

Pianciola Niccolò, *Stalinismo di frontiera: Colonizzazione agricola, sterminio dei nomadi e costruzione statale in Asia centrale (1905-1936)* [A Frontier Stalinism: Agricultural Colonisation, Extermination of Nomads, and State Construction in Central Asia (1905-1936)], Roma: Viella (Media et Orientalis Europa, 3), 2009, 552 p., tab., appendixes, bibliography, index

by **Beatrice Penati**

This book is based on a rich, albeit exclusively Russian-language set of archival and printed sources, in particular as far as the revolutionary and Soviet periods are concerned, from Moscow, Almaty, Tashkent and Shymkent. Despite its title, *Stalinismo di frontiera* focuses on areas of Central Asia inhabited by Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomads, from the 1890s to WWII, and reads their history through the prism of the confrontation between nomads and settlers, combined with the processes of state-building and inclusion of the nomadic population into the state's mechanisms. Between the 1927-1928 grain procurement crisis and the Great Famine, this inclusion took the form of an unprecedented pressure on the population in order to extract resources.

Adopting a medium-term perspective, after the massive arrival of Russian settlers in the Steppe and Semirech'e at the end of the nineteenth century, N. Pianciola focuses on the 1914-1920 period, combining existing historiography with some new archival evidence. In particular, he explains the attacks on Russian villages of 1916 more as a consequence of local micro-conflicts, than of general interethnic animosity (109). Dealing with the 1920-1922 period, he shows the strategies and consequences of early Soviet measures of "decolonisation", in particular the "land-and-water reform" in Semirech'e and, to a minor extent, in the Steppe region. N. Pianciola manages to estimate the dimensions of the reform and to refute the rhetoric of social revolution within the *aul* that accompanied it, and connects these measures with the apex of power of "Muslim communists" in Tashkent until February 1920. Nevertheless, the reasons why the "land-and-water reform" actually took place only after Frunze's arrival (158) are not fully illustrated (173,184). N. Pianciola consecrates two chapters to the economic situation in the 1920s and to the "politicisation of ethnic differences" in the same years, making clear the nomads' interaction with the sedentary population and their strategies to overcome economic hardship. "Nationality policies" are not limited to border demarcation, but included internal *raionirovanie*, rules governing agricultural credit and many "affirmative action policies," that made some identity cleavages meaningful. Yet, I would not agree with N. Pianciola when he peremptorily argues that the local population participated in the definition of national republics only as an *object* of ethnographic enquiry (235).

The 1927-1928 grain procurement crisis coincided in the Kazakh Autonomous Republic with the

cattle famine and a renewal of the "state's attack": the re-opening of Kazakh territory to European settlers, the introduction of compulsory military service, the criminalisation of aspects of traditional Kazakh habits, and the definitive alignment of the party on Goloshchekin's position, with the expulsion of all elements related to the Alash Orda. In N. Pianciola's view, the "debaysation" that took place in this phase explicitly targeted the Kazakh population (322) who, having fewer connections in the *apparat*, were also less protected against excesses (312). When the full collectivisation drive was launched in autumn 1929, the nomad economy was already close to complete collapse. In spite of Stalin's call for moderation in March 1930, the first half of that year was characterised by widespread hunger-related revolts throughout Kazakhstan. The rebels were mostly nomads (357), who were more heavily penalised by the grain procurements. Protests were directed more against collectivisation, than sedentarisation itself, as the latter was under-financed, organisationally feeble, and had no significant impact on the nomadic population. Nevertheless, nomads were pushed towards agriculture by their increasing poverty and by the diminution of pastures, due to the expansion of grain crops and by the resettlement of dekulakised peasants from the European parts of the USSR, between 1930 and 1931. In March 1931, the decision to "socialise" all cattle reduced Kazakh *otkochevniki* (former impoverished nomads) to starvation. This measure was not only aimed at freeing workforce and fields, but also at transferring livestock to the European parts of the USSR touched by the troubles of collectivisation (391).

An entire chapter is devoted to the famine of 1931, covering the years up to 1933. N. Pianciola focuses here on the strategies of emigration, re-immigration or urbanisation, the destiny of abandoned children, and the reaction of the state. Collections of published documents are combined with archival sources (esp. the Kiselëv commission's *fond*) and travel accounts. Curiously, almost no reference is made to Kazakh post-Soviet historiography on the topic, apart from brief hints in the introduction (28). The famine changed sedentarisation policies, because authorities were now confronted with *former* nomads. However, the initial goals were far from attained, and, despite their poverty, many families did not even remain in the "sedentarisation points" for long. In his evaluation of the famine, N. Pianciola analyses how depopulation was distributed according to nationality and region,

but does not provide his own calculations for the total and endorses Maksudov's (1,450,000 Kazakh victims), while substantially discarding Abylkhodzhin, Tatimov and Kozybaev's (1,750,000). However, this choice would have deserved more thorough illustration. N. Pianciola writes of the mutual responsibilities of Soviet officials that, although Moscow was continually informed in 1928-1932, the famine suffered from a lack of "visibility" because the Kazakh republic was less strategic from the viewpoint of agricultural or industrial expansion, or geopolitically, by comparison with the Ukraine, the Urals, or the Russian Far East. Goloshchekin is depicted almost as Stalin's plenipotentiary, to the point that he needed to visit the Kremlin only twice: at the beginning and at the very end of the crisis. However, he shared his responsibilities with the lower ranks, in particular in the local distribution of charges and quotas that penalised Kazakhs more than Europeans. As a counter-example, the author argues that in neighbouring Kyrgyzia no famine happened because, as the Kyrgyz autonomous oblast' belonged to *Sredniaia Azia*, collectivisation took place later and at a slower pace. Moreover, livestock per household was *ab initio* more abundant than in the Kazakh republic, and the relative poorness of Kyrgyz cereal production virtually excluded the *oblast'* from Soviet measures of requisition.

The focus of this research is on the role played by the state supporting nomads and settlers alternately, but ultimately pursuing a strategy of inclusion towards both. At least until 1933 the state in the Kazakh republic was far from being "totalitarian", and could not control thoroughly all passages in its chain of command. In this sense, the death of more than one million Kazakhs is to be considered – writes

the historian – as a by-product, as the "price" of policies of forced modernisation, more than as their goal (489), in a general attempt at state-building: only "collectivisation, in these areas [*here N.P. refers to Central Asia as a whole - B.P.*], meant the ultimate re-conquest of [Russia's] colonial periphery" (387). Yet, N. Pianciola defines the impressive death toll connected to the famine and its consequences using the expression "ethnic extermination": even if one could admit the existence of involuntary exterminations, the meaningfulness of the ethnic cleavage cannot be conceived without an active part being played by the perpetrators in defining their victims. This lexical choice, thus, remains controversial. This said, N. Pianciola's book is a solid and substantial piece of research, unfortunately only accessible to the small academic community of Italian readers. Plenty of references to wider historical debate make it interesting in a comparative perspective. There are a few questionable points and minor mistakes, generally referring to questions that fall beyond the author's main area of expertise. However, the ordinary reader would have wanted the author to clarify his position towards the abundant Kazakh historiography on the 1920s and 1930s, whilst Isabelle Ohayon's *La sédentarisation des Kazakhs* (2006) – cf. *supra* review No. 305 – is surprisingly absent from both text and notes. Remarks about historiography may have been superabundant for the standard Italian reader, but should be integrated if this book were to be translated for a public of specialists.

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