

Opinion – Kazakhstan’s Dark Heritage

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, JAN 14 2022

As Kazakhstan’s President Tokayev faces an unprecedented challenge from popular protest or “foreign terrorists” or internal coup (or a combination of all three) it is worth reflecting on the dark heritage of this former Soviet state. That Tokayev’s interior ministry recently confirmed that 9,900 people had been detained in the aftermath of the violence, refreshes the memory of the days when Kazakhstan was a key point in the Soviet Gulag Archipelago.

Solzhenitsyn used the word archipelago as a metaphor for political camps, which were scattered like hellish islands extending from the “Bering Strait across the Bosphorus.” The biggest of these notorious facilities, the Kazakh corrective labor camp at Karlag, Karaganda, was the pride of the Kremlin’s Gulag system. Established in 1930 it became the home for thousands of convict laborers and political dissidents and by the time of closure in 1959 had tortured over a million prisoners. Karlag was among the largest Gulag camps. Prisoners were brought to Karlag in shackles by train, packed into boxcars like freight. Most had been charged as “enemies of the workers” under the arbitrary Article 58 of the Soviet Penal Code.

Controlled from Moscow by the fearsome NKVD (secret police) prisoners who committed certain crimes were placed in special punishment cells notorious for their use of extreme heat and cold. Particularly intractable prisoners were housed in water tanks, depriving them of sleep. At first religious leaders, writers, and then anyone accused of regime disloyalty was subjected to repression. NKVD also arrested the wives and children of the “enemies of the people.” There was a massive childhood morbidity at these camps between 1930–1940 creating what is now gruesomely called “the Mommy’s cemetery”. Many were locked up for decades only for reading foreign textbooks. The living conditions of women did not differ from men. The women had only one advantage – they were rarely shot, but alas they were frequently subjected to sexual abuse. Known Gulag prisoners included Lev Gumilyov (son of Anna Akhmatova and Nikolai Gumilyov); Rakhil Messerer-Plisetskaya (mother of famous ballerina Maya Plisetskaya); Alexandr Yesenin (son of Russian poet Sergei Yesenin); as well as the leading Kazakh public figures like Ahmet Baitursynov and Gazymbek Birimzhanov,

Probably Karlag’s most famous inmate was the German writer Margarete Buber-Neumann. Author of *Under Two Dictators* (a memoir of Karlag) Margarete went on to survive a Nazi concentration camp. Her husband Heinz had been executed during Stalin’s Great Purge. She survived five years in Nazi Ravensbruck. Living in Sweden and later Germany, and encouraged by her friend Arthur Koestler, she wrote about her years in both Soviet prison and Nazi concentration camps, including her time in Kazakhstan. Predictably it aroused the bitter hostility of the Soviet and German communists but ensured that the detail of these torture camps was internationally understood. On 23 February 1949, Buber-Neumann testified in support of Victor Kravchenko, author of the best-selling autobiography, *Choose Freedom*, following his defection from the Soviet Union. Kravchenko was suing agents of the French Communist Party for libel after it accused him of fabricating his account of Soviet labor camps. Buber-Neumann corroborated Kravchenko’s account, securing his victory.

Buber-Neumann continued to write for the next three decades. The same year, she joined the anti-communist Congress for Cultural Freedom with Arthur Koestler and Bertrand Russell. Of Communism and Nazism, Buber-Neumann wrote: “Between the misdeeds of Hitler and those of Stalin there exists only a quantitative difference... I don’t know if the Communist idea, if its theory, already contained a basic fault or if only the Soviet practice under Stalin betrayed the original idea and established in the Soviet Union a kind of Fascism...” She died aged 88 on

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November 6, 1989, in Germany, just three days before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

May 31 is the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression in Kazakhstan, but it is a low-key affair. Kazakhstan has experienced a careful political memorializing of the Soviet Gulags into national historic sites. Two Gulag museums, Alzhir (the Akmolinsk Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland), and Karlag (the former Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp) opened in 2007 and 2011, respectively. Historical experience of Soviet brutality is watered down to create a more acceptable history. The Gulag tragedies are 'justified' by the ideologies of the time, and selective in what they say. This reflects a genuine if partial societal amnesia of the past. Such convenient loss of memory is a response to the collective trauma experienced by the population of Kazakhstan during the Soviet era. It should not be forgotten that during the Kengir uprising in 1954, Karlag's inmates pushed the Soviets out and held the complex for forty days.

Nevertheless, in Kazakhstan today, a significant percentage of people have living family whose life trajectories included deportation and imprisonment in the camps. A monument in Almaty, Kazakhstan commemorates an anti-Soviet protest in 1986, but the government, partly because of its pro-Russian foreign policy, discourages remembrances of selected historical events. There are political aspects to a sidestepping of Kazakhstan's recent history, too, often born out of the government's determination to stay friendly with Russia. To sustain support for a pro-Russia foreign policy, Kazakhstan seemingly ignores its colonial and neo-colonial history with Russia. Although those efforts have not added up to a ban on public remembrance, the government is wary- censoring via the education system and state media such as KazakhFilm.

Visitors to today's Karlag Gulag Museum Complex will find an impressive modern building which does not immediately embody dark heritage. Inside there are 3 floors of exhibits, convict art, propaganda posters and dioramas showing what life was like within the gulag system. A basement houses a gruesome series of prison cells, torture rooms and execution equipment, overlooked by approving busts of Lenin. The museum was able to find prison records for January 1959, the year it closed, that show 16,957 prisoners incarcerated across Karlag, a noticeable drop from the high of 65,673 recorded in January 1949.

The Karlag museum receives a score of 7 out of 10 on dark-tourism.com's "darkometer" scale. By comparison, Auschwitz, and Hiroshima both score 10. Exhibits include the horrors of the famine that ravaged Kazakhstan between 1919 and 1922 killing 500,000 people. The famine, along with the violent crushing of anti-Soviet rebellions, are described as "the most terrible offenses against mankind" but no explanations are offered.

The complex comprises a small but elegant museum, a memorial and a well-preserved Stolypin car, a basic railway carriage used for transporting prisoners. One of the first things the visitor sees upon entering is a quote by the former President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev: "the Gulag camp system was a crime against humanity!" However, this is not shouted too loudly, especially at times when the President might require Moscow's help.

The museum suggests Karlag's purpose was to feed the prison system in Kazakhstan; in other words, it dealt in agriculture. Karlag was reorganized into the state farm Gigant and the camp, which held about 65,000 inmates at its peak, became the largest sovkhos in the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan has done something that would be unthinkable in Russia. The past has been declared a national tragedy and the whole country has been turned into a huge memorial, but Russia manages to escape blame, as if decades of persecution had been committed by alien invaders.

Former President Nazarbayev, now 81, shrewdly embellished commemoration of the Gulag with a strange system of ritualized interpretations, which unified each ethnic group in memory of the Gulag on the side of the victims, while the blame is placed on the faceless NKVD or "Stalinist system". Modern Kazakhstan has a penchant for re-writing history, which means the events of recent weeks, alarm its leaders. Kazakhstan's current president has said troops from a Russian-led military bloc will soon withdraw. Tokayev had asked for assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to regain control, after unrest that left at least 164 people dead. Amidst fears of a permanent Russian foothold in Kazakhstan, Tokayev insists the withdrawal would begin soon.

Tokayev executed a ruthless crackdown after protests over rising fuel prices were allegedly exploited by violent

Opinion – Kazakhstan’s Dark Heritage

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groups, who attacked government buildings and briefly seized the airport in Almaty. He has described those involved as “terrorists” with shadowy foreign backers. Former President Nazarbayev has remained absent from public view since the protests began, and Tokayev removed him from his position as head of the national security council, as well as sacking his security boss. The extreme wealth accumulated by the Nazarbayev dynasty has contributed to the mood of protest, and fueled fears of regime infighting. Russian troops on Kazak soil are unpleasant reminders of Kazakhstan’s dark heritage and bring unwelcome memories of Solzhenitsyn’s “Gulag Archipelago” in this politically unstable part of Central Asia.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.