On the Landing: Stories

Yenta Mash, translated by Ellen Cassedy

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The literary accounts of Jewish peoples in the former Soviet realm occupy a marginal place in the English language literature. Those stories that have been produced are told from a predominantly male perspective, reflecting a paternalistic outlook, which, in turn, shapes the narrative. In this context, Yenta Mash's *On the Landing*, a series of short stories that feature mainly female protagonists, is a welcome development.

Available as a collection in English for the first time, Mash's compendium of sixteen stories, set apart in time and space, loosely reflects lived experiences from her life. Mash was born and raised in Bessarabia, endured Siberian exile, and, after having lived in Chisinau, immigrated to Israel. These locations make appearances in the book, which may also be understood as presenting a broad chronology of the phases of the author's life.

The stories bear an intensely personal tribute to the locations and experiences described. The work begins with a tale of a woman journeying through her now-destroyed former hometown, as she reminisces about the contrast between its heyday and the moment of its demise. This is followed by a description of the Soviet gulag and the travails of female prisoners. These accounts are succeeded by a more uplifting appraisal of the Moldovan Jewish community's efforts to re-establish itself after World War II. Tales of refugee life in Israel describe the chasm separating the wartime experiences of hard labor in Siberia and the notable comfort of life in Israel in later years. Accounts of romance, companionship, and friendship make an appearance on the pages on a variety of instances, tying the diverse stories together with a common thread.

Certain core themes are repeated throughout the volume, not least the peripatetic nature of life itself, the arbitrariness of state policies towards the Jewish people, among other categories and groups of populations, and the impact thereof on the individuals, nature, and architecture. "The Irony of Fate" tells a story along the lines of both Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, juxtaposing the bureaucratic state structures of those states that feature in the book, revealing elements of their similarities and absurdities. "Mona Bubbe" draws attention to the latter days of the Soviet Union, and particularly the phenomenon of migration as the Jewish musicians, among others,

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began to emigrate, thus thinning the sphere of cultural interaction available to the citizens of the USSR in the form of public concerts in the open spaces. Here, the sense of common cause evident in the shared experience of dealing with the varied manifestations of attitudes toward the Jewish representatives of the Soviet society is accompanied by a lack of rootedness felt by the female Jewish protagonists of Mash's stories as they move from place to place or watch others move.

Another common theme that runs through the book is that of the diversity of the human spirit and mind. Occasionally, the human spirit peeps through the reality of persons' lives in exile in a variety of forms, including those that allow the protagonists to engage sympathetically with the others despite the surrounding hardship. More often, however, the diverse range of reactions generated by similar conditions brings out the traits of human character that leave the reader reflective of the limits of adaptability, resilience, and civility.

Mash began writing in Yiddish when she was almost sixty years old, and her works were published from the 1990s on. This is worth noting since, at that time, voices have been cast on the imminent demise of the Yiddish language. From this perspective, works such as hers are culturally and historically curious. Moreover, the substance of the work, dealing as it does with female lived experience in a variety of Jewish communities, contributes to the bulk of literary accounts that are neither wholly autobiographical nor entirely detached from the author's biography. The choice of such writing style allows the author to take artistic license in following the geographical and chronological steps of her protagonists, each with their own "landing."

This book may be of relevance to those who are interested in the Yiddish literary tradition or those who wish to reflect on a series of short stories exploring the intersectionality of the female and Jewish conditions over a series of years and locations. As it stands, this collection of short stories represents a complimentary chapter to the literary reflections on the various categories of the population on the territories of the former Soviet Union that have been subjected to the targeted policies of displacement and exile, based on their ethnicity, culture, and religion. The positive connotations included in the book on the eventual possibility of rebuilding one's life, community, and meaning for the Jewish protagonists of the book contributes to intensify the contrast of the fates of the other categories of population, to whom such options have not been made available.

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The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan

Sarah Cameron

(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), x + 277 pp., \$49.95 (hardcover). ISBN 9781501730436.

In *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan*, Cameron draws on Russian- and Kazakh-language sources to narrate the important and tragic history of the human-induced famine of 1930–33 that claimed the lives of 1.5 million people, about one-quarter of the population of Kazakhstan, and drove another 1 million people to flee the republic as desperate refugees.

Cameron delivers a rigorous and moving perspective on Soviet modernization gone awry, laying out nuanced dynamics that spread the blame for this human-induced tragedy. In the famine's wake the base economy of the country was changed completely. Over the years of collectivization and the famine, about 90 percent of the country's livestock was eradicated; not until the 1950s did livestock numbers return to their prefamine levels, but the economy had been fundamentally changed from one of pastoral-nomadism to an industrial grain producer. Kazakhstan is today one of the world's leading exporters of wheat (9). These transformations, Cameron acknowledges, were the regime's intent. Demographically, however, the famine reduced Kazakhs to a minority population in their own country, which was not, Cameron finds, the regime's intent.

Cameron locates the roots of "the longer history of the steppe's agrarian transformation" into the imperial period (8). Chapter 1 identifies nineteenth-century peasant colonization and ideas about progress that drove the shift to agricultural production of the steppe—over the protestations of some imperial experts—as preconditions for the famine. The 1.5 million peasants from European Russia that migrated to the steppe (20% of whom ultimately left the steppe [36]) reduced Kazakhs to a republic-wide slim majority in their own republic (43). By 1916, northern Kazakhstan—where Slavs were already the majority demographic (19)—had become a major grain-producing region. These imperial peasant migrations brought changes to Kazakhs' annual migration patterns and diets (43). Nonetheless, in 1924 when the boundaries of the Soviet republic of Kazakhstan were officially set (44), "pastoral nomadism remained the predominant way of life for the majority of Kazakhs" (20).

Chapter 2, "Can You Get to Socialism by Camel?", charts the regime's shift from tolerating nomadism to committing to its elimination.

Cameron depicts the indeterminant NEP years of the 1920s, in which attempts were made to situate pastoral nomadism in a Marxist-Leninist framework, a program of indigenization (*korenizatsiia*) returned confiscated land from Slavic settlers to Kazakhs, and specialists warned against the compulsory settlement of nomads in the drought-prone steppe. Experts such as Sergei Shvetsov argue that nomadism was actually the most efficient use of marginal steppe lands (60). The launch of the "Sovietization of the Aul" campaign in 1925, which Cameron likens to the "Face the Village" campaign launched in Russia in 1924, aimed to educate the mostly illiterate Kazakh population in Bolshevik principles, gather data on the Kazakh republic, and break the power of traditional clans. This all shows, Cameron writes, "Moscow's assault on pastoral nomadic life was far from predetermined" (47). By 1926, the "Sovietization of the Aul" campaign was deemed a failure. With the Union-wide hardening of economic policy in 1927–28, and the accompanying "tightening ideological correctness" (64), voices defending nomadism were demoted or worse. Disregarding warnings about the chronic vulnerability of the steppe as agricultural land, Soviet leadership pushed forward with modernization plans, which meant the elimination of a backward nomadic lifestyles. The ideologically proper Marxist-Leninist reading of nomadism became that it was a kind of feudalism in which wealthy "feudal clan leaders" exploited others and needed to be eliminated (66–67). As with dekulakization (72), Kazakh *bais* (nomadic "exploiters" [13]) became the enemy to be dispossessed if not entirely liquidated in the campaign against rural elites launched in 1928.

Chapter 3 describes "Little October," so deemed because of a sense that the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution had little touched the Kazakh steppe. In the fall of 1928, "the party launched the *bai* confiscation campaign, a program to appropriate livestock and property from "wealthy" Kazakh elites who were supposedly exploiting their kin members" (70). To avoid confiscation, or to meet onerous grain requisition requirements, many Kazakhs redistributed to relatives, hid, sold, or slaughtered their livestock. Livestock flooding the market drove prices down, devaluing the central assets of most Kazakhs. Such high rates of sale and slaughter put Kazakhs in a precarious situation that proved disastrous when drought came in 1931. Regarding agency in this brutal campaign, Cameron writes that "the peculiarly destructive nature of the confiscation campaign was due to the fact that it was primarily carried out by *insiders*, rather than by outsiders (71) Such an approach implicitly sanctioned excesses, often horrific, and meant that the campaigns did not destroy the

traditional clan structures it intended. Contrary to the *svoir faire*—local, practical skills that James Scott, in *Seeing Like a State* argued could serve as a corrective to the failures of “high modernism”—Cameron finds that local involvement in bai confiscation made it worse, and “began to unravel Kazakh society from within.”¹ Although the “Little October” campaign looked in many ways to Moscow like a success, it worked against the center’s goal of sedentarization because so many Kazakhs resorted to flight (96).

On the heels of the bai confiscation campaign, the regime launched forced collectivization in Kazakhstan in late 1929. Cameron describes how “activists began to collectivize nomadic regions, levying dizzying grain and meat procurements on these areas.” The party criminalized “a range of nomadic practices” (98). Much-reduced herds were further decimated as Kazakhs forced into collective farms sold their livestock to meet grain procurement requirements (107). The horrors of the confiscation campaigns had been like a dress rehearsal as hunger descended upon a dislocated society that, through coercion, choice, or duress, was now without its primary assets.

By mid-1930, hunger was becoming common and Cameron details variations across the republic. Indicative of the desperation, over eighty thousand people in Kazakhstan took part in uprisings from January to June 1930. Facing chaos connected with the first collectivization drive throughout the USSR, Stalin’s “dizzy with success” speech of March 1930 signaled a temporary suspension of collectivization. But the message somehow did not immediately penetrate to party leadership in Kazakhstan. Cameron asserts that famine would not have occurred but for directives from Moscow, yet her nuanced account shows how some Kazakhs embraced the Soviet vision and facilitated suffering among their own. As the crisis unfolded, some leaders at the center, when faced with the devastation, were prepared to backpedal on a modernizing commitment to eliminate pastoralism. In February 1930, the Politburo issued a ruling to “proceed cautiously in livestock regions” but offered few helpful policy changes (109). Yet, on sum, in a society already weakened by confiscations, *zhut* (spring freezes that iced over forage, weakening or killing livestock), and minor droughts, Moscow’s course exacerbated the tragedy because the Kremlin refused to reduce grain and meat procurements and relocated people into the food-short Kazakh republic. Since Kazakh herds supplied needed beef to a rapidly growing Moscow, central planning urbanites were disinclined to disrupt Moscow’s meat supply. In March 1930, Moscow rejected a request from F. I. Goloshchekin, the party leader in Kazakhstan, to reduce meat

procurements (116). On 1 July 1931, Stalin sent Goloshchekin an angry telegram, informing him that he would hold him personally responsible" for grain deliveries (118). Further, bolstered by the misconception that Kazakhs possessed abundant livestock and poorly understood caloric needs, Moscow relocated over 260,000 "special settlers" (internally exiled peasants) and Gulag prisoners into food-short Kazakhstan.

When drought came in 1931, harvests failed and there were far less cattle to fall back on. As hunger spread, those Kazakhs who could attempted to flee to avoid starvation. Cameron depicts in heart-wrenching detail the refugee crisis that ensued. Belying notions of the "Soviet friendship of peoples," those who fled to other Soviet republics most typically faced disdain and cruelty, culturally bolstered by pejorative stereotypes about Kazakh backwardness. China was another escape route, although Soviet authorities attempted to arrest and, on some occasions, shot fleeing Kazakhs. In the Karatal affair in late 1930, Soviets shot several families trying to cross the border into Xianjing (123). Revelations that women and children who included poor people had been shot fleeing strained the official Party narrative that the state violence only dealt righteous justice to exploiting bais. Cameron's depiction of policy makers and enforcers attempting to filter their atrocities through an ideologically palatable lens offers troubling insight into ways in which Soviet humans rationalized inhuman acts.

Cameron concludes by reflecting on the ambivalent reception and legacy of this tragedy in contemporary Kazakh society. For her part, Cameron holds this tragedy in an unflinching gaze. She is a deft guide in this painful history, avoiding controversies over which oppression was worse. Cameron explains that although the death toll of the Holodomor was higher in sheer numbers, the Kazakh famine took a larger proportion of the Kazakh population. In both famines, according to Cameron, the state deployed similar murderous methods, including border closures, expulsion of famine refugees from cities, and blacklisting of famine-stricken districts (176). Ethnic Kazakhs suffered the brunt of the unprecedented famine, being reduced to a minority in their own republic, and the regime was aware of the risks yet took actions that exacerbated rather than mitigated the suffering as the crisis deepened. Nonetheless, in Cameron's assessment, this tragedy does not fit the definition of genocide because the elimination of Kazakhs was not an intended result. That said, Cameron's condemnation is clear. Though the result of multiple causes, the famine was neither unavoidable mistake nor accident: it was the man-made price of social engineering gone wrong; the result of a can-do ideology that believed it could triumph

over the environment and a millennium of evolutionary lifeways. *The Hungry Steppe* is a commendable achievement, important scholarly contribution, and worthwhile reading for undergraduates and graduates studying Soviet, borderlands, environmental, and indigenous histories.

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Note

1. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).