Julia Obertreis: Imperial Desert Dreams. Cotton Growing and Irrigation in Central Asia, 1860–1991 (Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte Osteuropas / Cultural and Social History of Eastern Europe, Bd. 8), Göttingen: V&R unipress 2017, 536 p.

Reviewed by
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History books about single raw materials, goods, commodities, or techniques are on the rise. In line with the global and transnational turn, a growing number of studies approaches global and (trans-)regional transformation processes through a material dimension. Cotton, coffee, salt, tobacco, water, and dams that guide it, coal, and nearly everything that can be found in a household serve as starting points for histories of capitalism or human society and culture. While Bill Bryson uses this approach through "things" in a very eclectic and entertaining way, in the more strictly scholarly field Sven Beckert's global history of cotton has caught the greatest attention.[1] Julia Obertreis' book on cotton growing and irrigation schemes in Tsarist and Soviet Central Asia is an important contribution to this growing field of global history, especially as the Soviet Union is to a large extent absent in Beckert's "Empire of Cotton". However, the book plays in more than one field – more than a transregional or *global* history of cotton and irrigation, it is a history of the (Central Asian) peripheries of the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union, and about how these were ruled in the context of an ever-transforming society.

The starting point and linchpin of Obertreis's longue durée history from the late Tsarist Empire to the end of the Soviet Union are the actors. Engineers working on irrigation schemes, aristocratic capitalists financing large canals, or national party leaders promoting the Hungry Steppe development project are the heroes of the story. The study deliberately does not go down to the level of the actual farmers and village people but stays on the level of decision-makers and specialists. This proves to be the perfect angle to detect the patronizing mechanisms of power in the Soviet system, a continuity of expert networks and their agendas from Tsarist to Soviet reign, as for example the "cotton autonomy" and the civilizing-mission mentality of European modernism, and a contraposition of "actors on the ground" towards central planning institutions.

The reader is introduced very closely to the world of the protagonists – a world of large-scale campaigns and mobilization of resources for overambitious goals and of a mentality of fighting and battlefield with the corresponding pride of the "Hungrysteppers". The Hungry Steppe development project in Uzbekistan from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s shall be highlighted here as an example of Obertreis's approach and the extremely valuable insights revealed by it. In the framework of the hungry steppe development project, several large-scale measures were combined to win huge parts of land for cotton growing: a large irrigation scheme, several state farms and the corresponding villages, a regional centre town, Yangier, and the corresponding infrastructures were built

up. Obertreis depicts this campaign as a micro-cosmos of personalized, patronalizing, Stalinist rule on the one hand, but as a progressive, multicultural space, which "offered a certain liberty from economic and professional restrictions" (p. 321) on the other. To realize the project, the Union government had founded the huge trust *Golodnostepstroj*, which disposed of several infrastructure-providing and material-producing enterprises from food to cement production, and got overfunded by the Union and the Uzbek republican government. Thus, this trust developed a considerably autonomous existence, and it was presided by an omnipotent chairman, who combined backslapping face-to-face contact with the workers with a strict regime of unconditional commitment – in line with the typical Soviet-Stalinist way of enterprise governance. Especially fascinating is that Obertreis elaborates various contradictions and debates among the leading engineers that touch upon basic questions of the Soviet model of development at the transition from Khrushchev's to Brezhnev's reign. An example stems from the field of architecture: the old chairman promoted a radical solution of urban-style agglomerations with multi-storey buildings, in line with Khruschev's "agro-city", while the younger engineers at the threshold to become his successors opted for accommodating the peasants in traditional style countryside housing (pp. 311–313). This debate is a small cut-out of a fundamental contradiction in the Soviet modernization project between a radical vision of destroying the old and a more cautious transformation of existing structures, or even a rebuilding of tradition and history. In the same line stands the contraposition between promoters of a highly industrialized, monocultural, intensive agriculture based on a deep division of labour (who dominated the Soviet discourse) and the supporters of a more adaptive approach with crop rotation and with an acceptance of local knowledge on the circumstances at place (pp. 188–197, 416, 472). This everlasting debate on agricultural development, which was not only led in socialist states and is contemporary also today, was carried on even in the high Stalinist 1930s, on the eve of the great terror. These are only two of many examples, where Obertreis brings out conflicting agendas among the protagonists and institutions of the Soviet modernization project.

The great number of actors, projects, and institutes named in the book is a disadvantage in terms of readability. A reduction of complexity would have been allowed in order to use these protagonists in a more exemplary and categorising way. This might also help to fill more of the middle ground between phone calls in starry nights of the Hungry steppe and the Soviet model of development.

As the title clearly promises, the book is more an imperial history and does not put the globality of cotton circulations centre stage. However, it hints to most interesting points, which can be taken as starting points for a global history of cotton in the socialist world. The most elaborated point in this respect is the presentation of the Soviet Central Asian peripheries as a model for Third World countries through the Uzbek party head's travel diplomacy, through visits to the Hungry steppe project by Fidel Castro, Ahmed Ben Bella, or Süleyman Demirel and through the export of know-how and technology for irrigation

and cotton growing by Uzbek institutes (pp. 334–339). Other examples of global entanglements are the attempts to grow Egyptian cotton sorts in Turkmenistan (p. 193), the chemicalization of agriculture (p. 345), and cross-border cotton trade statistics, including the Soviet role as the main cotton deliverer to the COMECON, only very briefly hinted to in the book (p. 453). That these points are not in Obertreis's main focus does not do any harm to the assets and strengths of the book: It is an important contribution to filling the gap of cotton history in the socialist world and Eastern Europe/Eurasia, as well as to the history of international entanglements of the peripheries of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, and to the social, cultural and economic history of Central Asia. In the context of the efforts undertaken by recent approaches to economic history[2] and by the material histories mentioned in the beginning, Obertreis's book certainly is a further step towards a conciliation of cultural history with political economy.

Notes:

1 S. Beckert, Empire of Cotton. A Global History of Capitalism, New York 2014; B. Bryson, At Home. A Short History of Private Life, London/New York 2010.

2 See for example the conference „Scales of Economy", Sydney, July 2016, URL: https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-6915?title=scales-of-economy&recno=3&q=Slobodian&sort=newestPublished&fq=&total=10.

Eckart Conze / Martin Klimke / Jeremy Varon (eds.): Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear, and the Cold War of the 1980s, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017, p. 370.

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Since the seminal book *Angst im Kalten Krieg*,[1] recently it has become commonplace to mention nuclear, fear, and Cold War issues in one breath. The 2017 compilation *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear, and the Cold War of the 1980s*, therefore, follows a well-established line of research. Yet this work equally attempts to consolidate two central perspectives within common ground: consistently linking military and civil aspects of nuclear technology, and popular public discourse with the high politics of international security.

This book is an offshoot of the 2009 conference *Accidental Armageddons: The Nuclear Crisis and the Culture of the Second Cold War 1975–1989*, held at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. After the editors' own introduction, a wide variety of scholars present 15 articles clustered under the main headings: 1. Defining Threat: Nuclear Dangers and the Moral Imagination, 2. Popular Culture, 3. Local and Transnational Activism, and 4. The Challenge for High Politics.

The introduction, which explains the book's structure, in itself exemplifies how difficult it is to actually stay true to the