

**MONUMENTS AND MEMORY IN THE LANDSCAPES OF KAZAKHSTAN**

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## ABSTRACT

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In the context of totalitarian regimes and their aftermaths, memorial landscapes are highly contested spaces in which newly emerging governments are quite active in framing and reframing the past as well as mapping a course for the future. Unsurprisingly, statuary and other overtly ideological materials are immediate targets. An abundance of scholarly literature has investigated memory, memorialization, and commemoration as state processes inherently complicated and problematized by greater public involvement. Far less time has been given however, to investigating the contrasting ways a state condemns or esteems the previous regime and for what reasons. Expanding these themes, Kazakhstan presents an ideal case study. Through an examination of archival materials, sixteen months of fieldwork, structured and unstructured interviews, media analysis, and governmental publications—this thesis uses discourse analysis to show the multiple agendas, conflicts, and negotiations that characterize the process of remembering the past and refashioning national identity in Kazakhstan. In this I examine three cities and how the legacies of the Soviet Union are selectively employed by the state to meet specific aims. First, underscoring a lack of uniformity in how the Soviet period is managed at the state level, this thesis investigates more broadly the kinds of currency that the Soviet period affords to Kazakhstan in different contexts. The three cities highlighted in this thesis were chosen to demonstrate the distinct ways that the legacies of the Soviet Union are employed in Kazakhstan in order to advance social, political, and economic agendas.

## *DEDICATION*

This thesis is dedicated to the love of my life. Without the support of M. Stawkowski, the very tenacity required to apply, accept, carry on, and succeed with my graduate studies would have been missing and my days desolate and perhaps even lonely.

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## ***Introduction***

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*Constructions of nationalism and national ideals both shape places and are in turn shaped by them. It should not be at all surprising, therefore, that a nation seeking to redefine its identities, histories, agendas, or other aspects integral to its projections and functions would employ new symbols—in turn reintegrating and reinscribing landscapes within its domains. (Evered 2008:236)*

The importance of Soviet monuments and memorials in Kazakhstan can be seen in the careful negotiations that surround their maintenance, removal, relocation, and destruction. In the summer of 2011, a lofty statue of the former Soviet leader, Vladimir Illich Lenin, was removed from a prominent city square in Karaganda. For more than 30 years, it was the unifying component of a city park through which the main streets of Karaganda intersected and where benches offered people space to be in public. Lenin's icon was not destroyed in the removal, but as has occurred elsewhere in Kazakhstan, was *re-installed* in a statue garden in a much less prominent, rather peripheral sector of the city. Two years later—and after a lengthy planning process—a new monument has replaced Lenin. Standing now is a towering, white obelisk adorned with a golden eagle at the apex—a national symbol of Kazakhstan also featured in the nation's capital, Astana.

The secrecy of the Soviet Union effectively shielded much of the western world from Kazakhstan and has in turn, produced different levels of ignorance regarding its geography and history. In the twenty first century, Kazakhstan has emerged, however, as a participant in broader Central Asian and European political, economic, and cultural processes (Olcott 1992; Schatz 2008, 2012). Attending this, the new forward capital city Astana, captured much of the attention and furthermore was intentionally positioned prominently to receive much of that attention. It, however, bears sparse resemblance to other cities in Kazakhstan. Besides the clear prominence that it bears in its new landscape of high-rises, banks, cultural

monuments, and its role as an overall “hub” of all that is Kazakh, Astana poses interesting questions to those attentive to memorial and symbolic landscapes. One thing for certain is that work is underway to produce a specific cultural and historical narrative for Kazakhstan and Astana is central to this process. A paradoxical consequence of interest here, however, is the persistence of landscapes that are arguably contradictory to the nationalist form and content of the capital city. A palpable example here is the ubiquity of Soviet World War II memorials and how these assiduously direct attention to the period prior to Kazakhstan’s independence.

For the purposes of this thesis, memorial landscapes are treated broadly as symbolic spaces that include monuments, statuary, public art, and other ideological materials, commemorative sites and most certainly those constructions that bear an unmistakable socio-political and or cultural message. Scholarship on memorial landscapes in the humanities, social sciences, and within geography specifically, has indeed addressed the interest and complexity of the topic (Dwyer and Alderman 2008). An important facet to previous research and literatures on memorial landscapes is the role that collective memory plays in the production and reproduction of space and the power laden in symbols to manufacture nationalisms and group identities (Azaryahu and Foote 2008). Therefore, objects, artifacts, statuary, and other installations act in tandem with those who interpret the space and give it meaning. Confounding the individual agent who produces the space, however, is the power wielded by states to orchestrate social, political, and cultural meanings around national objects and symbols (Adams and Rustemova 2009).

I have chosen Kazakhstan, and three cities in particular, because the Soviet period has been both perceptively and imperceptibly woven into the cultural landscape. In the wake of

the Soviet Union's collapse (or disintegration), spaces of commemoration and memorial are treated quite differently and for reasons that are addressed in this research. In some cases, the elements of Soviet landscapes are maintained but other times altered, relocated, or effaced. The cities of Astana, Karaganda, and Kurchatov are three distinct examples showing the treatment of the Soviet past. The reorganization of cultural and political symbols, as these comprise distinct landscapes of commemoration in the service of nationalism (Evered 2008), is an appropriate and understudied subject relating to Kazakhstan that aptly intersects a burgeoning topic in the social sciences and of interest here, geography.

### ***Research in Context***

According to geographers Owen Dwyer and Derek Alderman (2008:167), “the social or collective interpretation of the past is constituted in part, through the construction of material sites of memory, generally termed ‘memorials.’” Aside from geography, memorial landscapes and their significance to maintaining and refashioning nationalisms—as sites of collective memory, and as contested space—span a number of academic disciplines, including anthropology, history, and sociology. Regarding the specific geographic context of this inquiry—Kazakhstan—and pertaining to the deliberate negotiations with the Soviet period and its built landscapes, I have drawn on research in sociology, literary theory, anthropology, and history to help situate what I argue is an understudied case in an important field. The following survey of academic work gives foundations to the claims and findings of this project. Lastly, in this section I draw on research specific to Kazakhstan as a Soviet-created geographic and political space with intentional uses and look at literature that is

specific to Astana, Karaganda, and Kurchatov in order to provide a well-rounded context for this thesis.

### ***Research on Memory and Place***

Work on memorial landscapes is a multidisciplinary endeavor, but is nonetheless, largely indebted to French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992:38 [1951]), who argues, “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories.” Due to the intrinsic spatial quality of memorials and commemorative sites, it has been widely argued that they serve as locations for the production and reproduction of collective memory, social activity, and group identity formation (Halbwachs 1992 [1951]; Till 2001). Thinking in terms of social cohesion in times of political and cultural crises, literary scholar Edward Said is a key contributor to work on memory and national identities. Said argues (2000:179), “The study and concern with memory of a specifically desirable and recoverable past is a specially freighted late twentieth century phenomenon that has arisen at a time of bewildering change, of unimaginably large and diffuse mass societies, competing nationalisms, and, most important perhaps the decreasing efficacy of religious, familial, and dynastic bonds.” Corresponding with Said, sociologist Paul Connerton (1989) suggests that a society’s memory can be manipulated and even controlled by “hierarchies of power” that may choose which aspects of a collective past to emphasize, restrain, or even fabricate.

Within anthropology—and especially since the 1980s—interest in the intersection of memory and place has been abundant. The basic tenet of most of these works is that memory is the domain of social groups, is passed within them, and made understandable or

complicated by a multiplicity of diverging viewpoints (Rosaldo 1980; Appadurai 1981; Stoler and Strassler 2000). Anthropologist Keith Basso's work with the Western Apache in the United States is of paramount importance here to grasp the significance that anthropologists attribute to memory and place. According to Basso (1996), indigenous knowledge and experience lead to acquiring a sense of place that is rooted in local languages, folklore, and geographies. Moreover, without indigenous knowledge with which to narrate, over time both places and the people lose their meanings. Basso's work highlights places invisible to the outsiders (namely white settlers), who are without memory and stories necessary for a deeper understanding of a place. In other cases, anthropologists have looked at memory and place in the built environments of totalitarian regimes.

Important to this research is literature on ruins and ruination. In the case of post-Soviet Kazakhstan, there is an abundance of ideological structures, statuary, and built landscapes—places that would fit into what anthropologist Anne Stoler (2008) refers to as “imperial formations.” Stretching the notion beyond merely physical places that are discarded or abandoned, Stoler suggests that ruins allow us to look for the “after shocks of empire,” the “social after life of sensibilities, structures, and things” (2008:194). The existence, maintenance, or abandonment of identifiably Soviet landscapes tempts an analysis of ruin.

Anthropologist Katherine Verdery (1999) assesses the intersection between collective memory and the ideological motivations of states when they erect statues to national figures in order to produce commemorative sites. Furthermore, the bodies of deceased political leaders can situate memory to a place in addition to serving as political symbols (Verderey 1999). Vladimir Lenin's interment site at the Kremlin in Moscow's Red Square, its

accompanying mausoleum complex, demonstrates, for example, that a body itself can be a commemoration and in turn, a contestable site of memory and cultural production.

Historians have made sizeable contribution to work on memory as well. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger for example, in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), argue that as an instrument of rule, elite social classes and dominant social groups have actively sought to control what kinds of memories are appropriate and deployable as they relate to specific political, cultural, and social agendas. Following this work, historian Pierre Nora (1989) addresses “sites of memory” and the intricate ways that physical space influences social and collective memory at particular locations. Nora’s work looks at sites that have unquestionable historical relevance to national identities (contested or not), sites like battlegrounds, internment camps, and penal structures as these help to comprise the physical landscape of recognizable objects and places. Since the 1980s, geographers in earnest have drawn on these and other fields to expand the scholarship on memorial landscapes.

### ***Geographies of Memory and Place***

It is within the discipline of geography that memory as it relates to the formation of *memorial landscapes*—laden with contested ideological material—is perhaps most synthesized as several decades of scholarly attest. According to Dwyer and Alderman (2008:168), “Memorials obviously represent history, but it is wrong to see them as completely couched in the past. They are also mirrors of more contemporary events, issues, and social tensions.” From the work of geographer David Lowenthal (1975) for example, one gets the sense that memorials are challenged objects, situated in changing contexts, and without fixed meanings. Geographer David Harvey (1979), in the context of memorials as

constitutive of broader cultural landscapes, argues that they can sustain social norms and reproduce ideas about the past and impart these ideas to future generations. Indeed, part of Harvey's scholarship speaks to widespread changes in the late twentieth century in which social, political, and especially economic forces have exposed a need for constructions of the past in an understandable and stable form—something resistant to social, economic, and political transformations occurring beyond the local level. Geographer Karen Till (2003), drawing on the work of political scientist Benedict Anderson (1991), situates places of memory (taken in this context as memorial landscapes) as sites typically employed by the state that become 'sanctified locations' in 'symbolic settings' used in the process of nation-building (Evered 2008). Of great utility to this inquiry is geographer Kenneth Foote's seminal work, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy* (2005). From Foote, geographers attentive to memorial landscapes have gained expedient terminology like "sanctification," "designation," "rectification," and "obliteration," terms useful to describing the social, political, and cultural implications directly related to a memorial site and how the site becomes central to or disappears from the landscape.

### ***Geographies of Socialism and Post-Socialism***

The sites addressed in this thesis comprise a unique set of landscapes whose beginnings are traceable to important moments and processes in Soviet history, and therefore, the extent to which the Soviet period is visible in the built landscapes is of paramount importance. These memorial landscapes amidst the broader area (Central Kazakhstan) cannot be thoroughly understood, therefore, without their historical context as products of Soviet design. Astana, Karaganda, and Kurchatov, began as planned communities,

established for industrial, scientific, and agricultural purposes, respectively. Coinciding with these developments, a network of Soviet forced labor installments known as “Gulag” (Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps) was prominent in the area and much evidence of its existence can be found today. That said, scholarship from history that traces Soviet industrialization and histories of Gulag are necessary components to this research.

Historian Stephen Kotkin’s (1995) book *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*, gives a detailed account of the industrial city of Magnitogorsk, Russia, in the context of Soviet planned communities. It is from Kotkin that one gains an understanding of Soviet industrialization beginning in the late 1920s that included constructing entire towns from scratch. Additionally, we learn that such processes of industrialization were highly celebrated endeavors, including the fabrication of highly symbolic landscapes of ideological installations and built environments. Historian Anne Applebaum’s (2003) *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* provides detailed accounts of the geographies of the Soviet prison system, memorials to which are defining features of Karaganda. From Applebaum the extent and interconnectedness of Gulag landscapes from European Russia, to Siberia, and into Kazakhstan is detailed. Following closely with Applebaum, historian Steven Barnes (2011) has authored the most recent research on Gulag titled *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*. Barnes’ archival research into the Karaganda region has proven essential to navigating both Soviet and post-Soviet history in the region’s geographies of forced labor. In broadly thinking about the lasting imprint of the Soviet Union, both in the built landscapes and as a cultural mentality, Adrei Sinyavsky’s (1990) *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History* is unavoidably important, in part because Sinyavsky provides us with a first-hand account of life in the Soviet Union.

### *Scholarship on Memory and Place in Central Asia*

Whereas research on memorial landscapes within geography is not lacking, it is far less prominent in the particular context of Central Asia and in broader consideration of post-Soviet realities. Political scientist Edward Schatz, however, is at the top of a remarkably short list of academics who focus consistently on Kazakhstan's transition from a Soviet republic to an independent nation (2006; 2008; 2009). While Schatz does not invoke *memory* in his work, he nevertheless has contributed substantially to studies on Kazakhstan's authoritarian leadership and its landscapes of political symbols. Focusing on the relocation of Kazakhstan's capital to Astana from its previous seat in Almaty in 1997, geographer Natalie Koch (2010, 2012) explores what many have seen as a manifest and strategic reorganization of national symbols. Koch argues (2010:770), "Astana's new cityscape is clearly designed to stimulate such feelings of pride and national identity. It has been the focal point of ubiquitous nationalist propaganda, also designed to combat the challenges of nation building given Kazakhstan's significant demographic diversity." Koch's later work (2012) is an exploration of Astana as a focus of international criticisms, in the sense that such terms as "utopian", "false modernity", and "megalomania" have been leveled at the "spectacle" of nation building occurring there. Koch applies and expands upon the work undertaken by geographer Benjamin Forest and political scientist Juliet Johnson (2002). Forest and Johnson look at the formation of national identity in post-Soviet Russia relevant to the key monuments and memorials of the Soviet-era. Investigating the interplay between symbolic formations, ideological structures, and the aims of the post-Soviet government, Forest and Johnson (2002:526) argue that, "official memorials, monuments, and museums

play a unique role in the creation of national identity because they reflect how the political elite chooses to represent the nation publically.”

By region then, geographic studies in memory, memorialization, and commemoration within post-Soviet Central Asia are prominently represented by investigations of Astana (e.g. Schatz 2006, 2008, 2009; Koch 2010, 2012). My research thus continues the exploration of memorial and commemorative sites and the employments or erasures of a Soviet past to suit particular agendas. My study also considers the case of Astana because it cannot be ignored as a specific nationalist project with strong symbolic usages. However, this thesis pays significant attention to two greatly understudied cities of Karaganda and Kurchatov. The geographic proximity of these two cities to Astana, does not, however, mean that the Soviet past is treated in the same way. Therefore, in the brief section that follows, I draw on research conducted outside of geography, namely in history, that is crucial to understanding the formation of these memorial landscapes for this thesis.

### ***Research Methods***

It is with the goal of expanding geographic research on memory, memorials, and processes of memorialization that I have undertaken this study. Contributing to the extant body of critical literature in a thoughtful way, however, would not be possible by consulting secondary sources alone. Therefore, this project is aided and informed by extended travel and research in Kazakhstan where I spent a total of sixteen months (beginning with two months in the summer of 2009, eleven months beginning in the fall 2010 until summer 2011, and three months in the summer of 2012). During this time, I visited all field sites in question (Astana, Karaganda, and Kurchatov) in order to witness and assess monuments,

memorials, commemorations, public art, and overtly ideological materials. Familiarity with the landscape and observation over time was key. Adding depth to this research, interviews—both structured and unstructured—were sanctioned by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Michigan State University. My informants represent a wide segment of the population ranging from residents to city officials. Their impressions of Soviet history and emerging nationalism in Kazakhstan—which often precipitates altering Soviet landscapes, though not always—was crucial. Consulting archival materials at the Ecological Museum located in Karaganda was another key component of this work in order to assess changes in the landscape of monuments and commemorative sites over time. Domestic and international media analysis was especially fruitful in my examination of Astana.

To synthesize what amounts to a wealth of data for this project, I have chosen to look for underlying narratives and discourses that structure memorial landscapes. Because I ultimately argue that the Soviet period is denigrated, disregarded, or embraced to varying degrees as seen by commemorative sites in the built environment, informing my understanding is attention paid to political, social, and cultural motives and agendas within each field site.

### ***Structure of the Present Work***

This thesis explores three study sites in Kazakhstan in order to assess the deployment and concealment of Soviet landscapes in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Chapter one is devoted to Astana and the near-erasure of Soviet history in the built landscapes. Chapter two is devoted to how the Soviet period is evidenced in the built landscapes of Karaganda and to what extent the watershed of Soviet relics and commemorative sites are maintained, altered, relocated, or

effaced and why. I suggest that Karaganda's Gulag landscapes and histories serve as a complicated and painful source of national identity. Hence, the state-sponsored work to rebuild the Dolinka prison complex as well as the Spassk mass gravesite located just outside of the city. Chapter three explores the significance of the built ideological landscapes of Kurchatov—the former command center for the Soviet nuclear testing regime and a previously “secret city.” I argue that Kurchatov is elevated and cannot be de-Sovietized as this would delegitimize Kazakhstan's own scientific and nuclear entitlements.

My work has been steered by a simple question that was nevertheless rendered complicated upon investigations: for what reasons are Soviet monuments, memorial, commemorations, and broadly speaking—landscapes—left standing and in what instances is the Soviet period physically and discursively deleted? The three sites in question here—Karaganda, Kurchatov, and Astana—have undeniable Soviet geneses. With that in mind, all of the built landscapes were endowed with Soviet ideological material—either unique to the location (local figures, accomplishments, or historical moments) or more generic and universal (red stars, hammers, sickles, and World War II memorials). That being said, in a post-Soviet context, visible evidence of the Soviet past often clashes with the new monuments and memorial landscapes of the Kazakh present. Yet this is not always the case. As will be shown, Soviet landscapes continue to play important roles in Kazakhstan.

With this thesis, I have sought to address a gap in geographic literatures pertaining to the post-Soviet period and in doing so to illuminate largely understudied intersections between local and international processes in Kazakhstan. Placing a variety of literatures in conversation with personal field experience, the ultimate achievement of this thesis will be to

broaden our understanding of negotiations that take place as regards monument and memory in post-Soviet space.

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## Chapter One

### Akmola, Tselinograd, Astana: Kazakhstan's New Forward Capital and Soviet Agricultural and Penal Landscapes

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*Photographs of the first years in the new lands revive many memories. Bare steppe, tractor columns, stakes bearing the names of farms, tents, dug-outs, crowded trailers and mud huts with flat roofs, known as "sailors' caps." People used to huddle together in these dwellings by the dim light of lanterns and oil lamps. Everything was temporary, comfortless, rough and ready. But look at their faces—how merry, how joyful they are. Every smile, every gesture conveys confidence and optimism. All of us who were working in the virgin lands in those days felt this optimism, the feeling of people aware of their own strength. And how impressive the steppe was once we had awakened it to life! Everything was on the move, converging on this front-line area, just like before a big offensive.*

*Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev (1979)*

*Virgin Lands: Two years in Kazakhstan, 1954-5. 79*

*The means to raise it are all symbolic. The nation, too large to be known personally by a majority of its citizens, is known conceptually through the flag, national anthem, army uniform and ceremonial parades, ethnocentric history, and geography.*

*Yi Fu Tuan (1975)*

*Place: An Experimental Perspective*

Relocating the nation's capital from Almaty to Astana in 1997 has been a widely discussed topic in scholarship on Kazakhstan (Wolfel 2002; Anacker 2004; Schatz 2006, 2008, 2009; Koch 2010, 2012; Aitken 2012). It has been argued that the former Kazakh capital, Almaty, was too entrenched with the "old era" and its Soviet landscapes were unduly problematic for the new ethno-centric future of Kazakhstan (Wolfel 2002; Anacker 2004). At the same time, the northern half of the country was unequally weighted with populations of ethnic Russians, whose collective presence was ostensibly threatening to the territorial claims of the new Kazakh government (Schatz 2004; Diener 2002). Revisiting the host of reasons that surround the relocation of the capital, however, moves beyond the scope of this

inquiry. Of interest here is how Astana is billed as both a new iconic beginning, as well as an ancient territorial claim for Kazakhstan (Diener 2002) and how the Soviet experience is navigated and selectively employed in this process. Most of all, what are the Soviet histories unique to the Astana region and how are these histories found in the city's landscapes today?

Seen in terms of its commemorative space and sites of collective memory, Astana is heavily emphasized—perhaps even over-determined—to be the geographic foundation for Kazakh national identity.<sup>1</sup> And mythology is playing a definite role (Koch 2010; Talamini 2011). Speaking only to these new built landscapes—those that emphasize the national and ethnic histories and mythologies of Kazakhstan—however, effectively downplays certain histories of the broader region and the city itself. Interestingly, the wider vicinity, including Astana, is saturated with Soviet historical processes. Beginning at least with the late Russian Imperial epoch and continuing aggressively in the early and middle Soviet periods, the landscapes that Astana occupies were assigned for agricultural and penal usages (Prociuk 1961; Rogers 1974). The epigraph beginning this piece, by the former Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev, concisely recalls one side of an equally grand historical narrative—the intense symbolic meanings of the Virgin Lands campaign as a Soviet geographic project. Coinciding with these histories, and providing yet another component to the landscape, are the cultural histories of the Soviet penal system—the Gulag.<sup>2</sup> Popularized by former Gulag prisoner Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Gulag has come to be known as an ‘archipelago.’ Most notable to the Astana area is *ALZHIR* (Akmola Camp for the Wives of Political Dissidents and

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<sup>1</sup> In 2011 while speaking with a few residents of Astana's “old town,” I was appraised of the resentments of some Kazakhs in the new capital. “If we won't make way for the “*razvitya*” (development) ourselves, they'll drag us out ‘*vytoskat*.’”

<sup>2</sup> Chief Administration for Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies

Traitors), the settlement to which women throughout the Soviet Union were imprisoned for their spouses' crimes.

Considering the contemporary processes through which a Kazakh national identity is being constituted in the new capital city and forwarded in a post-Soviet context, the cultural and historic landscapes of the Soviet period can at times provide burdensome, acquired symbolic meanings that the state maneuvers in curious ways. In some areas, the Soviet legacy can still be found intact and conspicuous i.e. existing monuments, statuary, and ideological references—that celebrate aspects of the Soviet past. Conversely, in Astana the Soviet period has been brought to bear through the creation of a number of sanctified spaces. Interestingly, much of Astana is new and thus the Soviet period left no visible trace in the landscapes of the *new* capital. Yet the communist period is widely recognized for wreaking havoc on the cultural and social fabric of Kazakhstan, and these legacies and histories are being imported to Astana's cityscapes—imbuing places with richly symbolic, anti-Soviet meanings.

**Figure 1.1 Gulag Memory Site. Astana. Photo by Author 2012. (For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this thesis.)**



Astana is a unique case in which the Soviet Union has been resurrected—in a way. Creating sites in the new capital through which to remember the Soviet Union when there was nothing there before presents questions about the social and political motivations embedded in the act of representation (Azaryaho and Foote 2008; Forrest and Johnson 2010, 2011). This chapter investigates Astana as the post-Soviet manifestation of Kazakhstan's territorial, nationalist, and historic claims to sovereignty (Evered 2008) and ultimately as the most salient example of de-Sovietization occurring in Kazakhstan. By de-Sovietization, the point is not the silencing or removal of the past, but rather the opposite—calling the past into question by constructing sites of memory.

### ***Soviet Geographies: Collectivization, The Virgin Lands, and Gulag***

Several overlapping events have given shape to the lands which the new capital city occupies and thus, as a historical landscape, the Astana region is far older than the monumental structures of the new city attest to. Outside the capital's newest constructions, the remnants of Soviet state farms (*kolkhozy*) and the networks of small villages that characterize the area illustrate an overwhelmingly rural landscape and furthermore corroborate the kinds of land use that the region was employed for. The Soviet (and Russian before that) policies that sought to fashion a landscape of intense agricultural productivity in northern Kazakhstan, including the area around Astana, are nowadays a nationally lamented topic. "Collectivization,"<sup>3</sup> while referring to this process of amalgamating large tracts of

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about the spatial and political histories of collectivization, See Robert Conquest (1986) *Harvester of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. Oxford University Press. New York.

land for state farms in Kazakhstan and Ukraine in the 1930s, has a loathsome connotation to Kazakhs both at the state and individual level (Chokan and Laumulin 2009). Collectivization is blamed for the deaths of thousands of indigenous Kazakhs and furthermore impugned for the destruction of their way of life (Olcott 1991). According to political scientist and regional expert Martha Brill Olcott (1991), the collectivization campaign was a reckless procedure that, despite being enthusiastically promoted at the state level, accomplished little more than disenfranchising rural Kazakhs and expropriating them from lands previously used for stock breeding. In Kazakhstan, *golod* (the famine) is virtually synonymous to collectivization, as well as the decade of the late 1920s to the 1930s.

A lasting imprint of collectivization—in addition to the system of farms that typify the landscape and the period of starvation—is a sizeable community of ethnic Russians and other non-Kazakhs who were deported or otherwise relocated to the area. This migration of people significantly altered the demographics, especially in northern Kazakhstan. This will be of increasing importance in the post-independence years. Additionally, the prescribed land uses institutionalized by the Soviets, in this case agricultural, led to an instilled way of viewing the landscape and what its most useful employments were. Heavily influenced with principles of economic geography and further driven by rapid development schemes that sought the domination of nature through industry (Dobrenko 2003), Kazakhstan was heavily Sovietized both in terms of land use and increasingly in demographics.

The epigraph beginning this chapter, by premier Brezhnev, is taken from his recollections of a massive production campaign geared toward increasing the Soviet Union's wheat crop. Termed the Virgin Lands Project, a monumental goal was conceived to revolutionize agricultural production in the 1950s in response to vast grain shortages

throughout the Soviet Union. Attending this goal, a new geography of agricultural industrialization began, one that systematically enrolled and organized landscapes in northern Kazakhstan in the service of cereals production.

Historian Paul Josephson (2010) discusses the Virgin Lands in the context of Soviet “hero projects.” In essence, these refer to state-planned mega-enterprises in which the industrial and agricultural goals of the Soviet Union precipitated enormous construction schemes accompanied by state propaganda platforms. Beginning in the late 1920s, the Soviet Union under the auspices of “Five Year Plans” designed and carried through colossal building projects that included the construction of entire cities from scratch.<sup>4</sup> Geographic engineering was a key component of Soviet industrialization plans at this time, as is evidenced not only by the mass mobilization of natural resources, but also in the construction of canals, electrification projects, dams, and river diversion schemes.<sup>5</sup> Initiated by Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1950s, the Virgin Lands were both an ideological platform from which to marshal collective labor to the steppes in Kazakhstan as well as a geographically delineated territory in Kazakhstan to which thousands of settlers and agricultural workers were summoned (Brezhnev 1979). As was the case with Soviet “hero projects,” geographies were created, transformed, and ultimately destroyed in the processes of industrialization (Josephson 2007). Although Brezhnev himself noted that cereals production in northern Kazakhstan was risk-laden due to extreme seasonal temperature variations, the Virgin Lands were sown anyhow. Following from the Soviet/Marxist

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<sup>4</sup> Historian Stephen Kotkin in his book *The Magnetic Mountain* details the construction of Magnitogorsk, Russia as a premier industrial complex and socialist city of the future.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the scope and consequence of Soviet geographic engineering, see Paul Josephson (1995) “Projects of the Century” in *Soviet History: Large Scale Technologies from Lenin to Gorbachev*. *Technology and Culture*. 36(3):519-559.

philosophy of mankind's necessary domination of nature, this is not surprising.

The so-called hero projects of Soviet power—massive technologies and entire cities devoted to industrial production—had ideological and political purposes that forestalled apprehension of the costs. They enabled party spokespeople to claim that the socialist system was capable of achieving size, scale, and production on a level impossible in the capitalist West while simultaneously providing a forum in which nearly illiterate peasants could be transformed into politically conscious workers devoted to industrialization. (Josephson 2010: 22)

Heeding these kinds of philosophical underpinnings, the early 1950s saw a dramatic population increase to northern Kazakhstan accompanying the Virgin Lands campaign. The amassing presence of European Russians and Germans in region and the momentum of production caused somewhat of an alarm that perhaps Khrushchev intended to annex the highly productive and “colonized” territory to Russia (Chokan and Laumulin 2009:101). While in the end this didn't happen, the “Virgin District” (*Tseliny Krai*) was organized under the provincial capital, Tselinograd (Virgin City).

In a post-Soviet context, one can see the degree to which geographic engineering and planning produced certain landscapes. When Tselinograd was renamed Astana in 1998 following the relocation of the capital, the imprint of the provincial Soviet agricultural landscape was still largely evident. This bucolic setting was but one of many objections by cabinet ministers upon hearing that the capital would no longer be “the Garden City”—Almaty (Anacker 2004; Wolfel 2002). Other than a small network of central government buildings of the Soviet neoclassical style and a train station, the majority of the new capital was entirely rural and thus visibly synonymous with other agrarian Kazakh landscapes still found throughout the region. In this way, Astana is part of a broader historical-geographic episode that is unmistakably tied to how the Soviet Union imagined and enacted the

landscape. The histories of ‘collectivization’ and the Virgin Lands are woven into the surrounding region visibly and are as well maintained by the collective memory of agrarian life.

Another troubling feature of Astana’s historical landscape are the histories of the Gulag system of labor. Intriguingly, the violent and repressive features of the Soviet period—i.e. forced deportations, the imprisonment of political dissidents, and moreover, the wider geographies constructed for these purposes—are evidenced and not hidden in Astana’s new landscapes. A small number of commemorative spaces are dedicated to the collective memories of these histories. Yet as I maintain throughout this thesis, highlighting the atrocities of the Soviet period serves as much to vilify the agents of Soviet brutality as it does to control these by officially narrating, summarizing, and finally banishing these histories from the landscapes of the present.

Overlapping the Virgin Lands and the broader agricultural geographies mentioned earlier, northern and central Kazakhstan are notoriously connected to the Gulag prison network. This history, however, is not as infamously connected with Astana, per se, as it is with other places like Karaganda—a discussion to come in the next chapter. Nevertheless, Gulag does play a part in Astana’s geography. While not officially within the city limits, the former Soviet Alzhir prison camp, located in the village of Malinovka, has been made into a commemorative site a short distance from Astana. This Soviet prison installation for the wives of political criminals and traitors was active with deportees from 1937-1939 (Barnes 2012), years coinciding with the height of what is referred to as the Stalinist “Great Terror.”<sup>6</sup> During this period, thousands of women were incarcerated at Alzhir. According to Historian

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<sup>6</sup> For more information about the histories of Stalinism during the late 1930s, see Robert Service (1968), *The Great Terror*, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.

Stephen Barnes (2012) the women sent to the camp were deluded into expecting a long awaited rendezvous with their exiled husbands and other male family members. As such, they arrived at Alzhir several days, if not weeks later, with nothing packed and dressed in their best clothing. After 1939, these women were redistributed to other camps within the Soviet Union.

**Figure 1.2 Alzhir Memorial Site Outside Astana. Photo by Author 2012.**



In 2007, the Museum-Memorial Complex for the Victims of Political Repression and Totalitarianism was opened and the number of visitors annually has climbed into the thousands. Alzhir is largely under investigated in scholarly literature outside of collective

memory and oral history projects.<sup>7</sup> Yet, it is from the collected memoirs of survivors and archival research into previously classified materials that accounts of Gulag are beginning to surface. Assembling the life histories of victims and their families demonstrates but one facet of the interest in Gulag.

### ***Tourism and the Import of the Soviet Legacy***

Nearly every travel guidebook to Kazakhstan will mention collectivization, the Virgin Lands Project, and the former Gulag labor camps as significant themes and places to know about when visiting. Beyond that, many tourism outfits have emerged that offer excursions to places often deemed some of the most horrific staging points of Soviet brutality—like Alzhir.<sup>8</sup> In a very real sense, the Soviet legacies in the built landscapes of Kazakhstan have become tourist attractions, if not the sole impetus for visiting Kazakhstan in some cases. Intriguingly, a number of these outfits are not Kazakh businesses. One in particular operates out of the Netherlands and offers the following excursion:

A tour for people with an “unhealthy interest” in the former USSR, and especially its atrocities. This program is new, unusual, and packed with excursions to memories to the USSR, foremost, the labor camps and nuclear test sites. Not for the faint of heart! A Kazakhstani part of the Soviet heritage is represented in the central part of the country in the best way. This is here where notorious correctional camps of the Stalin epoch – “Karlager” and “ALZHIR” were situated. These are the lands which became witnesses of the nuclear explosions, made during Cold War and Arms Race. History of the Civil War, which followed the October revolution, is also represented abundantly. Developing virgin lands, industrialization, urbanization... Silent witnesses of all those processes, being a part of life in the USSR, are still can be seen here, in the very heart of Kazakhstan. (Kazakhstan Tours: New Routes in a New Country. [http://www.kazaktours.com/tours/nightmares\\_from\\_the\\_ussr](http://www.kazaktours.com/tours/nightmares_from_the_ussr)).

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<sup>7</sup> See Orlando Figes (2008). “Private Life in Stalin’s Russia: Family Narratives, Memories, and Oral History.” *History Workshop Journal*. 65:117-135.

<sup>8</sup> For one of the most overtly dramatic tours available, consult [http://www.kazaktours.com/tours/nightmares\\_from\\_the\\_ussr](http://www.kazaktours.com/tours/nightmares_from_the_ussr).

That the “nightmares of the USSR” can be visited for an agreed-upon fee and accompanied by a lunch is certainly a topic worth discussing further. For now, in a broad sense, the Soviet period in Kazakhstan and for the purposes of this chapter—Astana—holds different currencies. On the one hand, there are the tourism outfits that capitalize on featured attractions and “nightmares.” Supporting these ventures, likely, are people desirous for a variety of reasons to experience mass graves, camps, and other Soviet horrors innocuously.<sup>9</sup>

The import of revisiting and remembering the Soviet period more apropos here, however, is how the Kazakh state officially presides over the past in the nation’s capital. Clearly, sanctified landscapes like the former Gulag camp Alzhir as well as monuments i.e. such as to the Victims of Soviet Oppression and Totalitarianism have an overt political agenda. This is plainly seen by the direct indictment of Soviet atrocities committed in Kazakhstan and against a wide range of people, including ethnic Kazakhs. Furthermore, consistent appearances of President Nursultan Nazarbayev at ceremonies in Astana demonstrate the gravity of interest in narrating histories and thus, in a way, controlling them (Foote 2005). Whereas in less-conspicuous areas in Kazakhstan, Soviet spaces can still be found intact such as existing statuary, ideological artifacts, even abandoned cities, and military bases. In Astana, this is not the case. Memorializations have been erected in the cityscapes of Astana to deliberately keep the Soviet past visible.

### ***Conclusions: The Atameken Ethno-Memorial Complex and the New Map of Kazakhstan***

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<sup>9</sup> The act of consuming these landscapes has been referred to as “dark tourism” (Stone and Sharpley 2008) and “disaster tourism” (Mironova et al 2007). Both of these literatures involve experiencing and perhaps even internalizing the suffering of others in such a way as to address internal moral questions— relatedly ultimately to the mortality of the visitor.

One site in particular succinctly captures how the Soviet period is recalled in Astana and suggests several reasons for this. The Atameken Ethno-Memorial Complex is a multi-purpose commemorative landscape upon which two attractions were conceived. First, atop a small hill, a prominent dedicatory space honors the victims of Soviet Repression and Totalitarianism and secondly, a walking tour of Kazakhstan through an intricately crafted model of the country (including two ponds that represent Lake Balkhash and the Caspian Sea). By far the most elaborate model is that of Astana itself. Recalling the words of geographer Yi Fu Tuan at the beginning of this chapter, the state has taken ample steps to make the country knowable to those who are otherwise unaware.

**Figure 1.3 Atameken Ethno-Memorial Complex in Astana. Photo by Author 2012.**



Discursively, “Atameken” addresses several issues that have been central to the discussion thus far. First, it recalls and denounces extralegal, brutal, and inhumane acts that occurred during the Soviet period. These sentiments have been expressed in landscapes outside the capital as well, but nowhere else approaches the ceremonial significance of what has occurred in Astana. Second, Atameken is an “Ethno-Memorial Complex”. Therefore, a definitive space has been established only for certain victims—those assumed to be ethnic, not Russian. Thirdly, the walking tour of Kazakhstan is a steadfast territorial claim that refutes any potential disputes over the borders of the country. Scholarship has explored these concerns as they relate not only to Kazakhstan’s historical borders, but also to ‘traditional’ settlement and land use patterns of Kazakhs, and the potential irredentism of Russians in the north (Schatz 2002; Anacker 2004; Diener 2004).

**Figure 1.4 Atameken Ethnomemorial Complex in Astana. Monument to Victims of Oppression. Photo by Author 2012.**



Lastly, the Atameken Ethno-Memorial Complex is a manufactured sacred site—not itself the location of any tragedies—but one that nevertheless serves as a sanctified space within which to provide a concrete narration of the past. According to geographer Kenneth Foote (2005:8), “Sanctification almost always involves the construction of a durable marker, either some sort of monument or memorial or a garden, park, or building that is intended to be maintained in perpetuity.”

Speaking to a term mentioned earlier, de-Sovietization, I argue that this process is not necessarily geared toward removing evidence of that past. Therefore, in this case of Astana, I found that despite the passing of the Soviet Union, the most tragic episodes of these histories are resurrected. By renovating Gulag sites and building memorials within the newest landscapes of Astana, one could say that the existence of a thriving Kazakhstan is a celebration and testament of its own right to exist as a geographic space and as a people. Astana is, however, a unique case in which the Soviet period is selectively employed. As my further investigations show in later chapters, Soviet artifacts, statuary, and otherwise ideological materials are built into the landscape and allowed to remain. Negotiating the past in these places is a different process.

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## Chapter Two

### Karaganda: The Soviet Landscapes of KarLag in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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*Every ravine, every gully, every stream presented itself as a kind of fortress that was stormed in battle by the hero-organizers of Karlag agriculture. Yesterday's wreckers, bandits, thieves, and prostitutes, gathered from the various ends of the Soviet country, under the able and experienced Chekist leadership, accomplished great things. Burning with the flame of constructive enthusiasm, valuing highly and proud of that faith placed in them, the former lawbreakers stormed the semideserts of Kazakhstan.*

*--Statement about Karlag released to principal Gulag authorities in 1934  
From Barnes (2012:28)*

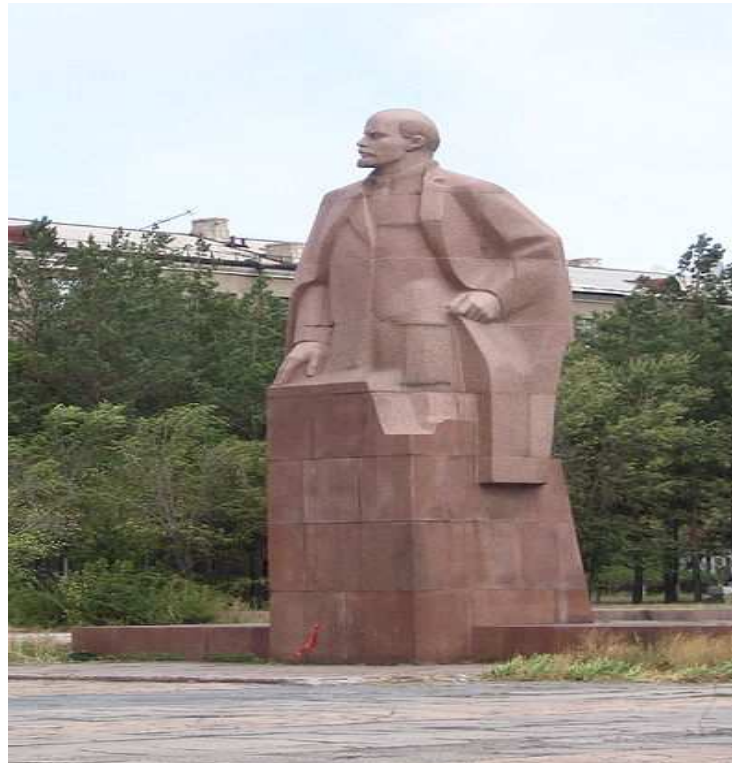
Following the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, nearly twenty years passed before the statue of Vladimir Lenin was removed from its prominent station in downtown Karaganda. This landscape change mirrors a definitive rearrangement of national symbols occurring elsewhere in the country, most notably in Astana. For *Karagandinskiy* ("Karagandans"), reactions to Lenin's removal were quite varied. To some, the moment was long over due to take down the first Soviet leader from his centrality in Karaganda—times had changed. To others, Lenin was a chapter in the annals of Kazakhstan and whose presence in the city furthermore, represented a system of beliefs and events, whose end, many lamented (and still do).<sup>10</sup> To still others, removing him was taken as the vanquishing of history and needlessly effacing the landscape of its artifacts. Regardless, now the statue of the first Soviet leader is no longer the centerpiece of Karaganda's main street *Bukhar Zhirau*—the central thoroughfare that is occasionally referred to as *Sovyetskiy Prospekt*—a jarring, and obviously anachronistic reference to the boulevard's former Soviet name. Locally, the spot is still

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<sup>10</sup> For a broad familiarization with "Soviet nostalgia" as well as a discussion dealing with the end of the Soviet Union, see Alexei Yurchak (2006) *Everything Was Forever Until it Was No Nore*.

spoken of as “where Lenin was” and is a common reference point when seeking or giving directions. Those who want to see the first leader of the Bolshevik Party *today* can do so in a small park that serves as much as a tourist attraction now as it does a “memory garden” for many local residents.

**Figure 2.1 Lenin in Karaganda. Photo by author 2011.**



Karaganda is only 200 miles to the southeast by rail or road of Kazakhstan’s new capital, Astana. Given the size of Kazakhstan (ninth-largest country in the world), 200 kilometers is relatively close. In this way, one might even elect to see Karaganda and Astana as being within the same region. In one sense, this argument is sound, while in another it isn’t. Historically speaking, the common ground uniting the area in question is that it was a heavily territorialized Soviet space of collective farms, mines, and industrial sites. Karaganda itself, additionally, was the center of one of the Soviet Union’s largest Gulag network of camps

called KarLag (Applebaum 2003; Viola 2007; Barnes 2012).<sup>11</sup> As a geographic area, KarLag encompassed the majority of central Kazakhstan, including what is today Astana. However, whereas in Astana evidence of the Soviet Union is largely erased or has otherwise been negated through a ritualized condemnation of the Gulag and collectivization, in Karaganda the process of de-Sovietization is partial at best. For example, as of 2011, coinciding with Lenin's removal, the *Dolinka* memorial complex was founded. *Dolinka* was the central administrative headquarters of KarLag and sits about 30 kilometers south from Karaganda. Here, the Soviet brutality infamous to the area was brought back to life in the old Soviet buildings-turned-museum. Yet despite this example and other clear actions of taking the Soviet legacy to task in the post-Soviet era, an extravagant new monument was erected in Karaganda to Yuri Gagarin, the first Soviet cosmonaut—also in 2011.

Negotiating the symbolic landscapes of the Soviet Union is a process that takes different paths throughout the former communist space of the USSR (Boym 2001; Verdery 1999; Forest and Johnson 2010, 2011). From the Baltics to Central Asia, the post-USSR epoch is a unique experience in which the past continues to be confronted in different geographies. Deciding which sites to save, efface, relocate, or destroy is a reflection of local pressures, political motivations, (Foote 2005; Foote and Azaryahu 2008) and taking the example of Kazakhstan, priorities. Finding *intact* Soviet relics in Astana, for example, is unlikely; the driving force to nationalize the new capital has entailed the meticulous attention to distancing the Soviet past from the present (Anacker 2004; Schatz 2010). Many sites in the most rural areas of Kazakhstan, however, remain beset with objects from the Soviet period that interplay with new national symbols in curious ways.

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<sup>11</sup>KarLag stands for the Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp.

**Figure 2.2 Soviet-Era mural in downtown Karaganda.  
Photo by Author 2011.**



This chapter thus investigates Karaganda in this context, specifically, as a unique hybridization of Soviet and Kazakh symbolic and memorial themes. The extent to which Karaganda is infused with Soviet history such as murals, statuary, monuments, and other relics from the past, therefore provides an excellent case study of Kazakhstan’s cultural landscapes transformation in the post-Soviet period.

### ***Industrial Geographies of Karaganda: ‘Gigant’, Coal, and Gulag***

Originally organized under the name *KazitLag* (*Kazakhstan Corrective Labor Camp*), the broader Karaganda region became the largest Soviet state farm (*Sovkhoz*) in the early 1930s (Barnes 2012). Its size was roughly 675,000 square kilometers. Initially given the name *Gigant* (Russian for “huge”), this vast geography would eventually turn into a *system* of farms and moreover, a colossal enterprise of grain and meat production that reached industrial levels. The agricultural history of Karaganda is largely invisible within the city limits; yet travel in any direction from the city and the unfolding rural landscape of small

villages and farmlands is unmistakable. Agronomy is however, not the sole defining characteristic of Karaganda. In Russian, the term '*ugolnyy baseyn*' (coal basin) is used to speak of the vast reserve of coal upon which the city of Karaganda was built. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tsarist Russia was extracting coal from the region, but not at near the scale that the Soviets would develop the resource beginning in the 1930s. The extent to which coal production was and remains a key component to Karaganda's civic identity can be seen from the dozens of active mining operations and, furthermore, by the railroad network that linked these operations to prominent industrial cities in Russia like Volgograd, Ufa, Magnitogorsk, and Chelyabinsk. Coal from Karaganda fueled the burgeoning steel industries in these cities (Warren 1978; Kotkin 1995). In this way, Karaganda's historical trajectory and subsequent development is critical to larger processes of industrialization occurring in the Soviet Union in the early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Like other planned cities and industrial sites in the Soviet Union, Karaganda has not been evolving for hundreds of years. Rather, its founding was rapid, largely improvised, and made possible by deportees and prisoners (Brown 2001; Applebaum 2003; Barnes 2012). Similar in certain respects to cities like Magnitogorsk where socialist ideology focused on enormous industrialization projects, rural settlement, and hurried modernization, Karaganda is rarely lauded as a "socialist city of the future" (Kotkin 1995). Seen in terms of Soviet economic geographies, and especially as regards "territorial production complexes" (Kolosovskiy 1961; Saushkin 1962; Rodgers 1974), coal from Karaganda was nevertheless critical to eager Soviet development campaigns and the founding of other cities.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Five Year Plans" were state-crafted development goals geared toward hyper modernization in the Soviet Union. In 1928 the first of these was unveiled. Examples of projects include widespread electrification of rural areas, dams, canals, river diversions,

As a geographic space then, the Karaganda region cannot be separated from the historical processes that led to its inception. In contrast to other cities in Kazakhstan that are much older, like Pavlodar, Semipalatinsk, Almaty, or Shymkent, Karaganda is a product of Soviet designs and ideologies of the 1930s. The context for much of this development is rooted in what historians and Sovietologists refer to as “Stalinism.” Historian Sheila Fitzpatrick provides a concise introduction to the philosophy of the early Bolshevik party and moreover to the later dictatorship of Joseph Stalin. She states (1999: 14-15),

At the end of the 1920s, the conventional starting point for the Stalin period, the Soviet regime had not been in power for much more than a decade. Its leaders still thought of themselves as revolutionaries, and they behaved like revolutionaries too. They meant to transform and modernize Russian society, a process they describe as “building socialism.”

While Fitzpatrick here is explicit in speaking only of the transformation of *Russian* society, the socialist revolution involved the new Soviet republics as well. Without consulting subsequent histories of Stalinism (Service 2004; Siegelbaum and Sokolov 2004), the city of Karaganda would be an anomaly in the Kazakh steppe. Instead, Karaganda’s expansive agriculture landscapes and open-pit mines are understood as products of Soviet planning and its accompanying economic and industrial goals (Brown 2001). The population of Karaganda went from “zero in 1926 to well over a thousand by 1939” (Fitzpatrick 1999: 42).

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extensive railroad construction, and perhaps most notable, the construction of steel factories and coal power plants. The city of Magnitogorsk and the more extensive “Ural Industrial Complex” were founded and put into operation at this time. For a critically acclaimed history of Magnitogorsk and the industrial histories of the early Soviet Union, see Stephen Kotkin’s (1995) *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*. University of California Press. Berkeley. Other sources to consult on subsequent *Five Year Plans* include Anne D. Rassweiler’s (1983) “Soviet Labor Policy in the First Five-Year Plan: The Dneprostroi Experience.” *Slavic Review*. (42)2: 230-246 and Chauncy D. Harris (1945) “The Cities of the Soviet Union.” *Geographical Review*. 35(1): 107-121 and Holland Hunter (1973), “The Over Ambitious First Soviet Five-Year Plan.” *Slavic Review*. 32(2):237-257.

This extraordinary augment of persons is attributable not to voluntary relocation, but rather to other Soviet state activities like “collectivization” and Gulag, which ultimately served as a means to turn Kazakhstan into an “economically efficient Soviet Republic” (Service 2004:328).

Indeed, the cultural and historical landscape of Karaganda is an amalgam of the processes discussed previously. Agricultural production, collectivization, industrial mining operations, and the KarLag system are key factors. Knowing that the ideological motivations of the Soviet Union emphasized modernization at all costs—even when human losses were enormous and environmental damage was guaranteed (Josephson 2007), Karaganda is rendered understandable in these regards. The histories of Gulag and the omnipresent coal mines of Karaganda—even within the city limits—likened the city to other cities of the Soviet Union. If there is a characteristically “Soviet” feel to Karaganda, as historian Kate Brown (2001) argues—that its grid design, public recreation spaces, and street names resemble other planned cities of Stalin’s “command economy”—Karaganda is nonetheless a unique geographic space, both as a part of the Soviet Union and since its passing in 1991. The current landscape of new and old monuments and the clear attention to ideological details of the city’s parks and public places make Karaganda anything but characteristic.

### *A Symbolic Landscape in Transition*

In the course of two years, 2010-2011, observable changes were made to the landscape and identity of Karaganda. The iconic statue of Vladimir Lenin was relocated from its downtown post and the Dolinka Museum to the Victims of Political Repression was opened to the public. Taken together, these acts highlight a concerted effort aimed at both,

decentering the Soviet past as well as recalling certain horrors of that period. Speaking to the alteration of monuments, memory, and public space in the post Soviet period, geographer Benjamin Forest and political scientist Juliet Johnson (2011:271) assert “Political actors invoke myths and symbols in an attempt to forge public memories that shape and delimit their societies’ collective identities. This serves to legitimate particular courses of political action and define membership in particular states and nations.” Looking at Karaganda within this assertion, however, shows a landscape that is both rich with symbols from its “heroic past” (Josephson 2010) of coal mines, rapid modernization, and the socialist future, as well as new dedications to the tragedies of the past. One might go as far to say that Karaganda’s landscape is at times schizophrenic.

**Figure 2.3 Dolinka Museum to the Victims of Political Repression near Karaganda. Photo by Author 2012.**



For example, Lenin was relocated to an obscure “statue garden”<sup>13</sup> and replaced by a marble obelisk (also found in the nation’s capital), yet the main west-to-east thoroughfare in Karaganda is still named after him. Referring back to Forest and Johnson, “forging public memories” and “delimiting collective identities” is certainly a factor when reading the symbolic landscape in Karaganda. More interesting perhaps is the question of which aspects of the Soviet past are kept and why?

**Figure 2.4 Spassk mass-grave memorial site near Karaganda. Photo by Author 2012.**



Tragedy plays an enormous role in the histories of Kazakhstan, and the Soviet period is the focal point of this attention. Presenting the victimization of people—those sentenced to Gulag prison camps and others expropriated of their property and forcibly relocated to

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<sup>13</sup> Statue gardens can be found in other cities in Kazakhstan as well. It is here that busts and effigies of former communist leaders and key philosophical influences like Karl Marx are relocated. The term ‘memory garden’ also applies.

collective farms—is an almost commonplace feature of Kazakhstan’s new national narrative. Designating monuments and memorials to tragedy plays a key role in a country’s official recount of its history (Foote 2005). In 2007, just south of Karaganda, the parking lot for the mass gravesite *Spassk* was completed. Since then, memorial plaques have been erected by dozens of countries whose citizens were exiled to Karaganda’s Gulag before, during, and after World War II. An otherwise invisible stretch of land is now a sacred site recognizing the brutality of the Soviet Union. Together, Spassk and the Dolinka museum expose the disquieting histories of the Gulag and root these tragedies to Karaganda specifically.

**Figure 2.5 Statue Dedicated to Karaganda's Miners in downtown Karaganda. Photo by author 2012.**



At the same time however, certain aspects of the Soviet past in Karaganda are not recognized

for their tragedies at all. Coal mining and the steel industry are examples, even though the Gulag's stock of prison labor was ultimately responsible (Brown 2001; Barnes 2012).

Karaganda's local soccer team is named the Miners (*shaktoriy*) and play at Miners' stadium. Furthermore, an essential feature greeting visitors to the city's central park is a towering statue of two miners holding up an enormous mass of coal. This statue is actually more interesting than that. Of the two figures, one is clearly Kazakh in appearance while the other is certainly supposed to be Russian. The criticality of coal to Karaganda's identity is not only expressed in soccer stadiums and statues commemorating miners, but by operational *mines* within the city limits. A most peculiar feature of the Kirov pit located just outside of the city is that to this day, the sign at the complex entrance is adorned with hammers and sickles. Its founding during the *Ochestvennaya Vojna* (World War II) is clearly stated on one of the signs.

**Figure 2.6 Entrance to Kirov (Shaxta) Mine Complex in Karaganda.**  
**Photo by author 2011.**



The character of Karaganda is thus unmistakably industrial and perhaps irreversibly so. Additionally, one could say that a definite Soviet atmosphere surrounds the city, even though steps have been taken to either decenter this by removing Lenin or denigrate that past by establishing memorials to Gulag victims. Yet a recent monument erected in 2011 suggests that in addition to the largely intact Soviet industrial landscape that may prove to be ultimately difficult to negotiate, new commemorative spaces come into being that highlight the greatness of the Soviet past and the will to remain connected to it. On April 12, 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to orbit the earth, launched successfully from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, 1,200 kilometers west of Karaganda. This site is still in operation (albeit leased by Russia). The path of departing spacecraft is typically over Karaganda, and locals enjoy the opportunity to spectate.

**Figure 2.7 Monument to Yuri Gagarin in downtown Karaganda. Photo by Author 2012.**



More frequently than not, discarded elements of the spacecraft used in take off fall to earth in the vicinity.<sup>14</sup> In this way, Kazakhstan and especially Karaganda, has a hand in space exploration. At the very least, geographically speaking the connection is plain. The new monument to Yuri Gagarin is an elaborately built structure in a park situated at the intersections of Lenin and Pushkin Prospects in Karaganda. During the summer months, the promenade is lined with flowers and visitors.

### ***Conclusions: Collective Memories and the Hybridization of Symbols***

Monuments, sites of commemoration, and memorials play key roles in the formation and transformation of national identity(s) (Forest and Johnson 2002; Foote 2005; Evered 2008). In the case of post-Soviet Kazakhstan and for the scope of this inquiry, Karaganda, the landscape, is a blend of themes and histories that take visible form in the city.

**Figure 2.8 Monument to Bukhar Zhirau in downtown Karaganda.  
Photo by Author 2011.**



<sup>14</sup> Certain residents from Karaganda report following the paths of falling debris in order to collect the scrap metal to then sell. Apart from the mere spectacle of watching space craft depart, other residents report noxious odors, fuel falling from the sky, as well as miscarriages after launches.

Important Kazakh historical figures like poet Abay Kunanbaev (2010) and Bukhar Zhirau (2009) have been recently monumentalized in public places. As well, streets have been renamed in their honor from *Sovyetskaya* (Soviet) and *Internatsional'naya* (International) to reflect this change in order. Actions at the state level, therefore, clearly reveal the impetus to redirect attention to Kazakh national themes and figures and thus, away from the socialist/communist past.

**Figure 2.9 Monument to Abai Kunanbaev in downtown Karaganda (Apex of Gagarin Monument visible in the distance.) Photo by Author 2012.**



Yet this is not always the case. As has been shown, new dedications to Soviet figures have also occurred. Although some of the most stunning cultural landscape additions in and around Karaganda distinctly unmask the Soviet period's brutality, plenty has been done to recognize its achievements. Space exploration and the vast mineral wealth of the region are both plainly visible and, moreover, celebrated in the city.

If memorial and commemorative sites can be used as rallying points for nationalistic

sentiments or other ideological purposes (Foote 2005), then it would seem that cleansing Karaganda of Soviet political leaders (like Lenin and Marx) seeks to avoid maintaining such spaces by physically removing an aspect of history and collective memory. Despite small protests by locals, Lenin has been given reprieve in a small park adjacent to a Soviet World War II memorial. It would seem that allowing the former Bolshevik leader a peripheral site of his own serves as a kind of negotiation. Whether fearing what an all-out attack on Soviet symbols would incite, or reluctantly acknowledging the complex collective memory and hybridized identities of locals, new and old symbols converge in Karaganda. Unlike the torrent of new growth in the nation's capital, a result of which is the forwarding of an almost singular Kazakh identity, Karaganda lacks the clean slate upon which to do so. Only in time will the steadfastness of Soviet monument and memory in the landscapes of Karaganda be revealed.

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### **Chapter Three**

#### *Kurchatov: The Use of Ruins and the Soviet Secret City in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

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*And to spite them [a town] will be founded. In time your town and mine will have everything—kindergartens, fine shops, a theatre and, if you like, a symphony orchestra! And then in thirty years' time your children, born here, will take into their own hands everything that we have made. And our successes will pale before their successes. The scope of our work will pale before the scope of theirs. And if in that time not one uranium bomb explodes over the heads of our people, you and I can be happy! And our town can then become a monument to peace. Isn't that worth living for?*

---Igor Kurchatov, March 1948,  
Chelyabinsk, Russia  
(from *Stalin and the Bomb*, Holloway 1994)

As the present headquarters of the National Nuclear Center of Kazakhstan (NNC), the city of Kurchatov is a hub of burgeoning scientific research and of great political importance to Kazakhstan.<sup>15</sup> Members of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, frequently visit Kurchatov's research laboratories and campuses. Similar to myself, it is likely that all foreign visitors will have their photo taken beneath the lofty, bronze statue of Igor Kurchatov standing at the end of the main street. Several miles to the south in the direction of Kurchatov's gaze, a number of nuclear reactor complexes are in operation and research is underway to construct more as Kazakhstan moves ahead with peaceful nuclear research. As a built landscape, Kurchatov has an unmistakable nuclear feel. Sign posts adorned with whirling electrons greet visitors at the city's limits and throughout town, mirroring the embellishments at the perimeters, public art taking the form of nuclei add to the atomic impression. Yet despite the scientific activity in Kurchatov of both national and international significance, the majority of the city is

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<sup>15</sup> Anti nuclearism is a distinctive political platform for the President of Kazakhstan. Additionally, after the close of the Soviet Union, the Central Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone was signed in 2006 by Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

overwhelmingly in poor repair. Abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and poor municipal oversight lend to the feeling of a collapsed political and economic system. The population that was once over thirty thousand has dwindled to less than eight. Lead scientists at the National Nuclear Center claim to not notice the “ruins” any more. If I want to see “real ones” they say, drive further toward Chagan.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 3.1 Kurchatov City limits. Photo by Author 2012.**



<sup>16</sup> Chagan is a former Soviet military base where experimental aircraft were tested and held during the Cold War. As of 1994, the entire community and airstrip were abandoned to rubble. Looting and the absence of environmental controls for the buildings has led to their speedy ruination.

In terms of assessing or even visualizing, in this case, what the collapse of the Soviet Union means, Kurchatov presents both the dramatic side of things as well as potential routes to normalization and hybridity. There are as many synonyms to describe the state of ruin in Kurchatov as there are to speak of the end of the communist system that preceded it. Sometimes dramatic, other times not, but *fall*, *collapse*, or *implosions* are commonly employed English terms used to style what happened to the Soviet Union. In Russian, “*razpadyeniya*” (disintegration) or “*razpada*” for short, is what I heard mostly in Kurchatov. According to some residents, however, it could be worse. 2004 saw a particularly cold winter (temperatures hovered below -50 Celsius for a week) during which many of the deserted buildings in Kurchatov flooded because their pipes burst.

**Figure 3.2 Abandoned Building in Kurchatov. Photo by Author 2012.**



Then everything froze. The cycles of freezing and thawing exacerbated the processes of structural decay already put into motion by the looting of doors, windows, hardware, fixtures, and copper wiring from within the hulls of buildings. One resident recalls the period as a time of “lawlessness” in which the lack of a municipal budget equated to no police force or garbage collection or municipal oversight of any kind. Yet, long time residents and veterans of the Soviet Red Army in Kurchatov still speak of the city as a sacred place in which the greatest battle of the twentieth century was waged. The *razpada* of the Soviet Union ended that battle and the nuclear city went from a posh outpost in the steppes of Kazakhstan to ruin in under a decade.<sup>17</sup>

The name Igor Kurchatov is woven into Soviet landscapes from Moscow, to Chelyabinsk in the Ural Mountains, and to Kazakhstan and the city named after him. A host of research facilities constructed at these locations at the onset of the Cold War were created and continued to develop into celebrated ideological spaces. I chose Kurchatov as a case study in this broader endeavor to formulate an impression and supply a narrative of what role Soviet landscapes play in Kazakhstan historically and currently. To what extent and where, are Soviet relics maintained and for what reasons? Given Kurchatov’s past significance in a scientific and particularly nuclear context, the continued elevation of its landscape furnishes a fresh perspective on how to understand the passing of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>17</sup> Long time residents of Kurchatov, especially ethnic Russians, expressed a forthright nostalgia for the Soviet period when their standard of living far exceeded nearly all other cities in the Soviet Union—with the exception of other secret cities.

### ***Historical Background: Soviet Secret Cities and the ‘White Archipelago’***

*Having emerged piece-by-piece over the last fifty years, the nuclear landscape constitutes as much a social and political geography as it does an environmental region. Because it is rather a recent phenomenon and has taken time to emerge in a recognizable form, because it exists in desert lands, and because it is the child of secret operations hidden behind the veil of national security, the nuclear landscape is to a large extent an invisible landscape (Kuletz 1998:9).*

Geographically, secret cities comprised an alternative topography of classified, scientific research institutions within the former Soviet Union (Tsukerman and Arzakh 1999; Rhodes 1986). Detailed maps with the names and locations of cities like Kurchatov, Chelyabinsk-40, Arzamas-16, Sverdlovsk, and Tomsk-7 were few and tightly controlled; maps with these locales were likely hanging behind “velvet curtains” in Joseph Stalin’s Kremlin office (Dobrenko 2003; Moran 2006). This network of confidential locations that date to the early 1940s, roughly, was vast. These “unknown” sites spread out from the suburbs of Moscow to the southern reaches of Siberia in Central Kazakhstan (Gentile 2004) and their clandestine research operations were generously funded.

The ‘White Archipelago’ is a related “industry term” that speaks to a particular web of cities directly involved in nuclear research and the production of atomic weapons in the Soviet Union from the years 1943 to 1991. These sites are also referred to as “Plutonium Cities” (Bukharin 1997). According to the personal memoirs of Veniamin Tsukerman (1994:xii), a Soviet atomic scientist who worked on the production of the nuclear bomb in Arzamas, “By 1991 there were eleven such places in the Soviet Union known collectively as the ‘White Archipelago’, to distinguish them from the ‘Gulag Archipelago’ of labor camps.” Kurchatov, Kazakhstan, was one of these many top-secret sites built during the Cold War that fall into the category of cartographic invisibility. Necessarily, the extent to which cities within the White Archipelago materialized on military maps, their names were obscured by a

variety of changing pseudonyms. Kurchatov for example has been known as Semipalatinsk 21, Moscow 400, and *konyechnaya* (Russian for “the end”). At times, secret sites were detected only by a railroad track that ended abruptly.

Kurchatov went under construction in 1947 as an installation whose purpose was to house scientists and military personnel for the first Soviet atomic tests (Holloway 1994; Pollack 2006; Werner 2007). In addition to the research laboratories and campuses needed for these purposes, Kurchatov was representative of the kinds of “model” socialist cities and moreover, elite cities too (See Kate Brown 2013). Access to the well-above-standard living conditions was protected with a strict passport system and communications with those outside of the “zone”<sup>18</sup> (Tsukerman and Arzakh1999) was limited. Recalling the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, like residents of Chelyabinsk, those of Kurchatov lived with electricity, indoor plumbing, central heat and hot water, fresh fruits, vegetables, and a cinema among other privileges.

These planned geographic spaces of the “White Archipelago” were emblematic of what geographers David Havlick and Scott Kirsch (2004) term a “production utopia.” Soviet state initiatives, prompted in this case by the Cold War, led to the formation of enclaves to which scientists were dispatched to solve the problem of attaining a nuclear bomb. Providing amenities higher than anywhere else in the post-World War II era, Soviet Union was designed to stimulate the highest levels of productivity (Holloway 1994; Pollack 2004). Additional encouragement included the risk of arrest, exile, or execution should confidentiality be breached or should the first test explosion be a failure (Holloway 1994).

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<sup>18</sup> ZATO refers to Closed Administrative and Territorial Formation (Tsukerman 1994). Often times a secret city would become simply a ZATO after the fall of the Soviet Union (Gentile: 2004).

The bomb project was indeed vital enough to the political aims of the Soviet Union that the entire venture was overseen by the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, secret Soviet police), a predecessor to the KGB (Commissariat for State Security).<sup>19</sup>

Unique to the city of Kurchatov alone, however, within this discussion of secret, atomic industry cities, is the adjacent nuclear test site of Semipalatinsk. At nearly 18,000 square kilometers, it is the largest terrestrial proving ground on the planet. More than 450 atmospheric, ground level, and subterranean explosions were carried out there for 40 years (Werner 2007).<sup>20</sup> Considering these figures, the idea of a "nuclear landscape" (Kuletz 1998) dons a different scale. During the period of atomic testing in Kazakhstan from 1949-1989, the secret city of Kurchatov was embellished with statuary, memorial and commemorative sites, and built infrastructure celebrating the staunch competitiveness of the Soviet Union in the Cold War with the West. The vast nuclear test site located to the south, of the city, on the other hand, was systematically destroyed and irradiated.

### ***Post-Soviet Ruination, Memory, and Capitalism in Kurchatov***

*If Igor Kurchatov returned to the Chelyabinsk region today, to the scene of so much of his life's significant work on nuclear weapons development, he would be immediately astounded. He and his associates had labored in strict secrecy; even the towns they had built did not appear on maps. First he would see the larger-than-life statue of himself located in Chelyabinsk City.*

John Whitely (1992:92)

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<sup>19</sup> Levrenti Beria, head of the NKVD until his execution in 1953, had a private home in Kurchatov near the research laboratories. In 1994 it was turned into a Russian Orthodox Church.

<sup>20</sup> As Cynthia Werner (2007) finds, the total number of explosions varies from study to study. For example, the number of "events" may have included more than one nuclear device, therefore, 450 total nuclear explosions may be significantly understated. Archival material on this matter is yet to be released.

The current shape of Kurchatov, Kazakhstan, is just as likely to bewilder the late nuclear physicist. Not only is there yet *another* statue of him in a town center, but the entire city has been re-named in his honor. The overwhelming shambles of Kurchatov's structures and built landscapes are furthermore, no secret. With Kazakhstan's declaration of independence in 1991, nuclear testing was halted and the former city of the "White Archipelago" was opened to the world. Local residents long accustomed to living within a privileged enclave express remorse at the freedom with which people can now enter the city—*bez propuskiye*—without passes. Save for the atomic art, the statue of Kurchatov, and a prominent World War II monument, the high modern, neo-classical Soviet built landscape of the Cold War seems to be in a perpetual state of decline with ruins being the defining characteristic.

**Figure 3.3 Atomic Art in Kurchatov. Photo by Author 2012.**



Yet within the dismal setting, there is a richer understanding of the cultural landscape of material artifacts that mere decay. Anthropologist Shannon Dawdy (2010:762) urges that “ruins remind us that modernity is always incomplete, always moving on, and always full of hubris.” Perhaps nowhere else in Kazakhstan is it more evident that a former civilization packed up and left.

**Figure 3.4 Hidden Statuary Kurchatov. Photo by Author 2012.**



The landscape of barbed wired terrain, vehicle depots, walled laboratory complexes, and military checkpoints no longer makes any sense to Kurchatov—in the way that did when initially conceived. In its current state, the dozens of hidden, Soviet structures—concealed

wreckage—that at one time adorned a veritable private commemorative landscape to the communist future, seems random. Archival materials for Kurchatov are sparse, leaving many details of this unique city with a scripted Soviet history mirroring that of other secret and closed cities of the “White Archipelago”. Furthermore, no map explains the topographical footprint of the buildings and sites. Within a broader discussion about ruins, this former secret enclave of the Soviet Union is a bewildering case in which the ubiquity of rubble firmly testifies to the passing of an empire (Stoler 2008). Visiting Kurchatov and observing the landscape is, really, to look upon an end.

Indeed there is a sense that Kurchatov once belonged somewhere else—to another time or another geography. Anthropologist Ann Stoler (2008:192) suggests that ruins be seen as “‘imperial formations’ which produce “ongoing, persistent features of their ontologies.” The USSR was a wholly different social, political, and economic worldview—a dissimilar ontology—to that existing today. Cities like Kurchatov attest not most importantly to just a philosophical construct, but more to the extent to which the Soviet Union was a geographic space that once included Kazakhstan for nearly seventy years.

**Figure 3.5 World War II Memorial in Kurchatov. Photo by Author 2012.**



While many areas under review in this thesis demonstrate a sense of negotiation with Soviet landscapes in their extant form i.e., statues and busts relocated and reinstalled in “memory” gardens, murals and other ideological features residing in tandem with new national symbols in Kurchatov, this is not quite the case. The Cold War and the Soviet Union ended and the city was left without a budget. Through looting, pillaging, and abandonment, the majority of the buildings quickly decayed in the subzero winter temperatures that typify the region.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, post-Soviet euphemisms like “transition” and “transformation” (Verdery 1999) in the case of Kurchatov are inappropriate. *Razpada* (disintegration) better captures the finale of events that literally nullified the celebrated socialist landscape.

In the twenty-three years since the times of the Soviet Union, prominent city names throughout Kazakhstan were changed to evoke something more Kazakh. For example, Almaty became Alma-Ata, Ust-Kamenogorsk became Ustkamen, Semipalatinsk was changed to Semey, and most notably perhaps, Akmolinsk was discarded for Astana. These changes likely reflect the processes by which the Kazakh ethnic identity has been forwarded onto a landscape of previously Soviet names (Wolfel 2002; Anacker 2004, Danzer 2009). For Kurchatov however, no changes have been made. It is more a case of “capture the flag.” As a top-secret nuclear city for forty years with an adjacent atomic proving ground, seizing control of the Soviet nuclear legacy was a key priority to both the new Kazakh government and to Western powers (Alexandrov 1999).

To long-time residents, Kurchatov is more than an important site for nuclear activity, it is also a home. The ruined landscape is a reflection of a life that is no more.

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<sup>21</sup> To long-time Kurchatov residents, when the demographics began to include rural Kazakhs after 1991, the city’s character changed forever and crime increased.

Unequivocally, the Soviet statuary and landmarks are important locations for public and private memory (Foote 2005; Azaryahu and Foote 2008), one might also ask “[w]hat people are left with: to what remains, to the aftershocks of empire, to the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things” (Stoler 2008: 194). Indeed the lives who interacted with Kurchatov’s secret landscape during its Cold War apex may very well have experienced what political scientist Francis Fukuyama (1992) deemed “the end of history.” More dramatic, too, is how the passing of the Soviet Union meant the foreclosure of the entire city that prior to the Cold War did not exist. If we understand the “end of history” to be the ultimate victory of western liberal democracies and capitalism over communism, then the presence of a market economy in Kuchatov is both shocking but perhaps, expected.

### ***Conclusions: Economies of Ruin and Destruction, Celebrating the Atom***

The unwavering downside to the collapse of the Soviet Union for many in Kurchatov is facing a city decorated with crumpled buildings, vacant, abandoned lots, and the remembrances of the past glory in the existing statuary and monuments. The scale of loss borders on catastrophic for many. Interestingly for a few, however, the deterioration of the landscape has created a small-scale economy. In the summer of 2012 when conducting field research in Kurchatov, I met a pair of local guides who wanted to assist me in my search hidden Soviet statuary and ideological materials in the city. Not dissimilar to the Western Apache with whom anthropologist Keith Basso worked for a number of years in Arizona,<sup>22</sup> these *mjestniy* (locals) or *sdjeshniy* (people from here) were intent on sharing what they knew

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<sup>22</sup> In *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996), Keith Basso assists several members of the Western Apache tribe in Arizona to construct “local maps.” This process was heavily imbued with storytelling and historical details that are unattainable without the Apache language. Basso’s works expands the boundaries of cartography as a discipline.

and insisted that only they knew it. Observing the landscape and thinking about not only the longevity of the past in the built landscape but also to see what role the Soviet Union plays in Kurchatov is an intensely qualitative endeavor. A number of landmarks are clearly visible and the broken-down buildings are easy enough to see by oneself. Yet accompanied by people who had grown up in the city, the dearth of archival materials and factual accounts about Kurchatov became irrelevant.

The places once arguably sacred during the Soviet period namely small parks with sculptures, monuments, and cenotaphs, are seemingly scattered throughout Kurchatov. Many of these sites are now largely overgrown and as such, unidentifiable, to a western researcher. With explanation, a better schematic for the city slowly materialized relative to the location of Kurchatov's Soviet artifacts. Such "unofficial tours" taken in tandem with a small assortment of sundries like key chains, post cards, and magnets hint at the potential for small economies to develop.

**Figure 3.6 "Gratitude to the Soviet Army" memorial in Kurchatov.  
Photo by Author 2012.**



In contrast, the largest presence and economy in Kurchatov remains to be the nuclear industry. While no weapons testing has occurred since 1989, maintaining the 18,000 square kilometer proving ground (Semipalatinsk) to the south is a task bequeathed to the National Nuclear Center of Kazakhstan (NNC).

**Figure 3.7 Bust of Igor Kurchatov at the entrance to the National Nuclear Center of Kazakhstan in Kurchatov. Photo by Author 2012.**



According to Sergey Lukashenko, director of the Institute for Radiation Safety and Ecology, Semipalatinsk is the largest research laboratory on the planet for assessing how radioisotopes move through the water, grasses, and soils of the former test site.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the NNC

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<sup>23</sup> Mr. Lukashenko was also very keen to note that research must continue at the former nuclear test site in order to continue garnering funding that contributes substantially to the operating budget of the NNC.

maintains several nuclear reactor complexes near Kurchatov in collaboration with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, Austria.

**Figure 3.8 Statue of Igor Kurchatov. Photo by Author 2012. (Author on the far left.)**



While a great deal of Kurchatov collapsed with the end of the Cold War and the cessation of Soviet nuclear testing in Kazakhstan, the scientific laboratories and research sites were

nationalized. A small corpus of radio-ecologists and physicists aided by an even smaller cadre of security personnel, now supervise and provide guardianship to the largest nuclear test site in the world. The legacy of destruction brought by atomic weapons testing, though beyond the scope of this inquiry, is vital to the identity of Kazakhstan in several key ways and the city of Kurchatov and its Soviet commemorative and ideological landscapes are employed in unique ways.

The historic towering Statue of Igor Kurchatov still stands prominently gazing in the direction of the nuclear test site. His likeness has, as well, recently (2011) been transplanted as a bust greeting guests to the NNC. Kurchatov's identity as a nuclear city has been retained at the same time as the Soviet Cold War physicist is celebrated. Kurchatov (scientist and city) thus, poses in many ways as an economy. Thinking about national identity formation and symbolic capital in geography (Gellner 1983; Hobswawm 1990; Anderson 1991; Forest and Johnson 2002), we understand that monuments, statuary, and iconic features are important sites through which nation states construct, formulate and reformulate identities. In the case of Kazakhstan, as relates to the Soviet Union, the relationship to the past is tenuous. The official position—as seen by events in the nation's capital Astana—is generally that of a careful denigration of the Soviet period. Moreover, the consecration of public sites of grief in Astana and elsewhere related to Gulag and collectivization in Kazakhstan, direct attention to the injustices and maligning of populations during the Soviet Union. The Kazakh state by taking the position of a “moral high ground” (Delue 2006: 395) partially formulates an identity based on collective victimization.

In the case of Kurchatov, Kazakh national identity, while clearly stated in the built landscape, does not speak to victimization at all. The symbolic capital of the former nuclear

city has been nationalized. The Kazakh state has an unequivocal anti nuclear-stance (citation). This position is a central platform to its “official” national identity and has been made clear in countless ceremonies, international agreements, collaborations, and ongoing security work. However, Igor Kurchatov and the Soviet atomic industry that developed the nuclear legacy in Kazakhstan remain central to the landscape.

As a complicated site of artifacts and ideological relics from the Soviet period, Kurchatov is a remarkable conflation of identities. It was highly regarded and glorified with monuments and commemorative spaces to the greater Soviet project of building a socialist utopia, its scientific achievements, and celebrating the attainment of the atomic bomb. In its present state, Kurchatov is still highly regarded. The history and ownership of the city has, however, changed hands. Kazakhstan, independent of the Soviet Union, now presides over a sacred landscape of scientific and technological history with the added complexity of contested nuclear legacies. Kurchatov’s distinct Soviet/Kazakh identity is really a state of exception. The intact Soviet landscapes together with the ruins offer legitimacy to Kazakhstan’s own nuclear status. Effacing historical structures and removing ideological landscapes would undermine what I suggest, is a powerful history and strategic legacy, that links Kazakhstan presently to the profound scientific and technological achievements of the Soviet Union.

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## Conclusions

### *Strategic Deployments of Memory: Globalization, Entrepreneurialism, and Soviet Legacies*

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*In the birthplace of apples and tulips, where technology unites people and where the land itself stores a wealth of potential, for a future which is already arrived. Because our goal for your business is to create the right conditions for your development and growth. Invest in Kazakhstan.*

*-- Invest in Kazakhstan, 2011, Advertisement*

*Mass media conveniently provide simplified and selective identities for places beyond the realm of immediate experience of the audience, and hence tend to fabricate a pseudo-world of pseudo-places”*

*-- Edward Relph 1976:58 quoted in Adams 1992:121*

The first epigraph above is the voice track to an infomercial that aired on US cable new stations in 2011. “Invest in Kazakhstan” is a collection of instructive ads ranging from thirty seconds to over eight minutes in which a definitive picture of Kazakhstan’s geography and cultural diversity are imparted. Taking the form of a montage, key industries of oil, gas, and mineral extraction merge with Astana’s bold new cityscapes. Viewers are left with a fresh assessment on both an historical landscape of Central Asia in addition to an emerging point in a global system of business and trade. The second epigraph advocates that places orchestrated for media consumption ought be read with judgment.

By way of infomercials, websites, and even full-page ads in the *New York Times*,<sup>24</sup> a consumable identity of Kazakhstan has been strategically released to the wider world over the past decade. There have been other publicities too—unsolicited—like the 2006 feature film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America Make Benefit Glorious Nation of*

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<sup>24</sup> November 28, 2005

*Kazakhstan*. Perhaps a torrent of publicity-gathering campaigns following *Borat's* release is a tactic to increase the notoriety and correct the maligned illustration of Kazakhstan in the global arena (Saunders 2008). Or perhaps the 2006 film that created such an adverse reaction by the Kazakh state (Saunders 2007) is only partially responsible for the rush of educational, self-promotion strategies seen today. Anthropologist Morgan Liu (2011:116) proposes that “Central Asia is a curiously over-determined, yet understudied region of the world.” Considering this, it is understandable that certain state promotions strategies situate Kazakhstan, on the one hand, definitively within Central Asia, while on the other hand the Kazakhs identity is singularized.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the region of Central Asia is both concisely articulated to include the modern nation—Kazakhstan—whereas bordering countries like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan, and Tajikistan are rendered more or less invisible. Further interesting in this is how Kazakhstan’s historical narrative is peculiarly edited for content. Essentially, their celebrated nomadic pastoral existence evolved directly into the amazing capital city of Astana. There is indeed a palpable cultural, political, and economic agenda emanating from Kazakhstan, one of the most transparent features of which is the absence of the Soviet Union.

In the global context to which Kazakhstan now finds itself, leaving the past behind is crucial (Murphy 2006; Roberts 2012). Moreover, seizing economic opportunities and beckoning foreign investment is a task taken up in earnest. ‘Invest in Kazakhstan’ demonstrates this clearly. It may, however, be a choice between two extremes. On the one hand there is the path to global integration empowered by an overtly “entrepreneurial” state that “reflects commitment to a global free market, deregulation, privatization, and

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<sup>25</sup> See Kazakhstan: “In the Heart of Eurasia.”

competition” (Sparke and Lawson 2008:315). While on the other hand, there is the possibility of Kazakhstan assuming a post-Soviet identity that is beset with doubts about “the return of clan politics,” corruption, and religious extremism (Collins 2004; Schatz 2000, 2006, 2008). Either way, what the wider world knows of Kazakhstan’s historical, cultural, and political landscapes almost certainly differs drastically from what residents of Kazakhstan know about it. The media as a venue is the ideal platform from which to fashion a “pseudo-world of pseudo- places” (Relph 1976:58), a realm where the negotiations over landmarks, histories, commemorative sites and memory are long resolved.

It has been the goal of this thesis to analyze Soviet built landscapes in Kazakhstan and the degree to which the legacies of that period persist, where and why. Looking at existing statuary, commemorative and memorial sites in three locations, it is clear that the Soviet Union is deeply imbedded in the cultural landscapes and built spaces of Kazakhstan. A component of this research has addressed new memorials, as well, that denounce crimes committed during the Soviet period as in the case of the collectivization campaign of the 1930s and the Gulag system of labor. Overwhelmingly, what is certain is that Kazakhstan is profoundly entangled with histories and memories of the Soviet Union. The three locations addressed in this thesis: Astana, Karaganda, and Kurchatov are each unique cases in which to witness the strategic uses of the Soviet period as a tool to fashion a distinct, Kazakh national identity. Geographer Benjamin Forest and political scientist Juliet Johnson (2011:273) speaking to post-Soviet alterations of the built landscape, have the following to say,

The physical transformation of places of memory reflects the struggle among political actors for the symbolic capital embedded in and represented by these sites. By co-opting, creating, altering, contesting, ignoring, or removing particular monuments, political actors engage in a symbolic dialogue with each other and with the public in an attempt to gain symbolic capital—the prestige, legitimacy, and influence derived from being associated with status-bearing ideas and figures.

The attention paid to Soviet landmarks, histories, and other sites in Kazakhstan demonstrates precisely this kind of ongoing dialogue.

My research has examined vastly different locations in the search of Soviet memory. Astana, as the nation's capital presents the Soviet Union as a finished, tragic, and brutal chapter of history. Karaganda, sharing similar elements with Astana—the distinct identification with Gulag histories in the built landscape—remains however, a complex array of existing landmarks, statuary, and ideological spaces. In Kurchatov, the Soviet memory is kept and elevated. Kazakhstan's own nuclear and scientific capital depends on the histories of the former secret city and the atomic proving ground. While each of my study sites reflect dialogue between the Soviet past and the Kazakh present, distancing, appropriating, and erasing these histories varies greatly across space. Speaking to this, geographer Kyle T. Evered (2008:329) suggests that,

Looking at spatial iconographies as they are imagined, constructed, and employed in process of self-definition demands appreciations over space and through time for changes in the symbols—both in their meanings and in the changes through their discursive roles.

The Soviet Union left unmistakable traces. To a great extent the built landscapes reflect this; to an even greater extent, the meanings of the Soviet period reside within former “Soviets.” In the age of independent Kazakhstan, the negotiations with the Soviet Union in new and old built landscapes is a blend of denunciation, indifference, praise, and silence.

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