

A trip to the Russian-Kazakh steppe

Where Europe and Asia begin

by Guy Mettan,* Geneva



Guy Mettan
(Picture ma)

I know you're good at geography, but I dare you to tell me where Orenburg is. This city of 600,000 inhabitants is located at the foot of the Ural Mountains, in the middle of the Russian-Kazakh steppe, on the border of Europe and Asia. For us, in the middle of nowhere.

We always learned that the European peninsula began in Portugal and ended at the Urals, a mountain range that conveniently bisected Eurasia and served as the border between the two continents. Scientific geography shows that this is not the case. The Urals are so insignificant that you can barely see it on the horizon. In contrast, the Jura in Switzerland looks like the Himalayas. And as the Russian geographers say, it is in no way a ridge that separates, it is at most a seam that assembles the two pieces of the Eurasian tunic.

The same goes for the steppe. This flat expanse undulates like the peaceful swell of a terrestrial ocean that would stretch from Mongolia to the Hungarian puszta. Open to a vast expanse without visible limits and without physical borders and (almost) without human borders.

It is entirely true that for fifteen hundred years, the steppe has served as a commercial, cultural, and human link between China and Europe, from the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty to the fall of Byzantium. through the Persian and Mongol empires. It is enough to reread "The description of the world" by Marco Polo (1254–1324) to be convinced of this. The steppe was at the heart of the first known globalisation.



The last hills of the Urals. The plateau in the middle points towards Iran and Pakistan. On the right it heads towards Europe and on the left towards Asia. (Pictures Guy Mettan)

The advent of maritime powers, Portugal, Spain, Holland, Great Britain and then the United States, caused this initial globalisation to collapse in favour of the masters of the sea. Yet, history has more than one trick up its sleeve: thanks to the Chinese *New Silk Roads*, the Eurasian continent and the earthly powers are recovering their natural position as the center of gravity of the human world, the world economy and the commercial exchanges which accompany it.

But the lesson of the steppe does not stop there. It is also here that one of the most disastrous agricultural experiments in the modern world took place. Not only because of *Stalin's* collectivism but also because of the technocratic stubbornness of *Khrushchev*, who had taken it into his head to exploit it until it broke down. He had decided to plant wheat and cotton on 45 million hectares of natural dry grassland. After promising beginnings, from March 1954 to the



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fall of 1957, the land, plowed too deeply by heavy machines, refused to produce, and took revenge by obliging the Muscovite bureaucrats, the height

of humiliation, to buy American wheat to feed hungry herds.

It would be wrong to believe that this was nonsense solely due to communism. The arrogance has not disappeared. On all continents, neoliberal productivism has replaced collectivism, management and marketing have succeeded central planning, but the spirit of unlimited conquest of nature has not changed one iota, regardless of longitude or latitude.

The millions of hectares that have become infertile and the silhouette of the dilapidated buildings of bankrupt kolkhozes lost under the immense blue sky of the steppe should encourage us to introspect.