Russia between West and East: images of the Tsarist empire in the Dutch periodical
De Aarde en haar Volken, 1864-1918

From the mid-1850’s onwards, the educated reading public of the French-speaking world was offered a new periodical that had been given the name Le Tour du Monde. Soon, the new magazine had a wide circulation, for there had been an enormous increase in that part of the nineteenth-century readership who enjoyed travelling from their armchair; it was an increase caused by, precisely, the almost free-ranging imperialism that characterised the century: in Europe, the fascination for all things non-European which almost automatically meant foreign and exotic had never been so great among so wide an audience. Thus, when the publishing house of Hachette decided to devote a magazine specifically to stories about exciting trips to far-away places, written by those who could claim to have been there themselves, success was assured.

In 1864, the Dutch printer/publisher A.C. Kruseman, who operated from Haarlem, decided to copy the formula which had brought such profit to his French colleague. His own publishing empire had been founded on the publication of the best-selling literary works of such popular authors as N. Beets, W. Bilderdijk and C. Busken Huet, to name but a few writers from his stable; however, by the early 1860’s, the firm was beginning to totter. Venturing into the as yet relatively new market of illustrated magazines aiming at the prosperous bourgeoisie, the Haarlem publisher hoped to recoup his dwindling fortune.

It is a pity that space does not permit me to analyse the interesting and complex publishing history of Kruseman’s new baby, which he named De Aarde en haar Volken - The Earth and its Peoples. Suffice it to say that the magazine, starting in 1865, continued to be a success till well after the turn of the century; although by the 1920’s its impact began to wane, nevertheless it appeared regularly till the beginning of World War II in 1940. From 1865 onwards, the magazine appeared in weekly instalments, priced at a dime. In 1919, it was turned into a monthly.

Though I have not yet been able to reconstruct the exact number of the magazine’s readership, contemporary sources tell us that it was well
appreciated in wide circles. The publisher himself did not stop shouting to his readers, and to the public at large, that De Aarde was deemed a valuable contribution to the general education of the entire family. In a somewhat more objective source, a review in the Arnhemsche Courant of January 1904, the author writes:

"De Aarde en haar Volken is one of those magazines that really belong in the home of every civilised family. This periodical is specifically suited to provide themes for conversation in the house, conversations in which both the pupil of a grammar school or a gymnasium, and their parents can profitably join".

This, to me, seems to characterise the readership of De Aarde: it was meant for, and read by the prosperous middle class, by people who had had some further education and wished to be considered culturally up-to-date, especially with regard to the expanding world where Europe was fulfilling its civilising mission, by people, moreover, who cherished one of the central values of 19th-century culture, a civilised, family-concentrated existence.

Admittedly, Russia was not among the destinations which were most favoured by the more than a thousand authors whose travel experiences formed the subject of the equally numerous articles which appeared in De Aarde during its nearly 80 years' history. Yet, up till 1920, nearly 40 texts about Russia can be counted - which, if they were long ones, were presented to the public in two or more instalments. One way or another, all of them informed the Dutch readers about some aspects of life and culture in the vast tsarist empire.

In the first decades of the magazine's existence, these texts, like all the other ones, were largely bought by Kruseman from Hachette or from other foreign publishers; then, they were translated, sometimes faithfully, sometimes in more or less re-written form. Obviously, the authors mostly were not Dutch. Indeed, nearly half of the articles were written by English and French authors. I must add that, as far as one can find out, the majority of these writer-travellers do not seem to have spoken any Russian. As with most travel writers, they mainly relied on Russian informants who spoke a European language, or on interpreters which, obviously, created some kind of distortion as well. All this, however, does not detract from the gist of my argument, for these writers did, of course, largely contribute to the image which their Dutch readers could form of Russia, of its inhabitants and of its civilisation.

Of course, the main question of this essay should be what kind of image this mostly well-educated audience, who, however, had no professional interest in matters Russian, could form on the basis of these articles. The question is relevant because I assume that only those who did have a more professional interest in Russia had access to or took the trouble to find other sources of information. Not only was De Aarde said to be one of the most-widely read periodicals in this field during the decades up till the first World War, one also has to conclude that other popular magazines only seldom devoted any attention to Russian affairs. Notable exceptions, among a few others, were the contributions which the well-known painter/writer Marius Bauer provided to De Kroniek in 1896.

He had been sent to Moscow as special correspondent to cover the coronation of Nicholas II. His informative and well-written reports balanced between awe for the 'barbaric splendour' of the occasion and an attitude of ill-concealed, somewhat arrogant western-European distance. His coverage did elicit a variety of reactions in the intellectual circles of late-nineteenth century Holland where, especially among the socialists, Russia's autocratic ruler was
vilified as a despot who failed to alleviate the misery of his people. However, the discussion, though wide ranging, soon diversified into other issues and did not really touch on Bauer's sketch of Russian conditions anymore.

Besides the travel stories *stricto sensu*, *De Aarde* also provided editorials which often contained more general information on the countries and peoples described in the magazine. Thus, to give but a few examples, in 1873, the reader could study an elaborate statistical survey of the situation in the Russian empire, in 1874 he was given an introduction into the ins and outs of Russia's policy in Siberia, and in 1876 he was told about the Tartars in Kazan.

From 1896 onwards, the magazine was given a supplement which bore the title "Op den Uitkijk", or 'On the Look-Out'. Not only did it replace the editorials, it also was far more orientated to the actual situation of the regions described than the stories in the main issue. In the case of Russia the texts in 'On the Look-Out' dealt with such items as the enormous significance of railway-construction for the Russian empire - these, of course, where the years in which Russia stated its claim on its Far Eastern holdings by building the Trans-Siberian railroad -, the importance of Nicholas's coronation in Moscow, the military background of the Russian-Japanese War, the revolution of 1905, et cetera. In short, with the supplement, the editors of *De Aarde* tried to steer a more news-directed course.

Undoubtedly, this must have meant that the magazine trespassed on the field covered more or less thoroughly by the regular daily press; though the new direction certainly will not have detracted from the attraction of *De Aarde*, at the same time one may assume that this change of policy was meant specifically to reinforce the magazine's hold over its readership; it seems to have occurred at a time wherein the number of buyers may have started to decrease, precisely because the regular press was expanding its coverage as well.

The illustrations of *De Aarde* tell a fascinating story of their own. The editorials left aside, almost all articles were more or less lavishly illustrated. Up till the middle of the 1890's line-drawings had to do the trick; from then on, however, photographs appeared, like the earlier drawings produced in black-and-white; for even though the production of colour lithographs had been known from the mid-1850's onwards, using this procedure probably would have been too expensive.

Obviously, one should ask whether the illustrations simply were used to add visual information, or if they had to visually prove the arguments made in the texts? Especially since the introduction of photography, the latter effect often was sought by the public press, acting on the assumption that photographs added a necessary touch of verisimilitude to their verbal craft; this, of course, was based on the belief - widely held by nineteenth- and, indeed, also early twentieth-century audiences - that contrary to the written word photographs did not lie.

As far as I can judge, the illustrations that went with the Russia articles in *De Aarde* either were made during the trips of the authors - drawn or photographed by the latter or by an experienced co-traveller - or produced on their return, to somehow go with the text. However, though drawings could be made from memory, photographs could not. Yet, we do know that precisely for the very popular stories covering, for example, the barbarically-fascinating regions of sub-Saharan Africa, such magazines as *Le Tour du Monde* used blood-curdling but entirely studio-made photographs, produced by entrepreneurs specialising in the genre. Thus, if nothing else was readily available, the editors of *De Aarde* simply delved into their stock of
illustrations of not easily identifiable far-away locations and exotic situations; sometimes almost testing their luck, and the readers' credulity, they then added these illustrations to those articles which were in need of proper visualisation. But whatever their genesis, the illustrations could not fail to somehow manipulate the reader.

Having dealt with the general background of the production of *De Aarde*, it now is time to confront its contents, and analyse what kind of images, more specifically about Russia, were offered to the reader.

It is clearly significant that the majority of the texts published in *De Aarde* do not cover what is now called European Russia. Only a few stories follow the beaten track to such cities as St. Petersburg, Moscow, Novgorod and Kiev. The reasons are twofold, and the consequence is interesting as well.

The causes must be sought both in the motives and the backgrounds of the travellers involved and in the editorial policy of the magazines that first published their stories, before *De Aarde* bought and translated them.

Studying the background of the authors whose Russian stories appeared in *De Aarde*, one must conclude that nearly a third went to the East for professional reasons, either as journalists or as scientists. This might lead us to conclude that they sought to cover the political and military situation of the day, or were induced to study the exotic and the unknown. In both cases, the object of their travel was more likely to be South or East Russia than the empire's heartland.

Moreover, with a shrewd eye on their circulation, the editors of *De Aarde* themselves or, for that matter, the magazines which they read for inspiration and actual copy, will have been far more interested in these Eastern-exotic features of the Tsar's realm that in its more or less European, rather dull Russian aspects. Indeed, it is quite clear that when the nineteenth century is approaching its end, the interest in the westernised parts of Russia, and, hence, in the articles dealing with it, disappears in favour of texts dealing with Asian Russia.

These choices, and the underlying motives are reflected in the images projected about the European part of Russia. In most articles, the ethnic Russian is presented as a kind, but rather lazy person; he - for men are described far more often than women - is childishly-naive, and easily led by the arguments of those in authority, without ever protesting against the numerous cases of wilful tyranny. Stereotypically, the real Russian wears a beard and a square hat, and cannot live without his tea. However, he also is almost always unspeakably dirty. His biggest vice by far is alcoholism - which, the authors note with obvious disgust, applies to the womenfolk as well.

Some authors do try to explain the widespread existence of this phenomenon. Thus, the Frenchman Albert Thomas, travelling through Russia on a voyage of discovery funded by the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits*, writes that:

"In the extremes of cold and heat a body does not react very well, and with the additional lack of invigorating food, vodka has to supply the energy people otherwise would lack. Thus, the Russian temper has been formed, because, as always, natural conditions create people's intelligence."2

The argument is a striking echo of the climatological and psychological reasoning which the ancient Greeks, more specifically Aristotle, had

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2 *De Aarde en haar Volken*, (1905), 310.
developed to explain the culture and temperament of the people who surrounded them, notably the lethargic, indolent Egyptians and Persians. Nor should we forget that the Greeks used the argument precisely to stress their own far more perfect physical and hence spiritual condition.

The Russian government official, a species which most travellers could not escape though they dearly would have liked to, is both very lazy and very nasty. However, pondering over the many references to the problems caused by a bored, inefficient officialdom, one has to realise that this characteristic cannot be deemed specific to Russia, only. Indeed, it rather is a constant in almost every travelogue written by nineteenth-century European or other Western travellers; the sense of freedom that the majority of travellers assume to be their due as the natural corollary of their travel pleasure cannot but clash with the restrictions inevitably posed on individual liberty by big systems and their slow bureaucracies.

Except for St. Petersburg, which is considered European, and Moscow, which is deemed rather more exotic, most Russian cities are described as terribly dull, with long, straight streets and uniform houses. Only the oriental bazaars relieve this monotony, most travellers write.1 Moscow, the old capital, though spoiled by a periphery made up of factories and slums, is, according to the Italian Barzini, a holy city, which the Russians themselves invest with something like a mystical significance. Albert Thomas even writes it is Russia's holy mother, to whom people pray in hours of need.2

Of course, the Russian Orthodox Church is very much in evidence all over the country. Most travellers cannot really appreciate it. They do observe that religion is deeply embedded in Russian culture and, indeed, is a living force among all classes of society. However, the clergy comes in for massive criticism: they are rather too well-fed, almost always drunk, almost always corrupt, and almost always totally uneducated, according to general opinion in the West.

In the stories about Russia published in De Aarde from the early 1870's onwards, the expanding railway system of Russia generally is spoken of with much admiration; it is seen as the logical product of a policy which for military and economic reasons aims to make the vast empire more manageable than it ever was; obviously, the admiration has a more immediately subjective background as well; for the existence of the railway network enables Europeans to travel to those parts of Russia which up till recently only could be reached with much difficulty or not at all.

Indeed, it is precisely this railway system which turns the travellers into tourists. The first stories mentioning trains are practically euphoric about the demise of the post chaise era, and, with it, of the Russian coachmen who were infamous for the way in which they loved to scare the travellers out of their wits with their deliberately dangerous manoeuvres.3 However, it soon transpires that, at least in comparison with European trains, the Russian railway system is little faster than the former coach system. Moreover, with the coming of the new transport system, old traditions are lost as well. The increasing westernisation of some parts of Russia even leads one female traveller to bemoan the fact that

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1 E.g. De Aarde (1903), 251. For further remarks: De Aarde (1867), 382; (1868), 311; (1873), 348.
2 De Aarde, (1905), 242, 248; (1908), 28.
3 De Aarde, (1873), 254; (1875), 103; (1879), 137.
"Instead of the biblical tent, we now have the vulgar hotel; instead of the unlimited freedom, we know have the innumerable ties of civilised society. We used to be travellers in the fullest sense of the word - now we are going to be common tourists."6

This was, indeed, an important observation: during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the traveller to Russia, who used to be somewhat of an adventurer, daring into as yet almost unknown parts, became a mere tourist. The magazine reflects that transformation, as can be seen from the at least partial change in character of the articles which are included; they now tend to stress the possibilities for sight-seeing, and address such mundane questions as which hotels one has to choose. Not surprisingly, by the end of the nineteenth century there is an increasing similarity between the descriptions of Russia's more general features as given in the travel stories, and those which figure in the two most commonly used travel guides, the *Baedeker* and the *Murray*.

As part of this change from travel to tourism, people increasingly complain when they realise that notwithstanding Russia's westernisation, outside the few big cities the touristic infrastructure still fails to meet European standards: somewhere it is said about a hotel, appropriately named London, that

"it is the most beautiful oasis of European cleanliness and comfort in the whole south and east of Russia."8

In the meantime it is precisely the railways that enable European travellers to reach those destinations that, to witness from the majority of the articles in *De Aarde*, were among the most favourite: the Caucasus and the various regions of central and eastern Asia.

In the year 1913, the Dutch painter and writer Maurits Wagenvoort, who in the 1890's had accompanied Bauer to Russia and had come to love the exotic, published a series of articles describing his vicissitudes in the Caucasus. Alas, he did not find what he was looking for. True, there were Cossacks, well-built, blonde boys, but otherwise he was terribly disappointed. The cities were ugly, spoiled by modern industry and consequently robbed of their oriental atmosphere; everywhere, ghastly, newly built orthodox churches had taken the place of the lovely old mosques which the Russian conquerors either had destroyed or had allowed to fall into disrepair.9

Still, it has to be admitted that this negative opinion, voiced by a highly aesthetically motivated mind, was the exception rather than the rule. Most travellers commented favourably on the consequences of Russia's expansion; indeed, the colonial policy practised by the tsarist regime in Russia's Asian territories is deemed a good thing. Echoing Russia's own ideology of its 'mission' in Siberia, someone wrote:

"Undoubtedly, in Asia, Russia represents the cause of civilisation in the face of barbarism ... The extension of Russian rule is indeed a blessing."10

Some authors specifically applauded Russia's colonial policy because it would help to spread Christianity in the heathen parts of the empire - once again echoing the official ideology of the tsarist regime where Siberia was concerned.

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6 *De Aarde*, (1894), 350.
7 *De Aarde*, (1913), 18.
8 *De Aarde*, (1904), 261.
9 *De Aarde*, (1913), passim.
10 *De Aarde*, (1871), 326.
In this context, even the policy of linguistic russification was considered a necessity; it was an instrument that would help formerly uneducated minds to develop at least some understanding.\footnote{De Aarde, (1869), 340.}

In short, even though various travellers are charmed and indeed fascinated by the exotic religions of Russia's Far East, and by the strange customs of the partly nomadic tribes living there, most cannot but feel that the frontier between Europe, the world of civilisation, and Asia, the world of barbarism, is to be located somewhere on the line from Moscow to Novgorod.\footnote{De Aarde, (1908), 26-27.}

Meanwhile, almost every traveller writing in the 1860's and 1870's realises that the state that has grown on both sides of this line, between these two worlds, will be one of the world's super powers before the end of the nineteenth century.\footnote{De Aarde, (1867), 287; (1873), 2.}

A question which has to be posed now is the one concerning the vision of man and culture that can be distilled from the thirty-odd articles on Russia published in De Aarde before 1920.

Despite the slow genesis of a more relativistic concept of culture during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the images Europe formed of the non-European world still were characterised mainly by an evolutionist theory of culture, in which European civilisation represented the highest degree. In this concept, European culture, implicitly but often also explicitly was used as the very norm by which to judge other cultures. Moreover, this theory contained a definite Darwinist strain, which judged people and, hence, their cultures from a racial point of view as well. This appears from various stories about Russia:

"This submission to a more gifted race naturally prepares the Samoyed for the rise to a higher degree of civilisation" an author writes in 1873.\footnote{De Aarde, (1873), 3.} Indeed, the stories about Russia in De Aarde regularly refer to a racial way of thinking or judging, whether it be in anthropological observations which often are combined with the then highly popular doctrine of phrenology, or in blatant remarks about the 'marvellous specimens' of the one race as compared to another, with its utter inability to acquire even the least smattering of culture.\footnote{De Aarde, (1880), 139; (1893), 188. Also the extra issue of November, 1902.}

At the same time one notices various references to the so-called survivalist way of thinking about cultures which had been made popular by, amongst others, the English anthropologist E.B. Tylor; in his ground-breaking study Primitive Culture, he had admonished his European and American readers to study other cultures if only because this might teach them about the original condition of European civilisation; in visiting non-European societies one might, in a manner of speaking, re-live prehistoric or medieval Europe; one author wrote about tribal life in Siberia:

"The natives of these Northern climes (provide us) with an example of the existence our forebears must have led in historic times (...) In order to better understand the ancient people, we must study primitive civilisations."\footnote{De Aarde, (1903), 24.}
Last, but not least, many stories strike a note of nostalgia for values that have been lost, for a way of life long past, for a far more uncomplicated society, all of which are recognised in the cultures of the steppes and deserts of Russia; unconsciously, but most times quite obviously, these are contrasted with the over-organised way of life that now restricts the Westerner; about life in the Caucasus it was said:

"I know very well that these people, whose way of life is so much closer to nature, also are far more receptive to violent emotions and deep-felt impressions than we are; in this they completely resemble the Greeks of Homer, in whom we find the very same violence and spontaneity".17

On the travellers' part, this clearly shows a longing for lost innocence, for a more intensely-lived existence; however, by the beginning of the twentieth century, only the farthest regions of the Russian empire still showed the conditions that could satisfy this escapist longing.

If I were asked to sketch a few more general ideas on the basis of this short survey, they would be the following.

First of all it appears to me that at least as far as European Russia is concerned, the way it was imagined in De Aarde en haar Volken repeats many of the stereotypes that had been current in western Europe from the sixteenth century onwards - stereotypes of the kind one encounters in the printed descriptions given by such famous Dutch travellers as Isaac Massa, Cornelis de Bruyn or in the manuscript notes of Nicolaas Witsen, which continue well into the early nineteenth century.

Admittedly, with the foundation of St. Petersburg, Western travellers had been given at least one spot in which they could identify imperial Russia with the civilised West. Yet the very laziness, the squalor and the rampant alcoholism, as well as the oriental despotism noted by authors like Massa, Witsen and De Bruyn, return in the articles published in De Aarde. More importantly, they contribute to a mental process which, depending upon the turn which the observer took, one might term the 'orientalisation' or the 'barbarisation' of Russia.

One has to conclude that this very process of 'orientalisation' is strengthened by the fact that now, by the end of the nineteenth century, Russia increasingly is identified with its Asian conquests, which are eagerly described by Western travellers. In the seventeenth century, a man like Witsen, who did discover the beginnings of westernisation during his stay in Muscovy, found little to admire in that part of the tsarist empire. However, he was absolutely and positively fascinated by what he heard of life in the transcaucasian and transuralian world. The same fascination characterises many authors who published in De Aarde in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first years of the twentieth century.

Yet it depended upon the author's point of view whether ultimately he would describe the ethnic, or rather European Russian as the herald of at least some kind of civilisation in these otherwise completely uncivilised regions, or as the destroyer of what had been primitive, innocent, good. When no such judgement was passed, the European Russians often were uncritically equated with the inhabitants of the exotic but barbarian steppes.

Even though the lines sketched above are few and rough ones, only, they suggest that the development of Russia-images in the Netherlands, or,

17 De Aarde, (1870), 274.
indeed, in Europe, over the course of three centuries, took the following course.

Well into the first decade of the twentieth century, with, perhaps, World War I as the watershed, Europe could not stop to think about culture and civilisation but as about a system of concentric spheres. Europe itself, or rather, depending upon the observer's admiration for technological progress, the entire West was the centre and, consequently, provided the standard by which all other cultures were judged. To maintain that standard, to maintain the positive self-image that came with it, and that, indeed, any culture seems to need in order to be able to survive, Europe created an 'outer world', an image to contrast with the image it had created of itself.

The process is quite visible in the stories relating to Russia published in De Aarde. Quite often, the criteria of civilisation developed in the capitalist, bourgeois society of the West, such as personal and public hygiene, urban development, the efficiency of public transport and, of course, the absence of superstition are used to measure Russia with; almost always, this comparison led the writers to conclude to the great differences still existing between the Tsar's empire and the West.

In this process, which is easy to understand from the point of view of cultural psychology, a grading scale of cultures was created, and indeed mentally stipulated. Travelling to the far East or the far West, the far North or the far South, a European, or a Westerner would encounter cultures that manifested themselves in ever lesser degrees of civilisation. As Wolff recently showed in his admirable study Inventing Eastern Europe, from the eighteenth century onwards Central and Eastern Europe acquired a specific function: they were described as the region that, though on the one hand semi-European, which meant at least semi-civilised, on the other hand was Asian still, which meant definitely un-civilised. On that grading scale, the European Russians were accorded the position of intermediaries, of those who prepared the way for Europe's civilising mission; though not yet completely civilised themselves, they still were instrumental in bringing the first glimpses of civilisation to the East. But precisely because the East, the Orient, still was described in terms of nostalgia and exoticism, the Russians, falling between two stools, were left in the cold; they neither were accepted as belonging to the world of the West, nor seen as part of the East. To interpret them and their culture as a category sui generis, with characteristics of their own, was beyond the European mind of the late nineteenth century. We may even ask ourselves if, having reached the end of the twentieth century, we have travelled much farther?

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