930): “RED POLICY ARGUED AT TURKSIB STATION”.

tured movement of Kazakh lifeways and pastoral traditions with their camels, *ishaks*, and shaggy steppe ponies. The new railway signals both the monumental promise of the modernisation to come and the destruction of the small, the colourful, the idiosyncratic, and the ironic.

We can perhaps associate some of Bender's views and inclinations to those of Il'ia Il'f, whose 1925 diaries and newspaper feuilletons betray an evident affection for the "capricious *ishaks*" of Central Asia, the "long-eared, big-eyed little donkeys" (Il'f and Petrov 1961, vol. 5: 29), a topic to which he returns many times. Like Bender, Il'f is also attuned to elements of beauty in traditional culture, often noting in his diary the colours and fabrics of Central Asia, for example, and other aesthetic details that strike him for their departure from Western norms. Some of these passages are quite lyrical, such as his description of riding a night train through the steppe: "I left Samarkand at night, which unsettles and touches a person, taking him as if in jest [*berët ego shutia*]. The small lamps of the carriage, the silence, the soft rocking, the faded and marvellous sky with the half moon coupled to a passing cloud" (2001: 14-15). Il'f's aesthetic appreciation is unaccompanied by Bendersque regret for the past, however. Concern over modernisation does not appear in his diaries and postcards, nor in the later reportage that he co-authored with Petrov. We find instead what seems to be very real European horror in the face of Central Asian 'primitiveness', an admixture of shock and dismay at traditional Turkestani lifeways.

It is true that the rhetorically satiric tone of Il'f and Petrov's official journalism, like the comically satiric tone of their novels, makes it difficult to ferret out the authors' distinct points of view. The study of Il'f's unpublished and probably self-censored diaries and postcards requires delicacy as well. At the same time, certain passages from these texts help us decipher some of the images and suggestions found in the novel and to understand – as is often the case with authors and their protagonists – that Il'f and Petrov were on both sides of the debate played out in *The Little Golden Calf*. They empathise with Bender's romanticism and see its limitations, appreciating "little Asiatic-style taverns with tambourines and cymbals" as well as mineral water and kitchen hygiene. Thus, the subtle suggestions of regret for the Sovietisation of Central Asia found in *The Little Golden Calf* should not be taken as wholly illustrative of views presumably held by its authors and otherwise latent.

While Il'f and Petrov's hard-hitting reportage champions the Soviet "war on the primitive" in Turkestan with the explicit and powerful language that was almost obligatory for Soviet journalism, the propagandistic timbre of such words does not necessarily indicate that either writer was insincere. It is likely that Il'f and Petrov felt some ambivalence about Soviet power in 1930 and certainly later – Nakhimovsky describes Il'f's last diurnal jottings (1936-1937)

as being “full of skepticism and despair” (1999: 106) – yet their sentiments can also be distinguished from Bender’s in encompassing pride for the achievement of Turksib, an appreciation for modernity and for the inroads of progress, and a firm conviction that many aspects of Central Asian indigenous lifeways should be modernised. That Il’f admired some aspects of Turkestan is evident from his diary, but his perturbation in the face of ‘primitiveness’ is registered still more broadly, appearing in his 1925 diaries as well as in the newspaper articles that he wrote both in 1925 and with Petrov in 1930. In *The Little Golden Calf*, Il’f and Petrov use stereotypes of the nomad to prefigure Bender’s downfall, and even arguably illustrate in his flight from Central Asia the assumption – unquestioned by them – that the Turkic steppe is no place for Europeans. However laughably expressed, Bender’s proposition that the iron steed Turksib modernize Turkestan by “fling[ing] up the sands of the past with its steely bound” and “guid[ing] the tread of history” also reflects the views of his creators.

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