

The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan. By Sarah Cameron. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018. xiv, 277 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. Index. Photographs. Tables. Maps. \$45.95, hard bound.
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“There is no evidence to indicate that Stalin sought to deliberately starve the Kazakhs. . . . Though Moscow anticipated that nomadic settlement would provoke hunger, the regime did not foresee the sweeping scope of the crisis” (99). Thus Sarah Cameron dismisses one possible criminal charge in the case of the Kazakh famine of 1930–1933, in which some 1.5 million out of 6 million Kazakhs perished. However, in this well-written analysis that draws effectively on both Russian- and Kazakh-language documents as well as oral accounts from survivors of the period, the author seeks not merely to depict the suffering of the Kazakhs as the Soviet state endeavored to eliminate pastoralism and introduce collectivized agriculture and animal husbandry, thereby “modernizing” and “civilizing” the nomads by transforming the Kazakhs into a modern, territorially-based nation; rather, she endeavors to answer the eternal Russian question “*Kto vinovat?*,” or as she frames it: “the question of human agency in the making of the famine” (186). A “crime”—a term used repeatedly—was committed; someone must be brought to justice.

The author’s brief starts not with a condemnation of the Soviet state’s war for bread and meat in its desperation to feed hungry towns and drive industrialization and preparation for the return of foreign armies; instead, she situates Soviet policy within the legacy of imperial rule, specifically massive state-sponsored peasant colonization of the Kazakh steppe and the conviction that nomads, confronting water shortages, lost grazing lands, and soil exhaustion, faced extinction. There existed “a general sense by the early Soviet era that the steppe’s economy was in state of crisis, and that only a radical fix, forced settlement of the Kazakh nomads, could make the area economically productive” (21). By 1929, the New Economic Policy’s (NEP) acceptance of nomadism as a mode of production under socialism ended. Experts condemned pastoralism as a fundamentally unstable means of production and declared that a socialist state could overcome the productive limits of the steppe’s environment. Politics now destroyed economics, and the state imposed heavy grain and meat procurement requirements on Kazakhstan, severing the grain trade networks that had evolved as a means to supplement nomad diets. Massive famine ensued.

Cameron demonstrates the all-important role of ignorance in Soviet policy formation. With the Stalinist war against complexity, a struggle emerged to find a “Marxist” analysis of nomadic society. Given that the party leadership knew almost nothing about pastoralist economy, the leadership quickly adopted a parallel program to the anti-kulak campaign—an anti-bai program to strip “wealthy” nomads of their livestock and break up the influence of powerful clans and their leaders, while forcing Kazakhs to settle on collective farms and provide ever-higher grain requisitions. With almost no local party or government agents to rely on, Kazakh officials unleashed disgruntled

Kazakh insiders to carry out the confiscation campaigns, insiders who used the occasion to pursue their own interests, welcoming the opportunity to turn the world upside down. Violence and chaos followed. Then, with livestock herds plummeting as Kazakhs sold off their animals to meet grain requisitions while the remaining herds were forcefully delivered to collective farms, drought struck in 1931. In the meantime, “The Central Committee received news of Kazakh suffering at several key points throughout 1930 and 1931, but several factors, including the stereotype that Kazakhs, as nomads, had an abundance of livestock, meant that the pressure on the republic for grain and meat remained largely unabated. . .” (99). Touring Politburo emissaries reported the existence of considerable amounts of grain hidden in remote regions.

Kazakhs responded to this growing disaster by attempting to flee to a neighboring republic or, more often, China, while others engaged in armed rebellion. Faced with massive outflows of labor and work animals, border guards were ordered to use whatever force necessary to stem the flow. The threat of popular rebellion combining with “ever-increasing paranoia over the disorder in Xinjiang helped bolster the suspicion that those who fled were ‘rebels’ and not ‘refugees’” (139). But in investigating the cases of Kazakhs shot crossing into China, the author concedes that “it is difficult to determine whether Moscow ordered these killings” (142); nonetheless, “it tacitly endorsed them” (142). Kazakhs fleeing to neighboring Kirgizia confronted mobs intent on either driving them back to Kazakhstan or beating them to death, often using the excuse that the refugees were bandits or carriers of disease. More died.

By mid-1933, with some 1.5 million dead, the worst was over. In June the central government authorized additional purchases of livestock from Xinjiang to replenish Kazakhstan’s herds. Then the rains came, and the harvest was good. “In 1934, party observers marked the first growth in the republic’s livestock numbers since 1928 and, though limited parts of the republic continued to suffer from hunger throughout 1934, the scale of the suffering had diminished. In part, this shift in the republic’s fortunes was brought about by a policy change, the belated decision to reallocate all the resources once devoted to sedentarization to the resolution of the refugee question” (165).

While the author splendidly recounts the disaster produced by the collectivization and anti-bai campaigns, misery and death far greater in proportion to population than anything suffered in Ukraine, what is missing is an appreciation of the centrality of hunger and famine in the creation of the modern world in general, not simply in the Soviet Union—whether it be the Enclosure Movement and the displacement of cottagers in England in order to modernize agriculture; the refusal to allow food relief into Ireland in order to protect the “rights” to profit of British grain traders and English domination of Ireland; the mass slaughter of the bison to force Native Americans through starvation to accept the White conquest of the west; the famine set off by the destruction of centuries of peasant communal rights to land in India in the name of private property and the rule of (British) law. Modernization to those caught

in it is indeed a crime. In Russian studies we so often simply return to the proverbial question—whom can we blame?

So many could not have perished in the drive to modernize unless evil intent was involved. Thus the author's constant reference to "crime." But there are varieties of crime, and intent is an important consideration. The author wants to argue that Stalin and the central leadership knew the results of their policies, but points out that reports coming to Moscow continuously claimed the existence of immense numbers of animals hidden from the government. She further reminds the reader that few officials in Kazakhstan could speak Kazakh and even fewer Kazakhs Russian. Stating that Stalin *must* have known something is not evidence. The evidence the author does offer supports the conclusion that were the Stalin regime not the most criminal in human history, certainly it was one of the most ignorant. Cameron is on safer ground when she states: "Some blame for Moscow's failure to respond must be attributed to Stalin, who seems to have paid little attention to matters relating to livestock, in contrast to his obsessive preoccupation with grain procurements" (15). Gross ignorance, disastrous policy formation, and crime, while often attired in similar vestments, demand distinction.

Time too often disappears from consideration. If changes in environment dating back to the imperial effort to colonize Kazakhstan were making modification of nomadism inevitable, as the author makes clear, then certainly the Bukharinist path of slow transformation within nomadic culture, the author implies, constituted the desired path. But given the experience of World War I and the proof that Russian relative backwardness was an invitation to invasion and conquest, how much time could any government spend waiting on evolution? Cameron appears to appreciate this when discussing Moscow's "paranoia" over Japanese and British machinations in Xinjiang: "Had we but world enough, and time" makes for beautiful poetry, but disastrous politics. Russia's internal development must never be analyzed separate from its foreign predicament of being a backwards, peasant, *and nomadic* society confronting a proven aggressive and superior west and east. The key to modernization—to survival—lay in the conquest of grain *and meat*.

Cameron concludes by arguing that the Kazakh famine constituted a form of "genocide" based on the fact that "through collectivization, Moscow sought to destroy nomadic life, a key feature of Kazakh culture and identity" (178). This is unfortunate. The author has shown that Kazakh society was already evolving away from simple nomadism as it adapted to environmental challenges. Are we to believe that the Kazakhs (or the Germanic tribes) were destined to remain forever in a single mode of production, and that change among Kazakhs, specifically sedentarization, urbanization, and geographical identity formation, even if impelled by violent exogenous forces, equals the group's destruction? This requires serious reexamination and mars an otherwise provocative work.

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