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Technologies of Rule: Empire, Water, and the Modernization of Central Asia, 1867–1941

This project is an environmental historical approach to the history of Central Asia under Russian rule. It analyzes the ways in which first tsarist and later Bolshevik efforts to change the physical landscapes of Central Asia intersected with Russian imperial and Soviet notions of civilization, progress, and modernity. The project focuses in particular on the manipulation of water, which has always been a crucial and contested resource in Central Asia.

Through a series of case studies of large-scale hydraulic projects and the multiplicity of actors involved in such endeavors—scientists, engineers, workers, entrepreneurs, local and regional officials, farmers, nomads, prisoners—this project highlights the complex dynamics of power relations in this multiethnic frontier region. Rather than seeing this region as peripheral to the Russian core, this work treats Central Asia as inseparable from a larger Eurasian world. It highlights the fluidity of boundaries in the region and the existence of transnational labor and migration networks that made such large-scale hydraulic projects possible.

By focusing on the Russian and Soviet efforts to transform landscapes in the Central Asian borderlands, the project also places Russia within a larger global context. It looks at participation in a global discourse of science and modernization and highlights international transfers of expertise and technology. In Central Asia—for tsarist and Bolshevik officials, alike—the apparent backwardness of Central Asian landscapes seemed to confirm the backwardness of the indigenous peoples and justified Russian and Soviet presence in the region. The invocation of science and technology as a means by which to improve agriculture and hydraulic engineering in Central Asia was intended to legitimate Russian and Soviet rule in the borderlands. At the same time, as systems became disengaged from the knowledge of local environments, they lost their flexibility. During the consolidation of Soviet rule, moreover, Central Asia went from being a dynamic and fluid borderland to an increasingly isolated peripheral colony of the Soviet empire and a space for increasingly radical projects to transform Central Asian environments and the lives of the people who lived there.