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Introduction

A few years ago, at a reception honoring the ambassador of Kazakhstan to the United States, some Kazakh students asked me about my current research. I replied that I am writing a history of Kazakhstani cinema. When the students asked about specifics, I mentioned the name of Shaken Aimanov. To my astonishment, they had never heard of it. An elderly Kazakh woman who joined our conversation was just as amazed: “Shaken Aimanov, our great actor and director! Have you not seen *Our Dear Doctor*?” The students had not. They were not so much embarrassed as surprised by the fact that the name of the founder of Kazakh national cinema had never crossed their path. A few months later, I talked to one of these students again, and she happily reported that she had watched *Land of the Fathers*, Aimanov’s greatest directorial accomplishment, and was deeply touched by it. She added that after returning to Almaty, she intended to start a Kazakh film club in order to learn more about her nation’s cinema and spread the word among friends.

The students’ lack of knowledge of their country’s history was no coincidence. While Kazakhstani high schools provide youths with a solid survey of the nation’s leading authors, cinema is not a focus. While this is typical of many countries where cinema is primarily viewed as a form of entertainment rather than an art form to be both enjoyed *and* studied, the degree to which many Kazakhs show indifference with respect to their own cinema is unusual. To be sure, it has not always been this way. The emergence of a national cinema in Kazakhstan in the mid-1950s was accompanied by enthusiastic reactions of millions of viewers to each new film coming from the Alma-Ata studio, and box office results of 12–15 million viewers in the first year of release throughout the Soviet Union was the rule. In the 1960s, millions of Kazakhstanis regularly flocked to movie theaters to watch the latest comedy or historical adventure, and even contemporary dramas attracted

their fair share of viewers. Aimanov's *End of the Ataman* became a Soviet-wide superhit, with over 30 million viewers. These are numbers that today's directors even of plain commercial pictures can only dream of. However, by the mid-1970s, the trusting relationship between the country's filmmaking community and native audiences fell apart, and in the 1980s, Kazakhstani cinema was in full crisis mode, not so much artistically (although there was a decline as well) but with respect to the acceptance of Kazakhstani films by the republic's population. Then, the breakdown of Soviet society and its film industry opened the doors for an astonishing artistic revival, but those films were shown at festivals and remained unknown to regular audiences. Thus, for current international film connoisseurs, Kazakhstani cinema is synonymous with the films of Darezhan Omirbaev and Emir Baigazin. To regular viewers at home, these names mean little—instead, mass audiences associate the notion of “Kazakhstani cinema” with Nurtas Adambaev's *Kelinka* comedies and Akan Sataev's thrillers, which, incidentally, are unknown abroad.

Today, only relatively small groups of cineastes are aware of the achievements of Soviet-Kazakh cinema, and only a minority take pride in the achievements of the cinema of independent Kazakhstan.¹ The fact that recent Kazakhstani pictures have won prizes at prestigious international festivals makes for good media headlines, but the films themselves are watched and appreciated by few. This dilemma is also true with respect to the legacy of Soviet-Kazakh cinema, which is kept alive by television. However, there is an additional generational divide: many Kazakhs who grew up with cult films such as *My Name Is Kozha* and *The End of the Ataman* remember these films fondly, whereas younger viewers, whose taste has been shaped by Western commercial movies, have difficulty connecting with the legacy films' aesthetics and morality.

Several factors may explain why Kazakhstani cinema takes such a hard stance at home and why its history has been largely forgotten. For one, there have been no systematic efforts to establish an awareness of Kazakhstani cinema of the past. When legacy films are shown on television, they usually come without preface or any form of contextualization, which makes their appreciation by unprepared spectators a challenge. Second, the official attitude toward Soviet-Kazakh cinema as part of the nation's twentieth-century cultural legacy has been ambivalent since the nation's independence. The cultural efforts to modernize society are often viewed as synonymous with the need to westernize and implicitly or explicitly reject the Soviet heritage.

Apart from current political considerations, the manner in which Soviet film history was written in past decades has influenced the perception of Kazakhstani cinema as well. One such factor was the russocentric approach taken by Soviet film historians. Suffice it to look at the authoritative *Dictionary of Film* (*Kinoslovar'*, 1987), which affords even to the leading Kazakhstani

filmmakers Abdulla Karsakbaev, Sultan-Akhmet Khodzhiikov, and Mazhit Begalin merely a few lines, reducing their careers to the bare facts and not making even a minimal effort to define their specific accomplishments. This sad state of affairs was mirrored by Western literature about Soviet cinema, which often did not mention any Kazakhstani picture or director at all.

The emergence of the “Kazakh New Wave” in the late 1980s for the first time brought Kazakhstani filmmakers to the attention of international festival audiences. However, this did not cause a reevaluation of the previous decades, which were usually dismissed in a superficial and undifferentiated manner. Ever since, new pictures coming out of Kazakhstan have been given a fair chance on the festival circuit and in specialized media. Yet, the legacy of Soviet-Kazakh cinema is still left unaffected.

This book has been conceived with the intention to reconstruct the history of Soviet-Kazakhstani cinema to the fullest extent currently possible. This includes its inner dynamics, contradictions, artistic achievements and failures, and the many gradations in between. I do believe that this legacy is worth knowing, both at home and abroad. To prove my case, I have analyzed many Soviet-Kazakh pictures in depth, including those that were ignored by official Soviet sources such as the four-volume *History of Soviet Cinema* (1967–1975). This thoroughness and inclusiveness are based on my experience that certain judgments quickly turned into clichés that were repeated by critics and then wandered from one article or interview statement to the next. An actual viewing of such neglected or dismissed films can make for a genuine surprise! Particularly the first three decades of Kazakhstani cinema have often been irreverently mischaracterized by film critics and historians. Thus, after mentioning that Eisenstein [Eizenshtein] shot his *Ivan the Terrible* in Alma-Ata during the World War II evacuation of Mosfilm studio, one author commented on the following decades of Kazakhstani cinema: “But propaganda films of the past years, historical dramas stressing Communist views, or love stories with predictable endings, created a cinema with little human interest.”² Even well-wishing critics opined that prior to “the recognition of the New Wave Kazakh cinema in the late 1980s, the Kazakhfil’ m Studios in Alma-Ata had an undistinguished history,” adding that the history of Kyrgyz cinema boasted far greater accomplishments. “Meanwhile, the Kazakhfil’ m Studios remained in obscurity: the only native director working there to attract interest was Abdula Karsakbaev who produced two films: *My Name Is Kozha* (*Menia zovut Kozha*, 1964), a film of daily life (*bytovoï fil’ m*) and *Journey into Childhood* (*Puteshestvie v detstvo*, 1970) which was devoted to similar themes.”³ Anybody remotely familiar with Kazakhstani cinema of the 1960s and 1970s would likely protest against such generalizations. After all, during these years Shaken Aimanov made remarkable pictures such as *Land of the Fathers* (1966), Sultan-Akhmet Khodzhiikov created a sensation with

Kyz-Zhibek (1970), Mazhit Begalin helmed one of the best war films, *Song of Manshuk* (1969), and Abdula Karsakbaev made what is arguably the most subversive picture about the Civil War, *A Worrisome Morning* (1966). These masterpieces were accompanied by lesser known, yet remarkable films. It is one of the goals of this monograph to challenge baseless cliché generalizations about the legacy of Kazakhstani cinema which, unfortunately, have been internalized by some Kazakhstani film artists themselves.

From the very beginning, Kazakhstani filmmakers were facing an uphill battle. The centralized apparatus of the Soviet film industry systematically diminished national aspects, accusing studios and film workers of provincialism and nationalism. When the filmmakers of Central Asia gathered for a five-day festival in 1966 in Ashkhabad (Ashgabad), critics from the center handed out marks and even numerical grades. One of the major points of contention was that “local problems, even the most poignant ones, are often being treated and dealt with from positions that do not go beyond narrow national frameworks.”⁷⁴ While this was considered a shortcoming, in hindsight the dogmatic critics may have diagnosed a feature of Soviet national film cultures that had surprising staying power and deepened, despite all careful monitoring and intrusions from the Soviet center, a national identity whose vitality came to the fore after these nations gained political independence.

When assessing the importance of individual films for this project, it was not decisive whether any one film is generally considered to be part of “the canon,” for it can be assumed that there is not one generally recognized canon for all of Kazakhstani cinema. Furthermore, the critical recognition of a film during the time of its release is treated as a factor of film history itself, that is, its contemporary relevance, but not the basis of its importance in general. For example, *Blood and Sweat* (1979), the adaptation of a socialist-realist epic, and *The Taste of Bread* (1980), a coproduction between Mosfilm studio and Kazakhfilm, were hailed as huge achievements of Soviet-Kazakhstani cinema at the time and were just as safely forgotten during the post-Soviet decades. Both of these films are analyzed in depth because of the aesthetic and political norm-shaping role that they played in their days.

In this book, the terms “*Kazakh* cinema” and “*Kazakhstani* cinema”⁷⁵ will be used interchangeably, denoting “the cinema of Kazakhstan,” despite the fact that these terms are not exactly synonymous. Recent attempts to ethnically narrow down the meaning of “cinema of Kazakhstan,” to include only films made by ethnic Kazakhs as being “truly Kazakh,” have not led to usable results and would ultimately lead to a falsification of the real history of this subject. Each chapter outlines the historical framework of a certain period of Kazakhstani film development, pointing out significant administrative and organizational events referring to the national studio, the union of film workers, governmental structures responsible for Kazakhstan’s film industry, as

well as congresses, official declarations, and media discussions. However, the largest space is afforded to the analysis of individual films. The thoroughness and degree of detail with which key pictures of Kazakhstani cinema are treated is essential for a profound understanding of the evolution of national Kazakh cinema as a whole. Feature films represent the main focus of this book, whereas documentaries and animated pictures are discussed in exceptional cases only. The film analyses include a discussion of the sociopolitical context, plot, peculiarities of direction, acting, camera work, music, and art direction, as well as critical reactions and box office returns. When dealing with individual directors, major elements of their personal biography are discussed, including ethnic background, since ethnicity was very much on people's mind in the film community and became an explicit political factor in the 1980s. The same is true for language issues: as early as in the 1950s, film workers at Kazakhfilm studio voiced their intention to shoot their pictures in Kazakh, although that decision was not consistently implemented.

The transliteration of names and film titles in this book is largely based on the Cyrillic alphabet. The main reason for that approach was practical considerations, namely, that the vast majority of documents are spelled this way. The film titles are provided in English translation, then, in parentheses, the Russian title under which the film was released in the Kazakhstani SSR and the USSR at large, and, whenever possible, the Kazakh title.

Researching the cinema of Soviet Kazakhstan means encountering a number of problems. First and foremost, many films are difficult to find, especially those from the 1950s. Archival documents, such as protocols of meetings, are also hard to come by. This is especially calamitous when a film was re-released in a newly edited version, which was a habit in the 1960s and early 1980s. Only in rare cases could both the original and the new version be located and compared. Of course, this is a lacuna and a challenge for future researchers.

The economic conditions under which cinema evolved was taken into consideration whenever possible. For industrial film production and distribution, these notions are fundamental. The terms "totalitarian" and "nontotalitarian," which became ubiquitous in the discussion of the Soviet-Kazakh legacy in the 1990s, merely established a narrow and not particularly helpful ideological framework that is subject to critical assessment in some chapters. Indeed, if one were to take the notion of totalitarianism in cinema seriously, one would have to move beyond mere political polemics, since very few Soviet films outside of the pure propaganda productions fit the definition of totalitarian cinema. Among Kazakhstani pictures, the one that comes the closest is arguably *The Golden Horn* (1948), a film that has been completely forgotten. The totalitarian framework of interpretation is most meaningful when applied to documentaries and newsreels. Feature films rarely fit into this procrustean

frame, even when they deal with revolutionary events from a communist viewpoint.

Ludmila Pruner, one of the first American scholars to deal with the cinema of Kazakhstan, once wrote: “One of the most tragic consequences of the socialist regime had been the catastrophic loss of the republics’ individual cultural heritage, traditions, diversity, imagination and creativity.”⁶ This is only partially true for the cinema of Kazakhstan, as will be shown on a number of examples. The national aspect of cinema was one that Soviet-Kazakhstani filmmakers had to struggle with for a long time. They were fully aware of their mentee role vis-à-vis the Russian professionals sent to Central Asia to build national film industries. Especially in times of crises (and there were several such periods in Kazakhstan cinema), directors from other studios came to realize their projects at Kazakhfilm studio, which often caused subliminal or open frictions. Closely connected with the national question is the dichotomy center/periphery, which is applied to the Soviet paradigm of film production and is important for the explanation of certain decisions made in Moscow or Almaty.

NOTES

1. The *Memory of the World. National Cinematic Heritage* project, organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, Paris, 1995, pp. 38–39) lists the following Kazakhstani feature films of the Soviet period as part of Kazakhstan’s national heritage: *Abai’s Songs* (1945); *His Time Will Come* (1957); *My Name Is Kozha* (1963); *Traces Are Going Till Horizon* [sic!] (1964); *Aldar-Kose* (1964); *The Land of the Fathers* (1966); *Kyz-Dhibek* [sic!] (1970); *Shok and Sher* (1971); *The Needle* (1987); *The Last Stop* (1989); *Fish in Love* (1989); *The Touch* (1989); *Fall of Otrar* (1990); *Surzhekei* (1991); *Kairat* (1991); *Woman between Two Brothers* (1991). The 1970s are clearly underrepresented, as are the early 1980s. Conspicuously, only films by ethnic Kazakhs were included (with one exception, *The Songs of Abai*)—neither Efim Aron’s *Botagoz*, nor Aleksandr Karpov’s *Tale of a Mother* are listed.

2. Dönmez-Colin, Gönül, “Kazakh ‘new wave’: Post-perestroika, Post-Soviet Union,” *Central Asian Survey*, 16 (1)/1997, p. 115.

3. Ludmila Zebrina Pruner, “The New Wave in Kazakh Cinema,” *Slavic Review*, 51 (4)/1992, p. 792.

4. M. Zinov’ev, S. Markov, “Seredina potoka.” In V. Golovskoi (ed.), *Kino 1966–1967*. Moskva: “Iskusstvo,” p. 74.

5. The two terms have political connotations that are associated with issues of ethnicity, national identity, and statehood.

6. Pruner, “The New Wave in Kazakh Cinema,” p. 793.