

# **The [Un]Making of a Mankurt: Soviet Legacy and Post-Soviet Identity**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis paper documents the research and process into Kyrgyzstan's history and the notion of post-Soviet identity through the research-creation and decolonizing methodologies. The study focuses on personal narratives, mythologies and Indigenous Central Asian knowledge to analyze Kyrgyzstan's turbulent history and cultural memory loss as a result of that. As an artist, I explore the notion of losing one's identity in colonization and its residue in the current times. Through illustrating an ancient Turkic legend called *the Legend of the Mankurt*, I am making open source material that is educational and interactive.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This Master's thesis belongs to interdisciplinary postcolonial research by analyzing Tsarist Rule and Soviet Times (1865 - 1991) from the Indigenous Kyrgyz perspective and historical events that shaped our consciousness. Through my studio work, personal narratives, experiences, and scholarly inquiry, my MFA thesis, exhibition and research, contribute to a discussion of post-Soviet identity, precisely the notion of losing one's identity in the time of colonization under the guise of modernization and progress that took place under the rule of the Soviets. The final studio piece is an illustrated book of the *Legend of the Mankurt* that has an interactive reflective element to it.

During Tsarist Rule and Soviet Times (1865 – 1991), the Russian presence and their policies made attempts to force a loss of roots everywhere in the post-Soviet spaces. The denial by Russian historians and politicians alike of the Russian colonial past, their violence, and land acquisitions are still ongoing issues. This research explores historical events that were attempts of cultural memory loss in the Tsarist/Soviet eras and what it led to in the post-Soviet period. Throughout this thesis, I will be exploring history, theories and concepts such as Orientalism, mind-colonization, postcolonial/post-Soviet identity through analyzing the novel *The Day Lasts More Than A Hundred Years* written by the Indigenous Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov and the *Legend of the Mankurt*.

### **1.1 Who is a mankurt? Origins of the legend and its significance.**

Before I dive into my research and creation processes, I would like to introduce you, the reader, to the word *mankurt* and its origins that are central in my work. The name comes from a Turkic legend popularized thanks to the renowned Kyrgyz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov and his novel *The Day Lasts More Than A Hundred Years* (1980). Aitmatov reintroduced the legend into artistic and scientific use and as a result made the term, and the legend, into a household concept in many cultures and languages. According to Aitmatov, a *mankurt* is a person who has



forgotten their past, abandoned their national customs, traditions, values and lost their moral guidelines. "A mankurt had no idea who he was, where he was from, did not remember his parents and even did not recognize himself as a human being. He did not think about running away, did the dirtiest, most demanding work and, like a dog, recognized only the owner".<sup>1</sup>

The legend and the term are Turkic. Turkic peoples are ethnic groups in Asia such as Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Kazakh, Azerbaijani, Uighur, Turkish, Tatar, etc.<sup>2</sup> and all of them speak languages that belong to the Turkic language family. The legend is reintroduced in the novel *The Day Lasts More Than A Hundred Years* as a recollection of the main character Yedigey - a Kazakh rail worker who is taking his deceased friend to a cemetery called "Ana Beyit" far away from their village. The novel and the legend both take place in the endless steppe area of Sary-Ozeks, Kazakh SSR.<sup>3</sup>

In the legend, the tribe called Zhuan'zhuans, who captured Sary-Ozeks in past centuries, were fierce with captive warriors. They destroyed their slaves' memories by putting a piece of wet rawhide camel skin on their heads. The slave would sit under scorching heat without water or food, and this skin cap would dry out and squeeze the slave's head wide like a steel hoop. Some died. Those who managed to survive became *mankurts*.

A woman named Naiman-Ana found her son transformed into a *mankurt* in the steppe grazing his master's cattle. She tried speaking to him, tried helping him to remember his past, but he did not recognize her. While they were talking, the woman was noticed by the Zhuan'zhuans. She managed to hide, but they told her *mankurt* son that this woman had come to hurt him. Bow and arrows were left for him. Naiman-Ana returned to her son with the idea of convincing him to flee, but he shot her and the hit was fatal. Her white headscarf fell from her

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<sup>1</sup> Aitmatov, Chingiz. 2000. *The Day Lasts More Than A Hundred Years*. Moscow & Boston: Kyrgyz Branch of International Centre, 124.

<sup>2</sup> Altai, Kipchak, Balkar, Bashkir, Dolgan, Karachay, Karakalpaks, Khakass, Kumyk, Nogay, Shor, Tofalar, Turkmen, Turks, Tyvans. (Brittanica).

<sup>3</sup> SSR stands for Soviet Socialist Republic. The Soviet Union consisted of 15 different states and each state carried their name along with the abbreviation (e.g. Kazakh SSR, Kirghiz SSR, Uzbek SSR).

head as she collapsed from her camel and turned into a bird, and flew away crying out: “Do you remember whose child you are? What’s your name? Your father was Donebai! Donebai! Donebai!”<sup>4</sup> The place where she was buried became known as the Ana Beyit cemetery, which in Kazakh means the “Mother’s Resting Place.”

In many definitions, a *mankurt* is a zombie, a mindless slave and a senseless murderer. The term is often used to chastise people for not having morals and forgetting their roots. This use implies that the omission is intentional and the one who is accused of it is at fault. If we look back in history, and look at ways the Soviet state treated individual nations and ethnic groups, it is evident that attempts at cultural genocide did happen. The Soviet Union's censorship and policies attempted to raise generations of those who do not remember the past atrocities and who will do anything for their “masters” through instilling fear in society, emulating responsive behaviors toward the government that mirror the “master” “servant” power structure similar to that of the *mankurt*.

## 1.2 Methodologies and methods

Decolonizing methodologies, which were extensively described by Linda Tuhiway Smith in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, is an approach that challenges Eurocentric research methods, anthropology and the notion of research as a whole. The research-creation methodology, broadly discussed by Owen B. Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, is an intersection of art practice, theoretical concepts and research, which allows artists and designers to make interdisciplinary work. My studio works encompass several inquiries within political, historical and artistic fields, drawing from research-creation and decolonizing methodologies. The goal is to support the growth of knowledge and innovation through scholarly, artistic and experimental investigation within the area of postcolonial/post-Soviet studies. Through using decolonization

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<sup>4</sup> Aitmatov, 124.

as a methodology I celebrate our survival, remember our history, and envision possible futures for the Kyrgyzstani people through writing and creativity. The work is driven by Kyrgyz worldviews, values and language, and aims to improve Kyrgyzstani society. Using *The Legend of the Mankurt* as a central theme in my thesis serves as an introduction of the Indigenous Kyrgyz perspective, literature and knowledge as the primary sources of testimony and history. An independent written academic analysis that addresses the historical, theoretical, and disciplinary concerns as a parallel discourse supports the studio project. The research-creation methodology combined with decolonizing methodology includes assessing history, literature, and mythology to create new knowledge and transform pre-constructed Soviet realities into new authentic actualities. This type of combination allows me to make knowledge accessible, inclusive and diverse.

Throughout this MFA thesis, and in my MFA online showcase, I present historical evidence and testimonies of people who experienced Tsarist and Soviet regimes themselves. This way I allow the change of perspective to take place and decolonize our history. Historical evidence is not always from historical sources in the Western sense, since the goal of this project is to highlight Indigenous experiences and challenge pre-constructed historical evidence. Kyrgyz oral poetry and storytelling are full of historical facts and testimonies. The novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* and *The Legend of the Mankurt* appear as dome-like themes throughout my research and are my way of reinterpreting the book and analyzing the contemporary struggles of Central Asia and our quests for independence and national identity. It is also my way of bringing life back to this novel and grounding the story on my ancestors' land.

### 1.3 Research questions

1. *What does it mean to be a mankurt?*
2. *In what ways did the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union affect Central Asian Indigenous populations and how did it lead to people's mankurtization?*
3. *How can research-creation support narratives that counter colonial frameworks connected to 'mankurtization'?*

## **Chapter 2: Historical Context**

Nomadic perception of time and space differs widely from the Western understanding of such concepts. However, for the sake of clarity for the reader, I will be using dates and timelines to indicate events' occurrences. Since I include personal narratives, comparisons, and events from different time periods to make arguments, I will not always discuss them chronologically. Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that "Indigenous ways of telling history have been negated and dismissed as 'incorrect' and 'primitive' and was a critical part of asserting colonial dominance on Indigenous lands".<sup>5</sup> The notion of 'prehistoric' and 'historical' time frames for Indigenous peoples is complicated since it creates that "before and after modernization and progress arrived" sort of dichotomy.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian monarchy was overthrown and abolished by the Bolsheviks on the 15th of March, 1917. The period between 1917 and 1922 is known as the Russian Revolution. Due to such abrupt and violent changes in regimes and the total removal of the monarchy in Russia and its replacement with Communism, people and scholars alike tend to set the two eras (Tsarist and Soviet) apart from each other. However, completely forgetting and dismissing the events during the Russian Empire's occupation of Central Asia is irresponsible. As the Kyrgyz

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 55.

proverb says: *Оорууну жашырсаң, өлүм ашкере кылат. Kyrgyz: Ooruunu jashyrsan, olum ashkere kylat - If you hide your illness, it'll come to the surface after your death.*

## 2.1 Occupation of Central Asia by the Tsarist Russia and the significance of 1916

*I thank my mind for not fading away,  
You, my speech, are not numb in trouble  
Fate, although I was sad more than once,  
My soul did not dare to curse you.  
Sometimes I saw people act like animals,  
And I moaned in pain  
But no! To hate the human race  
I didn't allow myself, even in my thoughts!*

- *Qanduu Jyldar (Bloody Years)*, Aaly Tokombayev

The infectious rhetoric of imperialism was one reason why Tsarist Russia began their invasion and occupation of Central Asian lands. Starting from the 1860s, the Russian Empire began their occupation of Central Asia. This vast territory stretched over lands of modern-day Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, eastern Tajikistan and southeastern Kazakhstan. In 1876, the Russian Empire annexed the region of Kyrgyzstan.

The Russian presence meant forced land acquisitions from the Indigenous peoples, tax collections and oppression. Land grabs led to several revolts within individual tribes, and the most significant uprising happened in 1916. The *Үркүн (Urkun)* uprising is one of the bloodiest chapters in Kyrgyz history and a nation-wide tragedy of the Kyrgyz people [Fig.1]. Several reasons for the uprising include the aforementioned tax, forced removals from land, the First World War and the Tsarist decree of June 25, 1915. The decree called for the Indigenous

populations of Turkestan to supply the armed forces with weapons, ammunition, fuel, food etc.<sup>7</sup> The *Үркүн* (*Urkun*) revolt was an anti-colonial and anti-feudal uprising whose main agents were poor people from various Kyrgyz villages.<sup>8</sup> Russian forces began resettling Indigenous Kyrgyz communities to 'free up space' for Russian settlers, peasants and military people. The passing of the 1915 decree was the last straw and led to attacks on Russian villages. The telegram of the assistant to the governor-general of Turkestan, M. R. Erofeev states: "Besides, panic among the Kyrgyz was sowed by Russian settlers, "teasing the Kyrgyz in every possible way that they would be taken to the trenches, killed, fed with pork".<sup>9</sup> (Kyrgyz people have been practicing Islam ever since the 8th century).



*Figure 1 The flight of the Kyrgyz to China from punitive expeditions through the Tien Shan mountains. Akipress archives.*

<sup>7</sup> Abdyrakhmanov, Telebek. 2016. "Причины восстания Кыргызов в 1916 г." *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia* 2 (11), 188.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 189

<sup>9</sup> from the telegram of the assistant to the governor-general of Turkestan M. R. Erofeev, 503, 709.

The Indigenous Kyrgyz populations were not armed with firearms like the Russians were; most were equipped with spears, swords, knives, and rocks. The telegram of the assistant to the governor-general of Turkestan M. R. Erofeev states: "The troops killed many thousands of Kyrgyz, the troops drove all the rebels into the mountainous areas, they soon, due to hunger and cold, will fully feel the consequences of their insane uprising, but the troops were ordered not to give the enemy mercy."<sup>10</sup> According to Dr. Osmonakun Ibraimov, a historian at the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, tsarism eventually came up with another idea - wipe the land out of all Indigenous peoples.<sup>11</sup> Russian military preparedness was unmatched, and after realizing that resistance is fruitless, people began fleeing their land in a panic to neighboring China.

Oral history and storytelling play critical roles in Kyrgyz people's culture and history. All ancestral wisdom, significant events, national sentiments and perception of the world as a whole were passed on orally from one generation to another. Oral histories and oral storytelling were essential survival strategies since there was not a writing system in place. *The Epic of Manas* is one of the longest epics globally and contains more than 500,000 lines. The story revolves around a hero named Manas and his exploits. *Manaschys* are master storytellers who can recite the epic by heart for several days. These storytellers are much respected in Kyrgyz culture as knowledge keepers. A renowned Kyrgyz poet Aaly Tokombaev wrote a poem about those events called *Кандуу Жылдар* (*Qanduu Jyldar, Bloody Years*). Aaly Tokombaev's family was one of many who fled to China in 1916. He describes those events, and his family's fate in many of his poems. Another poem that graphically paints his experiences is a heart-wrenching poem about his mother called *Eneme*.<sup>12</sup> The poem was written in 1930 for his late mother.<sup>13</sup> In 1917,

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Ibraimov, Osmonakun. 2015. "A brief outline of the history of the Kyrgyz uprising of 1916" Azattyk, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Kyrgyz: *To My Mother*

<sup>13</sup> Koldoshev, Tumenbai. 2019. "About the first elegy of Aaly Tokombaev." *Modern issues of modern science and society*, 70

when Kyrgyz families were returning from China back to Kyrgyz lands, Aaly's entire family died, and he ended up in an orphanage. He describes the loss of both his mother and his younger brother in the poem:

*You've moistened your wings for me,  
You've bloodied your heart for me.  
If only you knew that hunger breaks stone walls.  
You quietly said: "Be alive" and cried...  
Two orphans squealed like larks,  
It was nighttime, there were many stars in the sky.  
I remember how my little brother  
Screamed before me and fell with you...*

- *Eneme (To My Mother)*, Aaly Tokombaev

In 1916, people began fleeing to China to escape ruthless Russian troops and their punishment. Satkyn Saksynbaev, a well-known Kyrgyz documentarist and essayist, recalled his experiences as a child:

*"I was a nine-year-old boy at the time. Suddenly in the evening, some incomprehensible confusion began. Everyone was shouting about something, running back and forth, and then my grandmother who was on horseback, literally grabbed me by the collar, put me on a horse too, and our whole family set off in the dark towards the Issyk-Kul pass. And we lived in Kemin on the jailoo. People were just about to start harvesting. Everyone was so happy and could not rejoice that the wheat was good. I still remember climbing the pass and everyone stopped to let the horses take a breath. Some said goodbye to their native land, everyone cried looking back. Everyone thought they would never come back. And there was a massive fire. It turned out that before fleeing someone told us to burn these plots of wheat. And I never again saw how loudly grown men sob, seeing*



*how the wheat fields burned, how they turned into a blazing conflagration of their overwork, their sweat, the annual food for their families”.*<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, it snowed earlier than usual that year. People were dying from hunger, typhus and harsh climate. There were instances of cannibalism. When Kyrgyz people got the news in China that the Tsar abdicated his throne and a new government took over, people started going back. The road to return was just as difficult as the road to leave. Approximately 120,000 people perished on the way to and back from China.<sup>15</sup> Some Russian historians accuse Kyrgyz of exaggeration and falsification of details of this return. For example, according to the archives, Erofeev, the assistant to the governor-general of Turkestan, sent a telegram from Tashkent to Vernyi (present-day Almaty, Kazakhstan), on 8 January 1917, due to requests in the State Duma in Saint Petersburg, which stated:

*“Certain episodes of riots in the inquiry are, apparently, incorrectly illuminated: 1) the Kyrgyz did not have any weapons, except for rifles that were repulsed from the transport; 2) excluding Przhevalsky and Dzharkent districts, there were only a few Russian victims; 3) the Russian detachments systematically exterminated women and children, drove those into gorges who wanted only one thing — to abandon their homeland and flee to China; 4) 500 Kyrgyz were brought in from the Belovodskoe village: most of them were killed with sticks and stones and the rest were taken to Pishpek (Bishkek). Those who were brought to Pishpek were executed before the eyes of the authorities to the sound of cinema music in the evening; 5) in Tokmok, the head of the punitive expedition sent with the order to destroy all the Kyrgyz auls (villages) and the entire population. The executions took place in the presence of the entire Russian intelligentsia who was proud that the head of the expedition brilliantly fulfilled the order of the chief. The Kirghiz, who*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibraimov, Osmonakun. 2015. “A brief outline of the history of the Kyrgyz uprising of 1916.” Azattyk, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Ibraimov, Osmonakun. 2015. “A brief outline of the history of the Kyrgyz uprising of 1916.” Azattyk, 2015.

*came voluntarily were drowned while crossing one small river; 6) in the village Lugovoe the cordon surrounded the crowd of Kirghiz, drove the unarmed ones with shots and whips to the cliff, at the bottom of which was the river, and threw them there”.*<sup>16</sup>

The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, which took place on 7 - 8 November led to the demise of the Russian Empire and the abdication of Nicholas I and was the Kyrgyz peoples' chance to reclaim their land once again.

It is of utmost importance to note that the Russian Empire's primary stimulus and then the Soviets' was the land. The goal was to take the land, control it, and redistribute it. Gaining control of Indigenous populations was not even the intention initially since land and its resources were what they sought.<sup>17</sup> As Patrick Wolfe noted in *Settler Colonialism*, “Whatever settlers may say—and they generally have a lot to say—the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element.”<sup>18</sup> Collectivization, repressions and ethnic deportations contain the same motives. This includes access to land and the repression of those who were either against it or were in the way by merely living there. There are hundreds of proverbs and poems about the importance of land to Kyrgyz people, and one of them says: *Жекен жеринде көгөрөт, эр элинде көгөрөт. (Jeken jerinde kögöröt, er elinde kögöröt. Reedmace will grow anywhere, but one will thrive only on their land).*

There is a spiritual connection between land and people for many Indigenous communities across the world. For the Turkic peoples, the land is not merely a place of the dwelling but also a spiritual and physical space that connects to culture, identity, and ancestral memory. The sense of deep connection to our land is evident in our everyday lives, customs and oral histories. During Tsarist and then Stalinist repressions, the uprooting of many nations

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<sup>16</sup> from the telegram of the assistant to the governor-general of Turkestan M. R. Erofeev, 503, 709.

<sup>17</sup> Sabol, Steven. 2017. "Internal Colonization." In , 171: University Press of Colorado, 174.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8 (4), 388

attempted to create conditions where cultures could not survive and sustain themselves. The removal of many Turkic and non-Turkic peoples from their land created gaps between peoples and their cultures and identities.

*Urkun* is a sensitive and politicized topic to this day since many are concerned with Kyrgyz- Russian relations. On 2 November 2017, the Kyrgyz parliament pronounced the Days of October Revolution (7 - 8 November) as Ancestor Remembrance Day to commemorate the events of 1916. Some politicians in Russia called this step 'unfriendly.'<sup>19</sup> With time came a reevaluation of our Kyrgyz history, and with time came acceptance of these historical events that took place and how they shaped us as a nation.

## **2.2 What is the Soviet Union, who was part of it and key people?**

Putting the entire history of the USSR<sup>20</sup> into one section of an essay is like trying to fit a mattress into a pillowcase. In short, it was a single-party Marxist-Leninist state that consisted of 14 republics (Armenian SSR, Kazakh SSR, Azerbaijan SSR, Belorussian SSR, Estonian SSR, Kyrgyz SSR, Latvian SSR, Lithuanian SSR, Moldavian SSR, Tajik SSR, Turkmen SSR, Ukrainian SSR, Uzbek SSR, and Russian SFSR). It existed for 69 years, from 1922 to 1991. The capital was Moscow, and it became central in all transactions and affairs. All leaders of the USSR were as follows: Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, Constantin Chernenko and Mikhail Gorbachev.

Vladimir Lenin was the leader of the October Revolution in 1917. He was the leader from 1922 until his death in 1924. Joseph Stalin was the leader of the USSR from 1929 to 1952. Stalin's rule led to rapid industrialization and progress all over the Soviet Union at the cost of millions of human lives. His reign is known for purges, gulags, dekulakization and collectivization, repressions, censorship and mass deportations. Four decades and four leaders

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<sup>19</sup> Djumakadyrov, Samat. 2017. "Presidential Decree on the Status of November 7 and 8 Met with Resistance." Azattyk.

<sup>20</sup> The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or the Soviet Union

later, Gorbachev took over the office and began his reformist work. He is most well-known for such policies as *glasnost* and *perestroika*. *Glasnost* allowed more freedom of speech and less state censorship. At the same time, *perestroika* introduced some elements of liberal economics that were supposed to make Soviet people's lives more efficient and allowed foreign investments. *Glasnost* removed censorship, and the horrors of Stalin's rule began to surface. The policy allowed freedom of speech, and people could talk about and criticize the State more openly. This eased grip over states led to nationalist and separatist movements, and sentiments began rising all over the Soviet Union in the later 1980s.

On December 21, 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

### 2.3 Language policies

I was fifteen and was waiting for my turn at the hospital to have my chest x-rayed when an elderly lady came up to me and spoke to me in Kyrgyz. I looked at her and responded with a Kyrgyz phrase that I had to learn to get out of conversations with my dignity partially intact: "Sorry, I do not speak Kyrgyz." She gave me a surprised look, smiled and said in Kyrgyz: "How can a Kyrgyz girl not speak Kyrgyz? What a shame." I remember my face burning up because I was ashamed. I did not get a chance to look at myself in the mirror, but I am sure I was as red as a tomato. I remember that moment quite vividly because that was the exact moment when I realized how distant and alienated I felt from my own culture. It was because of this moment that I began asking myself: *Does this make me a mankurt?*

Both of my parents are ethnic Kyrgyz, and both speak Kyrgyz fluently. I grew up speaking Russian, and unfortunately still cannot converse in Kyrgyz. At times I have felt like a dog since I partially understand but cannot respond. There are thousands of people like me, who are ethnically Kyrgyz but can only speak Russian. Past language policies, the prestige of Russian during the Soviet Union times, contemporary education systems and parents' personal choices led to a whole class of people who do not know their native tongue. The language

policies that roughly began in the 1920s started dethroning the Kyrgyz language on the Kyrgyz territories.

One of the most fast-paced campaigns of the Soviets was the literacy campaign, popularly known as *likbez*, also known as '*likvidatsiya bezgrammotnosti*' (liquidation of illiteracy) that was launched in the 1920s<sup>21</sup> [Fig. 2]. By the early 1940s, most of the population knew how to read and write, at least on the basic level, adults and children alike.<sup>22</sup> It is important to point out that initially, the main idea of the Soviet government was to develop local languages and cultures. Joseph Stalin himself said in 1929, "Millions of people can succeed in cultural, political and economic development only in their native language."<sup>23</sup> However, in the 1930s, his attitudes changed, and from the 13th of March 1938, Russian became mandatory in all schools of the Soviet Union.<sup>24</sup> The most substantial push for the Russian language began after the Second World War. Native languages were no longer necessary since one could climb the career ladder solely with the knowledge of Russian.

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<sup>21</sup> Grenoble, Lenore A. and SpringerLink (Online service). 2003. Language Policy in the Soviet Union. Vol. 3., 2.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>23</sup> Stalin, Joseph. 1951. National question and Leninism. State publishing house of political literature, 354.

<sup>24</sup> Grenoble, Lenore A. and SpringerLink (Online service). 2003. Language Policy in the Soviet Union. Vol. 3., 54.



Figure 2 Likbez lessons. 1923. Foto.KG archives.

A great source of detailed information and extensive research on the topic is *Language Policy in the Soviet Union* by Lenore Grenoble. Grenoble points out how unique the study of language policy in the former USSR is and the advantage of the self-contained and relatively short history it possesses.<sup>25</sup> It is, in fact, recent enough to be my parents' and my grandparents' past.

One of the very first steps the Soviet regime took was hiring ethnographers and specialists that 'classified' ethnic groups into nationalities.<sup>26</sup> At that time, a total of 172 nationalities were recorded. However, the governments then asked the specialists to recalculate

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<sup>25</sup> Grenoble, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Grenoble., 39.

the inventory and identify “major” nationalities, a.k.a big nationalities and put smaller ones under major ones.<sup>27</sup> Smaller nationalities, as a result, were no longer in the official census and were under bigger nationalities. The language classification was also further complicated in Central Asia since languages were quite similar and distinctions were not as apparent as on the European side. As a result, more importance was placed on physical characteristics and traits.<sup>28</sup>

One of the main tasks the Soviet government faced is creating learning tools to spread literacy - the alphabet. The Kyrgyz writing was initially in Arabic, but in the 1920s, the discussion around Latinization began in the USSR regions. By 1928 – 1929, most education and communication was being conducted using the Latin script. By 1930, the Arabic alphabet was eradicated from use in all official sectors. The Indigenous peoples of Central Asia were mostly Muslim. The removal of Arabic distanced Central Asian peoples from the Islamic influence, thus furthering Communist plans towards secularism, which ended up not working since a strong sense of Muslim identity stayed put.<sup>29</sup> The deliberate separation of peoples into various nationalities, the individuation of different languages and making them as different from each other as possible was beneficial for the Soviet leadership since the manipulation of language was a way to achieve a larger goal of creating a Soviet State and one primary tongue for communication – Russian.<sup>30</sup> The Soviet officials and leaders' goals and actions shifted over time: different leaders had different plans (e.g. Lenin vs. Stalin). Lenin's initial policy emphasized the importance of indigenous tongues and guaranteed the right to use their respective languages. Russification policies began before WWII and became more intense after the war during Stalin's regime. Arabic script was rejected in favor of Latin since the Soviets wanted the populations to move away from the Islamic influence, and Latin was seen as more

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 39.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 138.

proletariat than Cyrillic that Tsarist Russia used.<sup>31</sup> Latin, however, posed another threat, since the Soviets feared the Turkic (Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek, Uighur etc.) peoples being drawn towards Turkey through Turkish literature (Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introduced the new Turkish Latin alphabet. Latin also served as an obstacle to learning Russian, thus the switch to Cyrillic from 1938 – 1940).<sup>32</sup> In general, Stalin's attitude towards indigenous languages and populations was very different from Lenin's, hence the significant move towards Russification and making learning Russian in non-Russian schools compulsory in 1938.

Almost right after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan passed the law to switch to the Latin script in 1993.<sup>33</sup> The switch is nowhere near being complete and is still causing learning challenges. Generational gaps and frustrations with different scripts are to blame. Still, they are the ones who have come the farthest along with Azerbaijan. Kazakhstan started the process in 2005, accelerated it in recent years, but it is only in the initial stages. Kyrgyzstan has this discussion regularly, but there is still nothing concrete regarding the change of the script. From Russia's perspective, it can be seen as an attempt to move away from their influence, which is also a big part of the conversation. The main issue with changing scripts is money. The project requires a lot of effort and funds. It will take decades and generations to switch completely, but people's actual real-life experiences of confusion, frustration and anger are usually left out of the conversation. Though, it's the people who are the primary agents. The script change conversation, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, is complicated and will take decades.

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<sup>31</sup> Dietrich, Ayse. 2005. Language Policy and the Status of Russian in the Soviet Union and the Successor States Outside the Russian Federation, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>33</sup> Tekin, Dr Feridun. 2008. "the Uzbek Orthography Works on Latin Alphabet / Özbek Türkçesinin Latin Alfabeti Esasindaki Imlasi Üzerine." *Turkish Studies* (2006) 3 (6): 588-600.



## 2.4 Political Repressions in the Soviet Union: Ata Beyit

Stalinist political repressions that led to people's arrests and executions took place during Stalin's Great Terror. Thousands of people all over the Soviet Union were sent to gulags, and many more were executed without trial. Many of Kyrgyzstan's *intelligentsia*<sup>34</sup> perished during that period, such as politicians, poets, artists, writers, activists and educators. Some were the founders of the Kyrgyz Soviet State and its very first leaders. Such notable figures as Kasym Tynystanov and Ishenaly Arabaev were also victims of Stalinist repressions. Both Tynystanov and Arabaev are the most prominent figures in Kyrgyz literature and linguistics. Tynystanov is the founder of the Kyrgyz alphabet in Latin script and wrote several works on Kyrgyz linguistics. He is considered to be one of the founding fathers of the modern Kyrgyz writing system. Ishenaly Arabaev is the author of the first alphabet book in Kyrgyz, was an editor of the first newspaper in the Kyrgyz language called *Erkin-Too*, and the head of the group for the collection and recording of the Epic of Manas and other poems alongside Ziyash Bektenov. During Stalin's repressions, many of those who tried recording and documenting the Epic of Manas were subject to repressions, arrests and executions, since folklore and non-Soviet poetry was considered counterrevolutionary and bourgeois. The ruthless removal of people who wanted to push for autonomy and national identity and had the power and knowledge to do so is a clear indication of the Soviet plan to erase people's past identities and raise generations of purely Soviet individuals. By murdering people capable of spreading Central Asian knowledge and making the change, the Soviets cut out the roots to stop the growth.

There are numerous chapters in Soviet history that are remembered for mass loss of lives. The traces of those events remain to this day. They are in people's stories, their land, their culture, language and everyday lives. Political repressions were present since the October

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<sup>34</sup> intellectuals or highly educated people as a group, especially when regarded as possessing culture and political influence.

Revolution.<sup>35</sup> These repressions reached their peak during Joseph Stalin's rule and began to decline following Stalin's death in 1953. Political repressions were used during the times of collectivization and later on during the Great Purge. In 1937-1938 the repressions reached a particular scale. Hundreds of thousands of people were sent to labor camps, gulags, deported and executed. The exact number of repression victims is unknown to this day since many documents were destroyed to hide evidence during Khrushchev's rule.<sup>36</sup> Yuri M Zhukov and Roya Talibova give approximate numbers of those who were victims of those repressions: Between 1921 and 1953, Soviet authorities convicted 3.8 million people.<sup>37</sup> A typical case began with a person's detention, interrogation, and forced confession, followed by an expedited trial and conviction by a 'special troika' – comprising an NKVD officer, a party secretary, and a prosecutor – and transfer to a labor camp (or execution without trial).<sup>38</sup> These approximate numbers give scale to how massive and widespread these repressions were.

According to Bolot Abdrakhmanov, a Kyrgyz candidate of historical sciences and a veteran of special forces, approximately 20,000 Kyrgyzstanis were repressed.<sup>39</sup> Scientists of the Ishenaly Arabaev Kyrgyz State University have now translated the State Committee's data for National Security's archive from Russian into Kyrgyz and published *The Book of Memory*. This work is significant because these names are of people who can live on in our memories. Aitmatov even once said, "A person is alive as long as they are remembered". Abdrakhmanov himself headed this work. According to him, "For 3.5 years, we studied 13.5 thousand criminal cases. The research group translated the data on the list of repressed people from Russian into

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<sup>35</sup> The October Revolution in 1917 is a coup d'état that led to the fall of the Russian Empire and eventually the inauguration of the Soviet Socialist Regime.

<sup>36</sup> Zhukov, Yuri M, and Roya Talibova. "Stalin's Terror and the Long-Term Political Effects of Mass Repression." *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 2 (March 2018): 267–83.

<sup>37</sup> Rudenko, R. 1954. "Memorandum of the Prosecutor General of the USSR R.A. Rudenko, Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR S.N. Kruglov and the Minister of Justice of the USSR K.P. Gorshenin on the number of those convicted by the OGPU collegium, the NKVD troikas, the Special Meeting, the military collegium, courts and military tribunals for counter-revolutionary activities in 1921-1954." *State Archives of the Russian Federation*. P-9401. On. 2. Д. 450. Л. 149.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 270

<sup>39</sup> Abdrakhmanov, Bolotbek. 2020. Bolotbek Abdrakhmanov: "The history of repressions can repeat itself if we do not learn the lessons".

Kyrgyz. The names of more than twenty thousand people are in the database, and the names are now on four thousand pages. The scale of the repression has reached monstrous proportions. In the lists, one could find people of different ages - from a 16-year-old teenager to an 82-year-old man".<sup>40</sup> People were tortured in the basement of the NKVD office. It still stands, and the upper floor is currently a bookstore. Some of those who were tortured in that basement were found buried in a place that is called *Ata Beyit (Ama Beŭum)*, which translates from Kyrgyz as "Father's Resting Place."

Ata Beyit is one of the largest burial places of the repressed found in the post-Soviet countries, and it is located not too far away from the capital of Kyrgyzstan - Bishkek. I remember hearing this story from my parents as a child in the early 2000s—the story of a woman who told a secret that led to an astonishing discovery. It was unknown for nearly five decades until the dusk of the Soviet Union in 1990. Her name is Bubiya Kydyralieva, who could not share her secret for many years because it was dangerous to talk about it and since no one wanted to listen. In the 1930s, her family lived in a dacha<sup>41</sup> thirty kilometers away from Frunze, modern-day capital - Bishkek. Her father, Abykan Kydyraliev, was a bricklayer that built houses for nearly three decades and then got employed as a janitor in the holiday complex run by the NKVD.<sup>42</sup>

In the fall of 1938, when Kydyralieva was 12, the NKVD made them leave the dacha for a week, and when they went back, there was a horrible smell in the air, as if something was rotting. The smell was especially noticeable at night when the eastern wind would blow in their direction. The smell seemed to be coming from an old kiln where bricks were made back in the day. Every night her father would walk to the old kiln and pray there and would go back home with tears on his face.

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<sup>40</sup> Abdrakhmanov, Bolotbek. 2020.

<sup>41</sup> a holiday cottage

<sup>42</sup> interior ministry of the Soviet Union, the predecessor of KGB

In 1980, Abykan passed down the secret to Bubiya on his deathbed. He had witnessed a mass execution at the hands of the NKVD officers that led to the deaths of 138 people - people of different nationalities, including members of the intelligentsia. Bubiya Kydyralieva was determined to tell the story and find the bodies of the murdered. She knocked on every door, tried to reach ministers and high-ranked people and still no one believed her. Until she met an ambitious KGB employee in 1990, whose name is Bolot Abdyrakhmanov. He felt her story, and in 1991, 138 bodies were exhumed [Fig. 3]. All bodies but one were identified. The reforms of Gorbachev were already in place, and as a result steps to rehabilitate the repressed were already being taken.



*Figure 3 Sarcophaguses prepared for burial, August 30, 1991. Ata-Beyit. Ata-Beyit Complex Archives..*

I will not be naming those who ordered their arrests since they do not deserve to be remembered. This is not their land. This is not their story, but I will name those who were falsely accused and convicted without a trial and then ruthlessly murdered. These are people of

different ethnicities, had different stories and were accused of various things by the Bolsheviks.

The names of all 137 people are as follows:

Abdukadyr Abdraimov, Abdray Abdrakhmanov, Yusup Abdrakhmanov, Garif Abdullayev, Imanaly Aidarbekov, Torekul Aitmatov, Ahmer Azizov, Yakub-Akhun Aipov, Azim-Akhun Akimov, Ibraim Aliev, Osmonkul Aliev, Aziz Alimov. Sergei Anders, Baki Akhun Akhmet Akhunov, Mamadjan Akhmetov, Isa Baibosunov, Sartbai Baibosunov, Mamut Akhun Bakiev, Ivan Belousov, Boris Beloshickiy, Fyodor Bengard, Petr Bergman, Ivan Borovoi, Abdrakhman Bulatov, Yusup Bulatov, Wilhelm Wahl, Wan Chan Lin Wan Dzi, Wan Ivan Wan Lin, Petr Golcev, Vladislav Gorbachevskiy, Freidrich Deis, Umuraly Djavgoshbaev, Asanbay Djamansariyev, Hasan Djienbaev, Omor Djumaev, Toktosun Dostaev, Notta Yankel Zeydel, Yakov Zinovyev, Daaly-Myrza Zylfibaev, Davlet Zununov, Mukash Imanbaev, Ismet Imin-Akhunov, Bayaly Isakeev, Ibraim-Akhun Ismailov, Sakmambet Ismailov, Tokhta-Akhun Ismailov, Kurman Kambarov, Kan Tai Dyu, Yusup Karimov, Abdulla Kachibekov, Sergei Keshevarov, Kerim Kenenbaev, Bahirdin Kirgizbaev, Daniil Kotlyarov, Ludwig Krenickiy, Iosif Kuzmin, Nurkul Kulnazarov, Arthur Lepin, Sami Li Ha, Vladimir Litsenmayer, Mikhail Luzanov, Lu-Chan-Toi, Lui-Che-Chin, Egor Lofin, Alexander Luft, Constantin Luft, Pavel Lvov, Arzy Magaz, Andrey Magay, Ahmed Mametov, Kadyr Mamayarov, Iosif Mildenerberger, Iosif Miller, Theodor Miller, Akimhan Muldogaziev, Idait-Akhun Murabedinov, Ashur-Akhun Musabaev, Ashim Muhamedov, Bakhtiyar Nasyrov, Mailya Kuli Nasyrov, Hurman-Akhun Nurakhunov, Papirjan Nurdinov, Kerim Nurmatov, Djorobek Omurkulov, Ait Akhun Oshurov, Andrei Polinkash, Grigoriy Prokhorov, Mikhail Rikhter, Kasym Sagimbaev, Niyazaly Sakenov, Murat Salikhov, Chengish Sarbanov, Nurdin Serkebaev, Iosif Skalickiy, Chokush Sulaimanov, Sultanbekov Yeshbay, Imin Sufiyev, Yusup Talipov, Grigoriy Taranchenko, Beakiy Tarkovskiy, Yusup Tashakhunov, Musa Toktosunov, Bakry Tokhtaev, Ismail Akhun Tokhta-Akhunov, Sadyk Tokhtaev, Tokhta-Akhun Turdakhunov, Imin-Akhun Turdiev, Akhmat-Akhun Turdyakhunov, Kasym Tynystanov, Usain Usmanov, Sabit Hadjimamabaev, Mamet Hodjanov, Ibraim Hudaiberdyev, Kharti Khunlava, Samal Chalov, Alybai Chengaziev, Petr Chepizubov, Sadyk Chobashev, Akhmatbek Chormokov, Alakhun Churukov, Umyraly Shabdanbekov, Sultankul Shamurzin, Sadyk Sharipov, Shakir Shafikov, Alexander Shevelev, Hodjakhan Shorukov, Erkimbek Essenamanov, Karimdjani Yuldashev, Yun-San-Sin, Boris Yurchev, Sydyk-Akhun

Yusup-Akhunov, Abdulla Yusupov, Sharip-Akhun Yusupov, Alexander Yanishevskiy, Henry Yancen, Bronislav Yackovski, and one body could not be identified.

Among the bodies found, there were outstanding personalities of that time, people who sincerely believed in the Soviet doctrine and who took upon themselves the burden and responsibility for the restoration of Kyrgyz statehood, language and identity. The bodies were exhumed in 1991 and were buried there. Ata Beyit is now a memorial complex that commemorates three significant events in Kyrgyz history: Urkun, The Great Terror and the Kyrgyz Revolution in 2010.

### **Chapter 3: Literature and Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1 The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years by Chingiz Aitmatov**

*“Trains in these parts went from East to West, and from West to East . . .*

*On either side of the railway lines lay the great wide spaces of the desert - Sary-Ozeki, the Middle lands of the yellow steppes. In these parts any distance was measured in relation to the railway, as if from the Greenwich meridian . . .*

*And the trains went from East to West, and from West to East . . .”*<sup>43</sup>

*Chingiz Aitmatov*

The novel *The Day Lasts More Than A Hundred Years* (И дольше века длится день: / *dol'she veka dlitsya den'*) by Chingiz Aitmatov is an anti-imperialist book that contains sci-fi elements along with biographical details that intertwine to critique Soviet imperialism and colonialism. It is also a critique of the ruthless policies that affected ordinary people and the

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<sup>43</sup> Aitmatov, Chingiz. 2000. *The Day Lasts More Than A Hundred Years*. Moscow & Boston: Kyrgyz Branch of International Centre, 29.

global race for advancement that completely overshadowed human values, nature and traditions.

The novel is set in the Kazakh steppe and is about a man named Yedigei who has to take his friend's body to the ancestral cemetery called Ana Beyit (which, as mentioned earlier, means "Mother's Resting Place"). Throughout the whole journey to the graveyard, Yedigei remembers his deceased friend, his other friend, who ended up being repressed for writing down their memories along with legends and myths that they know. When they finally get to the cemetery, they discover that the cemetery is protected with barbed wire and guards, and nobody can get in since now it is a spaceport. As a result, Kazangap had to be buried elsewhere, much to Yedigei's sadness.

Throughout the whole novel there is a strong sense of frustration with the Soviet regime. Certain moments feel much inspired by the author's biography, such as the arrest and departure of Yedigei's friend, whose name was Abutalip and who was accused of counterrevolutionary and bourgeois acts. Aitmatov's father, Torekul Aitmatov, was a high-ranking party official and one of the leaders of the Kirghiz ASSR (Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic). He was later accused of preparing an armed uprising against Soviet power. Allegedly Torokul was an active member of the liquidated counterrevolutionary national party called Sotsial-Turan (sought to create a bourgeois nationalist state in Soviet Kyrgyzstan). He was sentenced to 10 years of forced labor in camps and confiscation of all of his property. He was executed and his family did not know about it for 20 years. Aitmatov later recalled his last farewell to his father:

*"In the last days of August, we sold most of our things, collected only the essentials, and my mother, my six-month-old sister Rosa, and I went on the road. My father saw us off at the Kazan station...He said goodbye, and I still have the tears of my mother and the confused, sad look of my father before my eyes. There were a lot of people in the carriage who were scurrying back and forth. My father ran after the train car for a long time and waved, waved his hand to us...I understood everything as I was*

*lying on the top bunk of the compartment. Somehow, I felt that we would not meet with him again and therefore cried bitterly...So we left our father ..."*<sup>44</sup>

His father's body was one of the 138 bodies found in what is now known as Ata Beyit.

Yedigei's memories are not just recollections of past events, but a reflection on the community's past and present. These recollections also serve as a representation of how much traditional culture and lifestyles were disrupted by the pursuit of the Soviet consciousness, modernity and development. The Legend of the Mankurt is the central theme that runs like a thread throughout the entire novel, and Yedigei serves as an example of an anti-mankurt. The feelings of Yedigei are justified throughout the whole book, and it feels like he is surrounded by mankurts, who forgot who they are, do not speak their own language and do not care nor know how to bury their relatives/father. Most characters are ethnically Kazakh/Turkic; however, only a few exhibit pride and knowledge of their own culture and heritage, and the rest feel almost foreign in the novel.

Kazakh/Turkic words in a novel written in Russian put Indigenous peoples' struggles and cultural concerns into the limelight. Yedigei's persistence and determination to bury his friend at Ana Beyit shows the importance of practice and the significance of ritual in the face of modernization. The main character exhibits a strong opposition to the Soviet's desire to standardize thought and erase people's cultural backgrounds to create a purely Soviet individual. "His memories are hostile to the State and must be suppressed....".<sup>45</sup>

In the novel, the images of a mother and a father are representations of one's roots and consciousness. The imagery of a mother in the Legend of the Mankurt serves as a metaphor for one's morals, culture and land, and mankurt's murder of his mother represents one forgetting and betraying their ethnic and cultural identity. The use of Kazakh in the novel is also a

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<sup>44</sup> Ibraimov, Osmonakun. 2018. Chingiz Aitmatov: Life of Extraordinary People. Molodaya Gvardiya, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Aitmatov, 187.



reflection on the role of Russian in Central Asia and its relationship with Indigenous languages of the region. It contributes to the main character's sense of alienation since he is one of the very few who speaks Kazakh and uses it.

The liquidation of the Ana Beyit cemetery towards the end of the novel refers to imperialism and the Soviet use of land in Central Asia, specifically Kazakhstan. Linda Tuhiway Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* describes these types of actions as 'breaking in' of the land through legislation and forced movement of people off their lands and territories, which led to high mortality rates and other social consequences.<sup>46</sup> The scene with Yedigei and his companions speaking to the lieutenant about the cemetery and its fate represents the Indigenous struggle with the Soviet land grabs and how people became strangers on their territory. "You'll never have enough roads! You'll never have enough land! I spit on you!"<sup>47</sup>

Literature was under high surveillance since it was also one of the key tools in state control, reeducation, and creation of a 'Soviet Individual.' The writer himself was accused on multiple occasions of being too involved with myths, parables, and tales. He directly responded to such accusations by condemning such a narrow and superficial understanding of modern realism—such readiness to proclaim anything that does not imitate chronological reality a fairy tale.<sup>48</sup>

Every chapter begins with the phrase "*Trains in these parts went from East to West, and from West to East . . .*" and it signifies the non-stop race for progress and production at the cost of human lives, their cultures and their land. Aitmatov is a writer who managed to write within state regulations about things that grasped the peoples' complex histories and their identities. The novel connects Indigenous with the Soviet in a very organic way, without making it feel foreign and distant, since the ideas ingrained in the story transcend time and the book

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<sup>46</sup> Tuhiway Smith, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Aitmatov, 332.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

itself is written from the Indigenous Central Asian perspective. Alienation from our cultures were caused by Soviet Orientalization of non-Russian cultures and their attempts at creating a “New Soviet Person”.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.2 Russian Orientalism

I grew up in a Kyrgyz household that proudly celebrated Kyrgyz culture. My parents instilled a strong sense of culture and identity in me to the best of their abilities. As a child, I had a bizarre nostalgia for the Soviet period that I never lived in and I fantasized about the West and its “forwardness”. Apart from not speaking Kyrgyz, and not getting knowledge directly from Kyrgyz knowledge holders except my parents, I also witnessed the narrative of Eastern “backwardness” and the desire to “fix it” in the media and pop culture. There is a whole generation of people just like me who grew up absorbing the popular culture and social constructs that painted Kyrgyz/Turkic culture a certain way.

Orientalism (Said 1978) can be defined as a representation of the East in an exaggerated, distorted way that paints Eastern cultures as exotic, backward, uncivilized and savage. Said's phenomenon can be applied in many countries and is widely used in post-colonial and decolonial discourses. The Soviet Orientalism is quite interesting to look at since Russians themselves self-colonized with Western thought and standards with Peter I's reforms (Peter I is also known as Peter the Great. The ruler of the Russian Tsardom from 1682 – 1725).<sup>50</sup> Alexander Etkind, a historian and cultural scientist, brings up a provocative perspective on Russia and its imperialist history in his book *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*. What makes Russia different from other imperial empires is how they managed to 'other' their own Slavic people through history. Russia's pursuit of Western standards and ideas

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<sup>49</sup> A New Soviet Man/A New Soviet Person – an archetype of a Soviet person postulated by the Communist Party. A New Soviet Person is a selfless, hardworking, enthusiastic person who eradicated all nationalist sentiments within themselves.

<sup>50</sup> Etkind, Alexander. 2011. *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, 146.

initiated by Peter I colonized its people and structures, and the Soviet policies (repressions, dekulakization, purges) furthered those oppressions. The case with Russian Orientalism is quite peculiar, and Alexander Etkind applies the term "internal colonization" to characterize the Russian relationship with its people and land. "Internal colonization" means the process of cultural expansion, hegemony, assimilation within state borders, real or imagined. External colonization carries out the exercise of power outside and internal colonization within the state's established borders, although these borders are driven by colonization.<sup>51</sup> Russia, as a result, turned out to be a subject and an object of colonization and its consequences, and Orientalism was also a part of it.<sup>52</sup> It is crucial to know that for the most part, for Western Europeans, Russia was just as Oriental as the rest of the Eastern world and only began to emerge as a Western power with technological and military advancements in the 18th century.<sup>53</sup>

Through representations, propaganda in popular culture, art, and everyday life, Central Asia's colonized peoples were made to question their roots, religion, and past. According to Edward Said, Orientalism is a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts. It elaborates an essential geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, the Orient and the Occident) that is achieved by control and manipulation to create an alternative world.<sup>54</sup> As a result, in this alternative world, "Orientalist" stereotypes are absorbed and internalized by the subjects themselves.<sup>55</sup>

Orientalism acts as a framework racism can exist within. The creation of stereotypes of the 'Other,' in this case Central Asians and the Caucasus peoples, allows Russia to form assumptions. I remember being told to watch the classics of Soviet cinematography as a child

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<sup>51</sup> Etkind, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>53</sup> Morrison, 627.

<sup>54</sup> Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 12.

<sup>55</sup> Morrison, 620.

because many aphorisms within the Russian language are from various Soviet movies. "Vostok delo tonkoe - The Orient is a delicate matter" is one of such sayings, and it comes from one of the most blatant and great examples of Soviet Orientalism in Soviet cinema – *The White Sun of the Desert* (*Белое солнце пустыни: Beloye Solnce Pustyni*). It is an Ostern (Russian 'Western') filmed in 1970 that is considered one of the most prominent box office hits in the Soviet Union. All cosmonauts boarding Russian space flights still watch *White Sun of the Desert* before each launch for good luck, which is ironic since it seems like space colonization. The film's plot is simple and takes Homer's *Odyssey*'s shape: The film is set in the early 1920s on the Caspian Sea's eastern coast. The civil war is over, but the rebelling Central Asian gangs are still operating in the region. The Red Army soldier Fyodor Sukhov is met with many obstacles that he successfully overcomes, saves and liberates a harem of women, brings Soviet power to the region, and after completing all tasks given to him, gets to go home to Samara, Russia.

The film is full of imagery that painfully resembles every piece of popular culture about the Orient and the Other: sandy dunes, mysterious women in harems and Oriental men who all need to be rescued, backward ways and rebel groups. The desert is the total opposite of his home - a beautiful land full of trees and greenery. Sukhov's wife is a simple Slavic woman who will not accept multiple wives, and harem wives cannot grasp the concept of men in Russia only having one wife. Women from the harem are dressed exaggeratedly (a wild jumble of various Turkic headwear and jewelry, exaggerated eyebrow shape, dark eyes) [Fig.4]. They seem narrow-minded, and most of them are Russian/Slavic actresses. The film forces the viewer to see the Central Asian people as villains with backwards morals and values. The film felt off even as a child, and now it leaves a bitter aftertaste. I used to question this film; specifically, the portrayal of women in it because a lot of them wore jewelry that resembled Kyrgyz/Turkic

jewelry and wore headpieces that resembled Uzbek and Kazakh hats. What felt like mine was put on women who did not look like me.



*Figure 4 The White Sun of the Desert. One of the harem women.*

The Kazakh art historian Dr. Aliya de Tiesenhausen's research on Central Asian art and Russian Orientalism is an excellent source of empathetic and critical discourse on the matter. According to Tiesenhausen, Socialist Realist Art was the primary tool of propaganda in the hands of the state, and through art, the Soviet state propagated emancipation, liberation and Soviet modernization.<sup>56</sup> Socialist Realism played an essential role in creating and establishing the new national identity, and self-representation was only possible under State control. Even then, Central Asians were limited since they were no longer just Kyrgyz, Kazakh or Uzbek. They were, first and foremost, Soviet and then the rest.<sup>57</sup> They were still not Russian, and it had to be made apparent. Artists had to represent the benefits of the Soviet rule in their respective regions

<sup>56</sup> Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen, Aliya. 2016. "Central Asia in Art, from Soviet Orientalism to the New Republics."

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

and were not allowed to mention or hint towards anti-Russian propaganda. Most artists of the Soviet Union usually acquired their degrees in Russia, specifically The Surikov State Academy of the Arts in Moscow. My art teachers in Bishkek also went there. Most were taught during the Socialist era; hence some of their interpretations of Indigenous Central Asian cultures and ornaments can seem Oriental. Tiesenhausen brings up an interesting point regarding Soviet Orientalism - many paintings contain objects and other elements that create a divide between the Russians and the Other (stereotypically Eastern fruits, darker skin, modern clothing vs. traditional).<sup>58</sup>

Indigenous peoples worldwide were subjects of “research” and studies by ethnographers and scientists from the West. Russian ethnographers also studied Turkic peoples of Central Asia. I recently had a chance to attend a talk called “Between the past and the present: redevelopment of the cultural heritage” here in Bishkek.<sup>59</sup> In this presentation, activists, curators and historians discussed ways one can preserve memory and essentially not become *mankurts*. One of the speakers began their speech by saying how they stumbled upon a rare book that contained notes on Kyrgyz people in the 1800s by a Russian ethnographer and about how much they found out about us and our culture by reading that book. However, I believe this is our leading problem that we learn about ourselves through the Western/foreign gaze, and that has been happening for more than a century.

We saw ourselves on television and art. We read about our ancestors, and our traditions through the gaze of outsiders, and at some point we became alienated and distant from our culture. The Soviets wanted to standardize everything, including peoples’ unique cultures and essentially create *mankurts* who only want to please their master “the State”.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Abdykalykov Erik, Tentieva Cholpon, and Marat Azat. 2021. “Between the past and the present: redevelopment of the cultural heritage.” Panel Discussion, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, February 26.

There is a clear parallel between Edward Said's and Paulo Freire's pedagogical approaches and ways they can be applied to dismantle pre-constructed power structures that dominate the oppressed, the Other. Freire stresses the importance of social justice and democracy while questioning existing power structures that prevent certain groups from getting an education. Said's work allows the Other to understand their otherness and structures of cultural and political dominance. Both encourage critical awareness and the creation of counter-discourses to liberate the Other. Structures that lead to the creation of mankurts are very similar to those who oppress the Other, and such tools like education and critical awareness can dismantle these structures. Just like Freire and Said, I believe that inclusive education and critical awareness can prevent the mankurtization that is taking place in current post-Soviet states, which brings me to my next point.

### 3.3 Post-soviet/postcolonial identity

"What does it mean to be a void?" A great question that was asked by the decolonial writer Madina Tlostanova in the article *Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality*.<sup>60</sup> The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 shattered peoples' realities and forced them into realizing their own identities. The Soviet identity, also known as the aforementioned "New Soviet Man", that was forced on them no longer existed; thus, national and political identities had to be rethought and reimagined. Both socialist and colonial discourses under the guise of modernity and progress performed brainwashing that led to the colonization of minds and spaces. This means that the search for identity in postcolonial states is still on-going. The rapid re-evaluation and rethinking of values, 'heroes' and identity began during the *perestroika* period and continues to this day. Soviet/Socialist regimes' outcomes in the post-Soviet arena are self-orientalization and self-racializing, inferiority complexes, mimicry,

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<sup>60</sup> Tlostanova, Madina. 2012. "Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48 (2), 131.

and other phenomena.<sup>61</sup> Tlostanova asks, “what does it mean to be a void?” in a socio-political sense. My question, however, is, “what does it mean to have a void in your culture?”

The postcolonial discourse in the Central Asian context is tricky since it is a highly politicized topic. Close ties with Russia and its influence in the area do not fully allow an honest and unbiased evaluation of the past. The demonization of Russian regimes, both Tsarist and Soviet, seem counterproductive and potentially dangerous. Since most countries in Central Asia have more than just one titular nation, there is a high risk of igniting nationalistic and separatist sentiments. However, it is crucial to identify and acknowledge the region’s colonial past so the communities can grow from it, not repeat history, and understand the process of mankurtization that took place and prevent furthering it.

### 3.3.1 Language

There were far more Russian schools than Kyrgyz ones during the Soviet era, and most schools did not even teach Kyrgyz. All subjects were regulated to the Communist Party principle and were heavily influenced by communist ideology. No attention was paid to the national characteristics of education (Ministry of Education). Only in the 1980s the Kyrgyz State became invested in developing the Kyrgyz language. For 70 years before that, Russian was on the pedestal, and bureaucratic matters mainstream media, education, television, radio, institutions, politics and research were all done in Russian.<sup>62</sup> The only schools that taught in Kyrgyz were in remote villages.<sup>63</sup> In 2002, I was taught Kyrgyz three times a week, and all curriculum was introduced in Russian at my school. The majority of academic and scientific research at universities and elsewhere was and still is done in Russian. Most educational and scholarly material is only available in Russian, and there is no stimulus to translate and publish works in

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<sup>61</sup> Tlostanova, 132

<sup>62</sup> Derbisheva, Zamira. 2009. “Языковая Политика и Языковая Ситуация в Кыргызстане.”, 49.

<sup>63</sup> Derbisheva, 49.



Kyrgyz.<sup>64</sup> There is a big divide between people who live in the capital and the rest of the country; most of Bishkek speaks Russian and provincial territories are mostly Kyrgyz. The rhetoric of Kyrgyz - ours, Russian - theirs is not helpful since the Russian language is significant in all affairs, including inter-ethnic communications. Russian, as Lenin desired it, has become a lingua franca in most Central Asian states.

Language policies of the USSR have left their residue. The lack of Kyrgyz resources in schools and universities is a pressing issue, and many of those who speak Kyrgyz still mix Kyrgyz with Russian words. The Russian language has its reputation as the “language of the educated,” and speaking Kyrgyz is not considered prestigious. Kyrgyz has a reputation as a “village” or a “simple” language, I feel and look Kyrgyz, but the void I have in me, due to me not knowing my language, prevents me from fully understanding my history, my people and my culture in general. I once wanted to learn how to play the komuz<sup>65</sup>, but I was discouraged and was told that I would not understand the Kyrgyz spirit and music due to me being an “outsider.” These words also made me wonder if I am one of the mankurts and if there is a way out of it.

### 3.3.2 Spaces

I was not around during the USSR's existence, yet I still experience its physical presence in my country. It lives in city architecture, monuments, streets, words and people's minds. Most roads in big cities in Kyrgyzstan have at least two names: the Soviet one and the new one. People use these names interchangeably. Many towns and villages carry two names, even the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek. Bishkek used to be called Frunze, named after Mikhail Frunze, a Bolshevik leader and born in Pishpek (Future Frunze, then Bishkek). The Mira Avenue (Peace Avenue), for example, is now called Chingiz Aitmatov Avenue, the Southern Highway, in the south of Bishkek, now carries the name of Aaly Tokombaev, and what used to be Stalin Avenue

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, 59

<sup>65</sup> An ancient fretless Kyrgyz string instrument

(in 1936) is now called Chui Avenue. Hundreds of streets, cities and villages were renamed to honour our Kyrgyz ancestors. I believe such steps are necessary to decolonize, reclaim our land and reassert ourselves as an independent country. A great project that shows the act of reclaiming space and land is by Susan Blight and Hayden King called *Ogimaa Mikana* (2013). The artists posted billboards with Anishinaabemowin phrases around the city and pasted stickers with Anishinaabemowin names on street signs around Toronto.<sup>66</sup> Using the Anishinaabe language, the artists are reasserting their spiritual, political and physical presence on the Anishinaabe territories.

Many people in the post-Soviet space believe that cities and streets' renaming is pointless and does not solve anything. I believe that spaces carry memories, identity and energy, and this renaming is crucial to reclaiming our land. The problem with new names is that people are not interested in learning history and this lack of initiative is coming from various governmental institutions. Kyrgyzstan does not have stable leadership and has been through many turbulent moments over the past 30 years of independence, and certain groups believe that times were better in the USSR. There is one specific case that comes to mind that deals with street names. In June 2017, a group called "Coalition of Left Forces" put up a street name sign on Chui Avenue calling it Stalin Avenue.<sup>67</sup> They justified their actions by arguing that Stalin did a lot more for Kyrgyzstan than those whose names are on other streets (Ataturk, Deng Xiaoping, Gandhi). Eventually, the street sign was removed, and the people who put it up were fined. The coalition was accused of *mankurtism* by the public. A great work that shows the grueling process of name changes of cities belongs to the artist collective called *Slavs and Tatars*. The collective's main area of interest is everything east of the Berlin Wall and to China. They have dedicated a whole work cycle to their research of languages within the Turkic

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<sup>66</sup> Blight, Susan, and Hayden King. 2013. *Ogimaa Mikana: Reclaiming/Renaming*. Mixed media.

<sup>67</sup> Shambetov, Toktosun. 2017. "In Bishkek, 'left-wing forces' want to return Stalin's name to Chui Avenue." Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty.

language and beyond. Their work called *Love Me, Love Me Not* (2010) is a selection of 150 cities and their lineage of name changes throughout history with different regimes and religions.<sup>68</sup>

Seeing Vladimir Lenin's statue on the main square on my way to school was expected, and witnessing its replacement with a woman's figure that represented liberty was like seeing history embodied. However, the Lenin monument was not destroyed like in Georgia, Ukraine, it was moved to another square. Soviet statues in many post-Soviet states were either demolished or wholly removed. The most recent major event is Leninopad (Russian: Leninfall, as in starfall, waterfall or skyfall) in Ukraine that started with Ukraine's independence in 1991 but was more prominent during Euromaidan (2013 - 2014).<sup>69</sup> Thousands of Lenin's statues and other Soviet monuments and symbols were destroyed by the people of Ukraine, which symbolized the nation's desire to distance themselves from Russia and their collective past. With statues of Vladimir Lenin still intact and standing all over Kyrgyzstan, people are divided. One side wants them all removed and the other believes that Communism with Lenin did a lot for the Kyrgyzstanis.

In 2016, the Communist Party in Kyrgyzstan, that makes sure that the Lenin statue is clean, was collecting signatures from people to erect a monument for Joseph Stalin in the city, and that was met with a lot of backlash. *Ata Beyit* is a beautiful place where everything is saturated with sadness and tragedy. Brilliant minds who had a vision for what the autonomous Kyrgyz nation could be were ruthlessly murdered and hidden for decades without being buried properly, and some people still want to erect monuments for Stalin who is responsible for their deaths.

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<sup>68</sup> Slavs and Tatars. 2010. *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names*. Onestar press. <https://slavsandtatars.com/printed-matter/books/love-me-love-me-not>.

<sup>69</sup> waves of unrest in Ukraine that were sparked by the Ukrainian government's decision to suspend the signing of an association agreement with the EU, and instead choosing closer ties to Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union.

### 3.3.3 Minds

Self-orientalization and the inferiority complexes, that I spoke of earlier can be observed in many communities across Kyrgyzstan. Even high-ranking politicians are expressing their interest in joining the Russian Federation.<sup>70</sup> Russia being the most influential and strategic partner of Kyrgyzstan in the world arena is a determining factor. Frantz Fanon vividly describes the notion of inferiority complex in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), “Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation...He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle.”<sup>71</sup> A *mankurt* in *Black Skin, White Masks* feels inferior due to their skin color and is trying to blend in by “acting white”. They are still rejected as equal. The same situation can be observed in the Kyrgyzstani context. There used to be a term that was often used to describe people of the East - *азуамчуна (asiatchina)*, and it translates as ‘asianness.’<sup>72</sup> It was used to describe how ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilized’ something or someone is in Asia. The term is an old slang word and is not in use; however, another term came to replace it, and the name is *churka*.<sup>73</sup> Millions of work migrants from Central Asia currently residing and working in all parts of Russia are called *churkas* and “monkeys” by some Russians and are still facing discrimination on a daily basis. In the USSR, the Russians acted as ‘older brothers’ to the ‘little brother’ nations such as Kyrgyzstan.<sup>74</sup>

The Russian resistance to identify Central Asian desire to break away from their past is also evident. The mere fact that Russians still cannot unlearn the Soviet name Kirghizia and

<sup>70</sup> Eurasianet. 2020. “Kyrgyzstan: Party Leader’s Anti-Independence Quip Sparks Election Drama,” September 27, 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Fanon, Frantz, and Charles Lam Markmann. 1986. *Black skin, white masks*. London: Pluto Press, 18.

<sup>72</sup> *Churka* - Derogatory term, literally means black head, as in someone with black hair. Mainly used by ethnic Russians in Russia for people from the Caucasus, like Armenians, Georgians or Azerbaijanis, but also for Central Asians, like Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks)

<sup>73</sup> *Churka* - Derogatory term, literally means black head, as in someone with black hair. Mainly used by ethnic Russians in Russia for people from the Caucasus, like Armenians, Georgians or Azerbaijanis, but also for Central Asians, like Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks)

<sup>74</sup> Nahaylo, Bohdan. 1980. “The Non-Russians: Alive, If Not Well.” *Index on Censorship* 9 (4), 41.

start calling our country Kyrgyzstan (as requested) is frustrating to many Kyrgyz people. The issue has been addressed on multiple occasions. Russians are okay with Belarussia becoming Belarus and Moldova becoming Moldova. Still, Kyrgyzstan's spelling is not "phonetically correct" in Russian, hence them choosing to continue calling us by the Soviet name. The issue seems minuscule to many, but it is significant since our country is trying to self-identify and break away from our subaltern past.

It is important to note that many people understand the notion of *mankurt* in a profoundly nationalistic sense, and the rise of nationalism in the past few years in Kyrgyzstan is genuinely alarming. Specific political figures express clear signs of Kyrgyz nationalism that are detrimental to our country's further development. As I said earlier, *mankurtism* is not merely forgetting your roots and culture but also disregarding morals and not distinguishing right from wrong. As we begin identifying *mankurts* in our society and even within ourselves, we have a choice to either ignore it and continue or identify the voids within us and our culture and rebuild and reimagine what was lost. My work is an illustration of the legend that is known by many but not questioned and not applied to self enough. How can I be a *mankurt*? I have been asking myself this question for years. What did I lose from being post-Soviet Kyrgyz for not knowing my native tongue, not knowing in whose honour the streets were named in my city and absorbing outsider perceptions of myself and believing it? This is what I aim to do in my work—more on that in Chapter 4.

### **3.4 Hope**

Critical thinking was lacking in Soviet education since critical thinking was a thing of dissidents and anti-soviets. Unfortunately, the lack of such thinking is still present in Kyrgyzstan. It has been vividly visible over the past few years, especially with the pandemic raging all over the world. Some groups of people do not question any information they receive and will follow any leader who manipulates information and history to fit their narrative. Kyrgyzstan has had

three revolutions/coups, the first in 2005, the second in 2010 and the most recent one in 2020. Each time they are hoping it will get better, that we will learn our lessons of democracy, but instead, we are getting *mankurts* for our leaders every time. *Mankurts* are not just those who cannot speak their language or do not know their culture, but it is also those leaders who will do anything for monetary gain, including selling priceless land. It is also those who will do anything those leaders will pay for them to do. The biggest fear that Kyrgyzstani people are experiencing right now, including myself, is uncertainty. It is the fear of having our land taken away because *mankurts* are “selling our country” to anyone willing to pay.

I believe that classrooms and schools are where the unmaking of a *mankurt* can happen. bell hooks’ *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* is an inspiring book that is almost like a manual on building and creating beloved communities. Building on Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which argues that pedagogy should be a collaborative process in which the learner can serve as a co-creator of knowledge, hooks also emphasizes the importance of trust and respect in the classroom. She speaks a lot about critical thinking and how crucial it is in education. hooks argues that she became a beloved teacher, not because she is immodest, but because she was truly appreciated for giving freedom to her students and giving them the ability to think critically and make responsible choices.<sup>75</sup> I believe that is what needs to happen in classrooms in Kyrgyzstan. We need to begin building beloved communities where we start teaching our students to think critically and question things in a safe environment, and that way, they can make choices that are informed and responsible, starting from classrooms and ending with everyday choices. “We need mass-based political movements calling citizens of this nation to uphold democracy and the rights of everyone to be educated, and to work on behalf of ending domination in all its forms—to work for justice, changing our educational system so that schooling is not the site where students are indoctrinated to support imperialist white-

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<sup>75</sup> hooks, bell. 2003. *Teaching community: a pedagogy of hope*. New York: Routledge, 19

supremacist capitalist patriarchy or any ideology, but rather where they learn to open their minds, to engage in rigorous study and to think critically”.<sup>76</sup> There are several problems with the Soviet education framework that was partially retained: any information that is given to students is not meant to be questioned, and history cannot be argued. The other problem is how Kyrgyz cultural revival and critical discourse of history is interpreted as nationalism, separatism or treason by the Kyrgyzstani communities. The revival of certain cultural practices can be seen by some as archaic and backwards, and any critique of history is met with denial and nostalgia for the Soviet past. Students need not be indoctrinated with nationalist, racist and separatist views since it is also a form of *mankurtism*. Instead, it is questioning and critical thinking when it comes to Soviet history, Kyrgyz nationalism, politics, *mankurt* leaders, traditions, etc.

I think Kyrgyzstani people have to strive for anti-racist communities where all sides can learn and teach one another. “The process of ending racism in thought and action is always a mutual enterprise. All our power lies in understanding when we should teach and when we should learn”.<sup>77</sup> It is not the Central Asians’ responsibility to teach Russian people of their ancestors’ wrongdoings, but it is of utmost importance for them to understand and learn from it, instead of denying it and retaliating with the Soviet doctrine and the savior narrative. I am glad, however, that Kyrgyzstan is a multinational state where people can coexist peacefully and, with time, has become a melting pot of various ethnicities and backgrounds.

I am glad to see how Central Asian artists and creatives express their concerns and speak out against injustices, social issues, and doctrines with creativity and making. The arts allow us to make political statements that would have been dangerous if they were delivered in any other form. Through fine arts, music and media, people voice their opinions and are reevaluating Central Asian past and values. More on that in the next chapter.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., xiii

<sup>77</sup> hooks, bell. 2003. Teaching community: a pedagogy of hope. New York: Routledge, 78.

## Chapter 4

### 4.1 Studio work

The second part of my first year of the IAMD master's program was spent in many different locations. This led me to choosing digital media and print as mediums for my studio work since I was not quite sure where I would be in the next couple of months. I find social media and the ways people use it for activism, politics, popular culture etc., quite fascinating. Instagram filters have become a new medium for creatives, artists, and activists to share their ideas, thoughts, and works. The popularity of Instagram is immense in almost every corner of the world. For Kyrgyzstan, it has become a platform for virtually any form of activity: business, politics, activism, art, design and even dating. Many people recognize each other in Bishkek by their Instagram handles, which I find interesting.

In the visual work connected with my research, I combine illustration and print to create an experience that tells the Legend of the Mankurt through print and social media serves as a tool for self-reflection. By using the Turkic legend, I am grounding my work on Central Asian



Figure 6 *The Legend of the Mankurt: The Journey*



Figure 5 *The Legend of the Mankurt: The Search for her son.*



land. The legend is already quite popular in many parts of the world, but from what I have noticed, younger generations are not as familiar with it as the older ones. I aim to illustrate the legend and make it accessible to the public.



*Figure 7 The Legend of the Mankurt: Torture*



*Figure 8 The Legend of the Mankurt: Umutai wondering where her son is*



*Figure 9 The Legend of the Mankurt: Finding her son*



*Figure 12 The Legend of the Mankurt: Becoming a Mankurt 2*



*Figure 10 The Legend of the Mankurt: Becoming a Mankurt 3*



*Figure 11 The Legend of the Mankurt: Becoming a Mankurt 1*

The final studio project consists of 13 vector illustrations, and each image depicts a scene from the legend [Fig. 5,6,7]. The original tale that Chingiz Aitmatov first documented in his book, *The Day Lasts More Than A Hundred Years*, is much longer; hence I chose to simplify it and shorten it. The book's last pages contain a QR code, and I urge my reader to scan it with their smartphone. The QR code stands for a separate link that takes the reader to an Instagram

filter. Instagram filters provide a space in which the user can reimagine their identity through the modification of physical aesthetics. This is why I chose this specific medium and platform. I want my viewer to put on filters that make them think and ask themselves the same question I have been asking myself for many years now: am I a *mankurt*? The filter is a visualization of what I



Figure 13 Mankurtization, Instagram filter. 2021

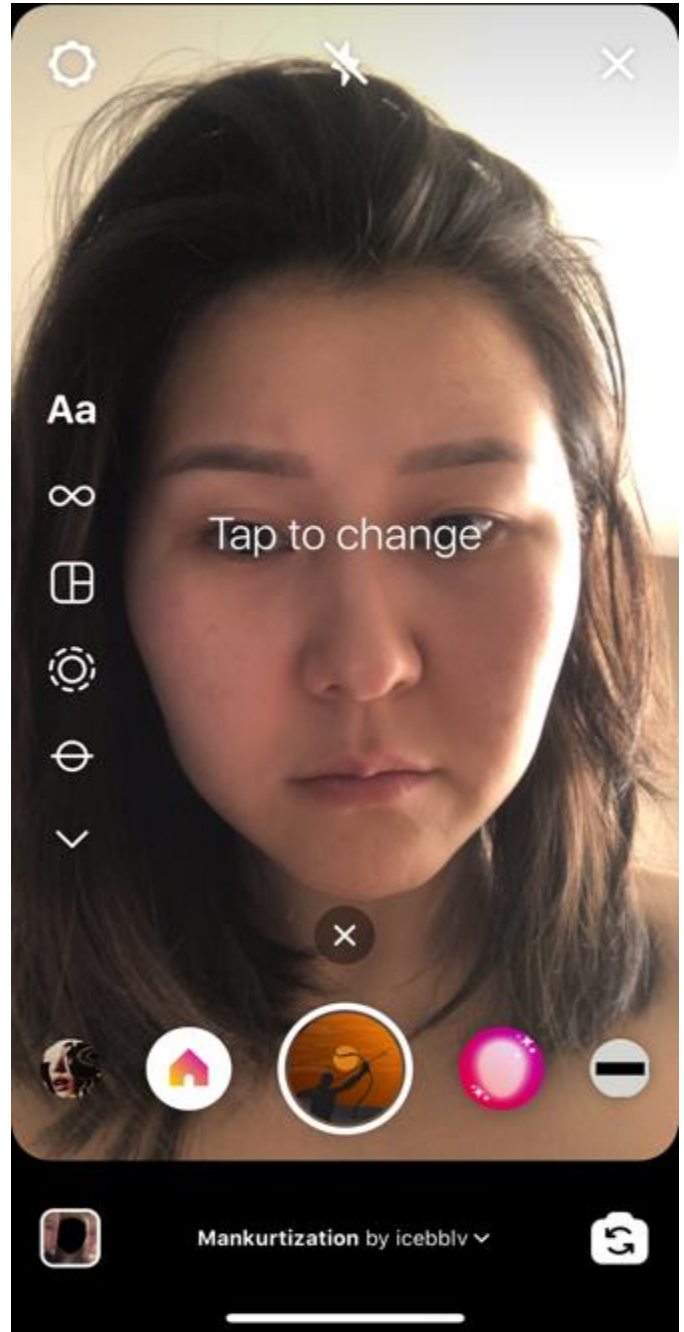


Figure 14 Mankurtization, Instagram filter. 2021

think a *mankurt* is [Fig.8]. They look like regular people from the outside but it is just a shell, a carcass. Inside there is a void.

#### 4.2 Precedents and related projects

There has been a lot of research in the field of post-Soviet studies, including the arts sector. Aspan Gallery in Almaty, Kazakhstan, represents several artists whose primary research and creation area is Post-Communist Central Asian cultures and issues. Gulnur Mukazhanova's work explores the transformation of traditional values in times of globalization. She is from Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan and is currently based in Berlin, Germany. She works with the mediums like felt, lurex, silk and velour. By working with traditional textiles and techniques, Mukazhanova feels a connection with her ancestors. Her most striking work that much inspired my studio practice is a large-scale installation made out of felt. The art-piece is called *Mankurts in Megapolis* which is a felt map of Kazakhstan that consists of people's faces.<sup>78</sup> The work explores globalization and how people are becoming disconnected from their culture due to the world evolving. Their work deals specifically with the idea of post-nomadism and modernism, which I find relevant to my work and studio practice.

Another project that I found visually and conceptually striking is a short animation done by film director Ermina Takenova, a Kazakh artist who graduated from the Royal College of Art in London, the UK.<sup>79</sup> Her work is based on the same Turkic legend I am exploring in my studio practice - *The Legend of the Mankurt*. In her interpretation of the story she uses oil mining imagery, which is a big issue in Kazakhstan. In her project she is exploring oppression and brainwashing in times of modernization. Stylistically her work is surrealist and minimalist, which is very captivating, and I appreciate the application of an ancient legend to Kazakhstan's contemporary issues.

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<sup>78</sup> David, Eric. 2018. "'Focus Kazakhstan: Post-Nomadic Mind' at Wapping Hydraulic Power Station." Yatzer, September.

<sup>79</sup> Takenova, Ermina. 2017. Mankurt. Animation. <https://vimeo.com/305926217>.

Two artists Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev, who come from Kyrgyzstan, also explore globalization and its effects on culture and society through film and installation. Their work gives a glimpse into modern-day Kyrgyzstan's harsh political and social realities and during its transition in the 90s from a Soviet state to an independent sovereign country. Their work *Transsiberian Amazons* was exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2005 and has been shown in many other exhibitions in China, Canada, Europe etc.<sup>80</sup> They are also represented by the Aspan Gallery in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

My previous projects were an exploration of the script changes during the installment of the Soviet rule in Kyrgyzstan. For the first project, I decided to create an interactive book that exhibits the differences between Latin and Cyrillic scripts [Fig. 9]. In this version of the book, there are ten letters: A, B, C, Ç, D, E, F, G, Ğ, and I and their equivalents in Cyrillic or the lack thereof. The letter H is missing since it was removed from the Kyrgyz Latin alphabet and then was added back in.

Some letters change/switch automatically/disappear, other need to be revealed by pulling tabs, and some are placed next to each other/opposite of one another. This is an attempt to show how different the scripts are and how difficult it must have been to switch: first from Arabic to Latin and then from Latin to Cyrillic (also keeping the time frame given in mind). The choice of the form being used for this piece of work is obvious – books are the vessels of thought and can contain different scripts. Also, the physical act of opening and closing a book reminds us of conversations regarding this issue. When people think that it is about to start, the project takes the back seat and “the book” gets closed “for an undetermined time frame.” There is also an idea of an alphabet book that most of us had as children and learning another language. Alphabet books contain pictures of animals, fruits and vegetables to make things easier to remember, but with constant script changes, it is like a clean slate every single time.

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<sup>80</sup> Kasmalieva, Gulnara, and Muratbek Djumaliev. 2005. *Transsiberian Amazons*. Installation, three-channel video and bags.

The continuation of that work cycle is called “Алиппе?<sup>81</sup> Alippe?” and it is an Instagram augmented reality filter that is a virtual sculpture [Fig. 10]. The sculpture is meant to represent past struggles with constant script changes and the current post-Soviet search for identity, and the alphabet being used as a tool in identity politics.

#### 4.3 The exhibition

I planned on having my exhibition in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, at the beginning of April 2021. However, the International Office of OCAD U advised me to return to Canada by the end of April to retain my chances of entering Canada as a student.

Even though the project itself is an illustrated book, I still want my work to exist in the digital space and be accessible to anyone (be open source). My work is available on the website [www.unmakingamankurt.com](http://www.unmakingamankurt.com), where users can flip through the book, read about my research and see the final documentation of the project.

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<sup>81</sup> Kyrgyz: Алиппе (Alippe) - alphabet



Figure 16 "Алиппе? Alippe? Instagram filter. 2020

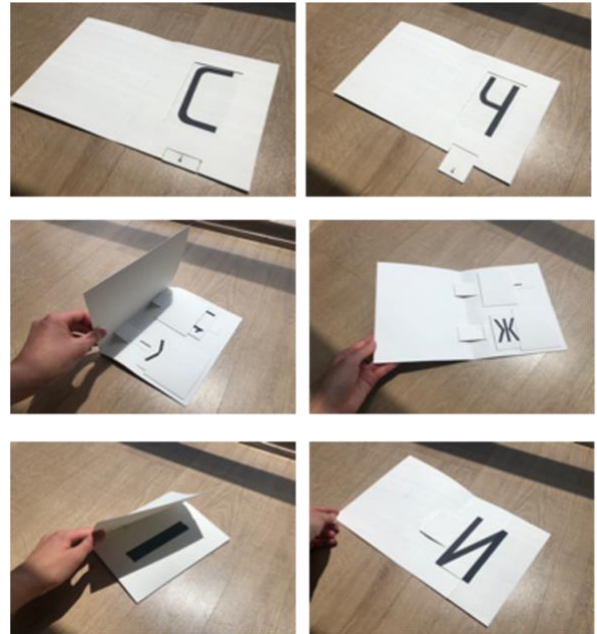


Figure 15 Alphabet book - spreads



Figure 17 "Алиппе? Alippe?"



#### 4.4 Final Documentation



Figure 18 The Book: Final Documentation 1



Figure 19 The Book: Final Documentation 2



Figure 20 *The Book: Final Documentation 3*



Figure 21 *The Book: Final Documentation 4*



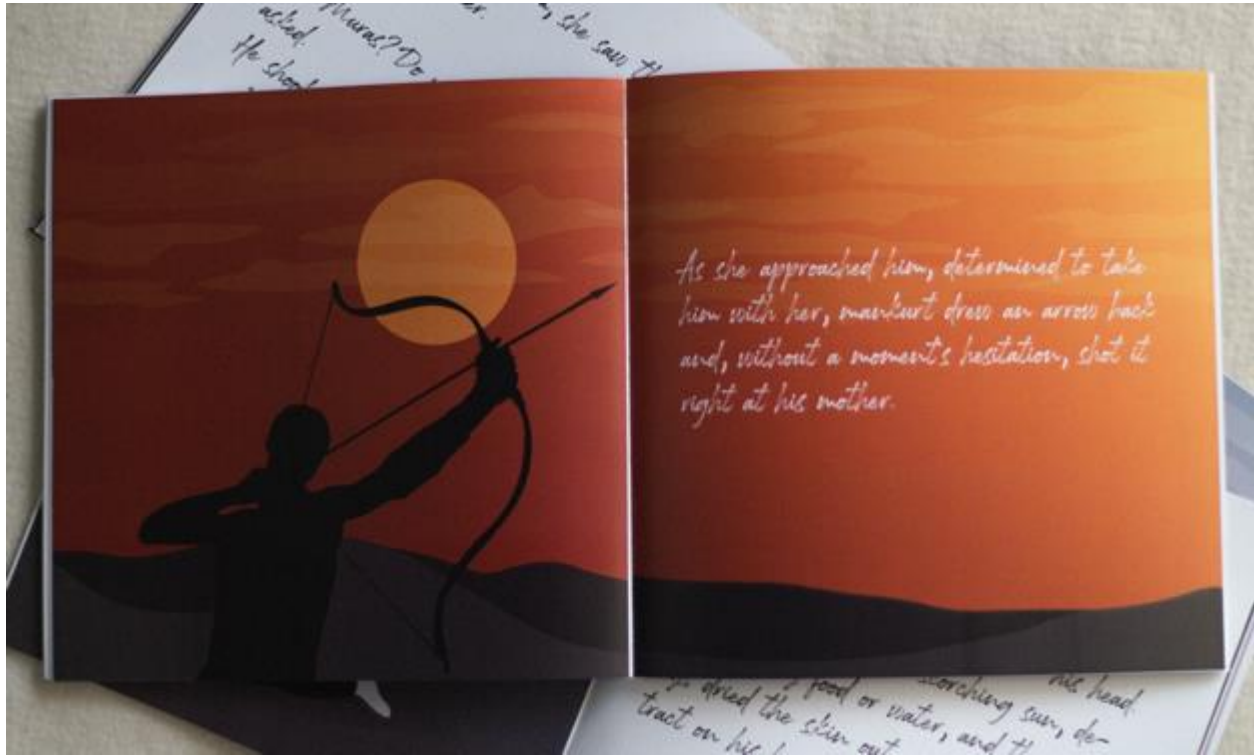


Figure 22 The Book: Final Documentation 5



Figure 23 The Book: Final Documentation 6



Figure 24 The Book: Final Documentation 7

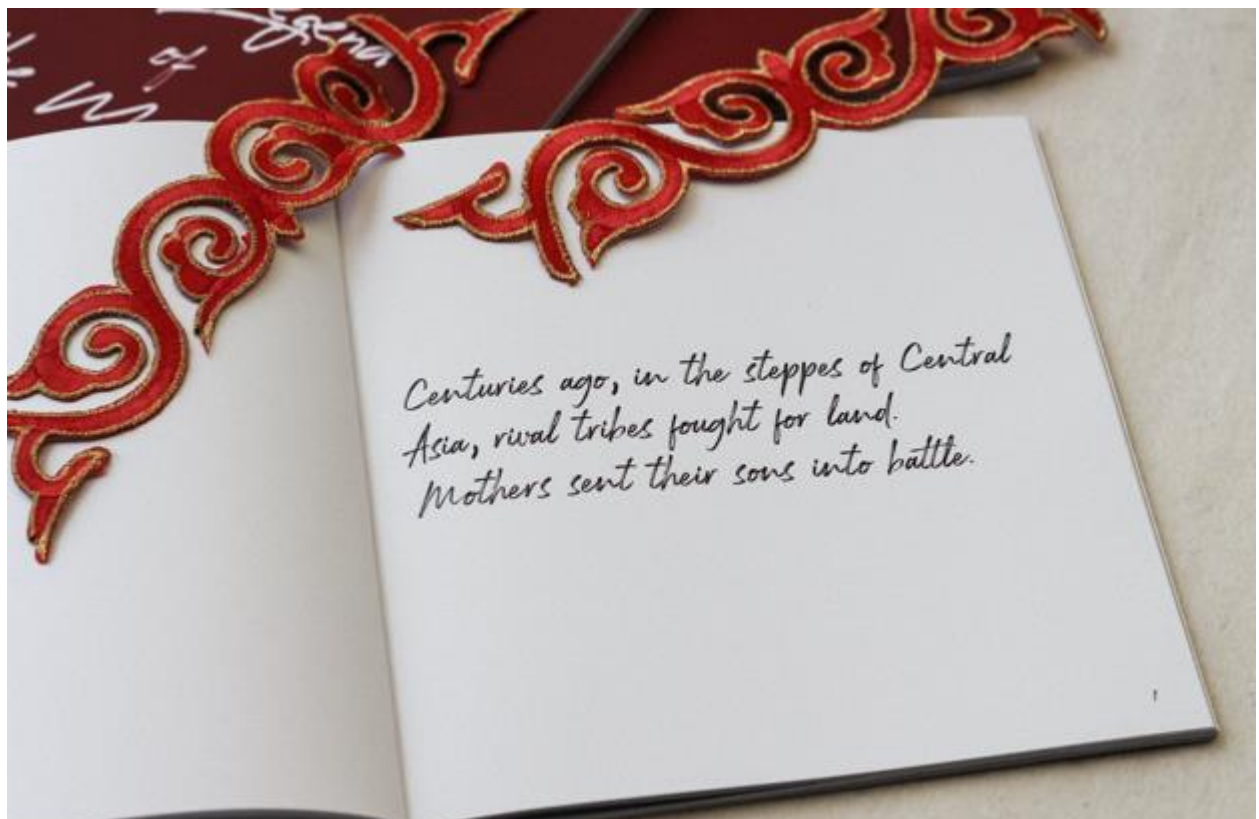


Figure 25 The Book: Final Documentation 8



Figure 26 The Book: Final Documentation 9

## **Chapter 5**

### **5.1 Conclusion and Future Research**

*The [Un]Making of a Mankurt: Soviet Legacy and Post-Soviet Identity* is an homage to my ancestors and their collective knowledge. By gaining a more in-depth understanding of Kyrgyz history and my ancestors, I have achieved a better sense of who I am and what culture I am a part of. Growing up in many places and living abroad for decades created a rift between me and my cultural identity, but through learning, looking and listening, that space is slowly healing. By exploring the Indigenous Kyrgyz perspective through poetry, oral history and narratives, I understand my history differently from what I was taught in school. This was my way of decolonizing our history and our stories by using them as historical evidence.

My studio work is an illustrated book that depicts an ancient Turkic legend because, for years, anything that was ethnic or pre-Soviet was dismissed and forbidden in the Soviet Union as bourgeois and nationalist. My work is my way of decolonizing our knowledge and doing work that can be disseminated and used for educational purposes. The book is currently available in English, but I plan to release it in Kyrgyz and Russian. The book has received a lot of praise within my Kyrgyzstani community and I want to publish it in the future. Another goal of mine is to create an open-source repository of Kyrgyz/Turkic knowledge, such as books, poems, songs, legends and tales, which in turn can be translated into Russian and English. The goal is to create accessible resources for those like me: those who cannot speak Kyrgyz, but still want to connect with their culture.

I spent the majority of my time doing thesis research back in Kyrgyzstan and it allowed me to ground my work on my native land and access sites that hold our knowledge and energy. The connection I possess with my land is spiritual, since being present on my land allows me to connect with my family, my ancestral roots, friends and other fellow creatives. This connection

facilitated further understanding of who I am as a Kyrgyz woman and my role as a creator and a future educator.

The Soviet pursuit of the New Soviet Person led to gaps in people's cultures and their understanding of identity, but these gaps can slowly heal over time through decolonization via education and loving communities. Many argue that a *mankurt* cannot change because, in the legend, their memory is completely wiped out, and there was no way of going back. Through my research, I have come to conclude that there is a way to prevent *mankurtization*: through making education accessible, teaching communities to love one another, create beloved communities and strive for open-mindedness and critical thinking, and that way, we understand history, our roles in it and propaganda a little better and not repeat our past.

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