**Julia Obertreis. *Imperial Desert Dreams: Cotton Growing and Irrigation in Central Asia, 1860–1991*. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017) [=*Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte Osteuropas,* vol. 8], 538 pp., ISBN 978-3-8471-0786-6*.***

This voluminous book by the German historian Julia Obertreis is a synthesis of the current scholarship on irrigation and cotton agriculture in colonial and Soviet Central Asia, accompanied by numerous new insights on debates surrounding technical and environmental matters, the profile of the experts (European and Central Asian) involved, and the ideological underpinnings of large-scale infrastructural projects. The study is organised around an original periodization that, for the Soviet period, appropriately looks more at turning points in the cotton sector than at political shifts in the ‘metropole’. A first chapter, based on evidence from published sources and the findings of other scholars, sketches out the peculiarities of the colonial-era “cotton boom” and clarifies the attitude of the Russian imperial government. It is followed by a reconstruction of early Soviet and Stalin-era policies for the achievement of “cotton autonomy”, including the revival of pre-revolutionary plans for the “vivification” of the Hungry Steppe, new projects (*e.g.* the Great Fergana Canal), the controversial diffusion of new technology, and even ‘soft’ symbolic decisions that cemented the image of cotton as the pride of the Uzbek and Turkmen SSRs. In addition, Obertreis here provides an account of the fate of Russian ‘experts’, particularly during the ‘Great Terror’, together with an evaluation of early policies to ‘indigenise’ the body of water specialists. The third chapter, which lies at the core of the argument, traces the success of ‘indigenisation’ after WWII, the completion of the Hungry Steppe and Karakum Canal projects, and the way Central Asia’s development was showcased to the ‘near abroad’; it also exposes, though, the first signs of unsustainability, such as lack of drainage and ‘waste’, which were nonetheless brushed away as a result of local malpractice. The study of expertise, technological decision-making, inter-ethnic relations, and symbolic investment on the Hungry Steppe site makes up a substantial part of this chapter and is, in my view, the most fascinating part of the book. The last chapter is devoted to the “crisis” of the Soviet “high modernist” programme in the region, with useful accounts of the Uzbek ‘cotton affair’ and its consequences, as well as of the means, timing, and protagonists of ecological criticism in the region, with a focus on the water deficit, salinization, pollution, and –last but not least- the Aral Sea catastrophe.

Obertreis situates her research between the disciplinary subfields of environmental history and of the history of science and technology, with specific links to the German school of “history of infrastructure”. The historian sets out to show how “water infrastructures make power relations visible … and they help legitimise power” (43), while conversely their failure brings discredit on the regime that invested in them, both materially and symbolically. The discussion of the ‘imperial’ dimension of such infrastructure in Central Asia, though, is less explicit than the title would let the reader surmise.

Source-wise, this is a rather eclectic work. Obertreis does not make consistent use of archival sources, although on several topics her evidence does come primarily from files in the Central State Archive of the Uzbek Republic (especially from the *fond* of the Council of Ministers) and, more sparsely, from Uzbekistan’s Central State Archive for Technical-Scientific and Medical Documentation. Well-known Russian published sources (and more obscure German ones) are used in the first chapter, while memoirs dominate the account of the Hungry Steppe; specialist journals are used in the account of the elite-level “ecocritique”, while one encounters visual sources throughout the whole volume. A few interviews are mentioned, but otherwise oral history is not the historian’s chosen method. For long stretches, Obertreis depends on what other scholars have produced, however little there is. For instance, she relies heavily (and legitimately) on the multi-volume *Irrigatsiia Uzbekistana*, on Thurman and Morrison on pre-revolutionary ‘native’ irrigation, and on Weiner, Gestwa, and Schlögel for late Soviet ecological discourse and activism.

Readers of this journal will therefore find in this volume a comprehensive –although not always ground-breaking- reconstruction of the medium-term history of irrigation and cotton agriculture in southern Central Asia. Obertreis, though, does not seem to be catering primarily to this audience. Instead, she links this same story to two further issues of relevance for Soviet and environmental historians at large: the first questions the supposed absence, in the USSR of the 1970s, of a rise in ecological movements parallel to what was observable at the same time in the ‘First World’; the second concerns the specific *loci*, diachronic transformations, and shortcomings of the Soviet “high modernist” project in the ‘periphery’. As to the former, Obertreis prudently concludes by stressing how in fact an ecological discourse existed in Soviet Central Asia in the late 1970s, but was articulated eminently as an “academic ‘critique’”, rather than as a social movement. She also notes continuities between the way the public sphere reacted to issues pertaining to water and irrigation in those years and during the *perestroika* period. This elite discourse on environmental questions at the twilight of the Soviet era was also relatively impermeable to nationalist tropes.

As to the latter, Obertreis intervenes in the ongoing conversation between those who, following Stephen Kotkin, emphasise the ‘High Modernism’ of Stalinist ‘civilisation’, and those (*e.g.* Terry Martin) who see the latter as a form of Neo-Traditionalism. She seems to offer a nuanced support to the first thesis, by demonstrating through the book the inherent fragility of Soviet modernity and insisting on how different actors –including the many Central Asian supporters of “agrarian modernism” (474) informally negotiated their way through a highly formalised system. In this respect, it would have been interesting if, besides offering her own view on James C. Scott’s paradigm, the author had engaged with the critique which Christian Teichmann has recently offered of the same, similarly in reference to irrigation in the region.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Another research question advanced in the introduction and pursued here and there in each of the four chapters pertains to the “tension between local knowledge and given policies” (41). It is not unfair to say that this line of inquiry is pursued less consistently than the other two, mostly because of the relatively little research Obertreis was able to conduct on grass-roots practices, but also because of the objective difficulty (acknowledged by the author) of tracing through documents what was transmitted orally or by practical example. What instead Obertreis documents very well are the effects and limitations of the various waves of intended or unintended ‘indigenisation’ of the body of water technicians and engineers at work in the region. One of the strong points of this book is indeed its reconstruction of the intertwined but different vicissitudes of the main research institution and the main provider of further education in the field of irrigation and agriculture (SANIIRI and TIIIMSKh respectively). Obertreis pays attention to ‘indigenisation’ at other points, too, for instance in the discussion of the ‘internationalist’ nature of the Hungry Steppe project and the inter-ethnic patronage networks it gave rise to.

Indigenisation, concludes the historian, was the main point where Soviet “desert dreams” departed from their Tsarist antecedents – while collectivisation disrupted the life of the Central Asian peasantry far more than Tsarist policies had ever done. A further difference, which is too often overlooked but very justly stressed in this publication, resides in the minuscule dimension and very limited record of successes of pre-revolutionary new irrigation projects. Finally, Obertreis correctly acknowledges that the effective role of the State in supporting the production of cotton in Central Asia before the revolution should not be overstated and foregrounds the importance of local and Russian entrepreneurs and the agency of peasants themselves. In this respect, she explicitly rejects (135) the idea of a straightforward collusion between Russian capitalists and the imperial government contained in Sven Beckert’s best-selling and highly influential *Empire of Cotton*, which curiously claimed to use Obertreis’s own manuscript as a source.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Soviet irrigation plans, true, did not come without their oneiric dimension, with their larger-than-life heroes, poetic description, and long-time failure to acknowledge issues of pollution, lack of drainage, salinization, and falling yields. In this sense, it is symptomatic that “dreams” is used in reference to both pre- and post-1917 projects by both Obertreis and Maya Peterson in her forthcoming book.[[3]](#footnote-3) However if continuities existed, we are told, they resided more clearly in the persistent idea of cotton autarky and in the concept of development as *osvoenie*, which Obertreis translates as “full use [of natural resources]” (or, even more precisely, with the German *Erschließung*).

The value of this work for teaching purposes is somewhat limited by its internal organisation in four very long chapters, each of which contains a great number of sections – and, in one case, sub-sections. While all chapters come with handy, clearly-written introductions and conclusions, clustering or hierarchizing the sections would have simplified the readers’ navigation and made the overarching lines of argument stand out more clearly. While the volume is overall well produced, a more careful copy-editing would have corrected clunky or ‘German’ transliterations, typos, and occasional repetitions. Minor qualms aside, Obertreis’s *Imperial Desert Dreams* is a welcome addition to the library of the teacher and student of modern Central Asia – and, hopefully, a window on the region for environmental historians of the USSR and beyond.

1. C. Teichmann. *Macht der Unordnung: Stalins Herrschaft in Zentralasien 1920-1950*. (Hamburg: Hamburger Verlag, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. S. Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 346-7, 362. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. M.K. Peterson. *Pipe Dreams: Water and Empire in Central Asia's Aral Sea Basin*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)