



Kazakhstan's Painful Coming to Terms With Its Totalitarian Past. Observations in the Margins of Three Source Editions

For obvious reasons, the question of coming to terms with Kazakhstan's totalitarian past arouses considerable interest in Poland, especially as the matter has gained significant momentum of late. Although there is no denying that the Act on the rehabilitation of the victims of mass political repression was adopted already on 14 November 1993, at the time this did not lead to the introduction of any systemic solutions focusing on the declassification of and granting broader public access to archival materials. Indeed, it was only on 24 November 2020 that a decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, set up the State Committee for the Complete Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression (O Gosudarstvennoi komissii po polnoi reabilitatsyi..., 2020). The practical outcome of the Committee's nearly two years of functioning has been the establishment at the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Almaty (formerly the Party Archive) of a Center for Information on the Repressed, which is tasked with receiving successive batches of declassified documents from the archives of the National Security Committee (formerly the КГБ), the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Committee of Legal Statistics and Special Registration of the Prosecutor General's Office of Kazakhstan, and district and regional archives. However, the process – as I was informed by one of the members of the Committee – faces difficulties brought about by the mistrust of certain archival institutions (for example, of the Police Archives in Almaty, and of some district and regional archives). As a result, the Center receives copies of certain declassified documents at a slower rate than was assumed, or they are once again designated as officially secret by the submitting agencies. There is no doubt, however, that the decision to grant a co-ordinating role in the whole process to the Archive of the President – a key archival institution in the country, having at its disposal a sizable budget and aspiring to play the role of Central Asia's leader in the democratic change taking place in this field, as evidenced by its organization of the global Congress of

Archivists “Open Society – Open Archive” on 19–21 October 2022 – was fully justified. To date, the Committee has helped to uncover the history of another, hitherto unknown, НКВД corrective labor camp. It operated in the years 1951–1953 in the Oblast of Eastern Kazakhstan, near the TurkSib railway line, “servicing” the nearby chemical and metallurgical works (Koltsova, 2022).

In Kazakhstan, the first social initiatives aimed at reinstating the historical truth about Soviet-era repressions were born in 1989, in the times of glasnost. They were focused at two locations: the village of Malinovka in Akmola Oblast, home to the former Akmola Concentration Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland, and the township of Zhanalyk, 40 km from Almaty, which in the 1930s and 40s became the location of a mass grave of victims of Stalinist crimes.¹ In due course, the former was chosen as the site of a state-funded memorial and museum complex, which carries on educational activities and gathers collections relating not only to the history of the camp (including, for example, valuable photographs and memorabilia connected with the colonization of the steppes in the times of Stolypin and the Soviet deportations). In 2018, Zhanalyk also became home to the Museum of Victims of Political Repression, which, however, was not newly established, but moved from Almaty (at the request of the Russian ambassador) and deprived of its “official” status and, therefore, of government financing. At this point we should add that the Museum’s exposition is clearly anti-colonial (or anti-Russian) – and not anti-totalitarian – in nature. Namely, the narrative starts off with the anti-Russian uprising of 1916, proceeds with the hunger and forced collectivization of the 1930s, the deportations and persecution of the Kazakh intelligentsia, and ends with the disturbances that broke out in support of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, the Kazakh Dinmukhamed Kunaev, following his dismissal and replacement with Gennady Kolbin, a Russian. It is worth noting that visitors to these places of memory are offered information about Polish women prisoners (Malinovka) and Polish victims of Stalinist crimes in general (Zhanalyk). Whereas the (state) Museum of Victims of Political Repression of the Oblast of Southern Kazakhstan in Shymkent, opened in 2001, is focused primarily on the Great Terror of 1937–1938 and the repressions targeting the members of the Kazakh Alash Autonomy movement, although it also gathers documents concerning other parts of the

1 The beginnings of the memorial complex in Malinovka are connected with the German Ivan Sharf, a deportee who was raised in a Kazakh family and who gained prominence as a social activist and sovkhos director (for more information on his topic, see Musagalieva, Musabekova, Sandybaeva, 2017, pp. 257–279). In Zhanalyk, the catalyst was the “Adilet” (Justice) Association, which initially operated as a branch of “Memorial.”

country. The Museum of Victims of Political Repression, which was set up in the same year in the village of Dolinka, once home to the administrative center of the Karlag (the Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp, an enormous camp system with an area equal to that of France, established in 1931), does not concentrate on the history of the camp alone, and strives to bring to light also other important aspects of Kazakhstan's totalitarian heritage: the terrible hunger brought on directly by the Soviet authorities at the beginning of the 1930s, the deportations, the Great Terror, and the persecution of the local intelligentsia. On 31 May each year, all four institutions host commemorations of the Day of Remembrance of Victims of Political Repression and Hunger, and as such constitute a potential point of interest for the originators of the "Sacred architecture of Kazakhstan" project, which constitutes a part of the Presidential "Spiritual awakening" program (*Rüchani žanggyrú*) (Kabuldinov et al., 2017, pp. 197, 221 ff). This is the backdrop that should be taken into consideration when analyzing the three reviewed publications.

Iz istorii massovogo goloda v Pavlodarskom Priirtyshie. 20-e – 30-e gody XX veka. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov. Karaganda: TOO "LITERA," 2021

The collection of documents published by the State Archive of Pavlodar Oblast, entitled *The history of mass starvation in the Pavlodar Priirtysh. The 1920s–1930s*, contains 118 documents from the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (fonds Kazkrajkom All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)), the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (fonds: Council of People's Commissars of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, Central Aid Committee for the Starving at the KirCIK, Representation of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic at the Siberian Revolutionary Committee), the State Archive of Pavlodar Oblast and the Center for Documentation of Recent History of the Oblast of Eastern Kazakhstan, and five fragments of press articles, books and memoirs. The selection covers the period from January 1921 to January 1933, although no documents are extant for the years 1926–1927. This is due to the fact that the presented documents actually reference two different phenomena: the hunger of the first half of the 1920s, brought on mainly by the ravages of the civil war and crop failures, but in some part also by the wasteful economic policies of the Bolsheviks and their inept control of the distribution of aid, and the famine from the years 1928–1933, which was caused directly by forced collectivization and the sedentarization of the nomads, and accompanied by the brutal seizure of herds and flocks by the Soviet authorities. The published selection is in line with a trend that is clearly observable in contemporary Kazakh historiography: the topic

of hunger as a form of Soviet genocide occupies a very prominent position – collections of documents are printed, museum exhibitions and conferences organized, and articles and other texts published, but analytical monographs continue to be the domain of foreign, not local, researchers.²

Zhumabay Shayakhmetov. Dokumenty i materialy, Almaty: LEA 2022

Published jointly by the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Institute of History and Ethnology of the Chokan Valikhanov National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Kazakhstan, this collection of documents concerning Zhumabay Shayakhmetov, the first Kazakh to hold the position of First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, embodies the difficult choices faced by the originators of the country's politics of memory. While it is true that Shayakhmetov, a graduate of the *russko-kirgizskoe uchilishche* born in the Omsk Oblast, where he went on to work as a teacher, was the first Kazakh to occupy such an elevated position in the Republic, we should keep in mind that his career was founded on his service in the НКВД during the period of Stalinist repressions (Stalin called him “the Eagle of the East”). In 1936, he was appointed deputy head of the НКВД for the Oblast of Northern Kazakhstan, which means that his purview included the deportations of Poles from Ukraine, and that he dealt first hand with the crimes of the Great Terror; in 1939, he was appointed Second Secretary of the Central Committee of the local Communist party, and promoted to First Secretary in 1946. During the war, he administered mobilization propaganda and collaborated on writing a textbook on the history of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, which extolled the “heroic past” of the Kazakhs. The decisive moment that resulted in Shayakhmetov being viewed even in contemporary Kazakhstan as a hero of the nation's anti-colonial struggle, and not as a Communist apparatchik and a representative of totalitarian Soviet authority, occurred in February 1954. It was then that the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic was removed from power as a “defender of the Kazakh steppe” against the Khrushchevite “virgin lands campaign.” Khrushchev later declared that Shayakhmetov understated the agricultural potential of the Kazakh steppes for “nationalist”

² Post-conference materials: Ayagan, 2012; Kudaibergenova, Kozybaeva, Bogaty, 2021; foreign monographs: Mikhailov, 2014; Ohayon, 2004; 2006; 2012; 2013; Cameron, 2016; Olcott, 1981; Kindler, 2011; 2012; 2014; Rohoziński, 2021; an exception is the Kazakh monograph concerning resistance to collectivization: Allaniyazov, Taukenov, 2009; an example of an account of a witness from the period written down by a local researcher, but published in a foreign journal: Nurtazina, 2012.

reasons, gradually becoming convinced that the local Communist nomenclatura was “hostile to modernization” (Mamashuly, 2011; Kanafina, 2007; Yilmaz, 2012; *Zhumabay Shayakhmetov*, n.d.).

The discussed edition contains 136 documents from the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Central State Archive of Film, Photographic and Audio Documents, the State Archive of the Russian Federation, the Russian State Archive of Modern History, the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, the Special Archive of the State Department of the National Security Committee for the city of Almaty, and also fragments of published memoirs of third persons and post-conference materials. The selection does not include documents from the beginnings of Shayakhmetov’s career at the НКВД, and thus concerning his probable participation in the purges and deportations of the Great Terror. The work starts off with a curriculum vitae of the future First Secretary, dated 18 July 1938, in which he points to his appropriate “class background” – “I was born in the family of a herdsman” – and acknowledges his employment with the security service with the following statement: “On 20 November 1928, I was directed to work at the ОГПУ/НКВД, where I was employed until 15 July 1938” (p. 21). Interestingly, the second document in turn – chronologically earlier – is an application dated 22 April 1938 to the Polish Communist Stanisław Redens, at the time the People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, for transferral away from the Oblast of North Kazakhstan (p. 22). The real cause of his decision is still up for debate, for it is difficult to accept the reason actually given, that is, an “excessively long” period of stay (sixteen years) in one and the same district. As regards his career in the Party and administrative apparatus of the Republic, Shayakhmetov’s typically “anti-colonial” stance found expression in a note to the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, Nikolay Skvortsov, dated 4 April 1940 and concerning “*ob osvoenii Golodnoi stepi*,” that is, the management of insufficiently irrigated areas located in the extreme south of the country. In it, he argues that it would be best to relocate the residents of other oblasts deeper into the Kazakh Republic instead of settling these territories with people from outside the country (pp. 27–28). Clearly, therefore, he considered that the “modernization” of Kazakhstan could be achieved only through totalitarian means, i.e., the displacement of large population groups. His suggestion was not followed through, however, and towards the end of the war the local cotton fields were forcibly settled by the Caucasian nations, and in 1952 by Polish deportees from the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. We should further note that in a telegram addressed to the Soviet Minister of Light Industry, Alexei Kosygin, dated 20 November 1952, the Kazakh leader asked for the provision of an additional 1 million rubles for “transporting additionally called up workers and kolkhoz members” to their places of work on the cotton fields (p. 251). These events constitute the

historical backdrop to the Pilecki Institute's film documentary entitled *One Breath from Death*.

***Materialy Gosudarstvennoi komissii po polnoi reabilitatsyi zhertv politicheskikh repressii (20-e – 50-e XX veka)*, ed. J. T. Karin, vols I–II, Nur-Sultan 2022**

The collection, which contains a total of 526 documents (273 in volume I and 253 in volume II), has been issued jointly by the Institute of History and Ethnology of the Chokan Valikhanov National Academy and the Design Office of the State Committee for the Complete Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression. The materials originated from the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the state archives of Almaty, Akto-be, Atyrau and North Kazakhstan oblasts, the State Archive of the City of Almaty, and the Special State Archive of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Volume I focuses on the repressive decisions of the central and republican authorities, starting off with the Decree on the Revolutionary Tribunal, dated 19 December 1917, and ends with a presentation of the rehabilitation procedures implemented by the Prosecutor General's Office of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic in 1960, at the same time citing certain documents that have already been published. Among others, it contains NKVD order no. 00485 regarding the "Polish operation" of 11 August 1937, and a decision of the Kazkrajkom All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) Bureau from February 1936 concerning Poles and Germans deported from the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. What is lacking, however, are documents that would augment the information already present in the previously published sets (Zhumashiev, Mikheeva, 2007; Karpykova, 2000; Gribanova, 2000) on the topic of Polish and other special settlers in Kazakhstan. Volume II is different. It contains archival materials covering a narrow time frame (1928–1931) and centers on the process of "dekulakization" and dispossession of the owners of the largest herds, which is relatively less well known than the forced collectivization and sedentarization of the years 1931–1933 (Kozybaev, 1998).

We should hope that the number of source works published in Kazakhstan will increase, and that they will present hitherto unknown, declassified documents concerning ethnic Poles and Polish citizens who were repressed in the country.

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