

Sarah Cameron

The Diary of Maria Bruss as a Source on Soviet Kazakhstan

The diary of Maria Bruss offers fascinating insights into the history of early Soviet Kazakhstan. Her work, only recently brought to light, is one of the very few surviving diaries from the republic's tumultuous early years (1917-1945). It is even more remarkable because its author was a woman and someone of modest means: Born a peasant, Maria Bruss becomes a factory worker by the diary's close. Her work offers a gripping, first-person account of issues such as family life, social change, and industrialization that other existing sources, such as Soviet bureaucratic documents and travelers' accounts, cannot provide.

It is likely that Maria composed her diary in the 1940s. The first third of the work resembles a memoir. Here, Maria reflects on her childhood and upbringing, including the chaos and food shortages of the civil war. In the last two thirds of the work, Maria's work begins to assume the form of a diary, as she details the dramatic effects of World War II on her family and the region.

Unfortunately, we know little about Maria Bruss beyond what

she reveals in her work. Although she wrote her diary in Russian, her last name suggests that she was part of the Russian empire's ethnic German community. Maria Bruss's family members were serfs; they had originally been sold in Poltava, a city in the Russian empire's southwest borderlands¹. After the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, the Bruss family headed east in search of good farmland, eventually resettling in the Kazakh steppe.

Their journey to the Kazakh steppe was one undertaken by more than 1.5 million peasant settlers, mostly Russians and Ukrainians, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries². The first wave of peasants came illegally, in search of good farmland. By the late 19th century, the flow of peasants dramatically increased: In 1889, peasant settlement of the Kazakh steppe became codified as official state policy, and in 1901 imperial officials completed the construction

¹ See Kasenova 2014.

² On peasant settlement of the Kazakh steppe, see Campbell 2011; Demko 1969 and Tursunbaev 1950.

of a railroad linking Russia and Central Asia, the Tashkent railroad, which cut through the western edge of the Kazakh steppe.

In 1917, when Maria begins her account, she and her family have settled in Voznesenovka, a village in the Aktiubinsk region in the northwest of the Kazakh steppe. Due to the arrival of peasant settlers like the Bruss family, the population of the Aktiubinsk region had more than doubled during the period 1897-1916 (Demko 1969: 129). This region, however, was still overwhelmingly rural and sparsely populated. In 1931, it had only one city, also named Aktiubinsk (present-day Aktobe), which had a population of about 30,000 people (Lan'ko 1931: 107).

Settlers like the Bruss family sparked dramatic changes in the region's economic practices and ethnic makeup: They displaced the Kazakh steppe's primary inhabitants, a group of Turkic-speaking nomads, known as 'Kazakhs', from their traditional pasturelands, and brought broad swathes of the steppe under cultivation. By the early Soviet period, northern Kazakhstan had become one of the Soviet Union's most important grain producing regions. Due to this period of intense peasant colonization, the new republic had sig-

nificant Russian (19.6 percent) and Ukrainian (13.2 percent) minorities³.

Yet as Bruss reveals, many of these settlers struggled to adapt to their new lives on the Kazakh steppe. In the Kazakh steppe, rainfall patterns often varied dramatically from year to year, leading to tremendous fluctuation and instability in the region's grain yields. New settlers endured terrible poverty, droughts, food shortages and illnesses such as typhus. These calamities were then compounded by the catastrophic effects of the civil war in the west of the Kazakh steppe, where White forces sought to seize control of the Tashkent railway line. Maria describes how she and her sister visited the soup kitchens of the American Relief Administration (ARA) as famine broke out.⁴

In much of the Soviet Union, the years that followed, those of the NEP, or the New Economic Policy (1921-1928) were a reprieve, as the regime relaxed the draconian economic policies of the civil war years. But for Bruss and her family, the NEP years were ones of hardship, a situation that was

³ In 1926, Kazakhs held a slim demographic majority (57.1 percent) in their own republic (Vsesoiuznaia 1927: 82).

⁴ On the civil war in Kazakhstan, see Mendeubaev 2003 and Kenzhaliev 2000.

mirrored across much of Soviet Kazakhstan, as the regime continued to redistribute land and water rights. Bruss details how her family endured these difficult years: During the civil war, when White officers threatened her family, her mother chased them out with a poker (*kocherga*). During times of hunger, the Bruss family ate substitute foods, such as tumbleweed, and in desperation even dined on the family cat.

That Bruss describes the civil war and famine of the 1920s with such intensity makes it all the more surprising that she does not mention the Kazakh famine of 1930-33, a catastrophe of far greater magnitude. The famine was sparked by Stalin's state-driven modernization policies, particularly the onset of forced collectivization in 1929. It closely resembled the disasters that followed on its heels, the better known Ukrainian famine of 1931-33 and the famines in the Volga, Don and Kuban regions of Russia. Famine-stricken Kazakh nomads, the disaster's primary victims, flooded grain-growing regions, particularly those near railway lines such as Aktiubinsk, in the hopes of finding food. More than 1.3 million Kazakhs perished. The disaster also claimed the lives of 200,000 people of other ethnicities,

many of them peasant settlers like Maria Bruss⁵. By the famine's end in 1934, the republic's camel population, which Bruss describes vividly in her account of the 1920s, was all but erased.

We can only speculate why Bruss does not discuss the famine of 1930-33, a disaster whose catastrophic effects she surely must have seen and experienced. Her silence presents a stark contrast with the diary of Tat'iana Gavrilovna Nevadovskaia, another inhabitant of the republic, who chronicled the effects of the famine in moving detail⁶. Nevadovskaia and her family were exiles; her father, a professor, had been deported to Kazakhstan during the 1920s. By contrast, Maria Bruss and her family became further involved with the party-state during this same period. Maria's diary thus offers insight into how the regime built up social support in the Soviet Union's distant corners, far from its urban, working-class base. Writing in the 1940s, Maria may have consciously censored her writings about the 1930s. She may have

⁵ On the Kazakh famine of 1930-33, see Cameron 2010.

⁶ The diary of Tat'iana Gavrilovna Nevadovskaia is held in the Central State Archives of Kazakhstan in Almaty. For further discussion of the Nevadovskaia diary, see Takhaeva 2010: 155.

feared that her diary could be discovered and jeopardize her chances of advancement in the new Soviet state.

From Maria's diary, we learn that her father had fought against the White forces during the civil war. Later, he became a plenipotentiary (*upolnomochennyi*) for the new Soviet state, traveling to Moscow in the early 1920s. Seemingly incongruously, Maria's father had also worked for the Russian imperial regime⁷. This was a career path shared by many other members of Soviet Kazakhstan's lower-level bureaucracy, an illustration of how the regime struggled mightily to create a bureaucracy free from the influence of the empire that preceded it⁸. Thanks to her father's new job as a plenipotentiary, the Bruss family got the use of an apartment, an improvement over their previous dwelling, a peasant hut.

In 1930, Maria became a member of the Komsomol. She writes about her participation in the first collectivization drive in 1929 and, later, her new role working in a factory devoted to dairy production. With the onset of World War II, Maria's in-

volvement with her factory job increased. With large numbers of men away at the front, Maria became involved in the physically demanding work of cutting and hauling blocks of ice during the wintertime. Her work ensured that the factory could keep the butter, milk and other dairy products cool when stored or shipped long distances.

As Maria's diary reminds us, World War II was a period of dramatic social and economic change in Soviet Kazakhstan: More than a million deported peoples, including Russian Germans, Chechens and Crimean Tatars, arrived in the steppe, part of the regime's attempt to expunge so-called suspicious groups from the Soviet Union's heartland⁹. Moscow built up a massive forced labor camp, Kar-Lag, near Karaganda, in central Kazakhstan¹⁰. During the war, more than a million Kazakhs left the republic to serve in the Soviet armed forces (Carmack 2014: 95-112). Several of Maria's friends and family members are called up. Maria relates the drama of these departures, the tremendous sorrow of wartime losses (her nephew, Vitya, is killed while trying to defuse a bomb),

⁷ Kasenova 2014: (*Dnevnik babushka okazalsia letopis'iu sobytii proshlogo veka i Aktiubinskoi oblasti*).

⁸ Cameron 2010: 89-91 (Chapter Two: *The Hungry Steppe*).

⁹ See Westren 2012.

¹⁰ See Barnes 2011.

and the joy that came with a loved one's safe return.

Maria's account is punctuated with periods of conflict, including marital strife, problems at work, and failed romances. But there are also moments of joy, including the birth of her daughter, her brother's safe return from the war, and family gatherings, such as weddings and New Year's Eve celebrations. These stories reveal how Maria and her family built a sense of community in the steppe. Though Maria was not Kazakh,

she appears to have come to consider Kazakhstan home, and the topic of ethnicity is not mentioned in her account. Today, at least one of Maria's descendants, her granddaughter, Marina Kolosova, lives in Kazakhstan. The story of Maria and her family thus provides insight into how Soviet Kazakhstan and later, independent Kazakhstan, became a multi-ethnic society.

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