Unwelcome but Dear: Poplar Trees in Northern Kazakhstan's Post-Soviet Cityscapes

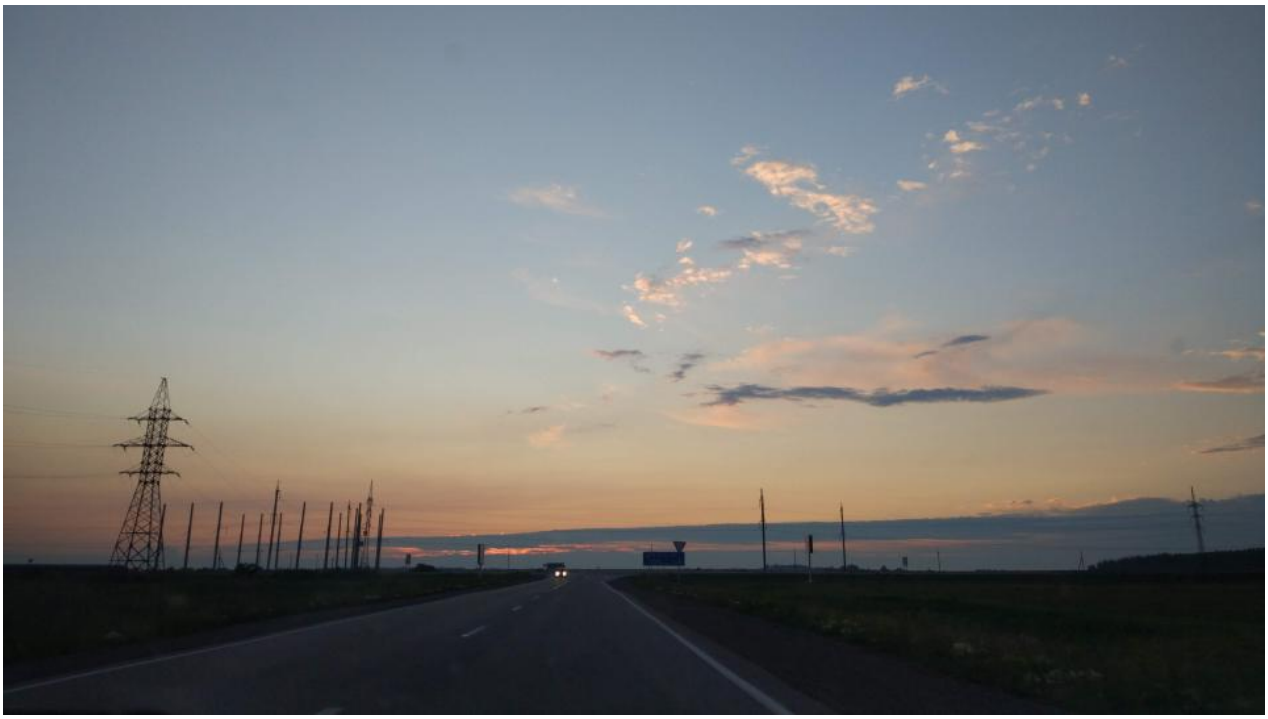
Zhanna Baimukhamedova

Summary

Urban beautification campaigns in the Soviet Union resulted in staggering numbers of poplar trees being planted all over the country. In comparison to other tree species, poplars' major advantage was their ability to grow quickly on a variety of soils. In Northern Kazakhstan, where the number and variety of indigenous tree populations are rather unremarkable, poplars rapidly came to dominate the urban landscape. Despite its troublesome cotton, poplar deeply entrenched itself in popular environmental imagination: it is almost impossible to think of one's post-Soviet hometown without remembering the rows of poplar. The ubiquitous tree made its way to people's memory and the sense of self.

Northern Kazakhstan is mostly a flat, vast, empty land with sparse birch tree groves and orderly pine forests, and endless stretches of grassland, golden brown by high summer, in between. A common saying claims that on a clear night out in the steppe one can see a flame of a candle from twenty kilometers away. This factoid points not only to impressive eyesight of local peoples, but also attests to two staggering shortages of the landscape: curvature and trees. In cities, however, trees are abundant, and a typical sight for a majority of former Soviet urban areas are streets drowning in clouds of cotton-like white fluff in early June. Up in the air, stuck in all crevices—the white is ubiquitous, maddening, inescapable. The white are tiny fine hairs covering a seed of a *Populus*, poplar tree.

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Print date: 04 November 2026 04:34:09



Time passes but emptiness in the landscape remains.

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Cities in Northern Kazakhstan are rarely older than two centuries. The land was indeed populated before, but pastoral nomads, as the name suggests, would move with their livestock between seasonal pastures. Such way of living did not necessarily prompt building cities, and as a consequence what are cities now were once mostly trading posts with Russian merchants. In the Tsarist era, nomads (typically the poorer among them) settled because available pasture shrunk, due to limitations to mobility and, from the late nineteenth century, resettlement. These settlements remained rather small in both population and size until the Soviet Union set to convert the local way of living from nomadism to collective farming. The degree of instrumental, blind disregard of the local environmental conditions resulted in unprecedented spread of human loss and tragedy, but a Soviet Kazakh *kolkhoz* (collective farm), city, and state were now physically manifest on the land.

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Poplars in the post-Soviet cityscape.

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The poplar—or rather its wide-spread use in urban beautification—took off in the 1930s during the second five-year plan when greening of cities was declared to be a necessary requirement for good health of an efficient worker. Not dissimilar to Stalin's Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature from a decade later, planting poplars was largely a strategic environmental move. Moreover, like standardized Soviet architecture, poplars helped creating a universal, replicable urban look whereby a city in one point of the USSR would be hardly distinguishable from a city at another extremity of the country. A poplar seed can grow into a seedling of half a meter in less than a year, its large leaves effectively capture smog, and it thrives on a variety of soils which, given the size of the Soviet landmass, made poplar a champion of tree planting campaigns. All across the country, in just a few years streets were lined up with rows of massive poplar trees—and as the trees matured, a blizzard of cotton-like fluff waltzed in the air of early summer days. The propensity of poplar trees to produce hair-covered seeds did not come as a surprise to urban developers, but back when there was a need to green cities rapidly, there was hardly any other tree species whose advantages surpassed that of the poplar. In flat steppe landscapes, poplars also helped to curb winds and subsequent soil erosion.

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Lightweight and intensely mobile, poplar fluff fills up the air of most post-Soviet cities for good two weeks in the early summer.

Photograph by George Chernilevsky, 2009.
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In places such as Northern Kazakhstan where there are not that many deciduous trees, poplars quickly took over the environmental imagination of the locals: most have childhood memories of using the leaves as a currency in a game of commerce or almost committing involuntary arson by setting a stretch of fluff on fire. For many a *subbotnik* (mandatory "volunteer" work) in school or at a workplace could require whitewashing poplars (a practice of curious origin and uncertain utility) in the spring and raking their abundant leaves in the fall—a kind of work that outlived the collapse of the Soviet Union and still transcends generations, social strata, and sometimes state borders. Because of how widespread poplar trees are, many suffer from allergies in the summer, too, because pollen and pollutants stick to the fluff and travel around, freely. And yet, despite this all, the poplar remains.

Not native to the area, in Northern Kazakhstan poplar has become such a typical everyday sight that it is almost impossible to imagine any given street without an orderly row of half-whitewashed trees. More than just a physical object, poplar has become a symbol in collective imagination, a thing one may recollect when thinking about their hometown, adolescence, play and tragedy, school days, and days of rest. Peculiarly, poplars can also

be viewed as entities that connect a person to a place that is not there anymore: one's past and a country that no longer exists. The identity of a place is a complex mixture of its physical characteristics and non-physical qualities, its objects and relations—between them and toward them. In the same vein, the identity of a person contains in itself not just the characteristics that one possesses but also memories of and interactions with the environment around. A poplar is not an exceptionally beautiful tree, but a tree whose modest beauty feels like coming home.

Further readings:

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Related links:

- David Moon, *The American Steppes: The Unexpected Russian Roots of Great Plains Agriculture, 1870s–1930s* (excerpt)
  http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/9105/

How to cite:

Baimukhamedova, Zhanna. "Unwelcome but Dear: Poplar Trees in Northern Kazakhstan's Post-Soviet Cityscapes." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (Spring 2021), no. 13. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. doi:10.5282/rcc/9271 .


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ISSN 2199-3408
Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia*

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- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Poplar_seed_tufts_2009_G1.jpg

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Zhanna is a RECOMS ITN fellow and a PhD candidate at Rachel Carson Center. In her current research, she is looking at the relationship between visual representation and ecological practices in the Bavarian Forest National Park. Nomad by blood and conviction, Zhanna has worked, lived, and studied across Europe and the US. She is now based in Munich.
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