

**Ainash Mustoyapova, *Decolonization of Kazakhstan*, Palgrave Macmillan,**

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Ainash Mustoyapova, Candidate of Philological Sciences, and Associate Professor, is a prolific author in the field of Central Asian studies. In this book, she presents a comprehensive analysis of various factors influencing the processes of decolonization and nation-building in Kazakhstan. The author underlines the relevance of these issues in contemporary times, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, because a deep understanding of the past can help to prevent the recurrence of totalitarian practices. These issues are in fact persisting in the country nowadays; the author cites as examples the events of Zhanaozen in 2011 and Kanatar in 2022<sup>2</sup>.

The book is divided into four interconnected main sections; and an extremely useful glossary is provided at the end of each chapter. In the second chapter Mustoyapova traces the origins of foreign domination in Central Asia, from the expansion of the Russian Empire to the Soviet annexation of Kazakhstan. Through extensive research and analysis, she reveals the various forms of oppression and exploitation endured by the Kazakh people, emphasizing how colonial powers sought to subjugate and assimilate indigenous cultures.

Mustoyapova explains how the decolonization process in Kazakhstan did not commence with its independence in 1991, also stressing the lack of a political effort towards decolonization. An emphasized theme extensively discussed in this chapter, and recurring throughout the book, is the challenge of overcoming the prevailing Soviet narrative, which still persists today. However, it is important to note that the Soviet interpretation of history often differs from collective memory. She also explains how orientalism has been used to justify imperial conquest, and to generate a false narrative about the nomadic civilization. There is also a section dedicated to Edward Said and the importance of his ideas, that can be applied also when talking

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<sup>2</sup> These are two examples of protests bloodily repressed by the authorities.

about colonization in the Steppe. Taking also into account the difference between history and collective memory, the author introduces important historical facts such as Asharshylyk, the two Kazakh famines. These events, among others, have been traumatic for the Kazakhs and are still important for the construction of their identity, and will be explored in depth in the subsequent chapters.

In the third chapter, extensive space is dedicated to the nomadic culture. Mustoyapova focuses also on the contrast with the sedentary world, with the purpose to show the two different points of view. By using a comparative approach, she tries to explain the rich nomadic world and its social structure. She accuses the current authorities to follow the old (Soviet) ideological paradigm, rather than trying to deconstruct it. Russification and colonization took place in name of the civilization, but what does civilization means? A wide and positive imagine of the nomadic Kazakh world finds huge space in this section. The author explores this theme in depth, from their social structure to their representation.

The same theme continues in the following chapter, where the author tries to analyze and deconstruct several false myths that are widespread among people. These stereotypes have origins in the colonial and Soviet periods but are persisting in the mind of people, including many Kazakhs. Among these, for example, there is the false common idea that because nomads were mainly busy with cattle breeding, they were not able to cultivate the land, and Soviet taught them how to do it. Moreover, she explains how the process of sedentarization contributed to change drastically the Kazakh's national identity. Nomadism was a pivotal element of their identity and has been eradicated. But the colonial legacy embraces many aspects such as the negative consequence on the environment. For example, the Semipalatinsk nuclear test side was active from 1949 until 1989 and it had terrible outcomes for both the territory and the population.

The fifth chapter addresses the theme of collective traumas, as well as collective identity and collective memory. Essential to Mustoyapova's narrative is the topic of the resistance against the colonial rule. She emphasizes the efforts of Kazakh intellectuals, activists, and ordinary citizens who advocated for autonomy and self-determination. A central theme that runs throughout her narrative is the process of nation-building in post-colonial Kazakhstan. She explores the complexities of identity formation, language policy, and cultural revival, shedding light on the

challenges and opportunities that arose in the wake of independence. Mustoyapova examines the role of state institutions, educational reforms, and media narratives in shaping the contours of Kazakh national identity, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of nation-building in a multi-ethnic society. In this section the author also presents a list of groups of people which are conditioned in different ways by the events of the past:

- descendants of people who suffered during the famines
- descendants of Bolsheviks and Soviet nomenklatura
- part of the Russian population
- nostalgic of the Soviet Union
- government officials

The presented categories (p.239) are interesting and can be a useful starting point for further research about national identity and collective memory in Kazakhstan. This if we consider the theory of Halbwachs according to which the number of collective memories is related to the number of groups.

The first and the last chapters are dedicated to the preface and the conclusions, where once again the author of the book underlines the legacy of the colonial past. Mustoyapova shows how the legacy of colonialism is present in the new independent Kazakhstan, highlighting the socio-economic and cultural consequences of decades of foreign rule. She repeats how the influence of the colonization and collective trauma are still present in the current society, and she appeals to her people. It is time to weaken this condition and to interrupt the colonial dependency. It is time to overcome the victim complex and to foster self-esteem. Furthermore, she openly condemns the Kazakh authorities which never started a political process of decolonization within the country. Her thought is consistently clear and explicit in her work, like when she openly criticizes the Eurasian Economic Union, advantageous maybe for Moscow but not for Astana. After all, this is what Mustoyapova also asks her fellow citizens: to hear their voice and their opinions.

Probably due to the connections of the arguments addressed within the book, sometimes the text can be repetitive. On the other hand, this can help readers which are not familiar with these themes. Besides, when dealing with certain topics it would be better to add a little context. A clear example

is the definition of Asharshylyk, the famines that took place in the Steppe in the early 1920s and in the early 1930, and that had terrible consequences on the population. Even if this page of history has not been completely studied and new searches are still taking place, the author provides an extensive overview of the past events. However, she describes Asharshylyk as an “artificially created famine” and indicated it as a genocide (p. 25; p. 257). First of all, inside the scientific community this is not a certain date; many scholars, in fact, disagree with this opinion. It is absolutely an author’s right to spread her point of view, but, nevertheless, it would be useful to know at least her definition of the term genocide. If for example she is using the definition adopted by the United Nations or not. This does not change the tragedy lived by the Kazakhs but can help a reader which is not familiar with their history to create his /her own opinion and agree or disagree with the content of the book.

If the differences with other realities can help to understand certain topics, a comparative approach can sometimes favor the use of a narration despite another one. It is clear that Mustoyapova wishes to overcome a Eurocentric and settled-centric vision of the world, especially when referring to the alleged backwardness of the nomads, but often she obtains the opposite effect. The positive narration of the almost perfect nomadic world is not always credible, and it finds plenty of space within the book. An example is constituted by the theme of prostitution and the comparison with nineteenth-century England. The author reports that, unlike the European country, prostitution did not exist in the Kazakh nomadic world. Furthermore, rape was equated with murder, and protection was ensured to women. This seems certainly positive, but then she continues saying that for a rapist was sufficient to pay a compensation or even worse marry the raped girl<sup>3</sup> to avoid consequences. (p. 179). Yes, prostitution did not exist, but maybe women could face other problems.

Referring to chapter two, in the conclusions Mustoyapova repeats that decolonization is an urgent problem for the country. Then, the author herself declares that this matter needs to be explored in strength also in other fields of sciences such as economics, political science, or history. This is certainly true. This book offers an overview of the theme, but to delve into it, an interdisciplinary approach is needed. Kazakhstan history

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<sup>3</sup> Shotgun wedding still exists in some countries, and it was common also in Europe. For example, it did exist in Italy until 1981.

is dense, and its demography drastically changes over time, at some point they were a minority in their own lands<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the strong bilateral relations with the Russian Federation are also due to economics and security factors. These are just few elements that help to understand the complexity of the situation and the reason because different disciplines must work together on this research topic.

Overall, the author's intentions are commendable, and her contribution to the field of decolonization studies in Kazakhstan is admirable. One of the purposes of Mustoyapova is surely to spread the topics she addresses in this book among the Kazakh population, and her hope is that Kazakhstan may soon overcome the dependence on the Russian Federation, and in order to achieve these results she proposes some concrete solutions. An example is constituted by the creation of a national school of translation; she also stresses the importance of cinema and literature. But unfortunately, it will be very complicated (but not impossible) for the Kazakhs to overcome the consequences of the colonization without a political process devoted to do it. However, it is important to approach this book with careful consideration, ensuring that no single narrative dominates over others.

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<sup>4</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Kazakhs had a constant growth, and today they are the major ethnic group of Kazakhstan.