
Opening Extract from...

Stalin's Legacy

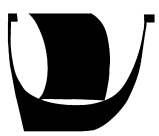
Written by Struan Stevenson

Published by Birlinn Ltd

Stalin's Legacy

The Soviet War on Nature

Struan Stevenson



First published in 2012 by
Birlinn Limited
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.birlinn.co.uk

ISBN: 978 1 78027 090 6

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Designed and typeset by Iolaire Typesetting, Newtonmore
Printed and bound by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin

‘Once the class struggle has been won, Soviet humankind will be free to engage its final enemy: nature.’

Maxim Gorky (1868–1936)

Contents

Lits of Illustrations and Maps		ix
Acknowledgements		xi
Foreword		xiii
Introduction		xv
One:	Central Asia	1
Two:	The Polygon	17
Three:	The Nuclear Legacy	39
Four:	Return Visit	72
Five:	Anatoly Matushenko and the Birth of the Soviet Bomb	90
Six:	Uranium Tailings	113
Seven:	The Aral Sea	124
Eight:	Desiccation	137
Nine:	Vozrozhdeniye Island	149
Ten:	Water Is Life	157
Eleven:	Afghanistan	177
Twelve:	Turkmenistan and the Golden Age Lake	187
Thirteen:	Ili-Balkhash Basin	204
Fourteen:	Rocket Launching in Kazakhstan	210
Fifteen:	Other Environmental Catastrophes in the former USSR	218
Sixteen:	The Lessons of History	222
Bibliography		241
Index		249

List of Illustrations

The first Soviet nuclear explosion, nicknamed 'Joe-1' by the Americans.

One of the many radioactive craters that have ruined farmland and water bodies in the Polygon.

A boy born to a Soviet pilot and his wife who were working on the nuclear tests in the Polygon, with a single eye in the centre of his forehead – a perfect Cyclops.

Some of the citizens of the Polygon have suffered terrible deformities due to the legacy of nuclear testing.

Angry Kazakh villagers from Sarzhal in the Polygon have called for more help for victims of the Soviet nuclear tests.

The Tsar Bomba – the largest, most powerful nuclear weapon ever detonated.

Struan Stevenson MEP, and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon during a visit to Kurchatov.

Struan Stevenson Street in Znamenka.

Struan Stevenson with parents and children at the opening of the new Urdzhar School for Handicapped Children.

The rapidly receding shoreline of the Aral Sea has left many fishing boats strewn across the former seabed.

Struan Stevenson on one of the rotting hulks at Muynak harbour, which is now over 100km from the sea.

Changes in the water level of the Aral Sea.

With the wife of the *akim* of Muynak after being welcomed into the furnace-like interior of their home and naming their grandson 'William Wallace'.

The Nurek dam in Tajikistan, currently the tallest in the world.

Struan Stevenson at the Nurek dam in Tajikistan, with the slogan 'Water is Life' painted over a tunnel entrance.

Struan Stevenson with Tajik president Emomali Rahmon at the Rogun dam.

Struan Stevenson with one of the less aggressive fighting dogs near Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan.

Maps

Central Asia xii

Kazakhstan 29

Radioactive hotspots in the Ferghana Valley 115

Landing areas of rocket's detachable parts 212

Map of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.
(Source: adapted from UN Map 37363 Rev. 7)

Foreword

This is a modern horror story about a ruthless regime using its own people like rats in an experiment. Told in very personal style by a campaigning Member of the European Parliament, the appalling legacy of what was Stalin's Soviet Union is spelt out in graphic terms. It makes for uncomfortable but compelling reading.

At one of my early meetings as NATO Secretary General with the then new President Putin, he expressed his concern with the proliferation of nuclear and other lethal material. He was candid about his country's record. 'Many things happened as the Soviet Union broke up. We are still not able to say how much technology and material escaped or was sold.' He saw proliferation as a key subject for NATO/Russia cooperation, and so did we.

The fact that the Soviet Union had huge capabilities in the nuclear, chemical and biological warfare field was never a secret. Indeed it was one of their boasts. What was unappreciated by everyone except a small Soviet elite was the brutal, merciless way in which Stalin had developed these capabilities using his own people and the land they lived on as a test-bed. Today the people of these lands still suffer the agonies left by a man completely careless of the humanity he abused.

Anyone who flies over modern Kazakhstan, as I have done, is struck by the mysterious straight lines criss-crossing thousands of miles on the ground. The observer will also see the Aral Sea, once a mighty internal ocean, now reduced to a miserable puddle surrounded by the concentric circles measuring the retreat of the water. In this book the mystery is

dispelled. The perpetrator was not nature, it was an evil tyrant who used the periphery of his empire as a gigantic cruel laboratory.

Struan Stevenson not only takes us on a personal journey to explore and expose the scandal of Stalin's war on the environment, but he usefully, and importantly tells us what needs to be done to avoid such outrages happening again.

Rt Hon. Lord Robertson of Port Ellen
KT GCMG HonFRSE PC
Secretary General,
North Atlantic Treaty Organisation 1999–2003

Introduction

An atomic lake, an imploded mountain, a disappearing sea, a top-secret biological weapons-testing site and hundreds of millions of tonnes of radioactive waste; contaminated food, deformed babies and widespread illness. Welcome to Central Asia, and some of the world's greatest environmental disasters. As undisputed leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin (18 December 1878 – 5 March 1953) introduced a policy of rapid industrialisation and the brutal collectivisation of agriculture that led to widespread famine and a catastrophic death toll. During the late 1930s, he launched the 'Great Terror', a campaign to purge the Communist Party of people accused of sabotage, terrorism or treachery. He extended it to the military and other sectors of Soviet society. In practice, the purges were indiscriminate; tens of thousands of innocent victims were executed, imprisoned in Gulag labour camps in Siberia and Central Asia or exiled. In the years which followed, millions of members of ethnic minorities were also deported. It is estimated that up to 60 million Soviet citizens lost their lives as a direct result of Stalin's repressive reign, making him one of the greatest butchers in history.

But Stalin not only waged war on his own people. He and some of his immediate successors regarded nature as an enemy that could be overcome by the might of Soviet technology and the brute force of slave labour. Stalin ordered vast networks of canals and irrigation channels to be dug by hand in an attempt to transform deserts into lush pastures. He built gigantic dams and reservoirs, and diverted the course of major rivers. He used his own citizens as human guinea pigs for nuclear tests, and

he conducted top-secret biological weapons experiments on islands that had been cleared of all animal and insect life.

The legacy of Stalin's ill-considered environmental adventures has been devastating. In Central Asia, the Aral Sea has been virtually drained; toxic dust storms rage across the landscape; humans have been exposed to anthrax, typhus and other deadly bio-weapons; generations face illness and disease because of exposure to radiation; acute water shortages threaten regional conflict and the mass migration of environmental refugees. These are global issues with global consequences that may yet impact on all of us.

Since being elected to the European Parliament representing Scotland back in 1999, I have travelled extensively in Central Asia. Having discovered the horrific legacy of Soviet nuclear tests in the Polygon of East Kazakhstan, I have returned there many times. I wrote a book, *Crying Forever*, about my experiences, the sales of which have raised money which Mercy Corps has distributed to children's hospitals, cancer hospitals, village clinics and other important projects in the region.

To show their appreciation, the Kazakhs have given me the Freedom of the City of Semipalatinsk, the main city of East Kazakhstan and the administrative centre of the nuclear-testing zone during Soviet times. I was the first and only foreigner ever to receive this honour; they also decorated me with various medals and honorary professorships and doctorates. In 2010, when Kazakhstan took over the rotating presidency of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), they invited me to become their 'roving ambassador' or personal representative of the chairman in office, with the special remit to draw up a report on the environment of the five Central Asian republics. My travels around Central Asia and the almost unimaginable environmental horror stories I uncovered, all arising from Stalin's determination to conquer nature, are the subject of this book.

CHAPTER ONE

Central Asia

Kazakhstan is home to more than 100 different ethnic groups and 45 religions, all of which live at peace with one another. Indeed the country's leader, President Nursultan Nazarbayev, now promotes racial and religious harmony as one of Kazakhstan's greatest achievements. Nazarbayev himself was born on a collective farm, to scarcely literate parents descended from nomads, in the foothills of the Tien Shan Mountains. He joined the Communist Party in 1962, and as a steelworker earned a reputation for energy and leadership. He soon became first secretary of the Young Communists in his steel plant and steadily rose through the ranks of the Party until he was appointed secretary of the Central Committee of the Kazakh Communist Party in 1980. He became president of the newly independent republic after the collapse of the USSR.

Over half the population is of Kazakh origin, and Russians comprise just over a quarter of the population, with smaller minorities of Uzbeks, Koreans and Chechens accounting for the rest. Since gaining independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan has become a model of stability and prosperity in the region.

Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world – bigger than Western Europe – but with a population of only 15.5 million people. It is rich in mineral resources and its oil reserves are said to be as big as those of Saudi Arabia, with exploitable deposits of coal, iron, lead, aluminium, zinc, uranium, silver and gold. Its landmass ranges from majestic mountains of Himalayan stature on the borders with Mongolia and China, to endless expanses of arid 'steppe', sparsely dotted by remote Kazakh villages. The

country has more than 40,000 lakes, which are teeming with fish and home to immense flocks of flamingos. Its great rivers, like the Irtysh and the Ili, were once the watering places for the conquering hordes commanded by Genghis Khan.

Since independence, Kazakhstan has propelled itself into the premier league of economic tigers in Central Asia with year-on-year growth in excess of 10 per cent, despite a momentary slowing of the economy during the world recession. The EU is Kazakhstan's biggest trading partner, and the state is pursuing a strategy of advanced social, economic and political modernisation which is creating a positive environment for investors. Massive investment is going into new, secure oil and gas transit routes to the West, to ensure a steady supply of hydrocarbons to European consumers.

Despite its rising prosperity, millions of people worldwide only know Kazakhstan from the antics of Borat, the hapless TV reporter played by Sacha Baron-Cohen, who claims to be from Kazakhstan. Many people in the West encountered Kazakhstan for the first time in this comedy blockbuster movie, although none of the film was actually shot in Central Asia. In fact, most of the movie was shot in Romania, where the abject poverty of Kazakh villagers is portrayed as playing a central role in Borat's life story.

Borat may have been filmed in Romania, but despite its burgeoning economic growth, poverty is still a real problem in parts of Kazakhstan, particularly the remote villages of the steppe, where many villagers complain that they have been forgotten. Not only do these formerly nomadic people have to live with the aftermath of Soviet-era nuclear testing and toxic waste dumping, but they also have to contend with common social problems like increasing drug addiction and a growing incidence of HIV/Aids.

Elections in April 2011 handed a landslide victory to Nursultan Nazarbayev for a further seven-year term as president with more than 95 per cent of the vote. His grip on power was strengthened even further when parliament voted in 2007 to allow him to stay in office for an unlimited number of terms. Although he says he advocates democracy as a long-term goal,

he warns that stability could be at risk if change is too swift. In 2010 the Majilis (the Kazakh parliament) agreed that there was no one capable of replacing Nazarbayev as president in the foreseeable future and passed a law requiring a referendum to be held that will enable him to remain in office until at least 2020. Nazarbayev wisely quashed this law, recognising that the 'Arab Spring' uprisings raging across the Middle East in 2011 often arose because rulers had clung to power for too many decades. He wishes to go down in history as the founding father of modern Kazakhstan and not as a ruler forced from power by a popular uprising. Nevertheless, his overwhelming victory in the 2011 presidential election will keep the 71-year-old in office until at least 2018.

The president merged his Otan party with his daughter Dariga's party, Asar, in July 2006. The move created a vast ruling coalition and was seen as consolidating the president's power. Otan was subsequently renamed Nur-Otan in honour of President Nazarbayev, and Dariga, who had been widely tipped as a possible successor, was quietly sidelined. There are currently no opposition MPs in the country's Majilis.

I have met President Nazarbayev several times. In 2005, I led a team of election observers from the European Parliament to cover the presidential elections. I was summoned for a personal audience to the grand new marble edifice of the presidential palace in the Kazahk capital, Astana, designed by British architect Lord Foster of Thamesbank (Norman Foster). I told Nazarbayev that he was a popular leader of his country and that independent opinion polls conducted by the Americans showed that he would win the election with a handsome majority. But, I warned, if the majority was around 60 or 65 per cent, no one in the West would raise an eyebrow. If it was 90 or 95 per cent, people would think that there had been a swindle.

The president roared with laughter. 'I can't help being popular,' he said. He then launched into a lecture on the emergence of democracy in Kazakhstan, explaining that following the collapse of the USSR he was determined to bring a new parliamentary system to his country, but that in the entire history of Central Asia there had never been such a thing as

democracy, only strong leaders that the people looked up to, such as Genghis Khan or Timur (Tamerlane). He said he had literally gathered his closest political friends and allies together and told them: 'You, you and you will form the opposition and you, you and you will join me in the government. There were howls of protest from those I told to make up the opposition parties, but I had to explain to them that democracy cannot work without at least a two-party system and democratic elections.'

On that occasion I took my team of around ten Euro MPs and officials to Astana, and we visited countless polling stations and spoke to opposition politicians and the media. The Kazakhs were very proud of the fact that they had bought and installed a new electronic voting system, which we saw in many polling stations. The big joke amongst Kazakhs was that these complex machines had been built in Belarus, and they predicted that the authoritarian Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko would be the ultimate winner of the Kazakh presidential elections!

Bruce George was the leader of the huge team of 465 election observers from OSCE. A large, bluff Welshman, Bruce was at the time the Labour Party member of parliament for Walsall in the House of Commons. He suggested that we should gather together all of our team leaders for a strictly confidential meeting following the closing of the polling stations, so that we could work out the main thrust of our communiqué for the press conference the next morning. He asked me where we could meet in Astana that was totally secure and well away from prying eyes and ears. We decided to approach the Americans to see if they would allow us to use a room in the US Embassy.

At around midnight, Bruce and his senior advisers from the OSCE, together with me and my top officials, arrived outside the US Embassy gates in a suburb of Astana. Extensive security checks were conducted on our car before the enormous tank barriers and iron gates were swung open. Once in the compound we were escorted to a lift and taken up to the seventh floor of the building, where we were shown into a large

meeting room which, we were assured, had been carefully scanned for bugging devices. We set about exchanging views on the conduct of the elections.

Around two in the morning, someone said that none of the recommendations we had made following the Majilis elections in 1999 had been implemented. Bruce George said that he was reluctant to put this into our final communiqué unless we were absolutely certain of our facts. He instructed our officials to check carefully 'even if it takes all night' to see if any of the recommendations had actually made it onto the Kazakh statute books.

After that we all wearily made our way back to our hotels scattered across the city in temperatures that had dipped to around -20°C. I got to my hotel at about 3 a.m., and as I turned the key in my bedroom door, was astonished to find a large, unmarked, brown envelope lying on the floor. It had been slid under my door. I tore it open to find a comprehensive list of all the recommendations made by the OSCE following the 1999 Majilis elections and how each of them had been properly implemented into Kazakh law! Next morning, each of the team leaders and officials who had attended the high-security meeting in the US Embassy the previous evening said they had returned to their hotels to find similar envelopes!

It wasn't so much that every word we said was being listened to that concerned us, as the blatant way the Kazakh authorities were happy to let us know. President Nazarbayev was re-elected with 91 per cent of the popular vote. We reported that although there had been some improvements in the democratic process, there was still a long way to go. But perhaps we shouldn't be surprised at the Kazakhs' rather distorted version of democracy. After all, throughout their entire history, democracy has been an alien concept across the whole of Central Asia.

A Reflection on the History of Central Asia

In the many years I have visited Central Asia since the fall of the Soviet empire, I have witnessed dramatic changes and huge improvements to the standard of living of the population,