Book Reviews


The title of the book, *Etzel*, would normally evoke the memory of Attila who ruled the Hunnic Empire in the 5th century (434-453 A.D.). In the German epos of the Nibelungen the name of this historical figure appears as “Etzel”. As it happened, Etzel was also the nickname of Hermann Joseph Theodor Consten (1878-1957) whose biography is presented in the book under review. Hermann Consten gained some popularity through his travelogue “Weideplätze der Mongolen im Reiche der Chalcha” published in two volumes shortly after the First World War (Berlin 1919-1920).

It gives a vivid account of his journeys in Mongolia. He witnessed the turbulent events of 1911 and 1912 when the Mongols gained their independence from the Manchu Empire, and he knew many of the leading figures of the time personally. Given the fact that historical sources from this period are relatively limited, Consten’s book is still worth reading for students of Mongol history, as it is instructive for the conditions prevailing in Mongolia during that time. Consten was also a gifted photographer who left us a set of brilliant pictures of substantial documentary value.

However, it is a mild overstatement to refer to Consten as “Forscher”, as he never held an academic position in the field, never completed a doctorate and was not really accepted as a scholar among Mongolists, though certainly to his own regret. Obviously, he was more of an adventurer and an agent, the latter in the sense of undercover agent as well, at least temporarily. The biography of this colourful man was written by Doris Götting, a retired journalist with many years of experience in Asia where she worked for the Deutsche Welle. Her book is based on extensive studies in all sorts of German, Mongolian and other archives, on written legacies, personal memories, and other sources of information well accounted for.
in not less that 110 footnotes. In spite of this impressing accuracy the biography is written in a brilliant German style, very exiting to read, in parts breathtaking as a thriller. Consten was an ambivalent personality, repulsive and fascinating at the same time, as Doris Götting states in her introduction (p. 15). And he led a venturesome, partly chaotic life.

Consten was born on 14 March 1878 into a prosperous Catholic manufacturer family in the German town of Aachen close to the Dutch and Belgian borders. After some less fruitful attempts to study things like architecture he enrolled in a “colonial school” (Kolonialschule) in Wittenhausen. This enabled him to get a job as assistant in a coffee plantation in then German East Africa, an area in today’s northeastern Tanzania, when he was in his early twenties. Due to an infection by blackwater fever and, seemingly, for other reasons as well, Consten finally turned his back to Africa and relocated himself to Moscow in 1904 where he learned Russian and studied Oriental languages at the Lazarev Institute (Лазаревский институт восточных языков). From 1907 onward he went to Mongolia on several occasions where he made, among others, the acquaintance of the famous Buryat lama Agvan Dorzhiev with whom he even went on a pilgrimage to Wutaishan in China. While Russian authorities where suspicious about him—they suspected him to be a German spy—Consten gained some credit among the Mongolians because he helped a Mongol courier to escape his Chinese pursuers. In doing so, Consten seems to have played a role in Mongolia’s independence. The incident took place in September 1911 and is told in some detail (pp. 164-165). Consten returned to his hometown of Aachen in 1913.

At the outbreak of World War I we see Consten involved in a secret mission, ultimately designed by Max von Oppenheim, aimed at weakening the enemy in his own hinterland and directed at Persia and Afghanistan. The idea was to incite an islamic revolt (“jihad”) against the British. In November 1914, shortly after the Ottoman Empire had entered into the war, a Turkish-German expedition under the command of lieutenant Oskar Niedermayer left Constantinople for Konya and Aleppo. It was Consten who organised much of the logistics for this operation. Early in 1915, the expedition arrived in Baghdad. However, latent rivalry between Consten and Niedermayer ended in bitter quarrelling, which finally resulted in Consten’s absenting himself from the expedition in February. He rode