Pipe Dreams

The drying up of the Aral Sea – a major environmental catastrophe of the late twentieth century – is deeply rooted in the dreams of the irrigation age of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time when engineers, scientists, politicians, and entrepreneurs around the world united in the belief that universal scientific knowledge, together with modern technologies, could be used to transform large areas of the planet from “wasteland” into productive agricultural land. Though ostensibly about bringing modernity, progress, and prosperity to the deserts, the transformation of Central Asia’s landscapes through tsarist- and Soviet-era hydraulic projects bore the hallmarks of a colonial experiment. Examining how both regimes used irrigation-age fantasies of bringing the deserts to life as a means of claiming legitimacy in Central Asia, Maya K. Peterson brings a fresh perspective to the history of Russia’s conquest and rule of Central Asia.

MAYA K. PETERSON was the Assistant Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Cruz.
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Pipe Dreams

Water and Empire in Central Asia’s Aral Sea Basin

MAYA K. PETERSON
University of California
To my parents, for being my original source of inspiration.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of Figures</strong></td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acknowledgments</strong></td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Note on People, Places, and Institutions</strong></td>
<td>xxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 The Land beyond the Rivers: Russians on the Amu Darya and Syr Darya</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Eastern Eden: Irrigation and Empire on the Hungry Steppe</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 To Create a New Turkestan: Water Governance in the Irrigation Age</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The Land of Bread and Honey? Settlement and Subversion in the Land of Seven Rivers</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Sundering the Chains of Nature: Bolshevik Visions for Central Asia</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 From Shockwork to People’s Construction: Socialist Labor on Stalin’s Canals</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue: The Fate of the Aral Sea</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Glossary</strong></td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography</strong></td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

I.1 Map of Turkestan under Russian rule, c. 1900.
   Map by Bill Nelson.  

1.1 Butakov’s map of the Aral Sea, based on his first expedition in 1848–1849, published by the Royal Geographical Society of London in 1853 to accompany “Survey of the Sea of Aral” (JRGS 23 [1853]) by Commander Alexey Butakoff. Historical Maps of Russia and the Former Soviet Republics, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin.  

29

1.2 Chigir. Reproduced with permission from the Willard L. Gorton Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA.  

61

2.1 The Hungry Steppe, early twentieth century.
   Map by Bill Nelson.  

84


86

2.3 Nikolaevskoe peasants and Central Asians working on the irrigation of the Hungry Steppe. “Gruppa krest’ian Nikolaevskogo poselka rabotaiushchikh na magistral’nom kanale,” photograph No. 19 in Raboty po orosheniiu 45,000 ga. v Golodnoi Stepi, 4. Reproduced with permission of the Rare Books Section of the Alisher Navoi State Library, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.  

89

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www.cambridge.org
xii

List of Figures


3.1 Cotton in front of the house of a settler in Veliko-Alekssevskoe in the Hungry Steppe. Photograph No. 13 in Vidy zaseliaemoi chasti Golodnoi Stepi [Views of the Settled Part of the Hungry Steppe], 7. Reproduced with permission of the Rare Books Section of the Alisher Navoi State Library, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

3.2 Cotton from the state plantation. Photograph No. 32 in Vidy zaseliaemoi chasti Golodnoi Stepi, 16. Reproduced with permission of the Rare Books Section of the Alisher Navoi State Library, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

3.3 Public prayer at the opening of the Romanov Canal, 1913. “Molebstvie.” Photograph No. 2 in the photo album Vidy torzhestvennogo otkrytia Romanovoskogo orositel’nogo kanala v Golodnoi Stepi 5 oktiabria 1913 [Views of the Celebratory Opening of the Romanov Irrigation Canal in the Hungry Steppe, 5 October 1913], 1. Reproduced with permission from the Rare Books Section of the Alisher Navoi State Library, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

4.1 Pastoralist women milking. Reproduced with permission from the Willard L. Gorton Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA.

4.2 Map of the Chu River Valley in the early twentieth century, showing Engineer Vasilev’s projections for irrigated areas (regions A–E), as well as the general locations of Kyrgyz volosts in the region of the Chu River Valley Irrigation Project. Map by Bill Nelson.

4.3 Semireche Cossack officers. From the album Vidy Semirech’ia i Kul’dzhi [Views of Semireche and Kulja], 5. Reproduced with permission of the Rare Books Section of the Alisher Navoi State Library, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

5.1 Khivan irrigation official. [1920s?] “Native engineer, the chief irrigator of the Khivinsky khan.” Reproduced with
List of Figures

permission from the Willard L. Gorton Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA. 225

5.2 Cotton bazaar, Old Andijan (Soviet postcard). Reproduced with permission from the Willard L. Gorton Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA. 250

6.1 Map of Soviet Central Asia, 1940s. Map by Bill Nelson. 270

6.2 An imported German Menk excavator at work in the Vakhsh Valley, 1930s. From the photo album Vakhshskoe irrigatsionnoe stroitel'stvo v Tadzhikskoi SSR [Vakhsh Irrigation Construction in the Tajik SSR], RGAE f. 8390, op. 1, d. 1098, l. 5. Reproduced with permission from the Russian State Archive of the Economy. 291

6.3 Meeting on the [Vakhsh Canal] headworks, 1930s. From the photo album Vakhsh Irrigation Construction in the Tajik SSR, RGAE f. 8390, op. 1, d. 1098, l. 100b. Reproduced with permission from the Russian State Archive of the Economy. 307
Acknowledgments

Just as a river on its way to the sea acquires water from many different tributaries, so this book has been influenced by many different sources on its journey to its final destination, a journey that has spanned many years and half the globe. Taking on and finishing such an endeavor was made possible by the support of a vast number of colleagues and friends. Many academic communities have made this book far better, and for that I am infinitely grateful. There is not enough space here to acknowledge every contribution in so many words, but these acknowledgments are, first and foremost, a thank-you to everyone who has helped this book to completion, in ways both big and small.

My interest in Russian history began in high school, when I took the last class that Peter Viereck ever taught at Mount Holyoke College. The following fall, I showed up at Swarthmore College, ready to tackle not only Russian history, but also the Russian language. My Swarthmore professors, including Sibelan Forrester, Bruce Grant, Pieter Judson, and Bob Weinberg, have remained generous mentors through the years. In a master’s program at Harvard University, I began learning Uzbek with Gulnora Aminova, and I first encountered the Aral Sea in a class taught by Laura Adams. The Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, which provided a wonderful academic home over many years, funded my first trip to the Aral Sea basin that summer.

The following fall, Terry Martin’s graduate seminar on Soviet history confirmed my desire to pursue a PhD in Russian and Soviet history. Terry was a wonderful graduate advisor and mentor; he encouraged me to follow my instincts and was this project’s first champion. David Blackbourn introduced me to environmental history, and though I abandoned
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In addition to the scholars mentioned above, numerous scholars of Russian and Soviet history, Central Asia, environmental history, and the...
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Note on People, Places, and Institutions

This book uses the term Central Asia for the region described by the Soviet concept of Central Asia (the area comprised by the Uzbek, Turkmen, Tajik, and Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republics, along with the southern part of the Kazakh SSR), and Central Asians to refer to the indigenous people who inhabited the region (Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmen, Uzbeks, and others) in both the tsarist and Soviet periods. Likewise, Russians or Slavs is used as a shorthand to describe people coming from central parts of the empire, either in an official or unofficial capacity, to the Central Asian borderlands, though many of these people, including the governors of the Central Asian province of Russian Turkestan, were Baltic Germans or may have been ethnically Slavic, but not Russian (e.g., Ukrainians or Poles). Russian Turkestan, Turkestan, and Turkestan krai [border region] all refer to the region under direct Russian rule in the imperial period (that is, excluding the autonomous protectorates of Bukhara and Khiva). Central Eurasian describes a broader territory, including the protectorates, the Kazakh Steppe, and regions that were generally beyond the boundaries of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, such as Persia (Iran), Afghanistan, and the Xinjiang province of northwest China.

In terms of spelling, I have generally used transliterations commonly used in English-language publications for names of places and peoples that may be familiar to the audience (e.g., Amu Darya, rather than Amu Daria; Ferghana, rather than Farghona; Kazakh, rather than Kazak or Qazaq; Bukhara, rather than Bukhoro), but I have taken the liberty of spelling other place names with transliterations that better approximate their Central Asian spellings, rather than the Russified versions of those
names: e.g., Qurghonteppa for Kurgan-Tiube, Qaraqalpaq for Karakalpak, Qara Qum for Karakum. There were, of course, still choices to make. The oasis of Khorezm, for instance, may be spelled Khwarezm or Khoresm (in addition to many other spellings). In all cases, I have tried to be consistent.

Throughout this work, for simplicity, I refer to the Ministry of Agriculture, although this institution underwent several important name changes between the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. What was the imperial Ministry of Agriculture and State Domains (Ministerstvo Zemledeliia i Gosudarstvennykh Imushchestv) was reorganized in 1905 into the Main Administration of Land Management and Agriculture (Gosudarstvennoe Upravlenie Zemleustroistva i Zemledeliia, often abbreviated GUZiZ). Turkestan gained its own branch of the ministry in 1897; that branch, however, retained the title of Administration of Agriculture and State Domains through the end of the imperial period. In 1915, GUZiZ became the Ministry of Agriculture (Ministerstvo Zemledeliia). After the Bolshevik Revolution, the tsarist-era Ministry of Agriculture became the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture. Throughout, I have given the commonly used abbreviated version of Soviet ministries (people’s commissariats) when they first appear—for instance, the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture (Narodnyi Kommissariat Zemledeliia) was typically referred to by its abbreviation, Narkomzem—but I have otherwise used their English translations, for those not familiar with these abbreviations or the Russian language. I have translated the tsarist-era Otdel Zemel’nykh Uluchshenii (OZU), a department of the Ministry of Agriculture, literally as Department of Land Improvement, rather than Department of Reclamation, since the term melioratsiia was coming to be used more frequently to mean “reclamation” in the twentieth century. Explanations of Russian and Central Asian terms that appear frequently in this work can be found in a separate glossary.