**An Empire Remembered?**

**Collectivization and Colonialism in Mukhamet Shayakhmetov’s *The Silent Steppe***

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**Abstract**

This chapter considers some of the tensions present in Mukhamet Shayakhmetov’s *The Silent Steppe: The Memoir of a Nomad under Stalin*, which relates the author’s adolescent experiences of collectivization and repression in early Soviet Kazakhstan. The chapter argues that Shayakhmetov exhibits the same ambivalence about the Soviet project as is common in contemporary Kazakhstan, with a representation of the early USSR as both an imperial space and a postcolonial space.

**Introduction: postcolonial Kazakhstan?**

The collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union, beginning in the late 1920s and largely finalized by 1934, is among the most notorious policies implemented by Joseph Stalin and the Communist Party. Following poor harvests and a crisis in the state procurement of grain, Moscow began endorsing the persecution of class enemies and the provocation of class war in the countryside as a means of raising yields. This culminated in the forcible dispossession of communities across the USSR, a massive confiscation of property, widespread repression and the formation, under coercion, of collective farms in place of privately-owned farmland. Perhaps eight million perished in the famine and violence which resulted from this campaign.

Collectivization had a particularly egregious impact in the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR), precursor to today’s Kazakhstan. The First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party, Filipp Goloshekin, implemented collectivization earlier and at a faster pace than elsewhere in the USSR. Many Kazakhs at this time were nomads, migrating annually with their herds of livestock between winter and summer pastures, and had neither the grain demanded of them by state militia nor the skills required to cultivate crops on the new collective farms. Well over a million Kazakhs starved to death or succumbed to disease as a result of the campaign, and by the mid-1930s their nomadic lifestyle had been almost entirely abandoned.[[1]](#footnote-1) Fatality in the republic was proportionately higher among Kazakhs than among other ethnic groups, causing some to describe the Stalinist administration as genocidal and to draw comparisons with the Ukrainian Holodomor.[[2]](#footnote-2) Certainly, the impact of collectivization on Kazakhs and their nomadic practices contains all the components necessary for the ‘constructing’ of cultural trauma.[[3]](#footnote-3) Both nomadism and membership of the KASSR helped to define the collective experience of early Soviet power for Kazakhs, one that led to upheaval, cultural transformation and loss. Yet, in contemporary Central Asia, the early Soviet period may be characterized in more than one way.

The 1920s and 1930s – indeed, the whole Soviet era – might be presented as a time of imperial subjugation for Central Asia. From the October Revolution of 1917, through the Civil War and culminating in the collectivization campaign, the Bolsheviks gradually consolidated and centralized their power in Moscow at the expense of local autonomy. For Kazakhs the Soviet state was distant, repressive and exploitative; the creation of collective farms was intended to facilitate the extraction of resources for the use of the metropole. Soviet authority was ethnicized, represented by Russians and representing Russian interests. New Bolshevik values, insensitively imposed, rapidly corroded the Kazakhs’ own customs and traditions. The destruction of nomadism plainly mirrors similar imperial episodes elsewhere in the world. Contemporary Kazakhstan is therefore a postcolonial space. Its citizens remember a Soviet ‘empire’ from a new position of sovereignty.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This narrative is complicated by the fact that the Soviet Union itself was a postcolonial space. The bankruptcy of Tsardom and the demise of the Russian Empire both enabled the communist takeover and allowed the Bolsheviks to present themselves as emancipators in non-Russian regions. Various measures, including the creation of national republics for the Kazakhs and others, were taken to demonstrate a decisive break with imperialism.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this alternative account, different features of Soviet power are brought into relief. Though no less oppressive, it might be more progressive, more modernizing, and more inclusive of non-Russians.[[6]](#footnote-6) The general exclusion of Kazakhs from the new centres of authority was not a deliberate policy but a legacy of Tsarism, whose ethnic stratification of power would not disappear overnight. Nomadism and other local practices could not have survived the modern era whether or not they were brutally undermined by Stalin. Could contemporary observers remember this postcolonial moment from a postcolonial space? Perhaps, if Soviet power became more imperial after the Great Patriotic War (World War Two). More likely, the notion of early Soviet Kazakhstan as a postcolonial, modernizing republic also fundamentally changes the position of those observing it in retrospect.[[7]](#footnote-7)

For historians of the Soviet Union, a dichotomy between imperial oppression and postcolonial modernization is problematic. Empires modernize. The Bolsheviks in particular combined modernizing zeal with a condescending and dismissive attitude towards non-Russian traditions. They saw nomadic society in particular as backwards and despotic. From health and social policy to macroeconomics, the Soviet state therefore controlled and exploited whilst simultaneously introducing and enforcing new universal values. It created national republics but these had little resonance for those they represented, and republic-level organs were in any case denied meaningful agency. It expedited old Tsarist policies with a renewed ferocity, such as the settlement of nomads and the cultivation of cotton.[[8]](#footnote-8) Given the historiographical tendency to question the imperial effectiveness of the Russian Empire, the relevance of the Soviet Union’s postcolonial position is yet more contentious.

For those in contemporary Central Asia who remember the Soviet period, however, the distinction is more instructive. This is so for a number of reasons. First, opinion there has naturally been shaped by a Soviet-era education system which generally taught, in contrast with Cold War verities in the west, that the Bolsheviks led non-Russian nations out of the imperial era. Such assertions have found their way into post-Soviet education systems, albeit alongside dissonant alternative readings of twentieth-century history.[[9]](#footnote-9) Second, the intellectual trends which in the west have connected modernity and modernization with European imperialism and Eurocentrism are manifested differently in post-Soviet Central Asian academia. The old Bolshevik promotion of modernization at the expense of local custom is not immediately associated with empire-building.[[10]](#footnote-10) Third, the (geo)politics of contemporary Central Asia discourage interpretations of the USSR as an empire. The necessity of maintaining good relations between the Central Asian and Russian diaspora populations which live side-by-side has lead some national administrations to deemphasize the divergent experiences of different ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. Historical narratives in which a Russian-dominated Communist Party exploited non-Russians and perpetuated imperial injustices are not in vogue. All these factors preserve a distance between imperialism and alternative understandings of early Soviet history. Observers have a clearer choice between one and the others.

This choice is exemplified in post-Soviet Central Asian historiography. Working on the assumption that their nations predated the Russian Revolution, some scholars are led to present the Soviet 1920s as a moment of national liberation. In this construal, the economic development and cultural change enforced by the Communist Party was a necessary moment of modernization. It may even have been fundamentally emancipatory.[[11]](#footnote-11) By emphasizing the difference between Russian imperial and Soviet rule, these authors also draw attention to the USSR’s postcolonial nature.

The choice between imperial and postcolonial is also exemplified in post-Soviet Central Asian memory. The memoir of Mukhamet Shayakhmetov, whose English-language translation is entitled *The Silent Steppe: The Memoir of a Nomad under Stalin*, demonstrates the salience of the choice and the different tensions at work when Kazakhs and others remember their Soviet past.[[12]](#footnote-12)

According to his memoir, Mukhamet Shayakhmetov was born into a respected nomadic family in 1922. In the late 1920s, as collectivization was getting underway, his uncle and father were both designated as kulaks, members of the rural bourgeoisie who retarded progress in the countryside and tyrannized their poorer countrymen. Both men were arrested and Shayakhmetov’s mother was left destitute with her two sons to care for. As the family of a class enemy, the three were considered suspect by Soviet authorities and were denied entry to a collective farm. Shayakhmetov thus spent his adolescence as a refugee, moving frequently to avoid starvation or deportation, living off the charity of others or on what few resources could be found independently. When the Soviet Union joined the war against Nazi Germany, Shayakhmetov was conscripted to the Red Army and participated in the battle of Stalingrad. In his later years he married and became first a school teacher, then head of education for an administrative region of Kazakhstan. He outlived the Soviet Union, first publishing his memoir in Russian in 1999.[[13]](#footnote-13)

*The Silent Steppe* begins with the trial of Shayakhmetov’s uncle as a kulak and ends with the author’s return from the Great Patriotic War. It focuses mainly on Shayakhmetov’s efforts to survive the collectivization famine and on his encounters with various Kazakhs and Russians at a time of profound tumult. It describes the days he spent with his mother illegally collecting handfuls of corn, to be husked by hand, fried and eaten with water, from the harvested fields of collective farms (192-193). It emphasizes the dangers of bad weather, as when a thick layer of snow covered the rushes which Shayakhmetov collected and sold to Russians as fuel in exchange for meager portions of grain (205).

The memoir relates a powerful personal story. It testifies to the sometimes terrible effects of repression on families and friendships, but also celebrates the resilience of social bonds and the courage and generosity of individuals in the face of enormous hardship. Additionally, it is an attempt to relate the tragedies of the Soviet past to a new generation and to morally condemn collectivization. As the author claims:

The founder of our clan, Nauei, was the progenitor of 25 male descendants in the course of one century (1820-1920). If each of them had emulated him, one would have expected the total increase in the number of males over the next 100 years to be 625. Instead, by 1990, it was seven. Such was the tragic fate of our entire nation in the twentieth century. (72)

The memoir is frequently interrupted by brief personal commentary on Soviet history, on questions of blame, morality, responsibility and causality (138, 220). Shayakhmetov has studied the history of the USSR and, to contextualise his own experience, he includes pertinent details relating to economics and high politics (154). As such, the memoir is both an individual account and a broader appraisal of a dramatic historical period.

A recurrent motif in the memoir is Shayakhmetov’s earnest desire for an education (140). His inability to receive an education as a kulak’s son, and his eventual reentry into school later on in life, are emotional moments in the story (53-54, 242-243). So, as a product of the Soviet education system, Shayakhmetov self-consciously expresses some tenets of the Soviet worldview while denying others. He writes both of indoctrination and honest patriotism when explaining the appeal of joining the Red Army, for example (257-258). In his broader appraisal of the early Soviet period, then, Shayakhmetov is ambitious, critical and independently-minded. He manifests very clearly the tensions affecting the construction of memory in post-Soviet Central Asia.

**There Was Something Extraordinarily Alien about it All**

A tendency to understand and present the Soviet Union as a transient imperial project is evident in *The Silent Steppe*, first, in the author’s characterization of pre-Soviet and pre-collectivized life. This is not utopian but does lean towards nostalgia. Chapter One, entitled “The Life we Lost”, presents a hard but harmonious existence (3-10). Duty, tradition and a collaborative culture of mutual respect, built around the habits of the pastoral livestock herder, are all emphasized. Little independent mention of the Russian Empire and its multiple injustices is included. It is further worth noting that, due to the chronology of the memoir (and Shayakhmetov’s life), the acute hardships experienced by nomads after the Russian Revolution but before collectivization are largely overlooked as well (6).[[14]](#footnote-14) All this amounts to a somewhat romantic picture of pre-Soviet nomadic life. What are the effects of Communism on this?

As the new governing doctrine of Kazakhstan in the twentieth century, Communism is presented as a persecutory ideology, with tenets designed to repress and intimidate. This applies particularly to class and class war. For Shayakhmetov, social hierarchy is a natural feature of Kazakh life and is associated with respect, sagacity and beneficence. The Bolsheviks’ economic conception of class, a vehicle for exploitation and control, has no likeness among Kazakh communities and therefore lacks explanatory power. Rather, it was an alien concept and a means of overcoming the Kazakhs’ collective will through the provocation of conflict. New lists of kulaks were publicized to frighten Kazakhs and turn them against one another (49). Though Shayakhmetov’s kinsmen regard Marxist class categories with skepticism in earlier passages of the memoir, new divisions between Kazakhs, generated deliberately by the Party, are manifested repeatedly in later chapters (17, 174-175). Bolshevik ideology was a foreign imposition intended to facilitate exploitation, to some extent successfully. It also proved fundamentally incomprehensible, even following concerted study, as when Shayakhmetov joins the Young Communist League and tries to discuss “empiriocriticism and dialectics” (246).

The national structures and identities introduced in the early Soviet period seem similarly unfamiliar to Shayakhmetov’s Kazakhs. While a collective Kazakh identity long predated the Russian Revolution, the notion of Kazakh nationhood was comparatively new in the 1920s.[[15]](#footnote-15) As the memoir relates:

I was about to set off for home when a Kazakh militiaman suddenly rode up to our group with a young Russian striding along beside him with a briefcase in his hand. The Russian started telling us in a hotchpotch of Kazakh and Russian that there was a public holiday to mark the autonomy of Kazakhstan. The whole region was celebrating. All the residents of the regional centre and visitors were getting together and going on a march along the streets with a banner to celebrate the occasion – and our group was to join the march as well. When people started muttering about urgent business and getting home before nightfall, the militiaman bellowed, ‘Never mind that! Your business can wait! If you don’t get home today, you will tomorrow!’ (82)

And so an absurd parade follows, under coercion, by a collection of baffled Kazakhs. They are then told of their new republic’s forthcoming economic triumphs, though they can derive no meaning from this either. For Shayakhmetov, “There was something extraordinarily alien about it all” (83). Although nationalism emerges in Shayakhmetov’s own worldview, as will be discussed later, it was a feature of Bolshevik ideology which put distance between the Party and Kazakhs, making Soviet power more of a foreign imposition and largely incomprehensible.

Communism also fatally undermined kinship ties, including their Kazakh specificities. In part, this was more a product of generalized hardship than ideology or governance. Shayakhmetov comments on the behaviour of famine victims, suggesting that it led women to marry men “unworthy of them […] Famine made people forget the traditions that made their nation so special” (184). The apparent degeneration of the Kazakh family was the product of Soviet rule as well. Shayakhmetov explains that, traditionally, a Kazakh might adopt a relative’s child to ease the economic burden if that child’s own immediate family was experiencing hardship. Shayakhmetov’s uncle had done this for his elder sister, adopting her son. All this took place under solemn oath. Yet, when Shayakhmetov encounters his uncle in *The Silent Steppe*, the adopted son had recently been convinced to leave his adoptive father and instead go and live with his elder blood brother, who was friendly with local Soviet authorities. Further, the son demanded supplies from his adoptive father as payment for the work he had done tending the man’s flock of sheep, even though this was work traditionally done by all a patriarch’s children. At a time of widespread shortage, the son eventually left with two goats (170). Shayakhmetov’s uncle experienced a second such humiliation. In addition to his sister’s son, he had also adopted his brother’s daughter. This daughter chose to marry the chairman of a local soviet, in secret and without her adoptive father’s blessing, who promptly lost contact with her. When Shayakhmetov later meets the daughter herself, she appears remorseful for her actions but is also, unusually, in a position to offer the author a substantive meal. The implication that she had married into power and wealth is clearly made (171-173). Shayakhmetov’s crestfallen uncle was forced to conclude that “Communism had undermined the foundations of family life” (170).

Direct professional association with the regime also changed domestic conduct by adding to the pressures individuals experienced, as Shayakhmetov observes when describing a hostile encounter with his cousin’s husband, Adilkhan Sikimbayev:

People change the way they behave amazingly fast, depending on where they happen to be on the social ladder at the time, and Sikimbayev seemed to prove this theory; but he may simply have been scared of being accused by the authorities he served of associating with a kulak’s son. (169)

Aside from those who served the authorities with a direct connection to Shayakhmetov, the Soviet state itself is as distant and unfamiliar as the ideology it endorsed. Personal experiences of state and Party are indistinguishable, leading to a generalized conflation of both. As a narrator, Shayakhmetov frequently imparts personal motivations and feelings to family members and associates. Party and state organs, in contrast, act without explanation or motivation, seemingly arbitrarily (18).

Chapter Two of the memoir, “My Uncle’s Trial”, recounts the judicial process which resulted in Shayakhmetov’s uncle being convicted as a kulak and sentenced to imprisonment (11-18). It describes an unintelligible dialogue between judge and accused in which guilt is already assumed and words like “justice” and “courtroom” are placed inside inverted commas. Another confrontation with Soviet legal authorities, this time as a prelude for the confiscation of property, leaves Kazakh women defenseless due to their illiteracy and general confusion about the nature of their crimes:

The court sitting lasted one day. All the defendants, including those with babes in arms, were sentenced to two years’ house arrest. Already baffled as to why they had been brought to court, they had no idea what the point of the punishment was. (60)

Soviet authority is thereby revealed to be obscure, illogical, and completely distanced from the lives of Kazakhs while also being hostile to their culture; the judge at this second trial further accuses Shakaykhmetov’s mother of dealing in bride money, or the resources passed from one family to another following a marriage. Kazakhs themselves display wonderment that women should be made to stand trial at all, since this did not reflect their own practice.

Despite its bureaucratic chaos, the Soviet state has power to radically alter lives without accountability and minimal human oversight. This is clearest in Shayakhmetov’s description of deportation and confiscation. The enormous refugee population which emerges from the collectivization famine is often moved using state-run transportation, but the process is anarchic. The fate of the individual is highly contingent on chance encounters and random decisions; families might be divided or remain united at the whim of minor Party operatives (138-141, 146-153).

During confiscation, the state proves ravenously extractive and causes widespread penury. Shayakhmetov emphasizes the corruption of enforcers, who take more than was legally permissible to enrich themselves (75-76). It is both localized corruption and disorganization that also make the state obscenely wasteful. Much of the confiscated possessions and livestock, so essential to those who lost them, are said to have disappeared from state inventories and to have been hidden for the private benefit of senior Party members and others (58). Confiscation even took place at times when bad weather had blocked the administrators’ pathways back to state warehouses and collective farms. In full knowledge of what would occur, livestock was taken from starving nomads, subsequently perished in the snow, and was left by the roadside to rot in the springtime after the ice had melted. In such a way, Kazakh nomads were randomly impoverished by the state to the benefit of a small number of Party members or to no benefit at all.

Perhaps the clearest condemnation of Soviet power comes when it is compared or connected to the Russian Empire which preceded it. The few passages which mention Tsarism often emphasize ethnic injustices between Kazakhs and Russians under Communism. Shayakhmetov says that Party agents “behaved arrogantly towards simple people, just like the officials in Tsarist times” (27). Later, he describes his encounter with a miller:

The latter was a Russian, as they usually were, since members of this minority – who made up one third of the population in our part of Kazakhstan – tended to be more prosperous than us Kazakhs, thanks to their settled way of life and the fertile lands they had been granted in Tsarist days (67).

In another representative segment, the author draws attention to the differences between Kazakh and Russian villages after collectivization (200-201). Though Russians suffered in this period, too, they are said to have enjoyed numerous advantages as a legacy of Tsarist rule and the benefits accrued to them through colonialism. Well into the Soviet period they had the best land, the best tools, and the best wages, and were able to hire Kazakhs as farm labourers. As in Tsarist times, the Soviet Union operated primarily in Russian and this put native speakers of Russian at a considerable advantage (152, 238-239). The malignant effect of Russian cultural domination, apparently reinforced by the Bolsheviks, made itself apparent in other ways, such as in the growing popularity of vodka among Kazakhs, who “until the 1930s, thought vodka to be the drink of the devil and would not touch it” (224).

There is a relatively straightforward representation of the 1920s and 1930s in *The Silent Steppe*. It is a period of imperial rule by a new empire, imposed by a distant, Russian-dominated state, to the detriment, impoverishment and disempowerment of Kazakhs and the enrichment of Russians, Party operatives and those Kazakhs who become complicit with the regime. But this narrative is complicated by the presence of other conspicuous tendencies in the memoir and, first, some ambivalence about the impact of Soviet power.

**Some Russians are Moslems, too**

Blame and intentionality are not wholly or unambiguously placed upon the Soviet state in *The Silent Steppe.* On the huge number of fatalities caused by collectivization, Shayakhmetov states: “[…] in my view the blame is justifiably attributed to the errors and excesses of the Soviet Government in forcibly collectivising the peasantry and making nomadic stockbreeders become settled arable farmers” (230). Yet Shayakhmetov hopes to add nuance to this judgement: “Those who believe that the famine in Kazakhstan was deliberately orchestrated by the Soviet Government should bear in mind these efforts to help the starving population, which – though in insufficient quantities and greatly delayed – certainly saved lives” (138).

Elsewhere, the memoir turns to the culpability of the centre (Stalin’s Moscow) relative to that of the periphery, represented primarily by the figure of Filipp Goloshchekin. Shayakhmetov acknowledges that, in the late 1930s, after years of hardship and persecution, he made the common assumption that localized injustice had localized cause and the overall regime itself had merit: “However evil the practice of the system, which led to mass destruction for the Kazakhs, I neither fostered nor harboured hostility for the system itself” (251). He partly defends the Party members who lived in relative comfort during the famine by suggesting that it was not them but the “Soviet Government” who controlled the distribution of goods (188). Again, though, the message is not simple. The memoir describes the callous behaviour of local Party activists or *belsendi*, distinguishing them from the centre and central legislation (24-25):

According to a Soviet Government decree of 1927, it was envisaged that collectivisation in Kazakhstan would be complete by the end of 1933. However, the officials who were put in charge of running the country – notably Fedor [Filipp] Goloshchekin, the brutal First Secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party – were mainly strangers to it, and neither knew nor particularly wanted to find out about the customs and mind-set of the nomadic population. (48-49)

Shayakhmetov does not append commentary when one elderly and respected Kazakh woman dies in appalling conditions “lamenting” not the vagaries of Bolshevism but “the cruelty of fate” (205).

There is some modulation, too, in the ethnic relations described in *The Silent Steppe.* In one episode, Kazakhs are warned off stealing from a collective farm by a Russian watchman. Though the Kazakhs themselves blame this on the man’s Russianness, the narrator explains that the watchman had been told that the whole farm would be held accountable and punished for stolen supplies, and so his behaviour is deemed understandable (196). Shayakhmetov quotes his mother who, after benefitting from the kindness of a Russian militiaman, concludes that “some Russians are Moslems, too” (152). At times, apparent optimism about the intentions and actions of Russians and Party agents seem more a means of communicating the narrator’s youthful naivety (208, 219). This is not always so, however; Shayakhmetov professes to still consider certain gestures as acts of kindness retrospectively in his old age (213).

**We Kazakhs have always clung to the past**

Shayakhmetov’s judgement of Communism is not morally inconsistent. Rather, it embodies different perspectives on the Soviet period and the USSR, as both an imperial space and a postcolonial space. As with the imperial paradigm, we see the first signs of postcolonialism in descriptions of the pre-Soviet past. It has already been argued that this past is tinged with nostalgia, but there are also suggestions of a harder appraisal. Kazakhs are said to have lived according primarily to tradition and custom, and Shayakhmetov sometimes professes some uncertainty or skepticism about the value of these customs (9, 24). The Kazakhs’ traditional religious beliefs are compared to the tenets of socialism, with the author suggesting that *both* create a passive and fatalistic outlook (220).

Kazakh culture, with its origins in the pre-Revolutionary period, affected Kazakh behaviour after the Revolution. The Kazakhs’ collectivist nature led them to fear the disapproval of their peers, making them suspicious of innovation; “conservative by nature” they “clung to what was familiar” (146). This leaves them unable to adapt effectively to the hardships of the Soviet era or resist the Party. During confiscation, Shayakhmetov’s mother seeks to dissuade activists by appealing to the veneration of their shared ancestors and implores them to fear God’s judgement. The confiscators, representatives of a militantly atheist state, pay her no attention (56). In fact, Kazakh insistence on following tradition only brought more trouble. The memoir goes on:

The way we Kazakhs have always clung to the past has proved disastrous for our people – and yet this stubborn habit still sometimes obtains at the start of the twenty-first century. To say that the fear of innovation hampers our development and leaves us lagging behind is an understatement. (147)

A conservative or fatalistic Kazakh mindset is even contrasted unfavourably against a more practical Russian one. Of the inadequate dwellings provided to refugees by the state, Shayakhmetov writes:

A few of the Russian [sic] tried to make them habitable for the winter, but the Kazakhs seemed simply to hope that either Allah would send them mild weather or the authorities would look after them. The fact was that most of them could not adapt to their new environment because they were so naively and hopelessly nostalgic about their former life. (140)

Kazakh passivity seems responsible for the cyclical nature of pre-revolutionary life. When describing the period before 1917, the memoir omits any temporality and deploys terms such as “as long as anyone could remember” and “since time immemorial” (3, 15). Kazakh life is portrayed as cyclical, rather than progressive, and dictated by weather and the needs of livestock (3, 5). Again, it must be acknowledged that the structure of Shayakhmetov’s memoir is partly dictated by his power of recollection and his age during the events described. But the structure of *The Silent Steppe* is such that a hazy, nostalgic, cyclical or atemporal past is discontinued and replaced by linear time at exactly the moment when Soviet power and influence makes itself felt most acutely with the implementation of collectivization.

The Soviet state presented itself as the quintessential modernizing project. Shayakhmetov’s account reflects this. The fatalism of Kazakh life and culture before the Revolution is contrasted with the dynamism of post-Revolutionary politics, at times “undeniably progressive”, which drags Kazakhs forcibly onto a linear historical trajectory (they are now “lagging behind” on this trajectory, as noted earlier; 27). In the late 1920s, atemporality is replaced with dates, events and discrete processes. There are parallels here with the author’s own personal development. As the Soviet authorities deprive the Shayakhmetov family of a patriarch, the young Mukhamet is obligated to take on many of the tasks which would otherwise have been performed by his father. This includes both everyday chores and perilous journeys to fetch grain or deliver news to a distant relative. He describes the pride he felt at being entrusted with these duties. He grows up during his family’s intense battle for survival, becoming an autonomous and responsible man rather than a dependent child, something many of his interlocutors note with approval (77-80). Collectivization brings Shayakhmetov out of childhood and into a self-reliant manhood.

In certain facets of life, something similar happens to the Kazakh nation. Shayakhmetov’s notion of “development” is similar to its Soviet conception. Technological change brings more convenience. Soviet education, of which the author became a practitioner, is generally celebrated. It is contrasted favourably with its religious predecessor, in which learning the Koran by rote was of the highest importance (9). The pedagogical efforts of Kazakh Mullahs are not respected (47). Shayakhmetov presents himself as a keen and willing pupil who reveres his serious-minded, stern but fair Russian teachers (46-47, 242-243). This follows a common trope in Soviet socialist realism, present also in the work of authors such as Chingiz Aitmatov, whose famous novella *The First Teacher* (*Pervyi Uchitel´*, 1962) is mentioned in the memoir itself (47). *The First Teacher* perfectly exemplifies the Soviet tendency to contrast an honest but ignorant non-Russian community with the earnest, more worldly teachers sent to the peripheries of the Soviet Union in its formative years.

*The Silent Steppe* is also clear that Soviet power had a positive impact on gender relations in Kazakh culture. Although there is some similarity here with Soviet academic opinion on nomadic communities, Shayakhmetov is fairly positive about the traditional treatment of Kazakh women: “Contrary to the established Western idea of women in oriental countries, they enjoyed extensive rights, and often became the head not only of the family but of the whole clan” (8).[[16]](#footnote-16) But the Soviet regime further improved things. It “liberated the women of the East from old customs such as polygamy and the obligation of a widowed woman in an aul [nomadic community] to marry a relative of her late husband” (27).

It also attacked the tradition of bride money or *kalym*, “the custom of a man’s family paying for his bride” (27). The impact of this campaign on Shayakhmetov’s sister further throws his attitudes into relief. The law against *kalym* was repeatedly abused by Party activists, who apparently denounced every Kazakh wedding as a criminal act whether payment had been exchanged or not. This frequently led to prosecutions. To avoid this, weddings took place in secret without a traditional ceremony. The distress and anxiety caused by a clandestine wedding “under the cover of darkness” is vividly communicated in the memoir and emphasizes the negative consequences of Soviet interference in Kazakh life (29). Yet Shayakhmetov is not supportive of *kalym* itself:

Originally, this custom probably had a positive function. It was devised as a way of creating comfortable living conditions for a young couple […] However, with the passing of time, bride money acquired a new significance, and in the hands of certain greedy people often became a commodity and source of easy profit. (27-28)

Furthermore, Shayakhmetov indicates that not all of his sister’s anxiety is a result of the campaign against *kalym*:

As she was so young, she was naturally nervous about what the future had in store for her. She had heard of the miserable lives of girls who lost all their freedom once they were married off, and love for her future husband was tinged with fear and uncertainty about the unfamiliar house she would be entering. She felt even more anxious because she was being given away in this secret and seemingly unlawful manner and being deprived of all the usual wedding celebrations and fun and games (29).

The campaign against *kalym* caused distress for the author’s sister, but mainly by accentuating anxieties associated with the bride’s age and the Kazakh custom whereby she would leave her family and live with her husband and his family, fulfilling domestic obligations for which she will be closely scrutinized (29).

A final sign of Shayakhmetov’s partial acceptance of the postcolonial paradigm is his repeated reference to the Kazakhs themselves as a nation in the 1920s (72, 184). For much contemporary historiography, this is an anachronism. The Kazakhs who were handed flags and told to celebrate their nation’s emancipation from the Russian Empire, as described in *The Silent Steppe*, were likely baffled partly because Kazakh nationhood was at that time a relatively new political project endorsed by the Soviet state.[[17]](#footnote-17) It was novel for non-Party Kazakhs, and less meaningful then than it became later on in the twentieth century. Shayakhmetov’s identification of the Kazakhs as a nation makes him more complicit with a Soviet-era discourse of emancipation for the oppressed national minorities of the Russian Empire, who existed before the Revolution and were notionally granted their own autonomy and formal recognition within the structures of the new USSR. They were postcolonial nations. Their experiences in the 1920s were at least partly a result of postcolonial processes of liberation and modernization. These convictions contextualize much of Shayakhmetov’s commentary on his adolescent observations. They stand in contrast with much contemporary English-language scholarship which mostly prefers to emphasize the Bolsheviks’ use of the national paradigm as a means of controlling non-Russian people and reforming non-Russian culture within an “Empire of Nations”.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Conclusion**

Mukhamet Shayakhmetov’s *The Silent Steppe* exemplifies, and makes vivid, trends in the way that the USSR is remembered in contemporary Central Asia. Clearly the collectivization period is looked upon with anger and sadness about the enormous loss, both demographic and cultural. For the oldest generation of Kazakhs living in the 1990s, collectivization, and the struggle to survive it, were formative childhood experiences. Yet there is nuance in the apportionment of blame, in explaining the catastrophe, and in appraising the period overall. That same generation who were persecuted by the Communist Party in their youth were also educated by it and accepted some of its ideological principles. They lived on in a sovereign nation with particular (geo-)political challenges. As their representative, Shayakhmetov distinguishes between the Soviet system and its practitioners, between intentional repression and unintended consequences, and between emancipatory modernization and repressive imperialism, in a way which is uncommon in English-language appraisals and those of some other post-Soviet states.

Is post-Soviet Kazakhstan also postcolonial? Shayakhmetov’s memoir leads to a finely balanced response. Shayakhmetov calls the Soviet system evil. For him, it led to multiple tragedies, large and small. Yet he does not condemn it to transience and fundamental illegitimacy. In his memoir, history begins with Soviet modernization, it is not interrupted by it. He accepts, even vaunts, some of its achievements. He acknowledges the complicity of some Kazakhs with the Party. He partially sees the past and his nation through a Soviet lens, creating a continuity of legitimacy between Soviet Kazakhstan and post-Soviet Kazakhstan, remembering the early Soviet period in a singular manner which challenges some of the more definitive assumptions about the past made outside of Central Asia.

1. Niccolò Pianciola, “Famine in the Steppe: The Collectivization of Agriculture and the Kazak Herdsmen, 1928-1934”, in: *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 45.1/2 (2004), pp. 137-191. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew Payne, “Seeing like a Soviet State: Settlement of Nomadic Kazakhs, 1928-1934”, in: *Writing the Stalin Era: Sheila Fitzpatrick and Soviet Historiography*. Eds. Golfo Alexopoulos, Julie Hessler, Kiril Tomoff (Basingstoke: Macmillan 2011), pp. 59-87 (pp. 60, 73). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, in: *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Eds. Jeffery C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley: University of California Press 2004), pp. 1-30 (p. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-1923* (London: Macmillan 1999), pp. 15-16, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism”, in*: Slavic Review* 53 (1994), pp. 414-452 (p. 423). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, “Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War”, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51.1 (2009), pp. 6-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paula A. Michaels, *Curative Powers: Medicine and Empire in Stalin’s Central Asia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 2003); Marco Buttino, "Study of the Economic Crisis and Depopulation in Turkestan, 1917-1920", in: *Central Asian Survey* 9.4 (1990), pp. 59-74 (p. 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Damira Umetbaeva, "Official Rhetoric and Individual Perceptions of the Soviet Past: Implications for Nation Building in Kyrgyzstan", in: *REGION: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* 4.1 (2015), pp. 71-93. The Kyrgyz and Kazakh experiences of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods are not identical but are comparable in this instance. It is important to note further that there was a steady rehabilitation of Russian imperialism itself in Soviet public discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Damira Umetbaeva, “Negotiating Kyrgyz Nationhood: Of History Textbooks and History Teachers Attitudes Toward the Soviet Past”, unpublished Doctoral Thesis (Universität Viadrina 2015), p. 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Akylbek Dzhumanaliev, *Politicheskaia istoriia Kyrgyzstana (Stanovlenie politicheskoi sistemy kyrgyzskogo obshchestva v 1920-1930-e gody)* (Bishkek: DEMI 2002), pp. 126, 130; A. M. Turgunbaeva, *Formirovanie systemy narodnogo obrazovaniia v period kul’turnoi revoliutsii v kirgizii (20-30 gody XX veka)* (Bishkek: KRSU 2008). While scholars in the USA have taken a very different approach to their Central Asian counterparts, certain dissimilarities between the Tsarist and Soviet states have also been emphasized: Adeeb Khalid, “Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective”, in: *Slavic Review* 65.2 (2006), pp. 231-251. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mukhamet Shayakhmetov, *The Silent Steppe: The Memoir of a Kazakh Nomad under Stalin*,trans by Jan Butler(New York: Overlook/Rookery 2006). References to this source will henceforth be given as page numbers in brackets in the main body of the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mukhamet Shayakhmetov, *Bezmolvnaia Step´* (1999).This Russian language publication is not widely available. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Alun Thomas, “Kazakh Nomads and the New Soviet State, 1919-1934” unpublished Doctoral Thesis (The University of Sheffield 2015), p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Jeremy Smith, *Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013), p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (London: Hurst and Company 2000), pp. 451, 542. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Kazakh nationalism predated the Russian Revolution, and the first Kazakh national state was declared by non-Bolshevik nationalists during the Civil War, but Kazakh nationhood in its contemporary iteration took form in the early Soviet period with the endorsement of the Communist Party. See Bhavna Davé, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power* (London: Routledge 2007), pp. 39-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations* (note 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)