Wildscapes In Ballyhooland

Shock construction, Soviet colonization, and Stalinist governance*

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soviétique et gouvernance stalinienne*

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/8345>
DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.8345
ISSN: 1777-5388

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2016
Number of pages: 221-246
ISBN: 978-2-7132-2540-6
ISSN: 1252-6576

Electronic reference

Christian Teichmann, « Wildscapes In Ballyhooland », *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 57/1 | 2016,
Online since 01 January 2019, Connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/8345> ; DOI : 10.4000/monderusse.8345

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Research for this article was made possible by research grants of Volkswagenstiftung (Hanover, Germany) and the Hoover Archives Summer Workshop (Stanford, California). Heartfelt thanks for help and advice are due to Samantha Taber, Johannes Arens and Philine Apenburg, as well as the patient editors of this special issue, the supportive anonymous reviewers and the diligent journal editors.

- 1 “People came into the Vakhsh Valley. Not simple people but Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks, organized by will, came for victory. They brought technique with them into the steppe. The technique began to move along the sun-burnt steppe by means of its draglines, Fordsons, dredges, and workmen camps.”¹ With words like these, journalists and writers hailed the Vakhsh River Valley Project in the many tongues of Soviet propaganda. What seemed like a fait accompli in 1931 newspaper reports, novels, feuilletons and public speeches was, nonetheless, an agricultural colonization project beset by great technological obstacles and deathly environmental risks. The valley’s geographical isolation in the southernmost periphery of the Soviet Union, the borderlands between the Tajik Soviet Republic and Afghanistan’s Kunduz Province, only compounded the challenge that Soviet planners, regional party bosses and irrigation engineers had set for themselves.
- 2 Neither its geographical remoteness nor its infrastructural isolation separated the Vakhsh River Valley Project from other Stalinist shock construction sites of the 1930s. On the contrary, Soviet economic planners sought to reverse hitherto familiar geographical hierarchies. They proclaimed that the distant peripheries were to be the new political

centers and that the invincible natural borders were to be the new frontiers of socialism.² Widely publicized landmark building projects such as the Magnitogorsk steel plant or the White Sea Canal—intended to open unexplored landscapes to the exploitation of natural resources in order to strengthen the country’s military capacity—emerged at geographically isolated sites with no reliable infrastructure in place.³ At the same time, the secret police deported several hundred thousand disenfranchised peasants and city-dwellers into remote regions for the purpose of agricultural colonization.⁴

- 3 In their interpretations of Stalinist shock construction, historians often drew on the concept of authoritarian modernization. They heeded the Bolshevik battle cry that Soviet socialism should be understood as a struggle against backwardness and underdevelopment. Accordingly, they presented Stalinist policies as a radical utopian drive towards progress and modernity.⁵ Despite difficulties and setbacks, construction projects eventually achieved their goals as new factories, infrastructures, and urban agglomerations arose in previously barren peripheries.⁶ From this perspective, the transformation of societies, geographies and natural spaces lent legitimacy to the Bolshevik project and made it palpable to the peoples of the Soviet Union. Moreover, through its anti-capitalist ideology the Stalinist regime constantly generated mobilization in the new “landscapes of possibility” where construction sites such as Magnitogorsk became “powerful levers in the fight to build socialism.”⁷ The Vakhsh River Valley Project, by contrast, experienced a different trajectory. Malfunctioning technology, environmental hazards, mass deportations, and a lack of political legitimacy undercut the project’s very existence. In May 1937, the Tajik government launched an inquiry into the state of the irrigation scheme and had to admit that it suffered from an “irregular and unreliable supply of water.” After seven years of costly construction work and difficult attempts at colonization, the Vakhsh project had transformed the river valley into a wasteland of salty marshes and swamps. Finally, the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture in Moscow earmarked the project for “liquidation.”⁸
- 4 The Vakhsh River Valley Project was one of the 150 prominent sites of “shock construction of all-Union importance” during the First Five-Year Plan.⁹ Unlike similar large-scale irrigation ventures in Stalinist Central Asia—the Great Ferghana Canal of the late 1930s or the Turkmen Main Canal of the early 1950s—it sank into oblivion outside the region of its creation. All leading personnel involved in the initial phase of construction fell victim to the Stalinist purge and terror campaigns between 1936 and 1939. Archivists destroyed large parts of the documentation.¹⁰ When a major technical overhaul of the Vakhsh irrigation scheme began in 1956, Soviet historians and propagandists invented an appropriately heroic version of the construction sites’ early days. This version of the story shapes local memory up until today.¹¹ Only during the short years of perestroika were scholars in Tajikistan able to carry out thorough archival studies of Stalinist colonization policies.¹² Their efforts were cut short by the outbreak of the civil war in Tajikistan when, in 1992, the Vakhsh Valley became a site of military conflict, material destruction and ethnic atrocities.
- 5 While the following pages trace the Vakhsh River Valley Project in the decade from its inception in 1929 to the Soviet entry into World War II, three overarching questions will be raised. First, the paper asks how Soviet bureaucrats and engineers struggled to manage a grand construction scheme in an austere and war-torn landscape. It traces the ways in which engineering expertise and agronomical knowledge were nullified by stiff decision-making hierarchies and widespread state terror. Second, the paper aims to treat

the natural environment as an actor in its own right, thus seeking to demonstrate how the forces of nature played out against the initial goals of colonizing and cultivating the isolated river plain. Third, it characterizes the ways in which Stalinist governance intentionally deepened, instead of remedying, the ongoing environmental and social crises in the valley. Rather than portraying the Vakhsh project as another key site of Soviet modernization, the paper scrutinizes the local consequences and legacies of violent state building. The Vakhsh Valley Project tells the story of a landscape and its people that remained outside the neat binaries of the Bolshevik utopia and the supposedly solid grids of Soviet modernity.

The gringos of Tashkent

- 6 On March 31, 1930, the American engineer Willard Livermore Gorton arrived in Tashkent. He brought with him two huge trunk suitcases and a rich engineering experience. Born in 1881, he had started his career at the North Platte Project in Wyoming in 1904. Based in Boise, Idaho, since 1909, he had continuously worked in the field of irrigation and reclamation. “My work covers the investigation, design, construction and operation of irrigation works,” Gorton wrote when applying to be employed by the Soviet government. In a stroke of luck, Gorton’s application was facilitated by the renowned constructor of the Panama Canal, Arthur Powell Davis, who already was working at the time in Tashkent as a Chief Consulting Engineer of the Central Asian Water Administration.¹³
- 7 When Gorton embarked on the Soviet Ark in 1930, his prospects looked exceptionally promising. Arthur Davis informed him that the Soviet government was planning “a very ambitious irrigation program,” which involved spending “over 100,000,000 rubles per annum during the next 6 or 8 years.” Moreover, “a project for irrigating 465,000 hectares of raw land has been under investigation for many years, and this has been ready for construction for two years,” Gorton read in Davis’ inviting letter. “It is possible that they are considering placing this construction under your charge.”¹⁴ Like thousands of American and European professionals at the onset of the Great Depression, Gorton chose to try his luck with the Bolsheviks both out of necessity and curiosity.¹⁵ “Whatever else their governmental scheme is,” he wrote to a fellow American engineer in an atmosphere of departure, “it is most assuredly a great social experiment.”¹⁶
- 8 Upon his arrival in Tashkent, Gorton soon discovered that the advertised Hungry Steppe Project in Uzbekistan had “gone cold” after its Russian Chief Engineer, Georgii Konstantinovich Rizenkampf, had been arrested by the secret police and disappeared in the Belomor camp.¹⁷ Instead of overseeing a conveniently located and thoroughly explored construction scheme, Gorton shortly after his arrival found himself sitting in an airplane headed for southern Tajikistan. He was to investigate “a project known as the Vakhsh,” which was “feverishly being examined” by Soviet engineers in the spring of 1930:

With an optimism typically Bolshevik, and an utter disregard of realities, also typical of the Communists —Gorton later sardonically remarked—, they decided that the job, involving the reclamation of 250,000 acres of land, should be completed in one year. Only the most preliminary engineering examination had been made and final surveys and plans were still somewhere in the future.
- 9 Yet, Gorton also admitted that at his new job, “it was difficult at times to retain that objective attitude toward the great experiment.”¹⁸

- 10 Gorton was not the only one caught up in the feverish atmosphere of the First Five-Year Plan. Vasilii Ėmil'evich Sproge arrived in Tashkent approximately at the same time as did Gorton. A Ukrainian of Swiss descent, Sproge was a son of Russia's three revolutions: a graduate of Moscow's prestigious Railroad Engineering Institute, a committed Kadet, a soldier of the Voluntary Army during the Civil War and, after the White's defeat, an enthusiastic builder of the Dnepr Hydroelectric Dam. His close association with the mastermind of the Dnepr Dam, Ivan Gavrilovich Aleksandrov, resulted in Sproge's promotion to the position of a Deputy Director of Dneprostroi in 1926.¹⁹ In 1929, Ivan Aleksandrov moved his team from Ukraine to Moscow and, from his new headquarters, ran the newly founded State Institute for the Design of Water Works. This institution was, in Sproge's words, responsible "for the design of all problems and major projects that previously had been managed by several different agencies in Central Asia, located mainly in Tashkent."²⁰ Sproge's and Gorton's technical expertise was a valuable replacement for those prominent engineers who possessed long years of work experience in Central Asia's irrigation sector but, in 1930-31, were being feverishly persecuted by the secret police.²¹
- 11 By the outlandish standards of the First Five-Year Plan—as demonstrated at Dneprostroi, Magnitorsk, Belomor, and many other shock construction sites—the Vakhsh Valley Project was hardly an exceptional case. In Central Asia, however, the political and social conditions differed significantly from those in the Soviet Union's Russian core. Here, the revolutionary war of the Bolsheviks had lasted until 1924 and had had the character of a colonial conquest.²² Soviet nationality policy, consequently, had failed in its goal to create stable and locally rooted governmental institutions.²³ Instead, until 1934 party politics in the region were overseen by the Central Asian Bureau, the powerful representative of the Moscow Central Committee of the Communist Party in Tashkent, which also steered economic and cultural policies.²⁴ Moreover, the turmoil of collectivization and enforced cotton cultivation was aggravated by crises and instability in the neighboring countries. In January 1929, for instance, the Afghan king and Soviet ally, Amanullah Khan, was toppled and Afghanistan slid into a protracted civil war. The deterioration of the Afghan state led the Moscow leadership to reconsider its administration of the southern borderlands. In November 1929, after five years of lobbying on the part of the Tajiks, the Moscow Central Committee finally granted the Tajik Autonomous District the breakaway from Uzbekistan.²⁵
- 12 The newly established Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic not only needed new ministers, an appropriate capital city and a state budget but, due to its enhanced political status, it was also entitled to run its own prestigious construction project. The Chairman of the Tajik Executive Committee, Nusratullo Maksum, therefore advocated the Vakhsh Valley as a potential building site. He had good reason to do so. On one hand, the hot climate of the valley offered a unique opportunity to cultivate long-fibred high-quality "Egyptian" varieties of cotton. This fact provided valuable arguments to enlist the support of the resource-hungry Moscow government for the adventurous irrigation scheme. On the other hand, the advocated scheme opened up the possibility for proactive Tajik nation-building. Hitherto, Turkic nomadic tribal peoples (identified at the time as "Uzbeks" and "Lakai") inhabited the plains of the Vakhsh Valley. By contrast, the Persian-speaking sedentary groups (identified as "Tajiks") were a tiny ethnic minority in the southern lowlands. In the minds of Chairman Maksum and his Tajik comrades, the

Vakhsh Valley Project provided a unique chance to redraw the ethnic balance sheet in the southern plains and to revamp their mountain republic into a truly Tajik country.²⁶

- 13 Engineers like Sproge and Gorton were hardly in a position to apprehend this situation. Being newcomers to Central Asia, they lacked a clear understanding of the murky political landscape and complex social realities of the region. Instead, the two men were preoccupied with time-consuming struggles with the Soviet bureaucracy over payment delays, food provisioning and poor working conditions. Due to his privileged status as a foreign expert, Gorton freely criticized the Vakhsh Valley scheme because of its isolated location, inadequate survey data and general unpreparedness. Still, his technical expertise was decisive for the planning of the future irrigation scheme.²⁷ Meanwhile, Sproge and his Soviet colleagues conducted a number of reconnaissance missions all over Central Asia between 1930 and 1932. In his memoirs, Sproge pondered the “totally impossible and unpredictable weather conditions” and the “constant danger to fall into the hands of native rebels and be tortured to death by them.”²⁸
- 14 Despite their different backgrounds, both engineers shared similar attitudes towards Central Asia and its people: while painting colorful Orientalist pictures, they neither appreciated nor studied local irrigation techniques and methods. Rather, a combination of ignorance (“a civilization that hardly changed during the past two thousand years”) and disdain (“Bolshevik Turkestan is no dirtier than other countries east of the Suez”) shaped their attitudes when working towards Soviet technological progress.²⁹ Moreover, the two engineers’ social contacts were limited to fellow professionals and Soviet officials. Their activities were circumscribed by arbitrary government orders, subject to ad hoc political decisions, and buffeted by frequent and chaotic change. Engineers experienced the hardships of “socialistic building” like everyone else. “Russia may be a workman’s paradise,” Gorton quipped after his return to Boise in 1932, “but it is a (Soviet) engineer’s hell.”³⁰ Still, the American had a point when recognizing that

Russian engineers work under great difficulties due to the peculiar type of organization utilized by the Communists whereby every important office, bureau, or project, has at its head a Communist, whose principal, and sometimes only, qualification for the position is his knowledge of Communist party ballyhoo.³¹

Burnt by the sun

- 15 The Vakhsh River cuts through the Pamir Mountains from north-east to the south-west and, at its confluence with the Panj River, forms the Amu Darya. Nineteenth century sources report that “just to the north of the Kurgan-Tiube settlement, the Vakhsh River enters into a plain and diverts into several arms, where it forms low banks covered with water reeds and a diversity of shrubs.” On the plain, stretching approximately 100 kilometers from north to south, the main river stream formed meandering beds on a width of 170 meters.³² Prior to 1917, geographers portrayed the valley as abundant with waterways and carpeted with vegetation. The terrain was “barely known” to outsiders, “sparsely populated,” and the river banks were “overgrown by extensive jungles.”³³ Only a decade later, the Bolsheviks saw the Vakhsh Valley as little more than a desert wasteland. It was not just the hot summers, snowy winters, and downtrodden post-Civil War population that shaped their perception.³⁴ The barren landscape represented a dark past that was to be overcome. Bruno Jasieński, a Polish Communist writer who visited Tajikistan in 1930 and 1931 with the task of propagandizing the Vakhsh Project in a novel,

described the construction site in the upper part of the valley as a “huge desert plateau that is stretched out between two chains of mountains on an area of about two hundred thousand hectares.” In a rather unsurprising turn of socialist realist dialectics, Jasiński then informed his readership that the territory “lends itself wonderfully for the cultivation of Egyptian cotton.”³⁵

- 16 According to Soviet planners, the “combat mission” of the engineers was to construct a canal network that would allow for the reclamation of 50,000 hectares of desert land within three years. Plans eventually foresaw the cultivation of more than 100,000 hectares in the valley. The construction of a concrete sluice over the Vakhsh was the cornerstone of the project.³⁶ In 1930, Ivan Aleksandrov, the prominent mastermind of Dneprostroi and influential Director of the Moscow State Institute for the Design of Water Works, even advocated the building of a hydropower station and the erection of an industrial complex in the southern parts of the valley that directly bordered with Afghanistan.³⁷ The American engineer Willard Gorton, for his part, repeatedly made it clear to the Soviet authorities that the envisioned construction program was “practically impossible.”³⁸ Other foreign visitors concurred. Egon Erwin Kisch, an ardent admirer of the Bolshevik regime and popular journalist in Weimar Germany, was amazed by both the enthusiasm of the people he encountered during his 1931 visit to the Vakhsh Valley and by the Bolshevik “phantasmagoria to turn a stone desert parched over thousands of years into a blooming cotton garden.”³⁹
- 17 At first glance, the site where the head sluice and main feeder canal were built looked like any other Soviet shock construction site of the early 1930s: chaos, scarcity and mismanagement reigned wherever observers turned their eyes.⁴⁰ Willard Gorton noticed that the “appearance of feverishness” on the construction site was “due to the utter confusion, bordering on chaos, which obtains practically everywhere.”⁴¹ Although construction had already started, the technical plans had not yet been finalized. Unsurprisingly, transportation and infrastructure were disorganized: neither roads nor railroads connected the site to the outside world. Functioning building machinery was scarce. Horses and camels died of neglect and starvation. The majority of the 7,000 workers and 700 Red Army soldiers on the site lived in tents, yurts, and mud houses because wood for the construction of barracks was unavailable. Workers lacked the necessary workwear, shoes, and soap. Salaries were paid out irregularly. Even a functioning party organization was missing.⁴²
- 18 In the spring of 1931, conditions further deteriorated due to hunger and war. “Kurgan-Tiube sits without grain,” reported the secret police. A caravan of 1,000 camels tried to cross the mountain range between Stalinabad and the Vakhsh Valley but failed because mock state functionaries and con party officials demanded road tolls and transfer royalties. Armed robbers made food deliveries to the valley virtually impossible. By June, Tajik Prime Minister Abdurakhim Khodzhibaev had to ask the Moscow government to take over responsibility for adequate food provisions to the valley.⁴³ To make things worse, an insurgency broke out when Afghan warlord Ibrahim Bek crossed into Tajikistan with his sizeable army. He had fought against Soviet rule throughout the 1920s but his troops had grown from a few dozen warriors in 1929 to 1,200 fighters in 1931. Ibrahim, a 42-year-old Lakai from Hissar, collected tributes from the population and recruited fighters in the valley and the surrounding lands.⁴⁴ Alarmed by the deteriorating security situation, Moscow sent in OGPU Special Troopers under the infamous commander Efim Georgievich Evdokimov. After two months of ruthless counterinsurgency operations,

Ibrahim was finally arrested and subsequently shot. His fighters went into hiding. A Soviet holiday was celebrated. Evdokimov and his radicalized troops moved into Turkmenistan to quell a nomad uprising in Karakum desert. In a continuation of their counterinsurgency operation, his soldiers used air bombardments and poison gas to end anti-Soviet resistance.⁴⁵

- 19 Despite massive food shortages and an epidemic of malaria, new people continuously arrived in the valley. Some were workers and soldiers recruited in Tashkent to toil on the construction site. The majority, however, were destitute Kazakh herders trying to escape famine in their homeland. They used the dangerous passage through the Vakhsh Valley as a gateway to Afghanistan. Between January and March 1932, more than 1,200 refugee families were able to flee from Soviet territory despite the massacres and man hunts employed by Soviet border patrols to prevent them from doing so. Tajik Prime Minister Abdurakhim Khodzhibaev complained to the secret police about the “masses of anti-Soviet elements” that “roam the border districts” and demanded that the border be sealed off.⁴⁶ Amid masses of deprived refugees, disease, and shortages, Soviet officials could hardly ensure the fulfillment of the construction and cotton sowing plans. “The reason for the lagging plan fulfillment is that the plans took into account neither the out-migration of the population to Afghanistan nor the non-arrival of new settlers,” Tajik secret police chief, Ivan Dorofeev, dutifully mused.⁴⁷
- 20 How could an ambitious Soviet agricultural development scheme thrive in this situation? It certainly could not. In late March 1932, a report cabled to Stalinabad from the Lubianka secret police headquarters in Moscow alerted the Tajik government to the dire state of affairs:

The entire territory of the construction site is littered with various objects and materials (tractors, trailers, carts, pieces of metal, ropes, canvases, and so on); the living conditions for workers are heinous: barracks are leaking and unheated; there is no hot water, no crockery, and no bathing facilities.
- 21 Characteristically for secret police reports of the period, data on the bad state of the machine outfit and livestock mortality supplanted any precise information about the living conditions of the population: only 40 out of 127 cars were in operation, only 15 out of 28 excavators, only 90 out of 213 tractors; half of the original number of 800 camels had died as had over 1,000 out of 2,600 horses.⁴⁸ This devastating result, achieved at a cost of 38 million rubles, was, however, only one in many missteps of shock construction during the First Five-Year Plan in the Soviet Union.

A leap in the dark

- 22 The Tajik Central Committee in Stalinabad now pushed for an “assault to liquidate the plan backlog” and for a “decisive breakthrough” on the construction site. Lengthy party resolutions and government orders, however, did nothing to consolidate the construction site. Directors came and went. Repressions by the secret police in the Vakhsh Valley against “criminal and enemy elements” continued. The food situation did not improve despite the accommodation of “Soviet bazaars” where private trade was officially sanctioned.⁴⁹ Unrestrained improvisation substituted for any serious advance in the construction process. When a new director was sent in directly from Moscow in September 1932, he summarized his first impressions with the statement that the Vakhsh Project was an “ideal example and wonderful role model of how not to build.” According

to him, construction “moved forward tentatively like a blind man” and was characterized by “lack of method, disorganization, sloppiness, and excursiveness.” Despite two years of building, the “most difficult and complex work” was “yet ahead.”⁵⁰

- 23 The new director of the Vakhsh Project, Ivan Aleksandrovich Tolstopiatov, was the right man in the right place. Born in 1892, the trained machine operator had built a career in the Soviet Ministry of Labor and, in 1928, climbed to the position of Deputy Minister. In 1930, however, he had to quit the job, officially “due to illness.”⁵¹ In 1932, at the age of forty, Tolstopiatov had regained his energy. Being both a committed Bolshevik and a capable industrial manager, he represented a rare type of Soviet official in Tajikistan. His knowledge of the Soviet state bureaucracy as well as his resolute and assertive behavior set him apart from his predecessors and colleagues. He ignored the downtrodden atmosphere on the construction site, which he likened to a “prison camp or place of forced exile” where “convicts and sinners on parole” worked side by side with “swindlers, thugs, and other vermin.” In the Vakhsh Valley, Tolstopiatov encountered only a “very small stratum of people” that “shouldered all the responsibility” and, unlike the majority, worked “not out of fear but out of good conscience (ne za strakh, a za sovest’).”⁵²
- 24 Fear was a natural reaction to the life-threatening conditions in the valley. In the autumn of 1932, malaria returned on a grand scale and the region suffered from a plague of locusts; typhus spread, and the secret police continued its hunts for starving refugees from Kazakhstan, Tajik resettlers on the run, as well as active and former anti-Soviet rebels.⁵³ Climatic conditions were rough during the 1932-1933 winter of starvation. Still, production targets had to be met. The Tajik government had lowered the original plan to cultivate 50,000 hectares of cotton by 1933 to 24,500 hectares. Tolstopiatov reported that 17,600 hectares could be sown in spring only if a number of “uncertainties” were resolved. (Since 1929 the size of arable irrigation land in the valley had decreased by a staggering 12,000 hectares.)⁵⁴ As a consequence of failure, the party organized public show trials while the secret police combed the valley in search of “anti-Soviet elements.”⁵⁵ Attempting to make progress on his assignment, Tolstopiatov willingly collaborated with the secret police. The well-paid and well-fed OGPU troopers were the only available resource to protect vital transport facilities, organize food deliveries, and successfully supply 2,000 forced labor camp inmates who served as a welcome and cheap source of manpower.⁵⁶
- 25 The 1933 construction season in the Vakhsh Valley began as a wave of state terror hit Tajikistan. Karl Bauman, the Chairman of the Central Asian Bureau of the Communist Party in Tashkent, specifically targeted Tajik indigenous functionaries. Allegedly, secretive “nationalistic organizations” were “uncovered.” In April 1933, Stalin granted Bauman permission to operate a special tribunal (troika) with the right to execute suspected “insurgents and counter-revolutionaries in Central Asia.”⁵⁷ The tribunal ceased its bloody operations after three weeks, but Bauman continued his campaign of terror into the summer: state ministers in Stalinabad were prohibited from using their telephones or sending telegrams. Up to 600 Tajik party and state functionaries were arrested. Bauman did not rest until the influential Chairman of the Executive Committee, Nusratullo Maksum, and the Tajik Prime Minister, Abdurahim Khodzhibaev, who were already under strict secret police surveillance, were relieved from their posts by Stalin in the fall of 1933.⁵⁸
- 26 To fend off the swirl of terror, Tolstopiatov began securing special powers and privileges, as a means of making the Vakhsh Project more independent from its superior

organizations in Stalinabad and Tashkent. The director was able to attain financial autonomy, decision-making powers over the development of local infrastructure, and the management of agricultural colonization. In return, he was required to ensure the successful completion of the construction scheme.⁵⁹ This assignment presented unexpected difficulties and unknown surprises. In 1931 and 1932, engineers and agronomists had realized that the location of the main sluice had been chosen “not entirely felicitously” and that the construction plan was “not sufficiently thought out and worked through.” One year before construction work was scheduled to be finished, the director and his staff knew very precisely that the core objects of the scheme were ill-conceived and premature. Hurried planning and the unfamiliarity of the engineering team (under Gorton’s supervision), with the terrain, combined with the local ecological conditions, produced a first negative result. Regardless of his doubts, Tolstopiatov fatalistically reasoned that “in the current situation there is no turning back because it is already too late.”⁶⁰

- 27 The construction proceeded incessantly until the last days of August 1933. Despite the fact that it was not carried out by the “best shock brigades with the strongest of workers” but by “local indigenous laborers unaccustomed to hard work,” Tolstopiatov was confident enough to guarantee that the main sluice would be completed and exploitation could begin by October 1933.⁶¹ Behind the scenes, however, conflict ripened. The Vakhsh River Valley Project’s chief engineer, Sergei Ivanovich Syromiatnikov, could regularly be seen arguing with workers instead of “quietly explaining to them their duties and requirements.” Tolstopiatov complained that the inspection trips of the “difficult” and “pigheaded” chief engineer usually ended in “fights and yelling.” At the same time, he accused Syromiatnikov of displaying “contempt” towards young engineers and noted that “his behavior and manners aroused the wish in many of the engineering personnel to quit their job.”⁶²
- 28 Tolstopiatov’s personal dislike of his chief engineer was fed by suspicion. Born in 1886, Syromiatnikov had been an aspiring and capable irrigation engineer in Central Asia during the 1910s and 1920s. Shortly after he turned forty, however, he was arrested and subsequently presented as one of the main culprits in the 1928 show trial against the Central Asian Water Administration in Tashkent. Two months before the beginning of the much publicized Shakhty trial in Moscow, Syromiatnikov was indicted in Tashkent along with a dozen fellow “bourgeois” engineers and convicted to five years in prison. Yet luckily for him, his prison term ended after a couple of weeks and he returned to his former workplace as if nothing had happened.⁶³ The experience of becoming a Soviet engineer had shaped Syromiatnikov’s personality without remaking him into a Soviet new man. Still, the Bolshevik Great Leap Forward heavily relied on engineers like Syromiatnikov. The “old guard” of “bourgeois” engineers had not disappeared from the scene in the late 1920s but instead found itself in the eye of the storm at the landmark Stalinist shock construction sites throughout the 1930s.⁶⁴
- 29 Tensions between Syromiatnikov and Tolstopiatov mounted as their collaboration approached completion. The last and risky step was the demolition of the cofferdam (an auxiliary construction 82 meters in length and 7 meters high, which shielded the excavation pit from the river waters). Despite having sought advice from Moscow and Italian experts, the construction team and its director could not find an agreeable solution to the following dilemma: how to calculate the right amount of explosives needed to detonate the cofferdam without also destroying the main sluice. For six

months, expert reports circulated between the Vakhsh Valley and the responsible agencies in Moscow's Ministry of Agriculture. By August, Tolstopiatov decided to circumvent the stiff bureaucratic procedures and act at his own discretion. Engineer Syromiatnikov, for his part, grew increasingly worried about the negative consequences of this decision.⁶⁵

- 30 Disasters were part and parcel of Soviet shock construction and had dreadful consequences both for Soviet workers and Soviet engineers.⁶⁶ Syromiatnikov had learnt his lesson the hard way in 1928: in the world of the Soviet judiciary, responsibility was attributed to the failure of individuals rather than to the failure of state institutions. Despite the careful preparation of the demolition operation under Tolstopiatov's supervision, on August 31, 1933—a day before the scheduled demolition—an explosive device detonated ahead of time and tore a deep hole in the cofferdam. Twelve days of emergency work “under the most difficult and sometimes life-threatening conditions for the workers” were necessary to seal off the damaged cofferdam. When faced with disaster, Tolstopiatov and Syromiatnikov followed different strategies of action. While Tolstopiatov struggled like a Bolshevik, Syromiatnikov was paralyzed by fear. At the height of the emergency, Tolstopiatov finally fired his “cowardly” chief engineer. The latter was allegedly overheard asking members of the engineering team, “Why do you follow Tolstopiatov? He is a powerful man. If the operation fails, he will sneak out. But we will end up in the clink.”⁶⁷
- 31 At last, the cofferdam was successfully demolished. The sluice and canal opened on September 12, 1933. Nevertheless, few people on the construction site were in the mood to celebrate. Due to the continuing purges in Tajikistan and the beginning of the cotton harvest, state and party officials from Central Asia skipped the grand opening. No official speeches were delivered, no flags were waved, and no portraits of the leadership were on display. Meanwhile, the workers were starving and sick. Even at the height of the shock construction campaign, food deliveries to the valley had been irregular, which led to an “unsatisfactory provisioning of the workforce” and the “factual breakdown of public feeding.” Pappataci fever and malaria occurred “on a massive scale.”⁶⁸ One Bolshevik battle was won, but several new fronts opened up immediately.

Fig.1: Opening Ceremony at the Vakhsh Canal Main Sluice, September 12, 1933

Natural forces

- 32 The opening of the main irrigation canal was the beginning of a descent into nature's hell. The lack of food and the abundance of disease led half of the 5,000 families (originating from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the Tajik mountain areas) who were resettled by force in 1933 to return to their regions of origin or take refuge in Afghanistan.⁶⁹ Those who had no choice and stayed behind faced a harsh winter in the severe continental climate of the valley. The party committees and the secret police were aware that

many kolkhozes, especially those made up of resettlers, had exclusively cultivated cotton and melons and, for that reason, start the year of 1934 without fodder and seeds, and with only minimal amounts of grain that they received in exchange for cotton.⁷⁰

- 33 Tolstopiatov was wise enough to pretend that difficulties did not exist. When he delivered his official report to a plenary session of the Central Asian Bureau in Tashkent in November 1933, he talked at length about the "absolutely satisfactory results with irrigation on the reclaimed lands" while he did not mention during his report that "over long periods of time, resettlers did not even have the possibility to receive drinking water."⁷¹ Planners, experts and party officials in Tashkent were, however, acutely aware of the bitter and deadly struggles at the Vakhsh River. "In view of their current state, none of the large-scale irrigation objects in Central Asia will deliver any meaningful results in the years to come," an internal report by the Central Asian Water Administration concluded in late 1933, "even under the condition of an exceptionally energetic state funding."⁷² Accordingly, the responsible government agencies scaled

down large construction schemes and turned to smaller but better manageable irrigation ventures.⁷³ Still, what was to become of the prestigious Vakhsh Valley Project once it was in operation?

- 34 The future looked bleak. In December 1933, Tolstopiatov's deputy reported that the recruitment of seasonal construction workers was becoming more difficult "year in and year out." Workers usually came in from Tashkent late in the fall and, after their three-month contracts ended, returned to their villages for spring sowing, which, as officials complained, "inevitably leads to difficult working conditions in the wintertime and drives up construction costs." Meanwhile, the permanent settler population was difficult to keep in check and did nothing to hide its resentment towards the Soviet state. Vakhsh officials recognized that the persistent lack of organization and workforce, construction materials and spare parts, clothing and housing, firewood and fuel, "put a question mark behind the effectiveness of all future plans."⁷⁴ Many Soviet shock construction projects were in a comparable state of crisis. In contrast to earlier years, engineers and officials were allowed to discuss the ongoing crisis more openly. They were still expected, however, to come up with viable solutions that would guarantee plan fulfillment.⁷⁵
- 35 Deprivation, shortages and lack of manpower had diverted the attention of Vakhsh officials and agricultural experts from their most powerful enemy: the turbulent river and its relentless waters. The original purpose of the irrigation scheme had been to reign in the mountain stream and use its waters for irrigation. In spring 1934 when the powerful river floods began pouring onto the wide and deserted valley plateau at a pace of 200-250 cubic meters per second, the serious defects of the main sluice and the feeder canal became apparent. The sluice's main defect proved that it was not a dam. With a length of 55 meters and a width of 40 meters, it allowed for the inflow of river water only after the water had reached sufficiently high levels. Given the 500 meter-wide range where the river bed meandered by the site of the sluice, the necessary levels were unlikely to be reached. Unlike a dam, the sluice could not effectively regulate water volume, as it was neither able to store water nor to effectively control its velocity. It also lacked an antechamber, which could have filtered out sediments and thus prevented silt and sand from entering the main canal and clogging the smaller field canals.⁷⁶
- 36 The second menace of the irrigation scheme was the misaligned main feeder canal. Stretching over a distance of 12 kilometers, the feeder cut through bedrock at a depth of 12 meters. This allowed massive amounts of river water to seep into the ground, causing the groundwater table to rise dramatically. In addition, watertight soil layers close under the ground surface transported water over long distances into the valley, leading to excess water, salination, and undercutting of soil stability. Furthermore, the oversized main feeder canal exposed the irrigated lands to unchecked flooding, since the sluice construction proved ineffective at stemming the sudden tidal waves of the Vakhsh River. Severe floods regularly haunted the irrigation system until the mid-1960s. The forceful floodwaters also washed away the light loess soils of which the field irrigation canals had to be built.⁷⁷ Rising groundwater tables and excess water led to high levels of soil salination which, in turn, became a major hindrance to land reclamation and cotton cultivation. According to official statistics, 50 per cent of the virgin lands of the Vakhsh Valley were either solid salt fields or marshes in 1939.⁷⁸
- 37 The final blow occurred when an earthquake hit the upper part of the Vakhsh Valley in 1935. While experts had been aware of seismic activity in the Pamir Mountains, they had

no possibility to foresee the precise consequences of such an event. They had, nevertheless, as early as 1932 found fault with the “not entirely felicitous” choice of the sluice’s location. The 1935 earthquake proved them right by causing a shift in the river bed at just the point where the main sluice was positioned. Suddenly, the bulk of the river water passed by the sluice because it now stood parallel to the new river bed. Sand islands, sometimes growing to four meters in height, prevented the inflow of water through the sluice into the main feeder canal. The sand had to be continuously removed by workers in difficult and dangerous manual labor. Engineers had to employ massive makeshift wooden auxiliary constructions to divert at least some amount of flowing river water towards the main sluice. Due to the diminished inflow of moving water into the irrigation system, the field canals, in turn, became clogged with sediment. At the same time, rising groundwater tables led to the formation of lakes and swamps in large parts of the valley. In 1937 the construction of drainage canals was hurriedly initiated, but these flat, hand-dug canals were quickly silted closed, rendering the measure ineffective.⁷⁹

- 38 Rather than the mountain river being tamed, it was the river that brought the Bolsheviks to heel in the Vakhsh Valley. The combination of irregular water supplies and the soft alluvial soils further aggravated the situation, as the valley soil proved extremely sensitive to water. On the one hand, alluvial soils can hold great amounts of pore water which, under solar radiation, is transported through the soil particles to the surface by capillarity. As a consequence, the surface soils become desiccated and salinized. On the other hand, alluvial soils can lose their stability when coming into contact with water. They collapse. In the Vakhsh Valley, strong and uncontrollable streams of water both on the surface and underground permanently undermined soil stability. This had devastating consequences. “You see someone standing in the field, watching over the cotton being watered,” an eyewitness remembered, “and suddenly that person disappears.” When the soil imploded, it left sinkholes of several meters in width and depth. Collapsing soils and quicksand swallowed and buried livestock, tractors and people. Each and every year during the irrigation and field work period in spring and summer, people died in sinkholes. This was such a widespread occurrence that people began only entering the fields if they had two to three meter-long sticks firmly tied to their backs as a means of saving themselves from a horrible death by quicksand.⁸⁰

State of chaos, world of disorder

- 39 Thirty years ago, historian Moshe Lewin famously labeled the Soviet Union a “quicksand society.” His memorable phrase referred to the permanent movement of state officials, workers, and peasants from one workplace, office, or town in favor of another. According to Lewin, Soviet people developed the “habit of leaving in good time, before they were penalized, recalled, brought in for questioning, downgraded, fired, or arrested.” From his observation, Lewin developed two compelling conclusions: first, that “social, administrative, industrial, and political structures were all in flux,” and second, that it was “not difficult to imagine the despair of the rulers and their fierce resolution to put an end to this situation and introduce law and order into the chaos.”⁸¹ In the Vakhsh Valley, however, there was little evidence for the “despair of the rulers” or their desire to “introduce law and order into the chaos.” On the contrary, decisions made by the Moscow leadership consolidated and deepened the crisis situation. Moreover, Stalinist governance intentionally prevented the emergence of stability and order.

- 40 In October 1934, Stalin commanded the Politburo member Valerian Vladimirovich Kuibyshev to travel to Central Asia with the assignment of “putting pressure on the cotton harvest campaign.”⁸² Weakened by heart disease and his longstanding alcoholism, Kuibyshev arrived in Tashkent on November 5, 1934. During his seven-week peripatetic tour of Central Asia, Kuibyshev spread death and terror wherever he went. Public show trials, special tribunals (troiki), and random executions helped the old Bolshevik to boost the cotton harvest yields. He regularly informed Stalin about his actions.⁸³ Despite his pressured schedule, Kuibyshev found the time to spend three full days in the Vakhsh Valley.⁸⁴ When the Politburo met to discuss the results of his trip in March 1935, Kuibyshev had already passed away (he died on January 25, 1935). For the Vakhsh Valley and its people, however, a new chapter had opened: Stalin had begun to take a personal interest in the project.
- 41 Under the direction of the General Secretary, the Politburo declared that the colonization of the Vakhsh Valley had progressed “at an impossibly slow pace” and that “to this date, the majority of the resettlers (kolkhozniki-pereselentsy) were economically unviable (lack of housing and so on).” Stalin’s solution to the dilemma was to order the resettlement of 12,000 new “households” to the valley between 1935 and 1937 (4,000 annually of which 3,000 should originate from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, respectively, while 6,000 would be “special settlers from other parts of the USSR”). Twelve million rubles were handed out to the authorities in the Vakhsh Valley to cover the cost of accommodation, provision, and preliminary credits. Additionally, the Politburo granted resettlers exemption from all taxes and deliveries for the period of five years—“with the exception of cotton.” The colonization campaign was to be “overseen directly” by the NKVD and was to begin immediately.⁸⁵
- 42 To the Tajik Party leadership, the colonization campaign came as a surprise. Unaware of the discussions in the Politburo and unused to deportations of people from outside Central Asia into their mountain fiefdom, they were unprepared and overwhelmed by Stalin’s decision. Tolstopiatov declared that the Vakhsh Project had no virgin lands available to accommodate large numbers of deportees. The Stalinabad party leadership hurriedly organized a government commission which was made responsible for supplying the deportees with basic necessities (building materials, fuel, food, cows, horses, and “at least 1,000 buckets, 1,000 cups, and 1,000 washstands”). On April 10, 1935, the commission members were met with yet another surprise when Moscow informed them that the actual number of new arrivals would exceed the originally announced figure of 2,000 deportees. In fact, between early April and mid-May, 4,895 people arrived in the Vakhsh Valley. This “special contingent” of future colonizers was a raw product of Soviet penal policies. It consisted of 315 German Mennonites from the Uzbek region of Khorezm, 350 former inmates of the Sazlag labor camps in Uzbekistan, and 408 prisoners from Karaganda. The most unexpected and numerically significant addition were 3,822 “special settlers” (890 “households”) from Leningrad.⁸⁶ Ironically, resettlers and deportees arrived in a borderland region with an enhanced internal security and passport regime. Periodic cleansing campaigns and the subsequent deportation of former deportees were thus regular occurrences.⁸⁷
- 43 Stalin closely monitored the colonization effort. What is more, his arbitrary decision to choose the Vakhsh Valley as a dumping site for large numbers of “special settlers” mocked Tajik party officials. Despite desperate pleas from the Tajik First Party Secretary, Suren Shadunts, to slow down the pace of the campaign, Stalin urged instead to speed up

the deportations.⁸⁸ He was neither interested in local conditions nor was he bothered by the consequences of his orders.⁸⁹ Thus, in the spring of 1936, 2,734 “households” from Uzbekistan and the northern parts of Tajikistan were brought into the Vakhsh Valley. Additionally, the NKVD dumped 1,902 “households” of deportees from Russia. To appreciate these figures, one should keep in mind that only 8,307 “households” had peopled the valley as of January 1, 1935.⁹⁰ Complaints on the part of the Vakhsh authorities did nothing to calm the determination of the NKVD, which “insisted on continuing the resettlement of special settlers in the Vakhsh Valley” on Stalin’s behalf.⁹¹ According to official calculations, during the period from 1933 to 1938, a total of 12,434 “households” originating from outside Tajikistan were moved into the valley. Stalinist colonization, moreover, did not stop when the targeted numbers were met in 1938 but continued on a massive scale until 1954.⁹²

- 44 Meanwhile, Central Asian leaders in Stalinabad and Tashkent had no illusions about the fact that the fragile and dependent economy of the Vakhsh Valley did not allow for the accommodation of thousands of people who had no prior experience in cotton cultivation. Consequently, government officials encouraged the diversification of economic activities in order to allow deportees to feed themselves independently of the state provisioning system. When resettlers and deportees started arriving in the valley in 1935, they were urged to engage in horticulture and handicrafts, to set up “fishery kolkhozes,” or to work as private traders on the local market.⁹³ For a group of “special settlers” who arrived in early 1936, Tolstopiatov and his team were obligated to provide building materials and food and to guarantee the “reclamation of 300 hectares of irrigated land, where they will be settled, for the cultivation of vegetables and foodstuffs for the needs of the special settlers.”⁹⁴ No one talked anymore about the need to grow more cotton.
- 45 On the other hand, the Stalinabad government announced measures that aimed at an ethnic division of the colonization administration: while Tajik state institutions assumed the task of monitoring the “voluntary” resettlers of Central Asian ethnic origin, the NKVD was to provision and administer Russian and Ukrainian “special settlers.” Accordingly, the secret police was put in charge of organizing shelter, food, and medical care as well as land surveying, reclamation work, and canal maintenance.⁹⁵ This ethnographic approach allowed the Tajik leadership to shed responsibility for large parts of the colonist population. Simultaneously, however, it institutionalized the perilous living conditions and economic deadlock in the valley, which was now being administered by three different sets of institutions: the Vakhsh River Valley Project (overseen by the Soviet Ministry of Agriculture), the Tajik party and state institutions, and the Resettlement Administration of the NKVD.
- 46 At first glance, this institutional arrangement seems to point to a centralized, bureaucratic and modern state. A closer look reveals parallel structures, mushrooming institutions, loss of control, and the unclear allocation of responsibility.⁹⁶ The outcome was a wretched administrative chaos with instable, illegitimate, and irresponsible state institutions. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, reports called attention to the disorganization of resettlement and the hardships of colonization in the Vakhsh Valley. Reports repeated that supposedly “voluntary” resettlers from Central Asia experienced much coercion and violence; that they arrived too late in the agricultural year to produce a sufficient harvest to feed themselves; that they suffered from malnutrition and disease; that they lacked housing, water, and fuel; and that they fled the pitiful living conditions

whenever they could.⁹⁷ Not even the severe hunger in Tajikistan in May 1945, about which Stalin was well informed, prevented the continuation of the relentless resettlement campaign.⁹⁸ There is no evidence of the “despair of the rulers and their fierce resolution” to “introduce law and order into the chaos.” On the contrary, the “quicksand society” was fuelled by decisions made in Moscow to deport and resettle large numbers of people—in full awareness of the deathly living conditions and the ongoing ecological crisis in the Vakhsh Valley.

- 47 Law and order in a blossoming cotton garden was a far cry from the realities of the Vakhsh Valley. This became apparent during the years of the so-called Great Terror. The first victim to fall prey to the purges was the Vakhsh Project’s prominent director Ivan Tolstopyatov, who was arrested as a “counterrevolutionary Trotskyite” in August 1936.⁹⁹ Tolstopyatov’s ousting triggered fierce criticism of his achievements. In March 1937, the Soviet government finally called for the Vakhsh Valley Project to be “liquidated.” Upon hearing the news, engineers, agronomists, and colonists started to leave the “quicksand” valley. Because of payment delays, the soldiers guarding the irrigation infrastructure unceremoniously abandoned their posts. Contract workers from Tashkent and Stalinabad ceased to arrive. In June 1937, the acting director of the project informed the Tajik government about the “pending collapse” of the irrigation scheme “within the next month or two.”¹⁰⁰ Before the liquidation was finalized, however, the responsible First Deputy Minister of Agriculture in Moscow, Nikolai Antonovich Paskutskii, was himself arrested and subsequently “liquidated.”¹⁰¹
- 48 Engineers and agricultural experts responded to the crisis by raising similar objections to the irrigation scheme that had been voiced at the initial stages of the project in 1932-1933: the ineffective sluice should be replaced by a dam, a hydropower station should be installed, the main feeder canal should be improved, and “past mistakes should not be repeated.”¹⁰² In the face of the terror, the engineers’ calls for major improvements amounted to pitiful cries into the wind. The state of affairs was now fundamentally different from previous years. “Heroes” and “pioneers” of the recent past were now “saboteurs” and “enemies of the state.”¹⁰³ Party officials even critically invoked Willard Gorton’s mundane 1932 warnings about the inevitable failure of the irrigation scheme as evidence that the “coarse deviational enemy work” of the Vakhsh engineers was to blame: “Just think that our specialists were unable to figure out these problems ...”¹⁰⁴
- 49 In 1937, fear triumphed over enthusiasm, and anxiety upset belief. The seemingly solid structures of the Soviet state began collapsing at a breathtaking speed. Was it disenchantment, an admission of defeat, or a moment of true socialist realism?
- I think that in view of the giant material sums that were invested in the Vakhsh Valley—stated the incumbent director of the Vakhsh Valley Project, Beliakov, in an emotional speech—, it would have been possible to create decent living conditions, a healthy financial situation, and a functioning infrastructure—but down to the present day there is nothing: hospital and school buildings collapsed; we have neither schools nor hospitals, and the infrastructure is in shambles.¹⁰⁵
- 50 Along with the irrigation scheme and the many lives of its unhappy builders, the symbolic landscape of the Soviet state was also falling apart. Since 1936, a statue of comrade Stalin, produced at a cost of 90,000 rubles, had been waiting to be erected on top of the main sluice of the Vakhsh irrigation system. Despite reminders repeatedly sent from Stalinabad to the responsible officials in the Vakhsh Valley, the statue was never put up.

- 51 Extraordinary violence and unmanaged environmental conditions upset the regular and continuous administrative work that is the vital fundament of modern state-building. Instead, Stalinist governance in the Vakhsh Valley produced a fragmented, conditional and illegitimate statehood. Under the pale sun of official propaganda, the Soviet First worlds were emerging as capital cities were being reconstructed and new industrial agglomerations were arising from scratch to shine in the bright light. The Moscow Metro, Magnitogorsk, or the much-hailed industrial landscape around Dneprostroi filled contemporaries of the Stalin period with enthusiasm and pride. At the same time, Soviet Second and Third worlds were emerging. Many places in the Soviet Union were touched upon by the forces of the Stalinist governance through shock construction and colonization projects yet were not penetrated by enduring, reliable, or legitimate state structures. In these places, building socialism amounted to suffering and sacrifices but without a happy end. On the contrary, the “quicksand society” suffered from both relentless state terror and the unruly powers of nature. The Vakhsh Valley stands out as an example for the latter category of Soviet spaces.

NOTES

1. HA GP (Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Willard Livermore Gorton Papers), Box 2, Folder A (Rough English translation of an official speech or newspaper article entitled “An Affair of Honor and Fame,” 29 May 1931).
2. Vladimir Kaganskii, Kul’turnyi landschaft i sovetskoe obitaemoe prostranstvo [Cultural Landscape and Soviet inhabited space] (M.: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2001), 135-154.
3. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 72-85; Nick Baron, “Conflict and Complicity: The Expansion of the Karelian Gulag, 1923-1933,” *Cahiers du monde russe*, 42, 2-4 (2001): 639-645. See also James Harris, *The Great Urals: Regionalism and the Evolution of the Soviet System* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, *The Social Life of the State in Subarctic Siberia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Oleg Leibovich, *Gorod M: Ocherki social’noi posednevnosti sovetskoi provintsii* [Town M: A survey of Soviet provincial everyday life] (M.: Rosspén, 2008); Julia Landau, *Wir bauen den großen Kuzbass! Bergarbeiteralltag im Stalinismus 1921-1941* [We are building the Great Kuzbass: Miners’ everyday lives under Stalinism] (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012); Andy Bruno, *The Nature of Soviet Power: An Arctic Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
4. Sergei Krasil’nikov, *Serp i molokh: Krest’ianskaia ssylka v Zapadnoi Sibiri v 1930-e gody* [Sickle and Moloch: Exiled Peasants in Western Siberia during the 1930s] (M.: Rosspén, 2003); Nicolas Werth, *Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian Gulag* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin’s Special Settlements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
5. On the powerful intellectual tradition of this argument see David Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 194-243.
6. With regard to Central Asia, see Matthew Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 288-292 and Julia Obertreis,

“Infrastrukturen im Sozialismus : Das Beispiel der Bewässerungssysteme im sowjetischen Zentralasien [Infrastructures under Socialism : The example of irrigation in Soviet Central Asia],” *Saeculum*, 58, 1 (2007) : 151-182.

7. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 155.

8. BMDJT (Boigonii Markazii Davlatii Jumhurii Tojikiston – State Archive of the Republic of Tajikistan), f. 268 (Upravlenie Vakhshskogo irrigatsionnogo stroitel'stva [Administration of the Vakhsh Irrigation Construction]), op. 5 (Sekretnaia chast' [Depository of secret documents]), d. 69, l. 37-38 (Stenogramma zasedaniia SNK Tadzhijskoi SSR [Shorthand Report of Tajik Council of People's Commissars Session], 10 June 1937).

9. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 7, l. 10 (Postanovlenie No. 215 SNK SSSR [Resolution No. 215 of the Soviet Council of People's Commissars], 2 October 1931).

10. Evidence for the destruction of a great deal of the archival material in 1981 is given by the description of the holding on which this article heavily draws, see BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, inventory, 8-9. In addition, the Tajik Communist Party Archives in Dushanbe remain inaccessible to researchers.

11. Salomiddin Mirzorakhmatov, “Triumf Vakhshstroia [The Triumph of Vakhshstroia],” *Asia-Plus*, 4 April 2013, available online at www.news.tj/ru/print/140648.

12. R.A. Abulkhaev, *Razvitie irrigatsii i osvoenie novykh zemel' v Tadzhikestane* [The development of irrigation and reclamation in Tajikistan] (Dushanbe : Donish, 1988); Shirin Kurbanova, *Pereselenie dekhkanskich khoziaistv i osvoenie tselinnykh zemel' v Vakhshskoi doline Tadzhikestana, 1924-1941 gg.* [Peasant resettlement and land reclamation in the Vakhsh Valley of Tajikistan] (Dissertation, Gosudarstvennyi Pedagogicheskii Universitet, Dushanbe 1993); eadem, *Pereselenie : Kak eto bylo* [Resettlement : How it really was] (Dushanbe : Irfon, 1993). See also Tim Epkenhans, “Zwischen Mythos und Minenfeld : Historiographie in Tadschikistan [Between myth and minefield : Historiography in Tajikistan],” *Osteuropa*, 62, 3 (2012) : 137-150.

13. HA GP, Box 1, Folder B (Gorton to Arthur Powell Davis, 1 August 1929). Gorton had previously worked for the U.S. Reclamation Service under Davis' supervision. Davis was familiar with Central Asia from an earlier visit to the region in 1911-12. On Davis' and Gorton's activities in Central Asia in 1929-32, see Antony C. Sutton, *Western Technology Soviet Economic Development, 1930 to 1954* (Stanford : Hoover Institution Press, 1971), vol. 2, 32-43.

14. HA GP, Box 1, Folder B (Arthur Powell Davis to Gorton, 17 September 1929).

15. The literature on foreign specialists is vast but often limited to American or German engineers. For a wider international perspective, see Andrea Graziosi, “Visitors from Other Times : Foreign Workers in the Prewar Piatiletki,” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 29, 2 (April-June 1988) : 161-180.

16. HA GP, Box 1, Folder B (Gorton to Andrew Weiss, 31 December 1929).

17. A celebrated engineer and associate of Lenin, Rizenkampf (born in 1886) was freed and rehabilitated shortly before the Belomor Canal was opened in June 1933. He continued his glamorous career as Chief Engineer of the Volga Don Project between September 1935 and January 1941. At the onset of the German-Soviet War, he was rearrested and died in a labor camp in 1943. See RGAĖ (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ėkonomiki – Russian State Archive of the Economy), f. 282, op. 1, d. 4b, l. 40-41. I am grateful to Julia Obertreis for this reference.

18. HA GP, Box 2, Folder A (Manuscript “The Five Year Plan,” 6-9).

19. V.Ė. Sproge, *Zapiski inzhenera* [Notes of an engineer] (M. : Russkii put', 1999), 362-363. The book is a concise reprint of a typescript of memoirs written by Vasilii (Wilhelm) Sproge, dated Zurich 1963, which is preserved at the Bakhmeteff Archive, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York City.

20. Sproge, *Zapiski inzhenera*, 384. The Russian name of the agency was Gosudarstvennyi institut po proektirovaniu vodnykh sooruzhenii (abbreviated “Giprovod”).

21. Gorton reports that on January 10, 1931, four key protagonists of Central Asian irrigation engineering (Romanovskii, Budassi, Morgunenko and Khrustalov) were seized by the Uzbek GPU without further explanation or further notice (HA GP, Box 1, Folder F). Many were taken to Belomorstoi. On the engineers' fate, see Baron, "Conflict and Complicity," 644.
22. The best available in-depth study is Marco Buttino, *Revoliutsiia naoborot : Sredniaia Aziia mezhdu padeniem tsarskoi imperii i obrazovaniem SSSR* [Inverted revolution : Central Asia between the fall of the tsarist empire and the formation of the USSR] (M. : Zven'ia, 2007).
23. See the overtly negative 1928-1929 assessments in TsK RKP(b) – VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros [The Central Committee and the Nationality Question], vol. 1 : 1918-1933 (M. : Rossipen, 2005), 574-592, 619-621.
24. Benjamin Loring, "Colonizers with Party Cards : Soviet Internal Colonialism in Central Asia, 1917-1939," *Kritika*, 15, 1 (Winter 2014) : 77-102 ; Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire : Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2004), 209-241 ; Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation : The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2004), 100-128.
25. On the Uzbek-Tajik conflict and partition, see Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan : Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2015), 311-315, 367-371.
26. Botakoz Kassymbekova, "Humans as Territory : Forced Resettlement and the Making of Soviet Tajikistan, 1920-1938," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, 3-4 (September-December 2011) : 349-370.
27. HA GP, Box 1, Folder D (Arthur Powell Davis to Glavkhlopkom, 16 March 1931).
28. Sproge, *Zapiski inzhenera*, 399.
29. Citations from Sproge, *Zapiski inzhenera*, 394, and HA GP, Box 2, Folder E ("Scholastic Pencil Tablet"). On the context of these attitudes, see Martin Reuss, "Seeing Like an Engineer : Water Projects and the Mediation of the Incommensurable," *Technology and Culture*, 49, 3 (July 2008) : 531-546.
30. HA GP, Box 1, Folder F (Manuscript "I had finished a round of sightseeing", 3-4 ; Pencil note "There is a serious lack").
31. HA GP, Box 2, Folder A (Notepad). With similar observations Sproge, *Zapiski inzhenera*, 384-385, 391-393.
32. Vladislav Ivanovich Masal'skii, "Vakhsh," in : *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* [Encyclopedic Dictionary] (SPb. : I.A. Efron, 1892), Tom 5a, 653-654.
33. Rossiia : Polnoe geograficheskoe opisanie nashego otechestva. Tom XIX : Turkestanskii krai [Russia : A comprehensive geographical description of our homeland. vol. XIX : Turkestan] (SPb. : Devrien, 1913), 737. For further details, see Sharki Iusupov, *Vakhshskaia dolina nakanune ustanovleniia Sovetskoi vlasti* [The Vakhsh Valley on the eve of the establishment of Soviet power] (Dushanbe : Donish, 1975), 8-17, 31-39, 46-51.
34. On the protracted civil war in the region, see Beatrice Penati, "The Reconquest of East Bukhara : The Struggle against the Basmachi as a Prelude to Sovietization," *Central Asian Survey*, 26, 4 (December 2007) : 521-538.
35. Bruno Iasenskii, *Chelovek meniaet kozhu* [Man changes his skin] (M. : Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960 [1932]), 44-45. An English translation was published in Moscow in 1936. On Jasieński's biography, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* : Second Edition (Detroit : Thomson Gale, 2007), vol. 11, 89.
36. RGAĖ, f. 8387 (Glavnoe Upravlenie Vodnogo Khoziaistva NKZ SSSR [Main Directorate of Water Management of the Soviet People's Commissariat of Agriculture]), op. 1, d. 17, l. 6 (Piatiletnyi plan vodokhoziaistvennykh meropriiati po Uzbekskomu Upravleniiu vodnogo khoziaistva [Five-Year Water Management Plan of the Uzbek Water Administration], n. d. [1929]).
37. "Tam, gde byla tsarskaia koloniia : Pis'mo iz Srednei Azii [Where once there was a Tsarist colony : A letter from Central Asia]," *Pravda*, 30 June 1930, 7.

38. HA GP, Box 1, Folder D (Gorton to Issa Khojanov, 14 October 1930).
39. Egon Erwin Kisch, *Asien gründlich verändert* [Asia thoroughly transformed] (Berlin : Erich Reiss Verlag, 1932), 247.
40. See the magisterial analyses in Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 37-71.
41. HA GP, Box 1, Folder F (Pencil Manuscript "There is a serious lack").
42. BMDJT, f. 18 (SNK Tadzhijskoj SSR [Tajik Council of Peoples' Commissars]), op. 2, d. 49, l. 107-110 (Protocol No. 145 of the Executive Commission of the Central Asian Bureau, 30 November 1931) ; BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 34, l. 23-24 (Kharakteristika sostoiianiia stroitel'nykh rabot Vakhshstroia [Information on the status of construction work at Vakhshstroii], 1 November 1932).
43. BMDJT, f. 18, op. 2, d. 51, l. 2, 52, 64, 142 (Correspondence with Tajik GPU, 1931).
44. RGASPI (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv social'no-politicheskoi istorii – Russian State Archive of Social and Political History), f. 85 (G.K. Ordzhonikidze), op. 27, d. 456, l. 17-17ob, 21-26 (David Guseinov to Ordzhonikidze, 6 May and 24 June 1931) ; William S. Ritter, "The Final Phase in the Liquidation of Anti-Soviet Resistance in Tadjikistan : Ibrahim Bek and the Basmachi, 1924-1931," *Soviet Studies*, 37, 4 (1985) : 484-493 ; Reinhard Eisener, "Who was Ibrahim Bik ?" in Gabriele Rasuly-Paleczek and Julia Katschnig, eds., *Central Asia on Display* (Vienna : Lit, 2004), 109-120.
45. Stephen G. Wheatcroft, "Agency and Terror : Evdokimov and Mass Killing in Stalin's Great Terror," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 53, 1 (2007) : 20-43 ; Turganbek Allaniiazov, *Krasnye Karakumy : Ocherki istorii bor'by s antisovetskim povstancheskim dvizheniem v Turkmenstane* [Red Karakum : Historical Sketches from of the Struggle against the Anti-Soviet Insurgency Movement in Turkmenistan] (Almaty : OST-XXI, 2006), 84-87, 158-160, 205-206, 213-214 ; Dzhumadurdy Annaorozov, "Vosstanie turkmenskikh kochevnikov v 1931 g. [The Turkmen Nomad Uprising of 1931]," *Voprosy istorii*, 5, 2013 : 36-53.
46. BMDJT, f. 18, op. 2, d. 91, l. 11, 15, 106 (Correspondence with Tajik GPU, 1932) ; Sovetskaia derevnia glazami VChK – OGPU – NKVD [The Soviet village through the lens of the secret police] (M. : IRI RAN, 2005), vol. 3/II, 80-81 (1 April 1932) ; Tragediia sredneaziatskogo kishlaka [The tragedy of the Central Asian village] (Tashkent : Shark, 2006), vol. 1, 510-512 (17 June 1932).
47. BMDJT, f. 18, op. 2, d. 91, l. 27 (Dokladnaia zapiska o khode vesennei posevnoi kampanii khlopkovykh kultur po raionam Iuzhnogo Tadjikistana [Report on the cotton sowing campaign in the districts of southern Tajikistan], 13 March 1932).
48. BMDJT, f. 18, op. 2, d. 91, l. 55 (Zapiska tov. Akulova [Letter of comrade Akulov], 29 March 1932).
49. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 32, l. 1-5 (Resolution of the Tajik Central Committee, 5 June 1932).
50. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 34, l. 8-12.
51. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 783, l. 18 (Politburo Protocol No. 124, 25 April 1930).
52. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 34, l. 26-27.
53. BMDJT, f. 18, op. 2, d. 81, l. 16, 39, 47, 95, 114, 117-118, 133-135 (Protocols of the Executive Bureau of the Tajik Central Committee, November - December 1932).
54. BMDJT, f. 288 (NKZ Tadzhijskoi SSR [Tajik People's Commissariat of Agriculture]), op. 3, d. 14, l. 12 (Poiashnitel'naia zapiska k planu osvoeniia irrigatsionnykh prirostov v Vakhshskoi doline v 32-33 khoziaistvennom godu [Commentary on the 1932-33 economic year's plan for land reclamation in the Vakhsh Valley], 13 July 1932) ; BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 34, l. 3.
55. Kurbanova, *Pereselenie dekhkanskih khoziaistv*, 92.
56. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 32, l. 12-15, 24 (Resolutions of the Tajik Central Committee, 1932) ; BMDJT, f. 18, op. 2, d. 81, l. 10, 16, 56, 134-135, 138 ; BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 52, l. 13, 15 (Vypiski iz sekretnykh prikazov po Vakhshstroiu [Secret orders on Vakhshstroii], 1933).

57. Lubianka : Stalin i VChK – GPU – OGPU – NKVD, ianvar’ 1922 – dekabr’ 1936 [Lubianka : Stalin and the Soviet secret police, January 1922 – December 1936] (M. : Demokratija, 2003), 428 (16 April 1933), 435 (7 May 1933).
58. Lubianka : Stalin i VChK, 444 (1 July 1933) ; Stalin i Kaganovich : Perepiska 1931-1936 gg. [The Stalin-Kaganovitch correspondence, 1931-1936] (M. : Rossipen, 2001), 364-368 (28-30 September 1933) ; Reinhard Eisener, Konterrevolution auf dem Lande : Zur inneren Sicherheitslage in Mittelasien 1929/30 aus der Sicht der OGPU [Counter-Revolution in the countryside : Internal Security in Central Asia in 1929-30 as reported by the secret police] (Berlin : Das Arabische Buch, 1999), 156-164.
59. BMDJT, f. 18, op. 2, d. 116, l. 39-40 (Protocol of the Bureau of the Tajik Central Committee, 19 May 1933).
60. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 34, l. 12-14.
61. RGASPI, f. 62 (Sredneaziatskii Biuro TsK VKP(b) [Central Asian Bureau of the Central Committee]), op. 2, d. 3119, l. 29 (Dokladnaia zapiska o sostoianii stroitel’nykh i osvoencheskikh rabot Vakhshstroia [Report on the status of construction and reclamation at Vakhshstroï], 5 July 1933).
62. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 44, l. 4 (Dokladnaia zapiska po voprosu udaleniia peremychki [Report on the demolition of the cofferdam], 12 September 1933).
63. GARF (Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii – State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. 374 (TsKK – NK RKI SSSR [Central Control Commission and People’s Commissariat of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection]), op. 27, d. 1525, l. 27 (Vinokurov and Antonov-Saratovskii to Ordzhonikidze, 2 January 1929). For an entertaining description of the trial, see Mustafa Chokai-ogly, Turkestan pod vlast’iu Sovetov : K kharakteristike diktatury proletariata [Turkestan under Soviet power : towards a portrait of the dictatorship of the proletariat] (P. : Iash Turkestan, 1935 [1928]), 113-127.
64. Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain, 74-75. Syromiatnikov was active in several construction projects in Central Asia during the 1930s. His name disappears from the record in late 1938.
65. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 44, l. 3-6.
66. Kurbanova, Pereselenie dekhkanskih khoziaistv, 64 accounts for “eight major disasters with large numbers of fatalities” at Vakhstroï but she does not specify or qualify this information.
67. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 44, l. 8-9.
68. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 33, l. 11-12 (Postanovlenie Ispolkomissii Sredazbiuro Ts VKP(b) [Resolution of the executive commission of Central Asian Bureau], 7 July 1933).
69. RGAÉ, f. 8378, op. 1, d. 97, l. 16-19 (Dokladnaia zapiska Pred. Upol. TsKK-RKI v Srednei Azii [Report of the Central Control Commission Plenipotentiary in Central Asia], 17 December 1933). On refugees, see Sovetskaia derevnia glazami VChK – OGPU – NKVD, 479-480 (20 October 1933).
70. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 3135, l. 77 (Spravki po Aralskomu raionu [Information on the Aral District], 22 December 1933). One kilogram of grain was handed out for the delivery of one kilogram of raw cotton.
71. RGAÉ, f. 8378, op. 1, d. 97, l. 11.
72. RGAÉ, f. 8378, op. 1, d. 99, l. 330ob-331 (Rakhimbaev and Askochenskii to Bauman and Paskutskii, n. d. [1933]).
73. A.G. Abdunabiev, Iz istorii razvitiia irrigatsii v Sovetskom Uzbekistane [From the history of irrigation development in Soviet Uzbekistan] (Tashkent : Fan, 1971), 110-115.
74. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 3119, l. 52-54 (Dokladnaia zapiska Zam. Nachal’nika Vakhshstroia Vinokurova o sostoianii i podgotovlennosti irrigatsionnoi seti [Report of Vakhstroï deputy director Vinokurov on the status and preparedness of the irrigation system], 8 December 1933).
75. RGAÉ, f. 8378, op. 1, d. 99, l. 307-329 (Stenogramma vystuplenija po dokladu t. Popova ob obsledovanii Karasuiskogo sistema [Shorthand protocol of reactions to comrade Popov’s presentation on the inspection of the Karasu irrigation system], 10 November 1933).

76. Valentin Vasil'evich Koshkin, *Vakhshskaia orositel'naia sistema : Iz opyta stroitel'stva i éksploatatsii* [The Vakhsh irrigation system : Construction and exploitation] (Dushanbe : Irfon, 1967), 47.
77. Koshkin, *Vakhshskaia orositel'naia sistema*, 39, 76.
78. Koshkin, *Vakhshskaia orositel'naia sistema*, 25, 63-64. 33,200 out of 67,000 hectares (in 1939) and 31,100 out of 70,000 hectares (in 1950) were heavily salinated or marshy lands.
79. Koshkin, *Vakhshskaia orositel'naia sistema*, 29, 47-48, 60.
80. Mirzorakhmatov, "Triumf Vakhshstroia," n. p.; Kurbanova, *Pereselenie dekhkanskih khoziaistv*, 64-66.
81. Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System* (New York : The New Press, 1994 [1985]), 221.
82. Stalin i Kaganovich : *Perepiska*, 519 (28 October 1934).
83. Oleg Khlevniuk, *Master of the House : Stalin and His Inner Circle* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2009), 124.
84. RGASPI, f. 79 (V.V. Kuibyshev), op. 1, d. 695, l. 4 (*Kalendar' poezdki V.V. Kuibysheva v Sredniuiu Aziyu* [Itinerary of Kuibyshev's trip to Central Asia], 1 November - 24 December 1934).
85. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 961, l. 35-36 (Politburo Protocol No. 23, 19 March 1935).
86. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 68, l. 11-12, 30-32, 38-40 (Protocols of the Bureau of the Tajik Central Committee, 26 March, 16 April, and 22 May 1935). On the 1935-1936 "mass operations" in Russia's major cities, see David Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism : Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924-1953* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2009), 205-215.
87. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 65, l. 106 (Protopopov to Stalin and Ezhov, 30 December 1937). The telegram sent by the Tajik First Secretary states that 6,366 "households" (26,000 people) out of a total 16,940 "households" were scheduled for deportation from six border districts during a "passportization" campaign despite harsh wintertime conditions.
88. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 971, l. 69 (Politburo Protocol No. 33, 29 September 1935) ; RGASPI, f. 558 (I.V. Stalin), op. 11, d. 54, l. 82 (Stalin and Molotov to Akmal' Ikramov and Faizulla Khodzhaev, 4 February 1936) ; RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 975, l. 44 (Poliburo Protocol No. 37, 9 March 1936).
89. *Dva sveta vremeni : Dokumenty iz lichnogo fonda N.S. Khrushchëva* [Two shades of time : Documents from the personal archive of N.S. Khrushchev] (M. : Demokratiia, 2009), vol. 2, p. 323 (Beseda N.S. Khrushcheva s zaveduiushchimi otdelami TsK KPSS [Discussion between Krushchev and Department Heads of the Central Committee], 11 December 1956).
90. Kurbanova, *Pereselenie dekhkanskih khoziaistv*, 93.
91. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 69, l. 21 (Paskutskii to Zaprometov, 14 October 1936).
92. Abulkhaev, *Razvitie irrigatsii*, 162, 166-168, 188.
93. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 68, l. 39-40 (Protocol of the Bureau of the Tajik Central Committee, 22 May 1935).
94. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 69, l. 11-12 (Resolution of the Tajik Council of People's Commissars, 9 February 1936).
95. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 69, l. 8-10.
96. Nicolas Werth, "Staline et son système dans les années 1930," in Henry Rousso, ed., *Stalinisme et nazisme : Histoire et mémoire comparées* (Bruxelles : Éditions Complexe, 1999), 55-60.
97. See, e.g., BMDJT, f. 18, op. 2, d. 126, l. 9-32 (*Dokladnaia zapiska ob itogakh pereselencheskoi kampanii* [Report on the results of the resettlement campaign], 29 April 1933) ; *Lubianka : Stalin i Glavnoe upravlenie gosbezopasnosti NKVD, 1937-1938* [Lubianka : Stalin and the main directorate of State Security, 1937-1938] (M. : Demokratiia, 2004), 630 (Malenkov to Stalin, 17 December 1938) ; RGANI (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv noveishei istorii – Russian State Archive of Contemporary History), f. 6 (Komisiia Partiinogo Kontrolia [Party Control Commission]), op. 6, d. 610, l. 60-71 (*Dokladnaia zapiska Upol. KPK pri TsK VKP(b) po Tadzhijskoi SSR* [Report of the Party Control Commission Plenipotentiary in Tajikistan, 11 March 1941]) ; Abulkhaev, *Razvitie irrigatsii*, 152-191.

98. GARF, f. 9401 ("Osobaia papka Stalina" [Stalin's secret archive]), op. 2, d. 96, l. 147 (Tajik NKVD Kharchenko to NKVD SSSR Beriia, 21 May 1945). The document can also be found in the Dmitri Volkogonov Papers (Box 2, Reel 14).
99. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 980, l. 59 (Poliburo Protocol No. 42, 1 September 1936).
100. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 69, l. 43-44.
101. On Paskutskii's background and early career, see Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 113-114.
102. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 69, l. 33.
103. BMDJT, f. 288, op. 5, d. 155, l. 44-45 (Kratkaia kharakteristika irrigatsii Tadzhikistana [Short information on irrigation in Tajikistan], n.d. [1938]).
104. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 69, l. 38.
105. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 69, l. 45 ("Na segodniashnii den' nichego net: bol'nitsy, shkoly razvalilis', u nas ni shkol, ni bol'nits, a transport ves' razuiut.")
106. BMDJT, f. 268, op. 5, d. 92, l. 5-6 (Tajik Deputy Minister Mazaev to Vakhshstroi Director Nechai, 14 September and 16 October 1939).

ABSTRACTS

Writing the history of yet another Stalinist shock construction site cannot be an end in itself. Hence, the article treats the story of the Vakhsh River Valley Project, a showcase irrigation scheme located at the Soviet border with Afghanistan, not merely as a humanitarian, economic and environmental disaster. While deprivation and fear were key factors that hindered knowledgeable engineers and capable managers from reigning in an unruly natural environment, the article scrutinizes how Stalinist political ambition and Soviet institutional disorder intertwined with unfavorable environmental conditions which, ultimately, prevented the irrigation and colonization scheme from succeeding. The imminent collapse of the Vakhsh Project in 1937, thus, revealed some fundamental limitations of Stalinist governance in a politically and ecologically sensitive borderland.

Écrire l'histoire d'un autre grand chantier stalinien ne saurait constituer une fin en soi. Aussi l'auteur fait-il le choix de relater l'histoire du Projet de la vallée de la rivière Vahš, projet exemplaire d'irrigation près de la frontière soviétique avec l'Afghanistan, qui n'est pas seulement un désastre humain, économique et écologique. Alors que la précarité et la peur étaient autant de facteurs majeurs qui entravaient l'exercice des ingénieurs et des responsables compétents dans un cadre naturel incontrôlé, l'article examine comment l'ambition politique stalinienne et le désordre institutionnel soviétique, cumulés à des conditions environnementales défavorables ont, finalement, abouti à la mise en échec du projet d'irrigation et de colonisation. L'imminence de la faillite du Projet Vahš en 1937 révèle ainsi quelques-unes des limites importantes de la gouvernance stalinienne dans une région frontalière politiquement et écologiquement sensible.

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