Changing Societies & Personalities, 2024
Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 1073–1076
https://doi.org/10.15826/csp.2024.8.4.313

BOOK REVIEW

Jennifer Keating (2022). On Arid Ground. Political Ecologies of Empire in Russian Central Asia. Oxford University Press

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This volume offers a fascinating perspective on the imperial power's efforts to transform the environment of its periphery. While political ecology, understood as the study of political forces at work in environmental access, management, and transformation, has gained recognition over the last decades (Roberts, 2020), Keating's imaginative formulations of the book's objectives and approach might well excite even a specialized reader:

> Exploring the connections between things, the assemblage of empire, one might say—for instance, how a camel in desert could be connected to fish in the Aral Sea, how sand was connected to tablecloths—exposes flows of labour, capital, ideas, ecology, and power, as well as revealing the entwined dependencies of histories that are more-than-human. (p. 27)

If a reader, indeed, expected a trans-scalar imaginative journey, the narrative might seem a bit more prosaic, but most illuminating and solidly corroborated by historical evidence, nonetheless. Setting out to explore the environmental imprint of Russian colonization and the impact of environmental challenges, J. Keating provides a comprehensive history of Russian presence in Turkestan over half a century, from the expansion to the disintegration of imperial control in Central Asia. Unlike traditional accounts of political, economic, or social development, however, Keating's narrative weaves together human and "more-than-human" aspects of history. Railroads provide an illustrative example. Traditional histories of imperial railroad construction typically emphasize planning, implementation, and subsequent utilization, framing railroads as symbols of imperial connectivity, which mark the empire's

Received 1 December 2024
Accepted 25 December 2024
Published online 28 December 2024

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capacity to mobilize and transport military and economic resources. Critical histories, conversely, often highlight how new transportation networks render older routes and localities obsolete, leading to depopulation and decline. Keating's analysis integrates both perspectives while also providing notable details. On the one hand, "the railway exerted a transformative impact not simply on mobility, but on intellectual and religious currents, and on the development of new imagined geographies of interconnectedness within and beyond Central Asia" (p. 49). On the other hand, Keating traces a discursive evolution from early justifications centered on the "civilizing mission'" to later arguments grounded in economic benefits as the rationale for infrastructure expansion. The "erasive implications" of new transportation systems are analyzed in the context of regional dynamics. For instance, the initial exclusion of Semirech'e from railroad construction plans was eventually overturned by arguments advocating for railroads that would integrate the region internally, rather than merely connecting the imperial center to its peripheries: "a picture less of the railway as a motor of cotton exports and more as a catalyst for the revitalization of local horticulture, viticulture, and sericulture" (p. 60). In this logic, Semirech'e had the potential to serve as a food supplier for the cotton-growing regions of Turkestan, thereby liberating arable land in those areas for the expansion of profitable cotton cultivation. This regional division of labor, it was argued, fostered a more integrated regional economy but simultaneously it also accelerated the advancement of monoculture, spurring the intensive environmental exploitation of cotton-producing areas. However, in her scaling down from imperial to regional perspective, Keating goes further and discusses railroads in their materiality. If we zoom in onto the objects that constitute the railroad—tracks, sleepers, switches, clearances, shelterbelts, bridges, stations, water towers, embankments, store houses, etc.—the whole range of new agents appear to be at play in specific locales, having specific (both planned and unintended) environmental effects.

While the language of actor-network theory is not used here, one might find resonances with the analyses of termites suddenly finding the treasure trove of wooden sleepers to feast on or ambitious water infrastructure projects leading to siltification, salinization, plant degradation, erosion, and eventual desertification (or re-desertification). Zooming out, though, Keating also explores how expertise gained by other empires such as France's projects in Africa was brought to bear in Russian terraforming in Central Asia as well as how Russian projects such as the Murgab imperial estate were showcased at international exhibitions, the venues of imperial competition and self-legitimation:

> The value of improvement work could be as discursive as it was physical. Via representation, the [Murgab] estate became a legible expression of the transformative effects of empire: in the semi-desertified river delta, Russian management of terrain had seemingly resulted in environmental transformation, reservoirs full of water, cotton plantations, fruit orchards, and a modern town complete with settled, productive population. (p. 87)

Keating discusses well-established tropes of imperial imagination, such as the portrayal of Asia as exotic and the depiction of imperial frontiers as sites of natural abundance ripe for exploitation. The broader framework of imperial projects involved efforts to "civilize" local populations, to introduce modern technological and scientific advancements into regional economies, and to channel local natural resources into global markets, thus positioning the empire as a transformative force. One of the interesting examples of how empire transformed the environment was the emergence of "heterotopic landscape," particularly in Semirech'e, where the Russian settlements were described by visitors as indistinguishable from villages in central Russia. The sources of pride for both state officials and imperial visitors, however, reflected how isolated and alien imperial presence remained.

The problem of settlement, though, invited specific challenges to Russian imperial planning. While many argued that the settlement of Russian agricultural population in Central Asia would result in political and economic benefits: political presence would be reinforced and "unused" lands will ensure prosperity, these aspirations were cruelly undermined by several factors. First, the land was not "unused," its designation as "empty" or "surplus" and allocation to colonists ignited violent clashes between local population and colonists, as akyns put it: "When the Russian comes, he will turn your lakes into roads, He will take stock of your land" (p. 124). Secondly, mass colonization of peasants required large scale programs of educating them in local agricultural practices. However, despite significant efforts of the state, many peasants who migrated to Central Asia were not necessarily apt for acquiring new competences and adjusting to local circumstances. Many ended up impoverished and disenchanted, manning the ranks of urban proletariat:

> Rather than a source of imperial stability and consolidation, agrarian settlement had the potential to be a major force of local volatility, and was a significant driver of the physical unrest that erupted in the summer of 1916. (p.130)

Thus, Keating shows how the familiar divisions of center–periphery, settler and indigenous communities, need to be complemented with regional and local divisions such as cotton-producing areas and food-producing areas, territories with traditionally sedentary populations and territories with nomadic populations, urban and rural divisions.

While many aspects of Russian colonization, from conquest to migration and ensuing revolts against Russian imperialism, are covered in detail, the second objective—exploring the impact of environmental challenges—seems to remain in the background. If "climate and landscape were seen as potentially threatening to Russian authority" (p. 20), a reader is presented with very few possible impacts of this threat on governance. One response could be described as imperial "doubling down" as was the case in Murgab estate, which despite all regional, national, and international parading as a "shining example" of progress, was in need of constant flow of investment, structural repairs, and central oversight:

> Crucially, degradation extended to the larger river system: erosion, salinity, disease, and reduced river volume did not vanish at the estate legal boundaries … ecological costs weighed on the wider legitimacy of the imperial enterprise. (p. 92)

The other response can be summed up in one word: corruption. From the local officials shaking down the local population to embezzlement and grafting throughout the imperial hierarchy. However, Keating also sketches some possibilities such as the growth of civil society in Central Asia and its efforts to bridge the local population and the colonists, academic expertise and local knowledge, imperial interests and local development. Several examples were given such as public lectures, publication of local news media, but also local exhibitions, which "not only mobilized society by bringing people together, it actively created society, cutting across the usually sharply delineated lines drawn between local inhabitants and Russian settlers" (p. 153).

It should also be mentioned that this volume is well-illustrated and would constitute a valuable addition to the collections of institutions focusing on Central Asian studies.

References

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