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Journal of Eurasian Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/euras

How Tatiana's voice rang across the steppe: Russian literature in the life and legend of Abai

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 December 2017

Accepted 10 December 2017

Available online

Keywords:

Kazakh literature

Russian steppe colonization

intertextuality in Russian and Central Asian literature

Alexander Pushkin

Mukhtar Aueзов

Abai Qunanbaiuly

ABSTRACT

The Kazakh poet Abai Qunanbaiuly (1845–1904) today enjoys a dual legacy as the father of modern Kazakh literature (as distinct from its oral tradition) and also as an enlightener who translated the Russian classics into Kazakh and acted as a vital bridge between the two cultures. Much of Abai's reputation owes its existence to the twentieth-century author, critic, and scholar Mukhtar Aueзов (1897–1961), whose biographical writings on the poet formed the standard narrative of his life and work. Initiated in 1937, the year of the Pushkin centennial celebrations in the Soviet Union, Aueзов's literary canonization of Abai hinges on the poet's acquisition of the Russian language and his transformative encounters with Russian-language texts – most notably among them, Pushkin's *Dubrovskii* and *Evgenii Onegin*. In Aueзов's account, Abai's efforts lead to the discovery of an authentically Kazakh literary voice, heralded by his successful adaptation of Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin* into traditional Kazakh song form. In analyzing this prominent episode of the Abai legend, I argue that Russian literature's "conquest" in Central Asia was in fact a multifaceted dialogue in which writers laid the foundation for distinct national literary traditions by appropriating the literature of the colonizer – and in particular by reading, translating, displacing, domesticating, and "disorienting" the figure of Pushkin.

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1. Introduction: The unknown Kazakh

In the spring of 2012, in the wake of Vladimir Putin's controversial re-election to a third term as President of the Russian Federation, the swelling anti-government protest movement in Moscow galvanized around a most unusual focal point: a statue of the nineteenth-century Kazakh poet Abai Qunanbaiuly (1845–1904) on the central boulevard of Chistye Prudy. Most Moscow protesters were initially oblivious to the man's identity – opposition leader Aleksei

Navalny urged people via Twitter to gather at the "monument to that unknown Kazakh" (*neizvestnomu kazakhu*)—but the poet's visage soon went viral on social media, and the hashtag #окупайабай ("Occupy Abai") came into use by participants in mass demonstrations. Before long, editions of Abai's work in Russian translation appeared once again on Moscow bookshelves and the Kazakh poet came to be known, in the words of one Twitter user, as "the Grandfather of the New Russian Revolution" (*dedushka novoi russkoi revoliutsii*). Yet this contemporary episode is merely the latest in a series of formative encounters between Kazakh and Russian readers and writers that have taken place since the Russian Empire's colonization of the Central Asian steppe. In this article I examine the process of mythmaking by which Abai came to occupy

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2017.12.002>

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a unique space in the interface between Russian and Kazakh cultures. In doing so, I will showcase the instrumental role of another nineteenth-century writer, one who is similarly memorialized with an iconic statue in central Moscow: the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin.

Abai, who, in the true fashion of a cultural icon, is known by his first name alone, enjoys a dual legacy in Kazakh culture. First, he is known as the father of modern Kazakh literature, as well as a vital bridge from the Kazakh oral tradition to the national, written one. He is also known as an enlightener, who translated the classics of Russian literature into Kazakh and provided an important point of contact between the two cultures during the Russian conquest in the late nineteenth century. In a collected works volume commemorating the 150th anniversary of Abai's birth, a mere three years after Kazakhstan gained its independence, the country's newly elected president Nursultan Nazarbayev neatly summarized Abai's significance in Kazakh culture. He lauded the poet's work as "a true reflection of the Kazakh people's mentality and existence," characterizing Abai as the epitome of the Kazakh nation's "bitter struggle for freedom, independence, and the preservation of national pride" (Akhmetov, 1994: 2). In the same volume, the critic Z. A. Akhmetov pointed out that although Abai "reviled" Russian colonization, he viewed Russian culture as a "window" to the world. Akhmetov then drew a familiar analogy to describe Abai's legacy: "just as Pushkin was Russia's spiritual father, so too did Abai become the founder of Kazakh culture" (Akhmetov, 1994: 23). Yet evaluations of Abai's life and work were not nearly as laudatory in the pre-Stalin era. Providing a blunt contrast to the worshipful words of the Kazakhstani president, a Soviet scholar remarked in 1923 that, "the Russian book awakened [Abai's] poetic soul," and "if not for the powerful [*moshchnaia*] Russian culture [...] Abai would have been just another well-known bureaucrat" (Zhirechin, 1949: 9). These contrasting views of Abai raise the central question to be addressed in this study: How did Abai come to be known as Kazakhstan's equivalent to Pushkin, and how did contemporary hagiographies come to link Abai's genius to the Russian book? The answer lies in the work of another intercessor: the Stalin-prizewinning Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov (1897–1961).

2. The path of Abai leads through Pushkin

Abai was born into an aristocratic Kazakh family in 1845 in a rural area outside the Russian colonial outpost of Semipalatinsk, where Fedor Dostoevskii would go on to spend several life-changing years in exile in the 1850s.¹ He received a customary Islamic education, first from a village

¹ The area around Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk) is significant in Kazakh history—it is not only the home of Abai and his Soviet biographer Mukhtar Auezov, but it was also the epicenter of the Kazakh intelligentsia in the early twentieth century as well as the headquarters of the separatist party Alash Orda and the short-lived Alash Autonomy (whose history was repressed in Soviet times), and finally as the site of the Soviet government's secret nuclear testing facility, the Semipalatinsk "Polygon." After years of environmental devastation, the Polygon became an important site of the Kazakh fight for self-determination, as the center of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement.

mullah, then at the *medrese* of Akhmet Riza in Semipalatinsk, before enrolling for a brief period at the city's Russian school. Here, according to his Soviet biographers, he had his first taste of the Russian classics – though he only attained fluency later in life, after many years of self-directed study. Like his father before him, Abai spent much of his adult life as an administrator for the Tsarist government of the Semipalatinsk *uezd*, ascending to the ranks of *volost* chief and then governor. Soviet biographers stress his involvement in the Russian cultural life of Semipalatinsk, particularly his acquaintance with the exiled Russian intellectuals Evgenii Petrovich Mikhaelis (1841–1893) and Nifont Ivanovich Dolgoplov (1857–1925), who purportedly encouraged Abai in his studies and creative efforts (Zhirechin, 1949).² In middle age he embarked on a parallel career as a writer and *aqyn* (bard), and he came to be known for his contributions to the Kazakh oral song tradition (Dubuisson, 2009). Yet Abai published only a handful of works during his own lifetime, in the bilingual Russian-Turkic bulletin of the Tsarist administration, *The Kirgiz Steppe Gazette* (*Kirgizskaya Stepnaia Gazeta/Dala Uilayetining Gazeti*).³ Only after his death did the pre-revolutionary Kazakh intelligentsia, and, later, Soviet folklorists and literary scholars, take on the task of transcribing, editing, and publishing his best-known works, including his philosophical tract *Words of Edification* (*Qara sozder*), his lyric verses and long poems, his compositions in the oral song tradition, and his translations and adaptations of Goethe, Schiller, Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoi, and Krylov.⁴ Beginning with his contemporaries in the Kazakh intelligentsia and continuing until today, scholars have credited Abai's works as landmark innovations of modern, written Kazakh literature, with their introduction of Russian subject matter and verse forms, philosophical preponderances on the meaning

² This is a common narrative in Soviet multinational literature, in which a young 19th century writer at the periphery of the Russian Empire is exposed to progressive ideas through the mentorship of exiled Russian intellectuals, and is then inspired to become the founder of a national tradition. One well-known example in the Azeri context is *Fatalnyi Fatali* (1983), Chingiz Guseinov's biography of the 19th century intellectual Mirza Fatali Akhuzade.

³ In Abai's lifetime, the Kazakh literary language was only beginning to be formed. Beginning in the 1860s, the first Kazakh materials were printed in the Tatar intellectual center of Kazan—the location of the nearest Arabic-script printing press. See Isabelle Kreindler, "Ibrahim Altynsarin, Nikolai Il'minskii and the Kazakh National Awakening," *Central Asian Survey* 2, no. 3 (September 1983), 99. See also Steven Sabol, *Russian Colonization and the Genesis of Kazak National Consciousness* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 59–60.

⁴ The first published assessment of Abai's work appeared in the journal *Semipalatinskii listok* in 1905. It was an obituary written by A. N. Bokeykhanov, an intellectual and education reformer who went on to become a member of the Alash party, as well as the president of the Alash Autonomy during its brief (and unrecognized) existence as an independent state from 1917–1920. Abai's obituary was re-printed in 1907 in the proceedings of the Semipalatinsk branch of the West-Siberian division of the Russian Geographical Society. Then in 1909 Bokeykhanov prepared and published the first collection of Abai's poetry in St. Petersburg (this text was in Kazakh using Arabic script), which was then reprinted in Kazan and Tashkent in 1922. In 1918 the young Mukhtar Auezov founded an entire journal, *Abai*, dedicated to propagating the *aqyn*'s works. A good overview of the complex publishing history of Abai's works can be found on the site of the Abai Eastern Kazakhstan Regional Library in Semipalatinsk: http://semeylib.kz/?page_id=965&lang=ru.

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