

Alun Thomas. *Nomads and Soviet Rule: Central Asia under Lenin and Stalin*. London et al.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. ISBN 978-1-35014368-5 (PB). ix-xii + 257 pp.

This study on the ambiguous interaction between state actors and nomadic pastoralists during the New Economic Policy (NEP) period (1921–28) is of valuable assistance in grasping the various ways in which early Soviet state governance relating towards nomadic groups in the steppe and mountain areas of Central Asia was intended to be applied – and how it materialised in reality. Alun Thomas' book fills a knowledge gap in assessing a so far largely ignored field of research, given that the socio-political negotiation of NEP policies in the Soviet society of the time has mainly been studied in historical research from the urban and rural sedentary perspective of European Russia, rather than that of the nomadic pastoralist context.

Focusing particularly on nomadic pastoralist groups denominated as Kazakh and Kyrgyz during the mid-1920s, the book across six chapters ('Perceptions of Nomadism', 'Nomadic Land', 'Bordering Nomads', 'Taxing Nomads', '(De-)Mobilising Nomads' and 'Collectivisation') provides an in-depth insight into the trajectories and instruments of early Soviet governance. As shown, the policies applied were characterised by a profound lack of understanding of nomadic customs, social organisation and social-ecological roles. Drawing on a sizeable body of archival documents from Bishkek, Almaty and Moscow, as well as secondary literature, the book sheds light on the often far from linear, ambiguous sedentarisation policies of the yet to be properly established and consolidated Soviet administration in Central Asia in the early 1920s. Thus, Thomas criticises general assumptions of pragmatic, increasing state-induced violence in the existing literature. These suggest a gradual tendency towards sedentarisation and the forceful collectivisation of nomadic pastoralists (1928–32) and ultimately towards famine and the extinction of nomadism across the region. Instead, he suggests that Marxist theory, given its inherent 'Eurocentric' character, offered only a superficial conceptualisation of nomads and their role in the social fabric of Central Asia, deeming them quintessentially 'backward'.

In fact, as argued by Thomas, the attitudes of early Soviet administrators in the region were not necessarily hostile. Rather, nomadism was considered by many of them an insignificant social phenomenon that would eventually be overcome by swift socio-economic and cultural development. Along these lines, Thomas' study reveals a disorderly, often indifferent, and in many cases simplistic treatment of nomadic pastoralists during the NEP period, which was shaped by the political principles of national delineation and delimitation, class struggle and

socio-economic development. The implementation of these concepts in establishing Soviet rule, being largely alien to nomadic pastoralist groups of the time, had a lasting impact on social transformations in the region. Yet, and this deserves some praise, the book also highlights the negotiation power of nomadic groups in adapting to, and thereby navigating, the often-violent impact of early Soviet rule. Thus, as argued by Thomas in Chapter 3, an accelerating and increasingly rigid border demarcation by the Soviet administration along the lines of ethnic differentiation and nation-building (*korenizaciya*), and also land allocation to sedentary farmers, cut across migration routes and pasturing areas of nomadic groups in many cases. Thomas illustrates, in well-presented cases, how, by means of these bordering practices, Soviet administrators put socio-spatial and political barriers in the way of Kazakh nomads' subsistence. Nomadic pastoralist groups, on the other hand, 'utilised' the border, e.g. by escapist movement. During times of hardship caused by rising levels of taxation and redistribution of their pastures, the nomads moved with their livestock beyond the borders of Soviet jurisdiction, particularly to China, but also Afghanistan and Iran.

Thomas follows a thematic rather than chronological order in the argument of his book. Chapter 1 offers a comprehensive overview of the political discourse concerning nomadism and nomads as a social phenomenon. It demonstrates, on the one hand, the difficulties of the Soviet administration in identifying and categorising nomadic groups, but even more importantly in making sense of their lifestyle. This lack of understanding, but also widespread ignorance towards nomadic social-ecological adaptability, on the other hand, eventually fostered widespread perceptions of nomadic 'backwardness' and faulty interpretations of nomadic societies' social stratification as class struggle. The Soviet administration's increasing assertiveness in making nomadic populations in Central Asia 'legible' (Scott 1999), is covered by the remainder of the book. Chapter 2 scrutinises the dynamics of the NEP period's land and water reform. It particularly describes the conflict-laden expropriation of farmland (and freshwater access) from European settlers to the benefit of nomadic pastoralist groups in the northern steppe and the Semirech'e. The reallocation of land to nomadic usage was reversed in the course of the 1920s in correlation with Soviet high modernist convictions that 'nature can be tamed'. The deprivation of nomadic groups of their livelihood went in line with taxation policies towards them, highlighted in Chapter 4. Here, Thomas convincingly shows the often-inadequate implementation of early Soviet taxation towards nomads in times of extreme hardship, alternating between notions of 'the payer's ability to pay and the state's need to extract' (Thomas 2018: 133), being disputed between different government bodies. The inadequacy of early Soviet administration's framing of

nomadic social organisation, based on concepts of class and ethno-linguistic belonging, is also reflected in Chapter 5, dealing with political mobilisation campaigning, particularly in the northern steppe. Scrutinising the activities of the ‘Red Caravan’ and the ‘Red Yurts’, interestingly, it appears from Thomas’ study that these efforts at least in some ways were innovative in mimicking and following nomadic mobile practices, and relatively successful in soliciting support and recruiting cadres. Finally, the rather brief Chapter 6 describes the transformation towards the forceful sedentarisation of nomadic groups in collective farms implemented after Filipp Goloshchekin became First Secretary of the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic’s (ASSR) party branch in 1925, and thus indicates the discontinuation of NEP policies.

The author throughout the book frames the Bolsheviks’ ways of dealing with nomadism during the NEP period as ‘postcolonial’, as they often positioned themselves and their patterns of governance in opposition to Tsarist administrative mindsets, knowledge and procedures. While there were powerful early Soviet attempts to overcome Tsarist rule, it is, on the contrary, also shown on multiple occasions by Thomas’ analysis that there was a strong path-dependency in utilising imperial concepts and knowledge in establishing Bolshevik rule in Central Asia. Moreover, the dominant power of Moscow in policymaking and the influx of ruling elites from outside the region clearly strengthened, rather than challenged, power imbalances of a distant ‘centre’ vis-a-vis the local societies. As the ‘backwardness’ of nomadism was widely considered as the main driver for sedentarisation, Soviet modernisation, rather than post-colonialism, might have been a more suitable framing concept for the Soviet treatment of nomadic groups. This minor criticism aside, Thomas’ study makes an insightful addition to the field and should surely take an honourable place on the shelves of students and scholars of Central Asian history alike.

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REFERENCE

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