
THE HUNGRY STEPPE

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Famine, Violence, and the
Making of Soviet Kazakhstan

Sarah Cameron

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Cover photograph: Plowing at a Kazakh collective farm, Pavlodar Province, 1930s. Image courtesy of the Kazakhstan Central State Archive of Film, Photo, and Audio Documents, image 5-3565.

For Arnd

Өлі риза болмай, тірі байымайды

Until the spirits of the dead are honored, the living will not prosper

—Kazakh proverb

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Explanatory Note

The peoples and places in this book underwent numerous changes in nomenclature during Russian imperial and Soviet rule. In the imperial period, Russian sources referred to the steppe as the “Kirgiz steppe.” Similarly, they referred to the steppe’s nomadic inhabitants as “Kirgiz,” even though these peoples referred to themselves as “Qazaq.” By the early Soviet period, Russian sources began to refer to the steppe as the “Kazak steppe” and the nomadic peoples that inhabited it as “Kazaks.” In 1936, Moscow adopted a different spelling for the republic and its titular nationality, referring to them as “Kazakhstan” and “Kazakhs.” For simplicity’s sake, I refer to the peoples that are at the heart of this book as “Kazakhs.” I use the term “Kazakh steppe” to refer to the steppe prior to the advent of Soviet rule and the term “Kazakhstan” to refer to the republic during Soviet rule and after independence. In citing published works, I have kept the spelling used in the original. I have adopted the term “The Hungry Steppe” as the title of this book although the phrase technically refers only to a portion of the region that I am studying. The Hungry Steppe, also known as the “Betpak-Dala” (or “Ill-Fated Steppe”), is an immense plateau located in the heart of Kazakhstan, just south of the city of Karaganda.

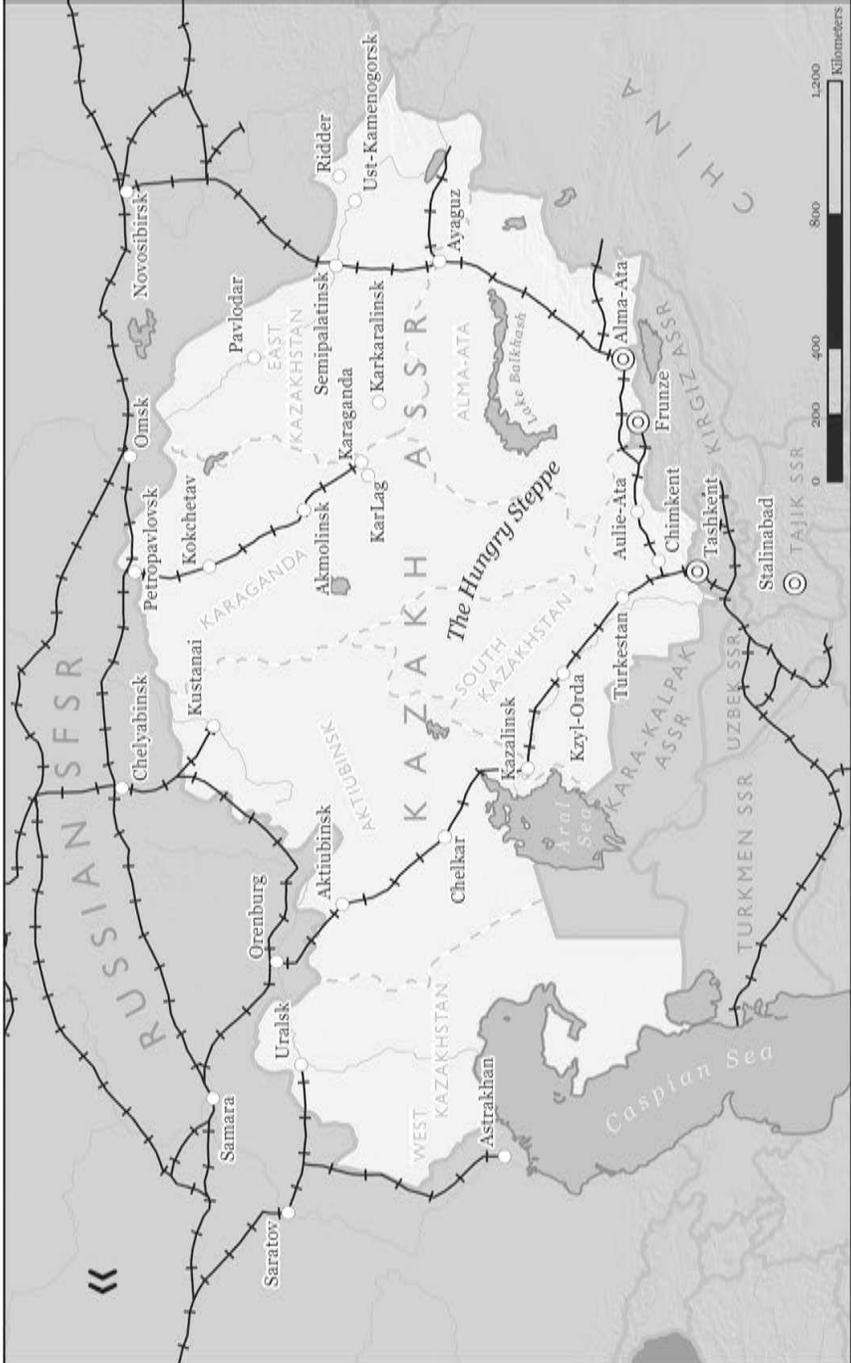
The place that would become known as Kazakhstan began to assume its territorial form under Soviet rule. It was known first as the Kirgiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) before it was renamed the Kazakh ASSR in 1925. As an ASSR, Kazakhstan was a constituent part of a federal republic, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). In 1936, the republic gained union republic status, becoming known as the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Throughout these shifts in administration, I refer to the republic simply as “Kazakhstan.” For Russian-language materials, I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system. For Kazakh-language materials, I have used the system in Edward Allworth, *Nationalities of the Soviet East* (1971). The Kazakh language underwent several changes in script during the period that this study surveys. In the interest of consistency, all Kazakh terms have been transliterated from the Cyrillic, which is the script in use in Kazakhstan as of the publication of this book. I have transliterated the names of places and people according to these systems, except in a handful of cases where an English spelling has become standard (i.e., Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev) or an exact transliteration seemed needlessly cumbersome (thus, the Kazakh nomadic encampment is

rendered as “aul” rather than “auil”). I have transliterated Kazakhs’ names from Kazakh, but place names from Russian. In cases where I could not be certain whether an individual was Kazakh, I transliterated his or her name from the source language. All web links are current as of April 2018. I have translated the titles of all archival files, except when the source language would help the reader to find the document in a published collection.

The maps contained in this book were created by Nathan Burtch using ArcGIS 10.4.1 for Desktop, which is created by Esri Inc. Terrain data from “Global Multi-Resolution Terrain Elevation Data 2010 (GMTED2010)” earthexplorer.usgs.gov and river data from ESRI, “World Major Rivers,” *Data and Maps for ArcGIS* (2016) were used directly to create the maps. City locations were also created directly using latitude and longitude information from Wikipedia. But in other cases, the data used in the creation of these maps represent an estimate, as there is no definitive source for the period that these maps depict. Approximate water body data were derived from Yuri Bregel, “The Principal Geographic Features and Provinces [map],” *An Historical Atlas of Central Asia* 2003), 3 and ESRI, “World Water Bodies,” *Data and Maps for ArcGIS*. Approximate vegetation zone data were derived from Lammert Bies, “Cartography” [map] (2003); Bregel, “The Principal Geographic Features and Provinces”; George J. Demko, “Natural Regions of Kazakhstan [map],” *The Russian Colonization of Kazakhstan, 1896–1916* (1969), 12; and “Global Multi-Resolution Terrain Elevation Data.” Approximate administrative boundaries were derived from Bregel, “The Principal Geographic Features and Provinces”; Map Trust of the Moscow Department of Public Works, “Map of the Asiatic Part of the USSR [map]” (1935); and “United Nations Environment Program,” <http://ede.grid.unep.ch/>. Approximate railroad boundaries were derived from Bregel, “The Principal Geographic Features and Provinces.”

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MAP 1 The Kazakh ASSR in 1933

THE HUNGRY STEPPE

Introduction

“I was still a child but I could not forget this,” said Zh. Äbışhüli, recalling the Kazakh famine of 1930–33. “My bones are shaking as these memories come into my mind.” Officials with the Soviet regime had stripped Äbışhüli’s family of their livestock and grain, and starving people were fleeing in every direction. His father’s relatives fled Soviet Kazakhstan entirely, escaping across the border to China. For those who remained, Äbışhüli saw, hunger became a “silent enemy.” He remembered the *arba*, or horse-drawn cart that collected the bodies of the dead, dumping them in mass burial grounds on the outskirts of settlements. Many years after the Kazakh famine of 1930–33, Äbışhüli would fight on the front lines for the Red Army during World War II. Nonetheless, he believed that, “Surviving a famine is not less than surviving a war.”¹ Another famine survivor, Nürsültan Äbdighanüli, then a seven-year-old boy, saw several family members die of hunger before his eyes in the fall of 1932. Other relatives perished in a mountain valley as they fled to Kirgizia. In early 1933, “the real black clouds of hunger came,” Äbdighanüli recalled. His family moved south to Uzynaghash, where his father took a position as the head of a district inspectorate commission. Though Äbdighanüli’s grandmother had warned him to stay hidden under blankets during the journey—children could be kidnapped and eaten by the starving—Äbdighanüli peeked out from underneath them and saw corpses scattered across the ground, hints of the horrors that lay beyond.²

As such recollections suggest, the period 1930–33 was a time of almost unimaginable sorrow in Soviet Kazakhstan, also known as the Kazakh Autonomous

Soviet Socialist Republic (the Kazakh ASSR). A massive famine claimed the lives of 1.5 million people, a quarter of the republic's inhabitants, and ravaged a territory approximate in size to continental Europe.³ The crisis upended lives and families, and left a trail of devastation in its wake. As hunger set in, over a million starving refugees from Kazakhstan flooded neighboring Soviet territories such as Kirgizia, Uzbekistan, the Middle Volga and Western Siberia, as well as China (especially the western province known as Xinjiang) creating a regional crisis of unprecedented proportions.⁴ Some never returned to Kazakhstan, and today significant populations of Kazakhs, many descendants of those who fled during the famine's course, remain in Xinjiang, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.⁵ Others fled within Kazakhstan, and by the disaster's end, more than half of the republic's remaining population had altered their district of residence.

Prior to the famine, most Kazakhs practiced pastoral nomadism, migrating seasonally along predetermined routes to pasture their animals, including sheep, horses, and camels.⁶ This practice had been the predominant way of life in the steppe for more than four millennia.⁷ It was an adaptation to the scarcity of good pastureland and water. It was also a crucial source of identity, one that had often determined who was "Kazakh" and who was not in the steppe region.⁸ But the famine forced Kazakhs to become sedentary, or abandon the economic practice of nomadism. Not only did this spark a sweeping shift in the steppe's economic practices, it also transformed Kazakh culture and identity.

For those who survived, the famine years were deeply traumatic. "Today, I tell people I don't remember the famine," said D. Äuelbekov, who got, in his words, "a taste of starvation," living through the famine as a young child.⁹ In one of the most striking results of the famine, Äuelbekov and other Kazakhs who survived became a minority in their own republic. For the remainder of the Soviet period, Kazakhs would occupy a curious position in Kazakhstan, at once the titular nationality and at the same time an ethnic minority. Moscow's population policies, which would bring waves of settlers into the republic in the decades after the famine, would further contribute to Kazakhs' minority status.¹⁰ Only by the 1989 census did Kazakhs outnumber Russians (39.7 to 37.8%) and it was not until the 1999 census, eight years after the Soviet collapse, that Kazakhs constituted more than 50 percent of the population in Kazakhstan, by then an independent country.¹¹

In its staggering human toll, the Kazakh famine was certainly one of the most heinous crimes of the Stalinist regime. Yet the story of this famine has remained largely hidden from view, both in Kazakhstan and in the West. This book seeks to tell that story, asking two interrelated questions: What were the causes of the Kazakh famine of 1930–33? And how does this famine, an event long neglected in narratives of the Stalin era, alter our understanding of Soviet modernization and nation making? It begins with the disaster's roots in the

last decades of the Russian empire and concludes with the republic's slow road to economic recovery in the postfamine years of the mid-1930s. It argues that the Kazakh famine of 1930–33 was the result of Moscow's radical attempt to transform a group of Muslim, Turkic-speaking nomads known as "Kazakhs," and a particular territory, Soviet Kazakhstan, into a modern, Soviet nation. It finds that through the most violent means the Kazakh famine created Soviet Kazakhstan, a stable territory with clearly delineated boundaries that was an integral part of the Soviet economic system, and forged a new Kazakh national identity.

But the nature of this state-driven modernization was uneven. In many respects, Moscow failed to achieve its goals. Though the crisis embedded nationality as the primary marker of Kazakh identity, a goal of Moscow's "nation-building" efforts, it did not eliminate alternate forms of Kazakh identity entirely. Kazakhs' allegiances to various clans—transformed by the famine and divorced from their original origins in the system of pastoral nomadism—continued to exert an important influence in the postfamine years. Though Moscow sought to make Kazakhstan into a meatpacking center to rival Chicago, the regime's radical program of state-led transformation actually sparked the total collapse of the republic's livestock economy.¹² By the fall of 1933, over 90 percent of the animals in the republic had perished, a striking turn of events for what had been the Soviet Union's most important livestock base.¹³ It would take more than three decades for Moscow to restore the republic's sheep and cattle numbers to their pre-famine levels.¹⁴ Ultimately, neither Kazakhstan nor Kazakhs themselves became integrated into the Soviet system in precisely the ways that Moscow had originally hoped. The scars from the disaster would haunt the republic throughout the remainder of the Soviet era and shape its transformation into an independent nation in 1991.

How did the story of the Kazakh famine, one of the most dramatic consequences of Stalinist modernization, become marginalized? It is in part because collectivization, the event that triggered devastating famines in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Volga Basin, and the Don and the Kuban regions has been presented primarily as a story of peasants. In 1929, Josef Stalin launched the First Five-Year Plan, a radical scheme to help the Soviet Union industrialize and "catch up" to the capitalist West. The collectivization of agriculture was at the heart of this modernization scheme. By forcing rural people to give up their land and livestock and enter collective farms, Moscow sought to tighten control over the food supply and boost the Soviet Union's production of meat and grain, particularly wheat. Through the institution of the collective farm, Moscow worked to sever local institutions and networks and firmly implant Soviet power in the countryside, an area that the Bolsheviks had long struggled to control.

A large and distinguished body of literature has detailed this assault, focusing almost exclusively on the Soviet peasantry.¹⁵ There are good reasons for this scholarly focus: the vast majority of people in the Soviet Union were peasants. On the eve of the October 1917 revolution, the peasantry accounted for more than 85 percent of the population, the industrial proletariat just 3 percent.¹⁶ Though the Bolsheviks had seized power in the name of the “working class,” they found themselves the inheritors of a predominately peasant state. Throughout the years of the New Economic Policy (1921–28), the “peasant question” would preoccupy the Bolsheviks like no other, as they struggled to ensure a steady supply of grain from the countryside to the cities, confronted the threat of widespread peasant rebellion, and debated how best to incorporate this ideologically suspect group into state structures. Launched by Stalin in the midst of a food supply crisis, a shortage of grain on state markets, collectivization was an attempt to bring this recalcitrant group to heel.

But the focus on the peasantry has obscured other facets of collectivization. At the margins of the former Russian empire, in places like the Russian Far North where hunter-gatherers predominated, or in the Russian Far East, home to a significant population of fisherman and hunters, or in Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, Turkmenistan, Kara-Kalpakia, Buriat-Mongolia, and Kalmykia, all of which had majority pastoral nomadic populations, the Bolsheviks confronted ways of life that were clearly not peasant in their orientation.¹⁷ If we broaden the story of collectivization to encompass these areas, then it is clear that the Soviet Union was not just a European power but an Asian one too. Collectivization was not only about the regime’s attempt to increase the production of grain but also about the struggle to transition from a system of long-distance animal herding to a network of meatpacking combines and slaughterhouses.¹⁸ Like other powers during the interwar period, the Soviet Union sought to bring arid regions dominated by nomadic societies further under state control.¹⁹

Particularly in the West, the stories of the Soviet collectivization famines have focused largely on Ukrainians.²⁰ There are several reasons for this emphasis. On the most basic level, more Ukrainians died during the collectivization famines than any other nationality. Scholars estimate that somewhere between five and nine million people died due to famine during collectivization.²¹ Ukrainians, who were the majority ethnic group in Ukraine as well as an important ethnic group in the Kuban region, suffered acutely. In Ukraine alone, somewhere between 2.6 and 3.9 million people (Ukrainians and those of other ethnicities) are believed to have died due to famine.²² In absolute terms, Ukraine was the center of famine during the collectivization period.

In the West, the issue of the Ukrainian famine has been buoyed by the Ukrainian diaspora. For many Ukrainians, the famine has come to serve as a crucial

event in the creation of a national memory. Much of the scholarship on the Ukrainian famine has focused on the question of whether the crisis was used by Stalin to punish Ukrainians as an ethnic group, and the debate surrounding this question has frequently turned polemical, inflamed by ideological divisions as well as present-day political tensions between Ukraine and Russia.²³ Some Ukrainians have called upon the international community to recognize their famine as a genocide, and they have demanded retribution from Russia for their suffering.²⁴ To bolster the claim that the famine was used by Stalin to punish Ukrainians as an ethnic group, some scholars have sought to emphasize the “uniqueness” of Ukrainians’ suffering, downplaying or even neglecting to mention the horrors endured by other groups, such as the Kazakhs, during the same period.²⁵

But the charged debate over the Ukrainian famine has eclipsed other aspects of the story. The Don Cossacks and the Volga Germans also suffered disproportionately from famine.²⁶ Pockets of the Russian heartland, such as the province of Saratov, had high rates of famine mortality. In Kazakhstan, famine deaths were sharply ethnicized: though Kazakhs constituted just under 60 percent of the republic’s total population on the eve of the famine, some 90 percent of those who died in the Kazakh famine were Kazakhs.²⁷ The famine claimed the lives of more than a million Kazakhs, approximately 40 percent of all Kazakhs in the republic.²⁸ Ultimately, the Kazakhs would lose a greater percentage of their population due to famine than even the Ukrainians.²⁹

Inside the Soviet Union, the story of the Kazakh famine, like other crimes of Stalinism, was suppressed. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, authorities in Moscow charged the republic’s party secretary Filipp Goloshchekin, whom they had removed from office at the height of the famine in early 1933, with committing “distortions” and “errors” during his tenure as the republic’s leader. Goloshchekin was a colorful figure. An “old Bolshevik” (one of a small number of Bolsheviks who had joined the party prior to the October 1917 revolution) who had originally trained as a dentist, he came to his post in Kazakhstan with an impressive array of revolutionary credentials. He was rumored to have been in the small circle of party cadres who carried out Vladimir Lenin’s orders to execute the tsar and his family.³⁰ He was renowned for his toughness and intense devotion to the Bolshevik cause, reportedly even going so far as to tell a cadre who pleaded for the release of his father from prison, “Communists don’t have fathers.”³¹ In 1941, some years after being dismissed from his post in Kazakhstan, Goloshchekin was shot as part of the purges, meeting a fate shared by many others who had joined the party in its early years.³²

Criticism of Goloshchekin’s leadership continued in subsequent decades, while the famine itself remained officially unacknowledged.³³ During preparations for the 1937 census, the first conducted after the famine, officials noted

the dramatic drop in the republic's Kazakh population. But they covered up the existence of a famine by arguing that such losses could be explained solely by the departure of many Kazakhs to neighboring republics to work during the period 1930–33, and this account, that missing Kazakhs had simply “migrated” away, became the predominant explanation for the republic's sharp demographic shift.³⁴ In his 1956 “secret speech,” Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, condemned Stalin for many crimes, but he failed to mention the collectivization famines. Nürziya Qajıbaeva, who lived through the Kazakh famine as a young girl, recalled these decades: “It wasn't safe to speak about the famine openly; the Party and the authorities disapproved of it. Newspapers, books, schools and institutes never touched upon this problem.”³⁵ In the intervening years, families discussed the hardships they had suffered privately, while authors wove the story of the famine into Kazakh-language novels and short stories.³⁶

In Kazakhstan, public analysis of the famine began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as scholars “discovered” the republic's horrifying loss of life.³⁷ In the decade that followed the republic's transformation into an independent nation in 1991, discussion of the disaster dominated both scholarly and popular media. In 1992, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan's president, himself a holdover from the Soviet period, authorized an investigation, and this commission ruled it a genocide.³⁸ This outpouring of interest in the 1990s led to the publication of a number of important studies, but many of the works produced offered only a slightly revised version of the Soviet explanation for the famine: they depict Goloshchekin as appropriating brutal policies from Stalin and intensifying them further, working to punish Kazakhs as an ethnic group.³⁹ The famine began to be referred to as “Goloshchekin's genocide.” In part, the continuing fixation with Goloshchekin was fueled by anti-Semitism: Goloshchekin was a Jew, born to a family of humble origins in Vitebsk *guberniia* (province) in the Russian empire's western borderlands.⁴⁰ In an effort to intensify the perception of evil, several works by Kazakhstani authors relied on anti-Semitic tropes to depict Goloshchekin's behavior during the famine.⁴¹

Until recently in the West, there were few scholarly investigations into the Kazakh famine, and even its basic events and causes were not well known.⁴² The reasons for this silence are many. During the 1920s and 1930s, few foreign travelers visited Kazakhstan. In Ukraine, the Welsh journalist Gareth Jones brought the horrors of the Ukrainian famine to the attention of the West, but in Kazakhstan there was no similar figure on the ground to chronicle the story.⁴³ Some fifty years later, the Ukrainian famine returned to view with the publication of the British historian Robert Conquest's seminal work, *Harvest of Sorrow*, in 1986. As Cold War tensions heightened, the US Congress set up a commission to investigate the Ukrainian famine.⁴⁴ An active Ukrainian diaspora then kept the story alive,

endowing institutes and centers for Ukrainian studies across North America. But there was no comparable movement among the much smaller Kazakh diaspora. As a result, the Kazakh famine, unlike many other crimes of Stalinism, was not incorporated into a Cold War narrative about the Soviet Union. As this book discusses in greater detail in a concluding chapter, after an explosion of interest in the 1990s, the current Kazakh government has largely turned away from public discussion of the famine, further reducing the likelihood that the story would be picked up in the West.

Other factors, such as the lingering influence of evolutionary theory, which holds that the disappearance of mobile peoples and their transformation into settled societies is part of the inevitable outgrowth of modernity, may also explain the relative silence. When the Kazakh famine is mentioned in the scholarly literature, it is often referred to as a “miscalculation,” a “misunderstanding of cultures,” or as an event that can be attributed to “Moscow’s shameful neglect” of the repercussions of its policies, depictions that would seem to downplay the disaster’s violent nature.⁴⁵ Arguably, the persistent but mistaken notion that the collectivization of the Kazakhs was not a violent act—or at least not *as* violent as Stalinist crimes committed against settled societies—may be one of the reasons that the famine has been neglected for so long by scholars in the West. If the starvation of the Kazakhs was a problem that originated in part from “natural” causes, then historians of Soviet history should first turn their attention to unearthing those crimes that stemmed purely from human causes.

More recently, an international group of scholars—the French scholar Isabelle Ohayon, the Italian scholar Niccolò Pianciola and the German scholar Robert Kindler—have published books on the Kazakh famine.⁴⁶ Drawing on a rich range of archival materials and using divergent approaches, including social, political, and economic history, they have made important contributions to the understanding of the famine’s major events, causal factors, and effects on Kazakh society. Ohayon’s study offers what she calls a “social history” of the sedentarization of the Kazakhs under Soviet rule: she focuses specifically on the catastrophic effects of forced settlement on Kazakh society, rather than on central decision making.⁴⁷ Pianciola’s book, by contrast, is grounded in economic history, an approach he uses to analyze the transformation of two pastoral nomadic societies, the Kazakhs and the Kirgiz, under Russian imperial and Soviet rule.⁴⁸ Finally, Kindler’s study examines the role of violence in the Kazakh famine, scrutinizing, in Kindler’s words, how different actors used violence to generate “order.”⁴⁹ Though these scholars disagree over the extent to which Moscow anticipated the full dimensions of the crisis, all contend that Moscow sought to use the famine as a means of incorporating the Kazakhs into the party-state.⁵⁰

This book supports this basic conclusion, but it seeks to revise the understanding of both the famine itself and this period in Soviet history by exploring the specific form that the incorporation of the Kazakhs was supposed to take. It focuses on Soviet nation making and Soviet modernization.⁵¹ It traces the frequent tensions that occurred between these two projects as Moscow sought to make the Kazakhs into a Soviet nation and guide the republic into Soviet modernity, and it analyzes their outcome, which saw immense human suffering and the republic's total economic collapse but also the creation of a Kazakh national identity. Engaging with the field of environmental history, an area previously unexplored by scholars of the Kazakh famine, it contextualizes the disaster in the longer history of the steppe's agrarian transformation. While previous studies of the famine by Western scholars have relied solely on Russian-language sources, this study incorporates both Kazakh and Russian-language sources, permitting greater insight into the disaster's devastating consequences for Kazakh society.

Though the story of the Kazakh famine has long been sidelined, it is in fact a crucial lens through which to view the transformations of the Stalin era. By turning to a region outside the Soviet Union's west, this study places the issue of Soviet modernization in a new light.⁵²

In Kazakhstan, the very scope of the Soviet modernization project—to transform not just peasants but *nomads* into factory workers, a far greater “leap” through the Marxist-Leninist timeline of history—was strikingly different from areas further west. World War I played a crucial role in transforming European Russia, politicizing the millions of Russian peasants who served and laying the groundwork for the advent of mass politics, but the imprint of this conflict played out quite differently in the Kazakh steppe: Kazakhs, like other Central Asian men under Russian imperial rule, were specifically excluded from active combat for most of the war, and the steppe was distant from the front lines.⁵³ Further complicating Moscow's modernizing aims, Kazakh culture was primarily an oral culture rather than a literary one. Illiteracy rates in the Kazakh *aul*, or nomadic encampment, were above 90 percent.⁵⁴ Though immense, the republic was sparsely populated, and it had little existing infrastructure such as dirt roads or telegraph connections.⁵⁵ Newspapers and other materials from Moscow reached Alma-Ata, the republic's capital, thirty to forty days after they were printed, and postmen could travel three to four hundred kilometers across the steppe by camel to deliver a piece of mail.⁵⁶

In Kazakhstan, the timing and tempo of Moscow's modernization project would also be distinct: In 1928, eleven years after the October 1917 revolution had transformed European Russia, Goloshchekin declared that the Kazakh *aul* had yet to undergo the October revolution. He announced the onset of a Little

October, an October-style revolution from above, which he claimed would belatedly bring about far-reaching social change in the steppe. Party members rationalized that extraordinary speed was needed to help the Kazakhs catch up to settled groups, and, as the First Five-Year Plan began, Kazakhstan's party committee proposed to settle and collectivize the Kazakhs simultaneously.⁵⁷

But Moscow's program of state-driven modernization sought to remake not only Kazakh society but also the Kazakh steppe itself. The environment of the steppe, like other arid and semiarid zones, was highly unstable. Rainfall patterns varied dramatically from year to year. The distribution of good quality soils shifted regularly, with some soils becoming highly salinated over time. The dry winds that swept over the steppe, known as *sukhovei*, periodically altered the shape and size of the region's bodies of water. Not only was this landscape unfamiliar to Soviet experts—it did not have clear parallels in the categories of analysis that they imported from European Russia—but its ecological instability posed a challenge to Marxist-Leninist ideas of economic development, which were predicated on the notion of constant and ever-increasing yields. Due to the steppe's unpredictable weather, the harvest from these lands might be plentiful one year and disastrous the next.

This ecological instability would bedevil those who sought to transform the steppe into an agrarian region. Under Russian imperial rule, the first wave of Russian and Ukrainian peasants that dared to settle there suffered through such terrible deprivations due to poor harvests that the Governor-Generalship of the Steppe temporarily closed the Kazakh steppe to further colonization. In the early Soviet period, experts, pointing to this history, warned of the dangers of settling the Kazakh nomads and expanding agricultural settlement further into the steppe. But the Central Committee decided that the possibility of getting an excellent grain harvest one year was worth the risk of a catastrophic harvest the next. In the summer of 1931, the Central Committee lost this gamble with human life, as a devastating drought intensified the famine first sparked by collectivization in the winter of 1930–31. Moscow never adjusted its grain procurement targets for this ecological instability, and Kazakhs had to make up the shortfall, intensifying the effects of the famine that had already begun.

Today, Kazakhstan is one of the world's leading exporters of wheat, which is the country's most important agricultural commodity.⁵⁸ After the Soviet collapse, some village households in southern Kazakhstan turned to mobile pastoralism, but the livestock sector currently plays a far smaller role in the country's economy than grain.⁵⁹ This dramatic shift in land use patterns—from pastoral nomadism to settled agriculture—began under the Russian empire and was dramatically accelerated by the Stalinist regime during collectivization. But despite the assertions of many Soviet experts that Soviet power would “conquer” nature, bending

it to socialist ends over the course of the First Five-Year Plan, Moscow, like other states that sought to transform the drylands, struggled to remake the Kazakh steppe as it wished.⁶⁰ In the postfamine years, agriculture would continue to be a difficult enterprise in the region: Crop failures, among other factors, brought Nikita Khrushchev's Virgin Lands program (1954–60), which aimed to expand the amount of cultivated land in northern Kazakhstan and other regions, to a halt.⁶¹ The 1960s and 1970s saw repeated droughts, sandstorms, and poor harvests.⁶² As the history of the Kazakh steppe demonstrates, Soviet power was not monolithic. Rather, in this arid region, as in other areas of the Soviet periphery, environmental factors shaped the nature of development.⁶³

The case of the nomadic Kazakhs illustrates the extraordinary importance that Moscow placed on its nation-making project, even as it underscores its destructive power. Due to a combination of practical and ideological considerations, the Bolsheviks chose to solve the “nationality question” (*natsional'nyi vopros*), or how they might manage the ethnic diversity of the peoples of the former Russian empire, by selectively supporting it. Moscow granted various forms of nationhood—including national territories, languages, and cultures to certain groups—and sought in turn to mold these groups into cohesive Soviet nationalities.⁶⁴ Over time, this wide-ranging project came to encompass efforts such as the establishment of native educational institutions, the training and promotion of native cadres, the standardization of national languages, the delineation of national borders, and the crafting of national histories.

But these nation-making efforts, which came to be known as “nationality policy” (*natsional'naia politika*), were less a rigidly defined course of action than a working set of ideas and assumptions about Soviet nationhood that shifted in emphasis over the course of the Soviet period. The broad outlines of the policy were elaborated in resolutions passed at the Twelfth Party Congress and a special Central Committee conference in 1923. Stalin periodically clarified or revised points relating to nationality policy in his speeches, arguing that Soviet nations should be “national in form, socialist in content.”⁶⁵ But these documents did not provide a detailed blueprint for how these nation-making efforts would be implemented.⁶⁶ Nor could they possibly anticipate every conflict that would result from the attempt to form nations, which were inherently particularistic, within the rubric of socialism, an approach that promised universality. In important ways, the project of Soviet nation making hinged on local initiative and popular participation.

The idea that Kazakhs formed a nation came to the steppe in the late nineteenth century. After the October 1917 revolution, a small group of settled Rusophone Kazakhs formed a political party known as Alash Orda and declared a Kazakh autonomous state based in the city of Semipalatinsk in the steppe's

northeast. In 1919, the members of Alash Orda surrendered to the Bolsheviks, and they forged an uneasy alliance with the regime, seeking to use the Bolsheviks' promises of national rights to promote their own ideas of autonomy.⁶⁷ But for most Kazakhs, nationality was not an important organizing principle of their everyday life on the eve of Soviet rule: Nürziya Qajibaeva, for instance, remembered that her family had heard of Kazakh political parties such as Alash Orda in 1917 but noted that "their ideas and way of life were incomprehensible to the common nomad Kazakhs."⁶⁸ Rather, being "Kazakh" was closely linked to being a nomad, a way of life that precluded an attachment to a "nation" grounded in territory. The term "Kazakh" was a mixed social and ethnic category, one that denoted an ethnicity but also a way of life, pastoral nomadism.⁶⁹

Though nationality was a concept antithetical to nomadic life, Moscow went to extraordinary lengths to form Kazakhs into a nation, seeking to engage, mobilize, and transform Kazakhs even in the republic's most remote corners.⁷⁰ But this project confronted many challenges, most notably the fact that culture and economics in the Kazakh steppe were closely intertwined. Because most Kazakhs practiced pastoral nomadism, the fate of the practice under Soviet rule was at once an economic question (was nomadism the most efficient use of the steppe's landscape?) and a national question (should nomadism, a defining element of Kazakh identity, be promoted as part of a Kazakh "national culture"?). Though initially Moscow pursued a contradictory approach, supporting pastoral nomadism in some respects but undermining it in others, by 1928 "national" and "economic" goals had aligned. Pastoral nomadism was declared economically inefficient and a practice at odds with the development of Kazakh national culture.

This feature reframes the long-running debate over the Ukrainian famine. Most scholarship on the Ukrainian famine can be divided roughly into two opposing camps, "nationality" and "peasantry."⁷¹ Scholars holding the latter view argue that the Soviet collectivization famines were part of a broader assault on a social category, the peasantry, and they conclude that Ukrainians suffered disproportionately not due to any specific intent to punish them as a group, but rather because most Ukrainians were peasants.⁷² Scholars holding the former view, by contrast, point to Ukrainians' historically troubled relationship with the regime, and they see nationality, or Stalin's specific intent to punish Ukrainians, as instrumental in creating the horrifying death toll.⁷³

In Kazakhstan, as in Ukraine, there was a clear overlap between national and social identities. Most Kazakhs were nomads, while in Ukraine, most Ukrainians were peasants. The "nationality" vs. "peasantry" debate assumes that Moscow used these two categories, national and social, to pursue different goals. Either Moscow sought to use famine as a weapon to punish Ukrainians as a national group or Moscow sought to use famine to punish peasants. But as the Kazakh

case reveals, national and social categories were not necessarily in opposition to one another but might serve overlapping, mutually reinforcing goals. During the refugee crisis, Goloshchekin and other top officials did not refer to starving Kazakhs as refugees (*bezhtentsy*) but rather as *otkohevnik* (literally, nomads who are moving away), a group in the throes of moving to a “higher” stage of national development, settled life. By framing the refugee crisis as an important moment of national transition, albeit one that required extra vigilance to ensure that Kazakhs progressed to the next stage, officials used the language of both Soviet economic policy and Soviet nationality policy to legitimize assaults on starving Kazakhs.

In taking a more complete view of Soviet efforts at nation formation, we also get a clearer view of the ways that these attempts could be both progressive and profoundly destructive at the same time. The regime’s use of violence against national groups did not always signal a shift away from Soviet nation making. Rather, it sometimes represented an attempt to consolidate national identities, bringing the nature of these identities into line with the regime’s political goals. At the height of the famine, for instance, thousands of starving Kazakhs were slaughtered by the regime as they attempted to flee across the Sino-Kazakh border to Xinjiang, a place historically and culturally linked to the Kazakh steppe and an important part of many Kazakhs’ seasonal migration routes. Though this assault was sparked by many concerns, including Moscow’s fears that refugees could connect with enemies of the Soviet regime in China, Soviet authorities used a central tenet of Soviet nation making, that nationality was connected to territory, to justify and support their murderous actions.⁷⁴

The literature has framed the regime’s commitment to nation making as separable from core Bolshevik policies, such as industrialization and collectivization, with the understanding that Moscow used its nationality policy as a palliative, or “soft-line,” measure to present core policies in a more attractive light.⁷⁵ But in Kazakhstan, officials did not necessarily see such distinctions, believing economic questions and “the national question” to be closely intertwined with one another.⁷⁶ Nor were Moscow’s nation-making efforts always greeted eagerly by Kazakhs themselves, as the “soft-line” categorization would suggest. As this book explores, the Kazakh famine took its peculiarly destructive shape not in spite of the Soviets’ nation-making efforts but partly because of them.

Kazakhs’ transformation into a new Soviet nation was not just imposed from above. Rather, it was participatory, and this book stresses the ways that Kazakhs themselves shaped Soviet Kazakhstan’s eventual integration into state structures. Their participation in the nation-making project was not limited to such tasks

as standardizing a national language or creating a national history.⁷⁷ This book finds that Moscow empowered Kazakhs themselves to carry out some of the most destructive assaults on their own society, entrusting them with determining who should be considered a *bai* (a nomadic “exploiter”) and who should not, as well as how to impose grain and meat procurements at the local level.⁷⁸ Though institutions heavily dominated by outsiders from European Russia, such as the Red Army, did play an important role in many violent attacks on Kazakhs, the OGPU (secret police) sought to diversify the army’s rank and file, believing that further Kazakh participation would make such assaults more “effective.”⁷⁹ By encouraging and inviting Kazakh involvement in the local-level implementation of these campaigns, Moscow successfully drove a wedge into Kazakh society, shattering old allegiances and sowing violent conflict in the aul.

But the notion of nationality was also a powerful tool, one that Moscow could not always control as it wished. Once released, the language of “national rights” or “national territories” could be claimed by different actors to promote goals that did not always align with those of the regime. Empowered by the regime’s nation-making efforts to conduct local-level campaigns of violence, many native cadres used the considerable flexibility given to them by the regime to manipulate these campaigns in accordance with their own interests. As the conflict over resources accelerated during the famine, some groups used the language of nationality to justify their assaults on others, and the regime fought to control the widening swath of violence. Indeed, the enormous struggle that Moscow encountered in trying to contain some of the unintended effects of its nation-making efforts would seem to contradict the idea that it could pull back the policy at will.

What were the causes of the Kazakh famine? The primary cause was similar to that of the other Soviet collectivization famines, forced collectivization, which included debilitating meat and grain procurements. But as a pastoral famine, as opposed to a famine among settled societies, the Kazakh famine had features that distinguished it from those that afflicted the Soviet Union’s west. Due to the enormous pressure for grain, local cadres forced Kazakh nomads, a population that consumed grain but did not ordinarily grow it, to meet onerous grain requisition requirements.⁸⁰ To fulfill these requirements, Kazakhs flooded markets with their livestock. In a feature characteristic of pastoral famines, the terms of trade for livestock worsened: grain became very expensive, while animals were very cheap, forcing Kazakhs to sell off even more of their livestock.⁸¹ Onerous meat procurements further impoverished Kazakh pastoralists, depriving them of their means of existence—seasonal migrations with their animal herds—while the closure of republican, provincial, and district borders prevented Kazakhs from reaching the pastures necessary to feed their animals. Though the major cause of the Kazakh famine was Stalin’s policies, the legacies of Russian imperial

rule must be considered an important contributing factor. Intense peasant settlement of the Kazakh steppe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prompted shifts in nomads' migration routes and consumption patterns, making Kazakhs more susceptible to famine.

Moscow's official sedentarization policy was not a major cause of the Kazakh famine.⁸² The regime devoted few resources to the official program of sedentarization, and the program quickly foundered. But the heavy meat and grain procurements that accompanied collectivization accomplished what the official policy of sedentarization failed to do, forcing Kazakhs to abandon nomadic life due to utter and total destitution. Once famine began in the winter of 1930–31, other factors became important in the crisis, including a drought in the summer of 1931, which amplified the effects of Kazakhs' impoverishment.⁸³

Finally, the steppe's relative underdevelopment magnified the effects of the disaster. Focused on implementing a breakneck program of state-driven modernization, Moscow ignored warnings from medical experts who, noting the republic's lack of modern medical services, urged the party to devote more resources to public health services and vaccination programs.⁸⁴ As famine broke out, diseases such as typhus, smallpox, tuberculosis, and cholera began to spread. These diseases were induced by hunger, but they were also exacerbated by other famine-related phenomena, such as massive population movement and unsanitary conditions.⁸⁵ Many Kazakhs would die from these diseases, which would play a far greater role in the Kazakh famine than in the famines in the Soviet Union's west. There the level of modern medical services was higher, and most famine victims succumbed to actual starvation.⁸⁶

Did Stalin intend to cause the Kazakh famine? It is clear that the regime's broader goal was to transform Kazakhs and Kazakhstan radically, with little regard for the tremendous loss of life incurred in the process. Soviet agricultural experts, many of whom would later be imprisoned or shot, warned of the risks of forcibly settling the Kazakh nomads and expanding the republic's agrarian frontier into drought-prone regions. Stalin received news of Kazakhs' suffering at several crucial points, in late 1930 with the first onset of hunger; in January 1931 as the second collectivization drive began; and again in late 1932 during the height of the Kazakh refugee crisis. Once famine had begun, Moscow took steps that worsened Kazakhs' misery, including imposing devastating meat and grain procurements on the republic, expelling starving Kazakhs from cities, slaughtering thousands of Kazakh refugees as they attempted to flee across the border to China, and "blacklisting" districts in the republic (a severe penalty that included a total ban on trade and deliveries of food).

Moscow's sweeping program of state-led transformation clearly anticipated the cultural destruction of Kazakh society, and, as I discuss in the conclusion,

there is evidence to indicate that the Kazakh famine fits an expanded definition of genocide. But there is no indication that Stalin planned the famine on purpose or sought to destroy all Kazakhs. Many of the famine's central events, from the massive outflow of refugees to the dramatic drop in the republic's livestock levels, were counterproductive to the regime's interests and were unanticipated consequences of the collectivization campaign. Once famine began, the needs of other groups in the republic, such as peasants and workers, whose labor in fields and factories was crucial to the fulfillment of the First Five-Year Plan, were prioritized over starving Kazakh nomads.⁸⁷ Very belatedly, Moscow issued limited food aid to the republic, although little of this relief reached starving refugees.

But while Stalin did not foresee the full scope of the crisis, the case of the Kazakh famine should upend some of our assumptions about Stalinism and Stalinist violence. In Kazakhstan, the nature of the Stalinist state often appears different from the way it does in the Soviet Union's west, characterized at times by its frailty or even absence rather than its coercive strength. Though the literature has stressed the central place of the Soviet Union's west in the genealogy of Stalinist violence, this book shows that the spectrum of violence under Stalin was broader than previously believed.⁸⁸ The Soviet east also generated important techniques of social control, and practices of population management were exchanged between east and west. While Stalin initiated the brutal policies that sparked the Kazakh famine, he does not appear to have tracked developments in the republic with the same attention he devoted to major grain-growing regions like Ukraine. According to his visitors' book, Stalin met with Goloshchekin just twice during the latter's tenure as the republic's party secretary, and few within Stalin's inner circle appear to have had detailed knowledge of the republic.⁸⁹ As collectivization began, İzmükhan Kūramısov, who served as Goloshchekin's deputy from 1929 to 1931, joked that some officials in Moscow could not even locate Kazakhstan on a map. Others, he noted, regularly confused "Kazakhs" and "Cossacks."⁹⁰

Similarly, the case of the Kazakh famine should challenge some of our existing ideas about Stalinist hierarchies. Soviet society is often viewed through the lens of a hierarchy of suffering, in which Gulag prisoners are believed to have suffered the most.⁹¹ But starving Kazakhs were expelled from their land at the height of the famine to make room for the construction of a forced labor camp, Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp (KarLag) in central Kazakhstan, and they died from hunger and disease outside the gates of this camp while prisoners labored within. Rather, the Kazakh famine is a reminder of the crude, heartbreaking way that so many Soviet citizens died under Stalin's rule—not in the confines of the Gulag or in the mass shootings of the Great Terror of 1937–38—but in ditches and abandoned villages from hunger sparked by collectivization.⁹²

Why didn't Kazakhs resist? And why did local officials continue to implement such destructive policies? As this book details, many Kazakhs did rebel. Kazakhstan, like other famine-stricken regions, saw massive revolts during collectivization, which Moscow struggled mightily to subdue. The motivations of local officials were varied. Some were coerced into cooperation by fear and intimidation. Others sought to use a career in the Communist Party as a method of personal advancement. Still others were convinced of the righteousness of the Communist cause, as the case of Shapiq Shokin (Shafik Chokin), a Kazakh who rose from extreme poverty to become president of Kazakhstan's Academy of Sciences, illustrates. As a teenager, Shokin worked as a plenipotentiary for the regime, confiscating grain and other goods from Kazakh households during the famine. His service earned high praise from his superiors, and he subsequently enrolled in the Central Asian State University in the name of V. I. Lenin (SAGU) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. There he encountered Kazakh refugees dying from hunger in the city streets. Nonetheless, Shokin later recalled, "If someone had told me then that the famine was an affair of my hands, I would not only have not believed it, but I would have considered it an insult, vile slander." He concluded, "I was certain: We were bringing not only a new system but a new, more just vision of life."⁹³

This study relies on Russian and Kazakh-language primary and secondary sources culled through extensive field research in Kazakhstan and Russia, including work with archival documents at former Communist Party and state archives in Almaty and Moscow, as well as regional archives in Almaty and Semipalatinsk. It also incorporates a wide range of published primary sources, including newspapers, ethnographic accounts, and agricultural journals. Many of the materials, including collections from the former Communist Party archives in Kazakhstan (now known as the Presidential Archives) and Kazakh-language sources, have been little utilized by Western scholars.⁹⁴ These sources shed light on a number of underexplored aspects of the Kazakh disaster. Archival sources reveal that Stalin knew of Kazakhs' suffering at several key moments in the famine, and they highlight the extremely brutal manner in which the regime treated starving Kazakh refugees. The use of Kazakh-language secondary sources opens up a dialogue on the famine with Kazakhstani scholars, many of whom publish exclusively in Kazakh rather than in Russian, while the use of Kazakh-language primary source materials, such as oral history accounts, brings to light the voices of famine survivors, who are otherwise difficult to find in archival sources or memoir accounts.

The last point is an important one, and it raises some of the key methodological differences between researching the Kazakh famine and some of the other crimes of the Stalinist regime, such as the Gulag system, the special settler system, or even the Ukrainian famine. In the Kazakh famine, a far greater percentage of