Empire on the Steppe: Migration and Settlement in northern Kazakhstan from the Late 19th to the Early 20th Century

On June 23rd, Sean McDaniel, a PhD Candidate in History at Michigan State University, delivered the REEEC Noontime Scholars Lecture, “Empire on the Steppe: Migration and Settlement in northern Kazakhstan from the Late 19th to the Early 20th Century.” McDaniel was this year’s Fisher Fellow for the Summer Research Laboratory, where he was conducting pre-field research on his dissertation prior to travelling abroad. His larger project involves migration within the Russian political space, but his lecture and research this summer focus specifically on the role of horses at the intersection of state, settler, and indigenous power in the Kazakh Steppe during the late imperial and early Soviet periods.

With the freeing of the serfs and the desire to increase the permanent Russian population along the Russian border, Russian authorities encouraged migration to the Kazakh Steppe in the late 19th century. The social climate began to shift as more Russian settlers came to the land and the government put forth efforts to make the native Kazakh population more sedentary. However, the real change came to Central Asia in 1891, with the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. As the infrastructure of the steppe changed and more Russian settlers established themselves in the land, Kazakh natives became increasingly poor and dependent on the Russian authority.

Horses, already a symbol of power and wealth in Central Asia, became increasingly more important to Russian settlers and the government. McDaniel’s lecture highlighted how the horse trade and instances of horse theft in Central Asia could tell us more about the power dynamic between the indigenous population, Russian settlers, and Russian authority in the steppe. As the value of the horse rose and the political landscape of Central Asia changed, new classes developed and small elite classes of Kazakh and Russian horse breeders emerged. A majority of the indigenous Kazakh population became increasingly poor and disenfranchised. Although the act was not solely committed by Kazakhs and was not always an act of retribution, horse theft became a heroic symbol of resistance for the Kazakhs against the Russian government. The Russian government’s failure to curb the problem of horse theft illustrated the limits of Russian authority outside of major European metropolitan areas.

McDaniel will continue his research on the horse trade as he travels to Russia and Kazakhstan in 2016. He hopes further research will continue to illuminate the complex power structure in Central Asia at the turn of the twentieth century.

Samantha Celmer is a graduate student in Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research focuses on incidents of genocide, crimes against humanity, and sexual violence in Russia and Eastern Europe. She received her B.A. from Oberlin College in History and Russian and Eastern European Studies in December 2013. After graduation, she hopes to work with organizations that focus on international human rights.