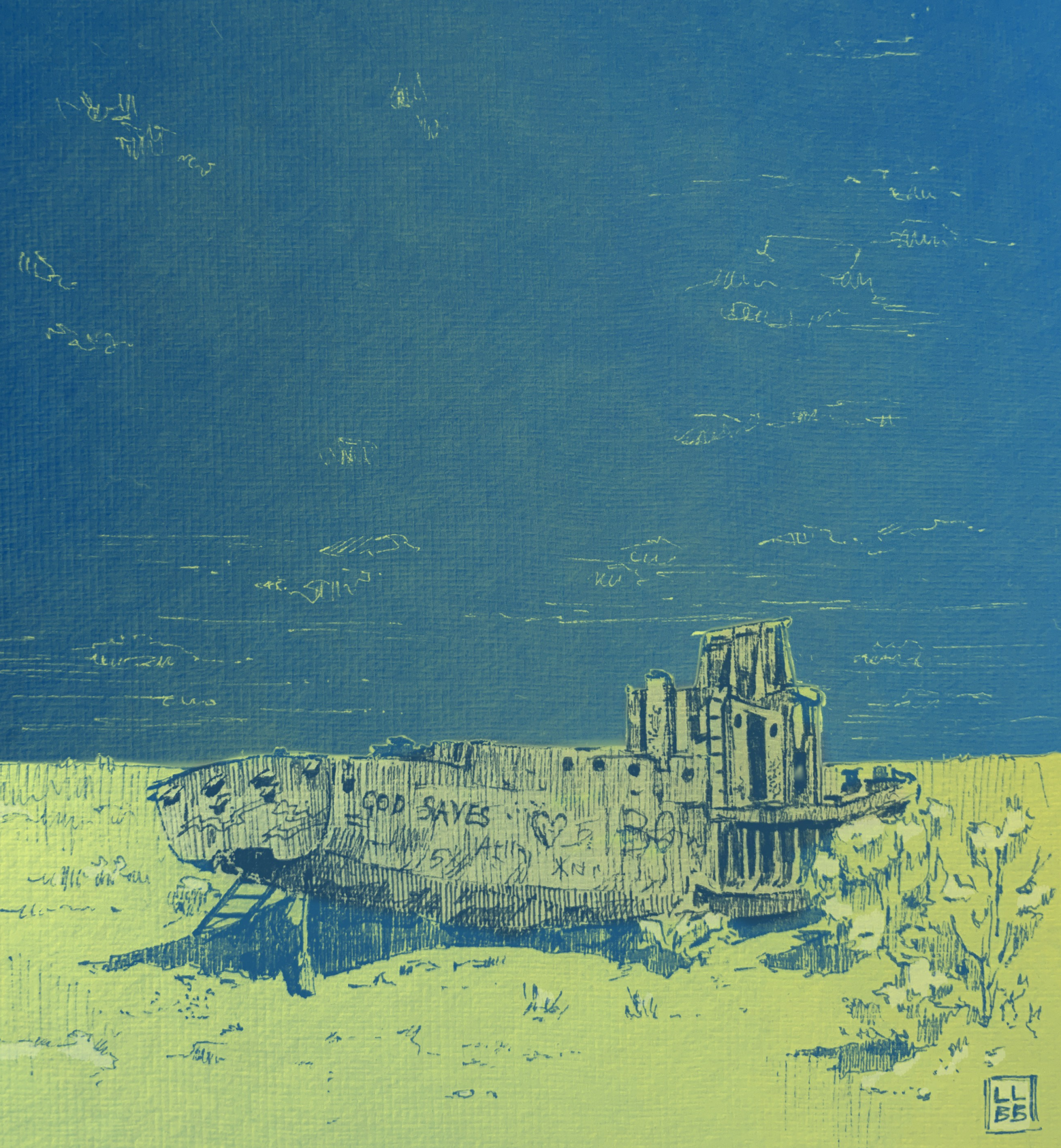


# Horizons

Student Central Asia Forum—Volume 3—Spring 2026



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# Introduction

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Views of Central Asia have historically been caught between an orientalist image from imperial powers and the visions that Central Asian societies hold of themselves. For this, the third volume of the Student Central Asia Forum, we invited proposals that consider the multitude of Central Asian horizons. We are delighted to present five submissions, encompassing journalistic articles, a film review, and several artistic prints. Our contributors engaged thoroughly with the complicated notion of *horizons* in Central Asia; they looked beyond traditional regional borders and sought to uncover how boundaries are made, reinforced, transgressed, or relaxed within the great variety of Central Asian cultures.

**Robert Willard** and **Chaya Steinsaltz** both analyse the position of Central Asia within the multicultural Soviet Union, as they take a transnational view when approaching the Aral Sea disaster (Willard) and the foundation of the Kazakh Academy of Sciences (Steinsaltz). Willard's piece, informed by his long term advocacy at the World Aral Region Charity, provides an overview of the catastrophe which unfurled (and continues to develop) in light of Russian colonial exploration, and later Soviet economic and scientific policies. In contrast to the top-down decisions made in urban centres far from the sea without the consultation of local communities, the article ends on a hopeful note, as Willard draws attention to local detoxification initiatives in the area. In her work on the Kazakh Academy of Sciences, Steinsaltz sees how a region that was considered "peripheral" to Moscow became a centre of research after a series of wartime evacuations. Steinsaltz' essay proceeds through the case study of Bekmakhanov who faced persecution in Almaty for turning his historical talents to non-Russian political actors and reflects on the uneven treatment of academics in the Soviet Union.

In this edition, our contributors have pushed farther afield to Western Chinese (Arshad) and Mongolian (Enkhee) populations. Looking at wider Central Asia, **Basmah Arshad's** essay considers the importance of domesticity and food culture in diasporic Uyghur communities. Her work shows how, when deterritorialised from Xinjiang, food culture is at once a resistance to Chinese nationalism and a reminder of home. Arshad's work considers video essays by Uyghur food creators in Pakistan, analysing the national identity that arises from cultural foods in foreign environments. In her review of *The Eagle Huntress*, **Byambasuren Enkhee** considers cross-cultural exchange in line with cultural resilience. In her work, she considers how a film that depicts a Kazakh community of eagle hunters in Western Mongolia falls into narrow Western centred tropes about "girl power", failing to offer a nuanced depiction of a marginalised community working to preserve their culture in the face of economic adversity. Finally, **Lyra Browning's** exquisite *Ship* series of prints form the cover to this issue. These prints were inspired by Browning's travels in Karakalpakstan and the "ship graveyard" in Moynaq, visually illustrating some of the desolation described by Willard.

The horizons of Central Asia are broad, diverse, and ever-changing. Our volume seeks to foreground this multiplicity, demonstrating that in this vast region, horizons are not fixed, but in a state of continuous flux.

*The Editors:* Colin (Kolja) Hood, Claudia Macey-Dare, and Lewis Ebert

July 2026

Oxford, Prague

# Writing *The History of the Kazakh SSR* in Wartime Almaty

*Chaya Steinhaltz*

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In 1952, the Kazakh historian Yermukhan Bekmakhanov was sentenced to twenty-five years in a labour camp for his work on Kenesary Kasymov, the leader of a nineteenth-century Kazakh uprising against Russian rule.[i] The work that led to his arrest was published in *The History of the Kazakh SSR*, a text written during the Second World War in Almaty by a collective of historians led by the prominent Soviet scholar Anna Pankratova. The evacuation of Soviet institutions eastward temporarily shifted the centre of Soviet scholarship away from Moscow. In Almaty, evacuated historians collaborated with local scholars to produce the first academic history of Kazakhstan within the Soviet system. Despite the wartime expansion of republican historiography, the subsequent fate of these historians showed that this shift in focus was only temporary. Bekmakhanov was imprisoned for his controversial work, but Pankratova freely returned to Moscow and remained an influential figure in Soviet academia.[ii]

The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 triggered one of the largest evacuations in modern history. As Nazi forces advanced, more than sixteen million civilians and thousands of industrial enterprises were relocated eastward.[iii] The territories occupied by Germany before the Soviet counteroffensive at Stalingrad in 1943 had accounted for roughly 40% of the Soviet Union's population and industrial capacity.[iv] The transfer of people, factories, and institutions to the Urals, Siberia, and Central Asia became central to the Soviet war effort and ultimately to its survival. Alongside industrial labour, the Soviet state relocated a significant portion of its scientific and cultural elite. Academic institutions deemed non-essential to immediate military production were moved away from the front, particularly to Almaty, Tashkent, and the Borovoye resort in Kazakhstan.[v]

For many evacuated scholars, Central Asia was unfamiliar terrain. Historians, philologists, and literary figures who had trained in Moscow or Leningrad suddenly found themselves working in what they regarded as the Soviet periphery. Despite overcrowding and wartime shortages, these cities became important intellectual and artistic centres. Almaty, in particular, hosted academic institutes, theatres and opera companies, as well as both the Moscow and Leningrad film studios.[vi]

Among the institutions relocated to Almaty was the Institute of History, headed by Pankratova. After a gruelling month-long journey to Almaty, the institute was ordered to move to Tashkent [vii] Pankratova petitioned local Kazakh Party officials to allow part of the institute to remain in Almaty. The authorities intervened, and twenty historians, including Pankratova herself, were permitted to stay.[viii] This decision was unusual, as most evacuees had little influence over their destination and were frequently dispersed from major urban centres. The historians' ability to negotiate their placement reflected the institutional authority they carried within the Soviet academic system.

In her petition to remain in Almaty, Pankratova argued that she and the other historians had already begun contributing to the wartime mobilisation. She noted that they were serving as “freelance lecturers for the Central Committee... on antifascist themes and on the history of diplomacy and international relations.”[ix] The mobilisation of intellectuals to Central Asia was also reflected in cultural production in Almaty, including Sergei Eisenstein’s film *Ivan the Terrible*, which was produced there during the war and presented a historical narrative emphasising strong centralised authority and national unity.[x]

The circumstances of evacuation led the evacuated historians, who had been prominent in fields such as Marxist or Russian labour history, to undertake the project of writing the first Soviet history of the Kazakh people and nation.[xi] As a result, *The History of the Kazakh SSR*, published in 1943 and written in Almaty by a collective of evacuated and local historians under Pankratova’s direction, became the first academic history of a Union republic produced within the Soviet system.[xii]

One of the most significant chapters was written by the Kazakh historian Yermukhan Bekmakhanov. His study examined the nineteenth-century uprising led by Kenesary Kasymov and interpreted it as a national-liberation movement.[xiii] This interpretation aligned with efforts to mobilise non-Russian nationalities by incorporating republican histories into a broader Soviet narrative of resistance and progress. The book was initially well received and even nominated for the Stalin Prize.[xiv]

However, after the war the political climate shifted rapidly. As the Soviet leadership increasingly emphasised the decisive role of the “Russian people” in the victory, interpretations that highlighted national resistance to Russian expansion became politically suspect.[xv] In 1948 the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR convened several days of debates that culminated in the condemnation of the book. Bekmakhanov was accused of “bourgeois nationalism,” expelled from the Communist Party, stripped of his academic degrees, and eventually sentenced to twenty-five years in labour camps.[xvi]

Pankratova, by contrast, returned to Moscow and remained a prominent figure in Soviet historiography. As one of her biographers, Reginald E. Zelnik, observed, she was “dethroned and restored more than once,” but never permanently excluded from the academic establishment. [xvii]

While the Central Asia scholar Adeeb Khalid has argued that the war was pivotal in transforming Central Asians’ sense of belonging within the Soviet system, the wartime expansion of republican historiography did not translate into lasting structural change within Soviet academic institutions.[xviii] The displacement of scholars during the war created temporary opportunities for new historical subjects and collaborations, but the postwar repression of figures such as Bekmakhanov demonstrated how firmly the hierarchy between the Soviet centre and its peripheries remained in place.

- [i] R. M. Zhumashev, A. Zh. Myrzakhmetova, G. T. Edgina, and D. S. Kozhabekov, "The 1944 Meeting of Historians in the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (b) and the Development of Soviet Historiography of the History of Kazakhstan," *History, Philosophy and Pedagogy* (2022).
- [ii] Reginald E. Zelnik, *Perils of Pankratova: Some Stories from the Annals of Soviet Historiography* (Seattle: Herbert J. Ellison Center for Russian, Eastern European, and Central Asian Studies, University of Washington, 2005).
- [iii] Rebecca Manley, "Escape to Tashkent: Fleeing Operation Barbarossa," Summer 2011, <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/escape-to-tashkent-fleeing-operation-barbarossa/>.
- [iv] Mark Harrison, *Accounting for War: Soviet Production, Employment, and the Defence Burden, 1940–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- [v] 74.004 Pavlador State Archive, ф708 оп5-1, д562.
- [vi] 74.004 Pavlador State Archive, ф708 оп5-1, д562.
- [vii] 74.004 Pavlador State Archive, ф708 оп5-1, д562, 0020.
- [viii] 74.004 Pavlador State Archive, ф708 оп5-1, д562, 0021.
- [ix] 74.004 Pavlador State Archive, ф708 оп5-1, д562, 0042-0043.
- [x] Neuberger J. "The Filmmaker in Wartime: Sergei Eisenstein Inside and Out. *Slavic Review*." 2020;79 (1):76-92.
- [xi] 74.004 Pavlador State Archive, ф708 оп5-1, д562, 0017-0019.
- [xii] Zelnik, *Perils of Pankratova: Some Stories from the Annals of Soviet Historiography*.
- [xiii] Zhumashev, Myrzakhmetova, Edgina, and Kozhabekov, "The 1944 Meeting of Historians in the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (b) and the Development of Soviet Historiography of the History of Kazakhstan".
- [xiv] Zelnik, *Perils of Pankratova: Some Stories from the Annals of Soviet Historiography*.
- [xv] Joseph Stalin, "Toast to the Great Russian People," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, Michigan State University.
- [xvi] Zhumashev, Myrzakhmetova, Edgina, and Kozhabekov, "The 1944 Meeting of Historians in the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (b) and the Development of Soviet Historiography of the History of Kazakhstan".
- [xvii] Zelnik, *Perils of Pankratova: Some Stories from the Annals of Soviet Historiography*.
- [xviii] Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).  
Oxford, Prague

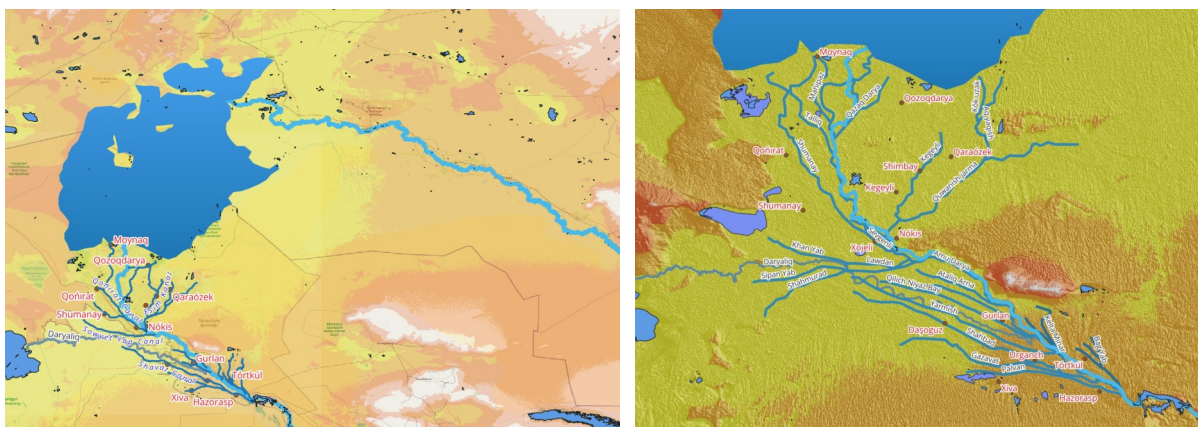
# Desert Castles and Canals: Evolving Discourses on the Hydraulic Heritage of the Amu Darya

*Robert Willard*

The Amu Darya is a transboundary river basin spanning Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Its downstream section, an arid and unstable terrain, has always been in flux<sup>1</sup>. It carries rich alluvial sediment from the the upstream Pamir mountains, to fertile floodplains downstream. Over the last two centuries, Russian colonial projects, as well current development practices, have sought to understand the river's history in order to expand the irrigated area of the oases. The resulting desertification of the basin, most emblematic in the disastrous shrinking of the Aral Sea, speaks to the consequences that such research discourses can have.

The topography of the basin carries the imprint of a shifting river basin. The right bank of the lower Amu Darya River, across from Urgench, is dotted by archaic canal systems that date to the fourth century BCE, when the Amu Darya flowed north via its tributary, the Aqcha Darya. After the zone dried out in the 10th century AD, Khorezmians resettled to the left bank. These irrigation systems reveal long-term strategies through which societies have negotiated environmental variability and climatic change<sup>2</sup>.

In the early modern period under the Khivan Khanate (16th century–1873) and later Imperial Russian control, the region was home to segmentary and non-segmentary Turkic groups today known as Uzbeks, Qaraqalpaqs, Turkmens and Kazakhs. These different communities carried different livelihoods including nomadic pastoralism, fishing and settled agriculture. Canal upkeep was dependent on collective corvée labour, an obligatory tribute of manpower to dredge or expand main canals, organized under the Khanate. Hydraulic governance was distributed among kinship networks.



Figures 1 and 2: The Aral Basin and Lower Amu Darya Basin in the 19th century  
Data Source: *OpenStreetMap contributors, NASA Earthdata DEM, Guliamov (1957)*

## **Russian Imperial Interest**

Russian interest in Central Asia's water sources stems back to Peter the Great, who proposed an expedition to find the end of the Amu Darya<sup>3</sup>. In 1843, Admiral Aleksey Butakov was sent to chart out the Aral Sea and its environs. Butakov's map, alongside the renditions of the accompanying painter (and future national poet of Ukraine), Taras Schevchenko, reveal an expansive flood plain south of the Aral Sea alongside dynamic local economies.

In 1873, the lower Amu Darya basin was brought under Russian control with the occupation of the Khivan Khanate by General von Kaufman<sup>4</sup>. The left bank was fashioned into a vassal state, and the right bank was incorporated into the Turkestan governorship. A team of ethnographers were subsequently sent by Russia to survey the basin's people, water, and land. Many marvelled at the productivity of Khivan agriculture. For example, the agronomist Orest Shkapski, invited to document local farming techniques, remarked: "Drought which kills the crop and brings about famine in our Russia, is unknown to the Khivans"<sup>5</sup>.

Following the global fall in cotton supply due to the US Civil War (1861-1865), the American strain of cotton, easier to harvest and more demanding of water, was introduced as a profitable cash crop<sup>6</sup>. With traditional irrigation networks largely kept in place, visiting experts such as Alexander Kaulbars<sup>7</sup> and Alexander Kuhn<sup>8</sup> revealed a basin not serving its full agricultural potential.

In these ethnographic and agronomic studies, St. Petersburg sought support for expanded irrigated zones and cotton production. For example, attempts were made to revive areas to the west of Khiva, bordering the Karakum desert, on the justification that they follow the contour of former irrigation canals, cut off by the Khivan Khan<sup>9 10</sup>. Historical research showed that the western zone of the Saryqamysh depression had once taken much of the water flowing to the Aral. Nevertheless, desertification was already somewhat observable in the Aral Basin, with researcher Alexander Voyekov warning that, the more the region was irrigated, "the less there is water for the Aral, and the smaller it will become"<sup>11</sup>.

## **The Early Socialist Period**

Following the Bolshevik Revolution and Russian Civil War (1917-1922), the entire downstream basin was incorporated into the Soviet system. The southern left bank between Khorezm region and the northwestern right bank became the Autonomous Republic of Qaraqalpaqstan, an ethnically mixed region within the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic.

In these reformatted territories, the expansion of Central Asia's irrigation system became a centrepiece of its domestic policy, born out of hopes at modernising its "third world" status, and increasing production of much needed cotton<sup>12</sup>. To understand the dynamics of Central Asian water systems, the government encouraged research into the history and ethnography of irrigation in the Aral Basin. In 1924, the *Bulletin of Irrigation*, a monthly journal in early Soviet Central Asia, published a detailed study of traditional Islamic rules for water-use in the region<sup>13</sup>. In 1937, under the leadership of archaeologist Sergei Tolstov, a major expedition was organised to document the irrigation of desert areas in Khorezm, on the right bank from Urgench. The Khorezm Ethnographic and Archaeological Expedition was partially funded by collective farming enterprises, which were required to survey the land before it was developed for large-scale cotton plantations.

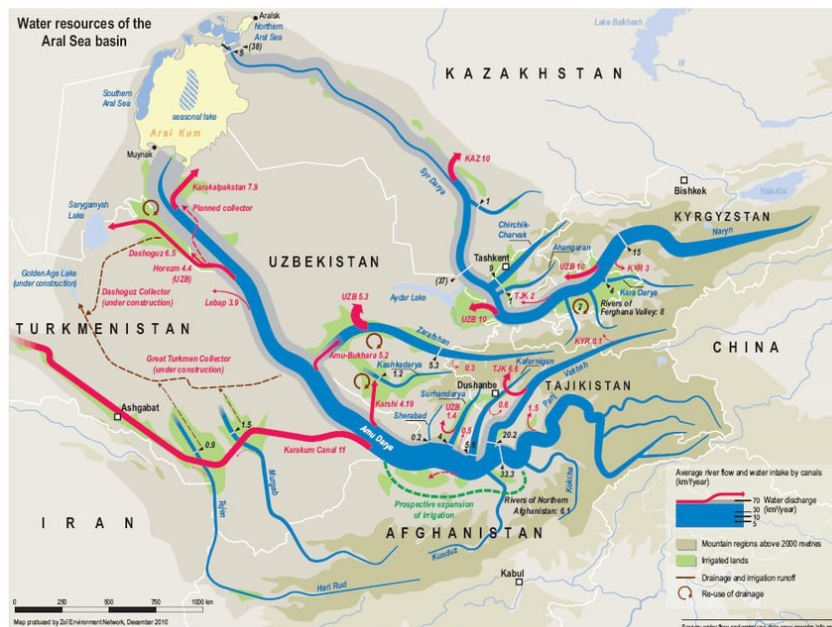
Although the USSR's mass construction projects already had a visible toll on the environment in the 1940's, many works produced by the expedition did not view these effects as harmful in the long run. When some scholars did warn of the fragility of the Aral Basin ecosystem, they were mostly dismissed by the mainstream Soviet scholarship<sup>14</sup>. For example, in reaction to the American geographer Ellsworth Huntington's warnings of the region's desertification due to over-development, Soviet

work in Central Asia “has not only a past, but also a future, and can be brought back to their previous state of cultivation”<sup>15</sup>.

Referencing the archeological data of the Khorezm expedition, Andrianov argues: “Without a doubt, modern farmers can use the help of the millenniums-long experience of ancient irrigation<sup>16</sup>”. His research aimed to help Soviet engineers build off of where their predecessors left off: “The majestic project of reclaiming and irrigating land in the deserts [...] being developed over the long-term by the [Central Committee] [...] oversees a grand work of developing new lands [...] the work of archeologists, ethnographers, [...] take on an important practical role.”

### **Increase in Cotton Production and the Decimation of the Aral Sea**

As a result of Khrushchev’s and Brezhnev’s campaign to expand cotton production in the Aral Basin, arable land in use expanded by 400% between 1960 and 1990<sup>17</sup>. New frontiers for settlement, like the Golodnaya (Hungry) Steppe, between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, were irrigated with the rivers of the Aral Basin<sup>18</sup>. However, tight production quotas and lax regulation led to inefficiencies in water use and improper disposal of toxic water discharge from fields.



Source: IFAS, Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea. (2026). Bassey Aralskogo morya. <https://ecifas.kz/drugie-resursy/bassey-aralskogo-morya>

Figure 2: Map of water abstraction in the Aral Basin. The Hungry Steppe is abstracted in the eastern portion of the Syr Darya River, near Tashkent.

Land reclamation was oftentimes justified for expanding cotton and wheat. Cotton in the late-Soviet period was used to supply both the textile and military industries. The intensification of cotton irrigation was accompanied by the re-distribution of society towards seasonal agricultural work. Students and urban professionals would be mobilized to harvest cotton in adjacent urban areas<sup>19</sup>. Over the 1960s, Khorezm and Qaraqalpaqstan experienced a particularly intense expansion of cotton, along areas formerly abandoned to archeological ruins and perennial wetlands. Zones that formerly supported non-agricultural livelihoods, like pastoralism and cairn irrigations, were transformed into collective farms<sup>20</sup>.

These land reclamation projects prioritised increased access to water over efficiency in irrigation. While it was assumed that best practices in water application and drainage would be developed in parallel, hasty quotas and vertical command structures lead to widespread water waste alongside rising mineralization of ground and surface water. Poor field leveling resulted in waterlogging, where excess irrigation water is bogged in a field and leads to increased salt content of the soil<sup>21</sup>.

Canal works were uncemented and, amidst economic recession, poorly upkept, resulting in large water loss. These inefficiencies were oftentimes a product of the hurried tempo of construction. Canals, like the Great Fergana Canal, were completed under hasty 5-years plans<sup>22</sup>. Other systems, like the Karakum canal, were constructed under GULAG labor from those repressed in prison camps<sup>23</sup>.

By 1990, the Sea was 30% of its original size, having drastically receded from the former coastal ports. The sea's recession put an end to the vibrant Aral fishing industry and left behind a desert of dried salts that were blown across the entire basin. Downstream areas were particularly hard hit. 75% of their land was salinized, childhood mortality was at 100 out of 1,000, and yearly losses of cotton due to salinization were estimated to be 0.5 million tons<sup>24</sup>.

### **Glasnost and Reactions to the Disaster**

With the arrival of Glasnost in the mid 1980's, the Soviet government opened up about the country's environmental mishaps. Amongst the first to speak were journalists and popular writers<sup>25</sup>. Although overly idealistic about the prospects of restoring the Aral Sea, they encouraged a national push for accountability from Moscow. Journalist Otkir Hashimov openly criticized the sloppily constructed infrastructure and excessive cotton demands whilst popular writer Sagdulla Karamtatrov wrote an allegorical novel bemoaning the environmental exploitation of Central Asia by the USSR. Meanwhile, high profile Uzbekistani ex-pats, like Rusi Nasir spread the word about the Aral Crisis among compatriots aboard<sup>26</sup>.

Many researchers revealed some level of complicity in keeping quiet about the crisis for so long. Scholars covered in this paper, such as Viktor Dukhovny and O.I. Subbotina, were affiliated with SANIIRI, the leading water research center of Central Asia, and would have been aware of the Aral Crisis much earlier. Scholar Leonid Elpiner admitted that data on the health consequences of the Aral Crisis had been gathered in the 1960s, but were only allowed to be publicized in the mid 1980's. Similarly, an account of consequences of the Aral Crisis published by a team of hydrometeorologists under Tatyana Molosnova in 1987 discussed research on the meteorological effects of the Aral Crisis being conducted since the 1960's. The data they present makes strides in depicting the massive geographical scope of the crisis, as evidence of climate change is found as far as the Fergana Valley<sup>27</sup>.

The uncertainty of the late 1980's also contributed to uncertain accounts of who exactly was to take charge of the remediation process, as evidenced in Ziyavitdin Akramov and Asom Rafikov's 1990 book *The Past, Present and Future of the Aral Sea*, a comprehensive scientific prognosis on the crisis, published in 1990. While laying out the results of inadequate administrative planning of Central Asian irrigation projects, the authors make sure not to implicate the Communist system itself, and instead focus on what changes could be implemented through the Soviet apparatus. Consequently, the authors discuss ambitious, characteristically Soviet infrastructure projects promising to restore the sea by 2010. These proposals included ambitious projects such as diverting Siberian rivers into Central Asia, or building a complex damming system to contain the remaining sea. They finish their book with a reassurance to the reader that "The unique waterbody of Central Asia – the Aral Sea - will live!"<sup>28</sup>.

Most bittersweet, perhaps, is *The Aral Crisis*, a collection of historical and scientific articles on the Aral Region, in which Boris Andrianov, whose 1969 book voiced support for Soviet irrigation projects, served as editor, along with the scholars Nikolai Glazovsky, Larisa Levina and Lyudmila Timoshuk. Their introduction displays a reversal in the rhetoric presented in Andrianov's previous work. The authors admitted to a continuity between the current period of man-made desertification and previous periods of environmental decay in Central Asia. As before, they propose to look into the region's ancient history of water systems for a solution<sup>29</sup>.

### **Present and Future Challenges**

Today, the downstream Amu Darya is facing dire desertification. Salt winds, combined with the continual evaporation of surface waters, have dramatically increased the area of salinized soil, affecting groundwater supplies in the region. The subsequent decline in economic opportunities has been recognised as a primary driver of increased emigration<sup>30</sup>.

Despite this difficult situation, there have been several positive developments in recent years, as both Uzbekistan and Qazaqstan recognise the need to improve the environmental situation. Several current development projects reinvestigate traditional ways of dealing with water in order to inform resilient practices<sup>31</sup>. Under new initiatives like the Aral Summit, government officials employ culture professionals to promote discourse on Qazaqalpaqstan as a heritage-scape, whose tourism potential and unique story of resilience in light of desertification offer opportunities for new livelihoods.

Local NGO initiatives like the Kiva Center, and the World Aral Region Charity, which the author of this article works with, explore mechanisms for motivating water efficient practices from below. Technologies like drip irrigation and desalination, though popular, lack sufficient community trust and buy in. Drip irrigation seeks to deliver water directly to the root of the plant through a network of PVC pipes. Reverse osmosis desalination reutilizes highly saline ground- and drainage water for agriculture and consumption via a high-energy of pressure filtration process.

Drip irrigation, in particular, is met with widespread skepticism amongst downstream farmers, despite large government and NGO promotion of its use, as it does not solve the underlying problem of soil salinity. We study these frictions in adoption and seek water efficient practices that are more viable for rural farming communities.

Nevertheless, one should be careful in the interplay between policy and reality, as revealed by the long-term heritage of hydraulic societies in the lower Amu Darya Basin within its. As much as the lower Amu Darya Basin carries traces of settlement and irrigation, so does it carry traces of desertification and emigration. Soviet scholarship paid most attention towards histories of irrigation and settlement, thus justifying disastrous land reclamation projects around the Aral. We propose policy and academia to strive for hydraulic relations that reflect past nature-cultures' resilience to both scarcity and abundance in water. A resilient society should then seek to build futures that safely co-inhabit a wet and dry basin.

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# Selling Uyghur Foodways: The Shift in Culinary Borders Between China and Pakistan

*Basmah Arshad*

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In the spring of 2020, vlogger Arshad Mahmood walked along a strip of malls in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. He craved a specific dish: a Central Asian dumpling of heavily spiced meat called *manta* in Uyghur. For Mahmood and his fellow Pakistanis who learned of the dumplings via Chinese restaurant menus, it was called *mantu*. Mahmood eventually made his way to the restaurant Mizlick Meals and sat to eat his meal of *mantu*, *laghman*, and *dapanji* while the restaurant owner, a man named Hanzala, corrected Mahmood's initial description of the restaurant as Chinese.<sup>[i]</sup> "[This is] total home-cooked food [from Xinjiang]," Hanzala said, recalling how his maternal grandmother had moved to Pakistan and kept her children and grandchildren connected to her homeland via food.<sup>[ii]</sup>

Since the 1940s, Uyghurs such as Hanzala's grandmother have migrated to and settled in Pakistan. Initially using Pakistan as a stopping point in their eventual journey to Saudi Arabia for religious pilgrimage, political tensions within China eventually transformed Pakistan into a destination itself around the 1970s. Many, like Hanzala's grandmother, settled in Rawalpindi, a city near the capital Islamabad. In Pakistan, Uyghurs maintain varying levels of connection to their heritage, with food critical to remembering the taste of their homeland. In Rawalpindi especially, an existing local fascination with Chinese textiles and, of course, food give the Uyghur diaspora an avenue to publicly connect with their homeland while ensuring their short- and long-term financial security. During the late 2010s and early 2020s, Pakistani vloggers increasingly record their experiences within Uyghur-owned Chinese restaurants, sometimes even meeting and speaking with the owners to learn about Xinjiang's unique dishes, culinary techniques, and eating rituals. These vlogs offer insight into how the Uyghur diaspora in Pakistan maintains a subtle cultural and culinary border between themselves and Pakistan while relaxing the more rigid religious borders that Uyghurs hold within China. Given the Pakistani authorities' willingness to suppress Uyghur nationalism within Pakistan at the behest of the Chinese government, these restaurants also offer insight into subtler forms of gastronomic nationalism.

In China, Uyghur cuisine is distinctly understood as a Muslim cuisine. Uyghurs are far from being the only Muslim-majority ethnic group in China; there are also Tatars, Kazakhs, and others. However, Uyghurs define their food in contrast to Han food, which encompasses Hui food. While the Hui explicitly mark their food as *qīngzhēn* (*halal*; pure by Islamic laws) to distinguish their dishes from the original non-*qīngzhēn* Han variants, the Uyghurs, in presenting themselves and their food as Muslim by default, do not. It is a given that Uyghur food is *qīngzhēn*.<sup>[iii]</sup>

It is, similarly, a given that all food in Pakistan will be *halal*. Established in 1947 as a homeland for South Asia's Muslims, the incorporation of Islam into the foundations of Pakistani law makes it legally and culturally difficult to sell or even acquire non-*halal* ingredients such as alcohol or pork. Within Pakistan, Uyghur cuisine is not distinct as a Muslim cuisine but is instead widely understood as

“Chinese,” with most Pakistanis seeing no distinction between Han and Uyghur cuisine. It is all Chinese, and this broad label enables Uyghurs like Hanzala to open restaurants and thrive.

These vlogs center Pakistani reception and fascination toward Uyghur cuisine and culture, but they also provide insight into how Uyghurs have maintained and sold their foodways outside of Xinjiang. Without the distinction as a Muslim cuisine, Uyghurs are enveloped into the broad category of Chinese cuisine, a categorization they may reject within China itself, especially as China’s vast culinary and ethnic diversity enables culinary nationalism.<sup>[iv]</sup> That Uyghurs in Pakistan demonstrate a flexibility with Pakistani vloggers who insist on calling them Chinese as opposed to Uyghur, softly correcting them but not pressing the point, demonstrates how they have adapted to Pakistani norms. The adoption of Pakistani and Han cuisine into their restaurant menus further demonstrates Uyghur willingness to evolve Uyghur cuisine into a broader category. This can be read as a strategic marketing decision, but it also signals soft assimilation into Pakistani society by sacrificing public identity claims for the maintenance and commercialization of their foodways. This ensures their long-term security and stability within Pakistan, as overt Uyghur nationalism could risk negative attention from Pakistani authorities.

For example, apart from Mahmood’s 2020 vlog, a 2022 vlog from a Pakistani woman named Fatima features another Uyghur-owned restaurant in Rawalpindi: the aptly-named China Xinjiang Restaurant. Fatima makes her way to the rooftop, where she sits cross-legged and at an angle to watch the sunset while her food is served. Her dinner menu provides a glimpse into how Uyghurs combine their food traditions with that of Pakistan’s – *rooh afza*, a concentrated rose syrup mixed with water popular in Pakistan, is served alongside *chay dora*, a herbal tea blend popularly consumed by Uyghurs. The latter, in particular, is served with some theater, as the waiter initially pours some tea into a small bowl before immediately tossing it out onto the floor and re-filling the bowl. This method for serving tea is common within Uyghur and Han cuisine, but it is unique to Pakistanis like Fatima, who treat the tea pouring as a spectacle and the tea itself as a unique medicinal beverage.

Taken together, these vlogs reveal how Uyghur cuisine in Pakistan exists within a carefully negotiated space of visibility and containment. In China, Uyghur food functions as both a marker of Muslim identity and a boundary against Han culinary nationalism.<sup>[v]</sup> In Pakistan, however, where *halal* is the default, that religious distinction dissolves. What remains legible to Pakistani consumers is not “Muslim food,” but “Chinese food.” This broad categorization both obscures and enables: it envelops Uyghur identity within a generalized Chinese aesthetic while simultaneously providing restaurateurs the commercial legitimacy and political safety necessary to operate within Pakistan.<sup>[vi]</sup>

Uyghur cuisine in Pakistan is neither fully assimilated nor fully distinct. It occupies a liminal position: publicly Chinese, privately Uyghur; commercially adaptable, culturally rooted. In this diasporic setting, food becomes more than sustenance or spectacle. It is a medium through which identity is preserved, softened, and strategically reframed.

[i] Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 27-31; Cristina Cesaro, "Polo, Lāghmān, So Säy: Situating Uyghur Food Between Central Asia and China" in *Situating the Uyghurs Between China and Central Asia*, eds. Ildiko Beller-Hann, Cristina Cesaro, and Joanne Smith Finley (London: Routledge, 2007), 187-188.

[ii] Arshad Mahmood, "Lets Eat Mantoo a Chinese Dish | Murree Road Rawalpindi," YouTube video, 10:22, March 10, 2020, Lets Eat Mantoo a Chinese Dish | Murree Road Rawalpindi

[iii] Qīngzhēn (清真) literally translates to "simple" or "plain" but has come to stand for "Muslim" in modern Chinese. However, the word mùsīlín (穆斯林) is more commonly used to refer to adherents of Islam, while qīngzhēn refers to food that is considered "halal" (permissible for consumption according to Islamic laws and norms).

[iv] John Beck, "China is erasing their culture. In exile, Uyghurs remain defiant," *National Geographic*, November 22, 2022,

[v] Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 199; Dru Gladney, *Dislocating China: Muslims, Minorities And Other Subaltern Subjects* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 11-20.

[vi] Nicolas Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," *The China Journal*, no. 44 (2000): 65, 74-76; Michael Clarke, "China's "War on Terror" in Xinjiang: Human Security and the Causes of Violent Uighur Separatism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 2, no. 20 (2008): 76-78; Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi, "Han Migration to Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: Between State Schemes and Migrants' Strategies," *Zeitschrift Für Ethnologie* 2, no. 138 (2013): 155-157; James Milward, "Historical Perspectives on Contemporary Xinjiang," *Inner Asia* 2, no. 2 (2000): 122.

# The Only Eagle Huntress

*Byambasuren Enkhee*

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The Eagle Huntress (2016) portrays thirteen-year-old Aisholpan Nurgaiv as she learns to hunt with eagles despite the disapproval of elders in her community. After these trials, she is shown triumphant after she wins the Golden Eagle Festival in Bayan-Ulgii, western Mongolia. This “girl-power” narrative extended beyond the documentary itself, as the filmmakers claimed (inaccurately) in its marketing that Aisholpan was the “first girl in two-thousand years to hunt with eagles.” Whilst this was an alluring narrative that helped the documentary gain entry to prestigious film festivals, it did so at the expense of portraying her community as an unenlightened backwater.

The Eagle Huntress is valuable as an introduction to Kazakh-Mongolian culture for English-speakers. Yet this exposure is a double-edged sword: the filmmakers didn’t take care to unearth nuance in their portrayal of gender dynamics, claiming that Aisholpan’s community had “a certain kind of ignorance” about women’s abilities. Filmmakers and content creators catering to the American market tend to highlight stories of exceptional individuals overcoming challenges rather than examining the institutions that encompass these challenges and individuals. The film’s narrative insistence on showing Aisholpan’s triumph over patriarchy was built on inaccuracy; the issue was never about whether girls and women are allowed to or are capable of hunting with eagles. They have been for millennia, as historian Adrienne Mayor has shown using early Central Asian artifacts and records of modern-day eagle huntresses.

In avoiding mention of Aisholpan’s predecessors, the documentary gets to exceptionalize Aisholpan’s struggle without exploring more complicated community dynamics. What do Kazakhs feel about the increasingly tourist-sponsored nature of hunting with eagles, distanced from its origins as a subsistence practice? How do economic necessity and gender roles intersect to determine who gets to hunt with eagles? It is for the same reasons that the *The Sydney Morning Herald* called the documentary a “fantasy for Western eyes.” Aisholpan’s story would have been no less remarkable because of how difficult eagle-hunting already is – for boys *and* for girls. When Mayor pointed out this condescension in the film and its marketing, one of its producers, Asher Svidensky, responded “‘entertainment isn’t anthropology’.”

In embracing a simplistic narrative about rural western Mongolia, the documentary avoids messier questions about structural difficulties in preserving the practice of hunting with eagles. In 2023, an *Al Jazeera* reporter, Asha Tanna, visited Bayan-Ulgii in “search of the eagle huntresses,” and found locals encouraging their daughters to pose with eagles for journalists. “‘These girls do not hunt,’ [the local guide, Nurbol Kahjikhon] confesses... We know tourists and photographers want to see girls and eagles. And we want people to visit Altai.” These contradictions exist alongside each other, and filmmakers like Bell and tourist photographers like Svidensky choose not to portray these nuances in favor of a narrative that plays better for audiences at home. Though entertainment is not anthropology, both fields share the tendency to exoticise their subjects.

Aisholpan represents the big “other” in our country: she is of Kazakh heritage, her community is primarily Muslim, and she speaks Kazakh in addition to Khalkha Mongolian. Thus, her visibility is not seen as Mongolian visibility. Kazakhs make up about 4% of the population of Mongolia, the majority of whom reside in Bayan-Ulgii province. Ethnic minorities like Kazakhs, Tuvas, and Tsaatans have less access to education and employment opportunities nationwide (UN Committee on the Elimination of

Racial Discrimination). Aisholpan has had to be careful in celebrating her Kazakh heritage in Mongolian press coverage, having to balance both pride in her Kazakh heritage whilst reiterating that this does not make her less Mongolian. In one Mongolian interview (paraphrased and translated from the interview with O. Shinetsuya, Zindaa.mn), Aisholpan stated that despite many asking her whether her family will shirk their Mongolian citizenship in favour of Kazakhstani nationality, her family is proud to live in the beautiful country of Mongolia, and know they must never forget this.

Interestingly, foreign media like *The Eagle Huntress* helps fight this othering by forcing Mongolians overall to pay attention to what is being branded as Mongolian abroad. The international attention towards the documentary and its acceptance to film festivals forced Mongolian audiences to pay attention to Kazakh culture more than we have in the past.

The stakes of misrepresentation are intensified when there are so few variations of a Mongolian identity popular globally. Representation like *The Eagle Huntress* has an outsize influence on how foreigners see Mongolians. Unexpectedly for the better, it will also influence how we Mongolians see one of our own minority cultures. Representation can help us vouch for our existence and lend us validity when there are threats to our cultures, but a system that necessitates inaccurate, attention-grabbing representation before a community's basic needs are met, or their distinct identity protected, is fundamentally flawed. We should strive for something better.

The 2016 film amplifies otherness for the benefit of foreign audiences while inadvertently challenging it domestically. The documentarians should have focused on “community dynamics for community members themselves, in relation to their own knowledge production about themselves” (Shneiderman, 2021). If they had done so, the documentary could have been a nuanced portrayal of Kazakh girlhood in western Mongolia and provide representation for a marginalized community trying to preserve their culture amidst the changing tourism industry. There was an opportunity for nuance and deeper resonance had the filmmakers dug deeper into the historical dynamics surrounding Kazakhs in Mongolia. In that way, this documentary did a disservice to Aisholpan's community. The filmmakers showed the trope of unenlightened men presenting an obstacle to the heroine of the narrative, not a nuanced portrayal which acknowledges the greater gender equality that does exist in her community.

- 1 <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-38874266>
- 2 From an interview at the Sundance Film Festival (2016): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cpnm2VcaDQI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cpnm2VcaDQI)
- 3 Mayor, Adrienne. The Eagle Huntress: Ancient Traditions and New Generations. AncientOrigins.net reprinted in BUST. [www.researchgate.net/publication/301699343\\_The\\_Eagle\\_Huntress\\_Ancient\\_Traditions\\_and\\_New\\_Generations](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301699343_The_Eagle_Huntress_Ancient_Traditions_and_New_Generations). 1 May 2016. Accessed 3 Dec. 2023.
- 4 Svidensky took the initial viral image of Aisholpan holding an eagle in 2013 for the National Geographic. <https://www.svidensky.com/projects/the-eagle-huntress>
- 5 As quoted in Mayor's 2016 paper: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301699343\\_The\\_Eagle\\_Huntress\\_Ancient\\_Traditions\\_and\\_New\\_Generations](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301699343_The_Eagle_Huntress_Ancient_Traditions_and_New_Generations)
- 6 As of 2021, according to the National Bureau of Statistics

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# Ship Graveyard, Moynaq

## *Lyra Browning*

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Ghost Ships is a series of artworks inspired by Karakalpakstan, which Lyra has kindly given us permission to reproduce here. About the series, she writes:

*"In September 2025 I visited the small village of Moynaq in Karakalpakstan, an autonomous region of Western Uzbekistan. Given that it now lies 150km from the shores of the Aral Sea, it is hard to tell that this community was once a thriving town, central to the country's fishing industry. But there are traces. The endless sandy horizon is occasionally broken by strange, sad shipwrecks, slowly decaying beneath the cloudless sky. I was struck by the tragedy of the scene and made these sketches in response."*



Above: "Plural", Lyra Browning, 2026

Overleaf: "Red Sky", Lyra Browning, 2026



# Contributor Biographies

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*Chaya Steinhilz* is an MPhil (Master's) student in Russian and East European Studies at St Antony's College, Oxford. Her research focuses on national identity in the Soviet Union, particularly in the lead-up to and during the Great Patriotic War. She received her BA from UCL in 2024, where she studied at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies. In addition to her academic work, she is a Dahrendorf Scholar at the European Studies Centre at Oxford, where she is researching the connections and alliances between illiberal leaders in Eastern Europe and the American MAGA movement. She has been awarded scholarships by Oxford's Global and Area Studies Department, the European Studies Centre, the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, and a FLAS Fellowship through the Davis Center at Harvard.

*Robert Willard* is a PhD student at the University of Vienna, in the department of Near Eastern Studies. His current research focuses on the use of heritage as a framework for practicing and maintaining water governance in Western Uzbekistan. Robert has 10 years of experience in ecological advocacy and fieldwork in Uzbekistan, in partnership with Webster University, the University of Pisa and the World Aral Region Charity. Robert obtained an MSc in Sustainability Studies from IHE Delft and a BA in Economics at Columbia University.

*Basmah Arshad* is a doctoral candidate of history at the University of North Texas. Trained in cultural history, she is interested in issues of migration, race, and gender relevant to modern Asian and Asian American foodways. Previously, Arshad earned her Master's in International and Regional Studies from the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor in 2023. Throughout her academic career, Arshad has explored topics relevant to museums, diaspora, and borderlands histories.

*Byambasuren Enkhee* was born and raised in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. She received her bachelor's degree in English and Environmental Studies at the University of Washington and worked as a community engagement professional in Seattle, Washington, before switching fields to gain an MPhil in Social Anthropology from the University of Cambridge. Her research focuses on identity, language, and gender in contemporary urban Mongolia.

*Lyra Browning* is a second-year student of Russian and History at The University of Cambridge. Alongside her studies, Lyra is a keen artist and has drawn inspiration from recent travels in Central Asia. Lyra plans to deepen this engagement during her upcoming Year Abroad in Bishkek, where she will be teaching local children and researching Soviet and post-Soviet political and cultural legacies in contemporary Kyrgyzstan.

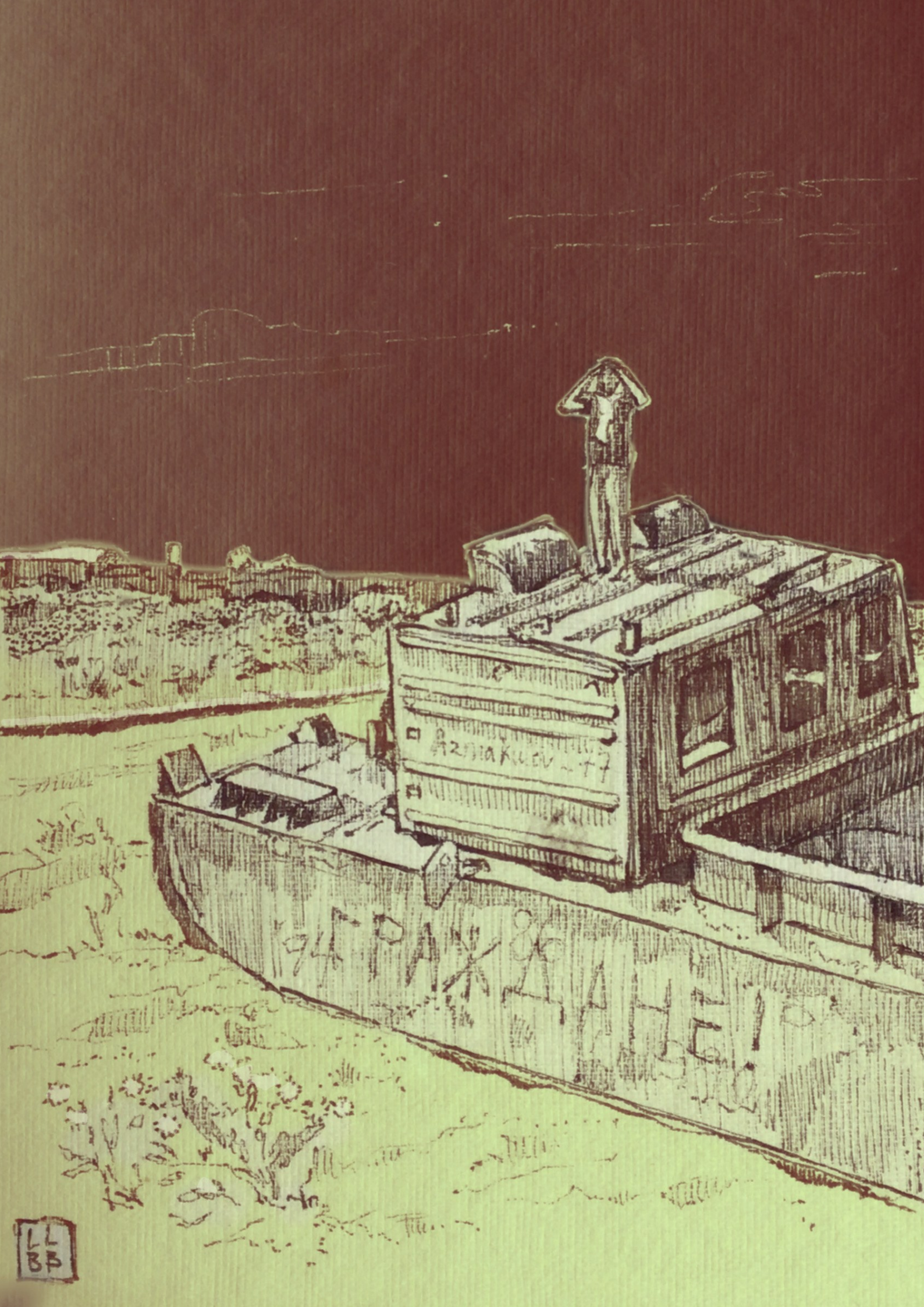
# Editor Biographies

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*Colin (Kolja) Hood* is a freelance journalist and recent master's graduate specialising in Russia and Eurasia. At Charles University, he focused on the development of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia. He also holds an undergraduate degree in Russian and French from the University of Cambridge, and he has spent time living and working in Bishkek. His work on the post-Soviet space has appeared in Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, Novaya Gazeta, and Le Taurillon amongst other places. In 2025/2026 he was part of a highly competitive cohort of young journalists trained by European Solidarity Centre, and New Eastern Europe Magazine. In addition to his native English, Kolja is fluent in Chinese (Mandarin), Russian and French, and has a strong knowledge of Czech, Polish, and Ukrainian.

*Claudia Macey-Dare* is an Anglo-Slovak PhD researcher in Area Studies at Charles University, Prague (Univerzita Karlova), whose work focuses on postmodernism in post-Socialist literature as a distinctive transnational literary genre. A recipient of the Polish Institute's Marian Szykowski Prize (2026), she has received scholarships from both the Latvian, and Slovak governments, as well as the Hlávková Foundation (Hlávková Nadace), and she is fortunate enough to currently be funded by the Czech government. Her recent book chapter 'Weaving Between the Meta-Narratives of Multiple Pasts', is available in the Bloomsbury compendium *The Fluidity of Collective Memory* (2025). Her professional experience includes the Civil Service Fast Stream, and working as a Desk Officer at the Foreign Office on Sub-Saharan policy. In her free time she can usually be found hiking halfway up a mountain!

*Lewis Ebert* is a DPhil researcher at the University of Oxford, where he previously completed his BA and MPhil. His research focuses on the historical development of steppe cultures in Mongolia, with particular attention to the intersections of cuisine, medicine, and cosmology. His DPhil thesis examines the period of Mongol rule in China, analysing how the influx of steppe cultural practices reshaped established dietary and medical frameworks. Through a close reading of dietary manuals, the project combines textual, historical, and anthropological methodologies to reconstruct the culinary cosmologies of the period and to trace their lineages into the present. His first book project, *Food Cultures of Mongolia: Cuisine, Customs, Issues*, with Bloomsbury Publishing is forthcoming in 2027. His broader engagement with Eurasian history has led him to research on steppe culture, religion, and art history, on which he has published and presented widely. Underpinning his work is a sustained interest in the cosmological relationships between ritual, culture, and everyday practice, which continues to inform his interdisciplinary historical approach.



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