

## History and Memory

The evocative memoir, *The Silent Steppe*, by Mukhamet Shaykhmetov a former Kazakh nomad who shares memories of his life during the Stalinist era spent on the expansive, seemingly never-ending Russian Steppe (Steppe is the Russian word for grassland).<sup>1</sup> The Steppe, of course, is also a mythical place where the ancient Scythians, and the later Mongols and the Turkic tribes once roamed. Cultures like the nomads of the past and those that came after flourished in the Steppe all because of traditions that respected clan authority. But most of all, it was about protecting their animals: the yaks, the camels and the horses, which gave meaning and sustenance to their lives. Shaykhmetov's life is centered on the Steppe, where he and his extended community moved from grassland to grassland to provide pasture for their animals. It all came to an end with the arrival of Joseph Stalin's forced collectivization policies beginning in the late 1920s.

The Kazakh nomads suffered horrendously from famine due to Soviet authorities repossessing their animals and forcing them into collectivized farming. Because the nomads possessed few farming skills (which included amongst many things the lack of knowledge on how to use farming equipment that was supplied to them) the result was another predictable famine. The question arises, was this famine man-made? Reading Shaykhmetov's poignant descriptions of how Soviet authorities confiscated Kazakh animals and their personal property under the ruse of underpaid taxes, all to force the nomads into farming, leads us to believe that the famine was indeed planned. It is also a reminder of how Stalin built greater authoritarian control over all of the Soviet Union and its various people and ethnicities by using famine as a tool of political control.

Shaykhmetov's memoir is a personal story of how he and his family suffered greatly from the loss of their animals and their forced relocation ordered by the Soviet state. But there is more to his story, as he and his family adapt to the new circumstances by moving to a Russian village and learning Russian as a means to escape the famine. Paradoxically, it is this adaptability to Soviet life that saves Shaykhmetov and his family. Shaykhmetov is a willing convert to modernity, and labels those who hung on stubbornly to their past way of life to be backwards. In a surprising turn of events, Shaykhmetov declares that he is a proud, modern, and cultured Soviet citizen who takes pride in the technological cultural superiority of the Soviet Union. In the memoir, Shaykhmetov consciously plays down of the disaster of Stalinism.

In this complex tale of life and death, where individual success comes at the cost of great social suffering, government policies appear to be righteous, and Soviet leaders appear to be charismatic. It is in this regard that we come to interpret Shaykhmetov's *The Silent Steppe* as a novel preserving the incomprehensibility of famine and death and the loss of one's nomadic historical past. But in so doing, the novel also preserves the memory of those millions who died under Stalin's authoritarian control.

*Pedro de Macedo*

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<sup>1</sup> Mukhamet Shayakhmetov, translated by Jan Butler, *The Silent Steppe, The Memoir of a Kazakh Nomad under Stalin* (New York: Overlook/Rookery Press, 2006)