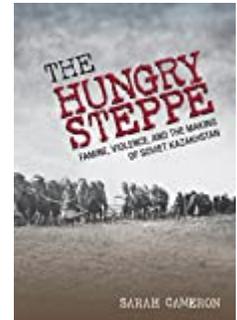


Sarah Cameron. *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. 294 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-3043-6.



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In *The Hungry Steppe*, Sarah Cameron weaves environmental history together with the threads of economic, political, and social history. Consequently, the book contributes to the literature on the Soviet modernizing project and on famine and nomadic societies as they relate to twentieth-century modernizing projects worldwide.

As an environmental history, *The Hungry Steppe* is about place. In a narrow sense, the Hungry Steppe comprises a region of the larger Kazakh Steppe, but Cameron uses the term in the book's title to characterize the whole region when struck by famine in the 1930s. Not completely coterminous with the post-1991 nation-state of Kazakhstan, the Kazakh Steppe lies north of the oases and river valleys famed in earlier centuries as nodes in the Silk Road network but south of the forested belt of western Siberia. To the northwest lie the Ural Mountains and to the west the Aral and Caspian Seas. To the east rise the Tianshan Mountains, across whose passes Kazakhs for centuries had migrated into what is now the Xinjiang region of China. Some attempted to flee from the famine

via this route. As Cameron shows, Stalinist modernization and its attempts to create firm boundaries for the Soviet Union and the Kazakh national republic within it conclusively disrupted Kazakh seasonal migration patterns, which had hitherto little heeded lines on maps unread by the nomads.

The Kazakh people were created from various clans and lineages who had inhabited the region for centuries, spoke a common Turkic language, and shared religious customs incorporating both Islamic and local beliefs. Like predecessors inhabiting the region for thousands of years, they practiced pastoral nomadism and semi-nomadism, the seasonal migration along stable routes to pasture, water, and shelter for their herds of horses, sheep, and camels. Steppe peoples confronted an extreme continental climate prone to unexpected freezes, which could leave livestock unable to consume grass covered in frost, and the desert or semi-desert land with its limited access to surface water.

Fundamentally, the book is a history of the Soviet Union, and therefore must be situated in that field. Historians have scrutinized Joseph Stalin's collectivization of peasant farms in the late 1920s and early 1930s, usually emphasizing the famines that struck Ukraine and neighboring parts of Russia beginning in 1932. By contrast, the steppes of Soviet Kazakhstan typically warrant only passing mention. Cameron puts the Kazakh story front and center. Our telling of Soviet modernization can no longer ignore those Kazakhs who perished, those who fled, those who survived, and those who perpetrated atrocities.

Cameron argues that the Soviet modernizing project attempted simultaneously to make the Kazakh aul, or nomadic community, sedentary and collectivized. Soviet officials sought to transform social, cultural, and economic relations they viewed as unsuited to modernity. The supposedly backward Kazakhs, both as individuals and as communities, were to reemerge as a modern, Soviet nation. A disaster in the short and medium term, this program and the resulting famine decisively shaped Soviet Kazakh nationhood and identity, with consequences for post-1991 independent Kazakhstan. Its "uneven" results culminated in a catastrophic collapse in the region's livestock herds at the very moment when Stalin imagined remaking the Kazakh Steppe into a replica of the American Great Plains, whence grain and livestock would flow: in this case not to Chicago but to Moscow and St. Petersburg (p. 3).

The Hungry Steppe emphasizes that actual Soviet power fell far short of its ideal, a monolith bent on dominating, destroying, and remaking. Instead, the book emphasizes local, regional, and fractured dimensions of the Soviet modernization project. Indeed, Soviet claims to be a revolutionary force with a singular vision could not overcome environmental conditions. These claims, however, have often been accepted by scholars, albeit not before turning them 180 degrees to use as evidence of Soviet tyranny.

The book brings the study of this specific modernizing project and the famine to English. Its elements drawn from environmental history offer a needed corrective to the growing recent literature on the famine, principally recent work by Isabelle Ohayon, Niccolò Pianciola, and Robert Kindler, who have published in French, Italian, and German, respectively. These are necessary inquiries into economic, social, and political conditions of the Soviet modernizing project for the Kazakh Steppe, and yet none center environmental conditions and forces.

The book moves straightforwardly from introduction to conclusion, proceeding through six chronological chapters, each with its own thematic emphasis. The first relates the region's pre-Bolshevik history, beginning in the late nineteenth century when migrants from Slavic western regions of the Russian Empire settled the margins of the steppe. Land hungry, they sought to convert the steppe from pasture to grain cultivation. As always, nomads' ways of life were then adapting to new conditions and challenges from the environment, of which curbs on their mobility by the encroaching settlers were but one. Contrary to opinion among imperial officials and early Soviet visionaries, the Kazakh aul was not static, unchanging, or backward. Instead, nomad communities were already in ferment when World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the ensuing civil war brought chaos to the steppe from 1914 to 1921, much as they did to the Russian Empire's other regions. This chapter in particular establishes the steppe's environmental limits and changing conditions, against which the Soviet project was bound to struggle.

In chapter 2, the book explores debates in the 1920s about the nature of the aul, of the Kazakhs as a people, and of the Soviet modernization project. Could pastoral nomadism be compatible with communist modernity? Some argued that the aul was already a form of socialism and, indeed, that the answer to the chapter title's question, "Can you

get to socialism by camel?," was a resounding "Yes!" Although in hindsight this approach's potential seems vanishingly small in light of Moscow's designs, these lost voices nonetheless cannot be dismissed.

Chapter 3 moves into the timeframe most associated with Stalin's Five-Year Plan, collectivization, and the precursors to famine. The Moscow-appointed boss in Kazakhstan, Filipp Goloshcheikin, launched an all-out assault on those painted as the elite of nomad society. The campaign was premised on the idea that the socialist revolution of 1917 had never really reached the aul. Instead, the October Revolution had to be imposed now, ten years on, with an emphasis on denouncing and bringing low the bai, the wealthy and powerful of the aul. This both precedes and presages Stalin's well-known attack on the rich peasant farmer, the kulak. Yet this story accords with scholars' understanding of the virtual civil war between the government and peasants but also suggests a distinct, asynchronous story.

The next chapter takes up the dual campaign to sedentarize and collectivize Kazakhs from its launch in 1928. As in other regions, these years witnessed repression, wild expropriation of grain and livestock, and ultimately the economic ruin of productive regions. The outcome—famine and social upheaval—is familiar from other Soviet regions, even if the waves of crisis broke in Soviet Kazakhstan in 1930, a year or more before other regions. In Kazakhstan, a drought in the summer of 1931 compounded the already desperate situation. Cameron concludes that republic authorities and their superiors in Moscow—including Stalin—anticipated that the program would cause hunger by extracting supposedly surplus grain, but they did not foresee or intend a crisis on this scale.

Chapter 5 chronicles the violence that Soviet authorities employed in attempting to prevent the flight of Kazakhs from the steppe beyond the borders of Soviet Kazakhstan or even across the Tian-shan Mountains into China. These borders had not

existed before, and Kazakhs did not recognize them, but the Soviet security forces nonetheless sought to enforce them by any means necessary.

The final chapter explores the politics of the famine and the relief efforts that followed, as well as the economic, social, and political consequences. As in other areas, this included the disgrace of the republic's leaders, who were scapegoated for those quite foreseeable consequences.

In the epilogue, Cameron documents the memory—however limited—in Nursultan Nazarbayev's post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Long tacitly ignored, the famine received some public recognition on its eightieth anniversary. This memory, however, remains far less prominent than that of the *Holodomor*, the simultaneous famine in Ukraine, which dominates memory in post-Soviet Ukraine and the Ukrainian diaspora. Even though the famine period forged Kazakh identity and nationhood, it never became an accepted part of narratives of Kazakh-ness. Cameron navigates issues raised by the contentious debates surrounding the *Holodomor* by emphasizing that Stalin and his henchmen wanted to exploit resources even as they shaped both social and cultural landscapes, to break the peasants as a class and to forge modern nations in the Soviet image. They did not set out to kill Kazakhs, but they also cared little if a few died in the process of increasing economic output. They became alarmed only when many died and economic plans ran aground on the consequences of their gross indifference to human life.

The Hungry Steppe makes a valuable argument for expanding our view of the Soviet modernization project to include non-Slavic, non-western regions. It balances the views of Moscow and the republic center of Almaty with those of Kazakh-language documents and memoirs. Moreover, the book effectively blends environmental history with the social, economic, and political approaches that have generally dominated Soviet history. In its environmental aspect, *The Hungry Steppe* might be compared to Bathsheba Demuth's recent

Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait (2019), an environmental history of Beringia, the lands and seas spanning the Soviet and American sides of the Bering Strait. Environmental conditions and non-human actors—walrus, wolf, or whale—become almost co-protagonists with the humans, who have been shaped by ever-evolving Beringian ways of being or driven by ideologies of modernity and production. Each using a distinctive approach and narrative style, Cameron and Demuth both convey a story of a common twentieth-century modernization project that demanded ever-increasing output, a goal incompatible with the limited capacity of earth and sea to yield use-values.

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