

Kazakhstan, a cradle of Nomadic Civilization, celebrates 550th year of Statehood. Putin and guileless observers need a history lesson.

As the country plans to celebrate the 550th year of Kazakh Khanate, Vladimir Putin's statement to a pro-Kremlin youth camp on August 29, 2014, downplaying the legitimacy of Kazakhstan's statehood comes to mind. Many observers and publics picked up on the subject, mostly around the question, "Will Kazakhstan be next (*after Ukraine*)?" This speculation might be correct, yet remains superficial.

Putin erred when he tried to kill two birds with one stone: praising President Nazarbayev for the modern progress of Kazakhstan, while casting doubt on the country's historic attributes of statehood, such as territorial borders. The hint implies that the nation could lose part of its territory, if it betrays loyalty to Moscow. But Putin miscalculated the effect of his message, when he decided to court Nazarbayev at the expense of the Kazakh nation's pride. And anti-Kazakh attacks from the head of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia Vladimir Zhirinovskii, the ultra-nationalist Eduard Limonov and alike, which "coincided" in time with their leader's statement, have gone over the top.

In the long run these reckless statements can backfire, if history is anything to go by.

A profound ignorance on historic matters is a feature of a considerable part of Russian society. Even the intelligentsia and the so-called "elite" in Moscow remain indoctrinated by old history textbooks and the "Bolshaya Sovetskaya Encyclopedia". Putin employs this to play the nationalist card and garner *nostalgia* for "the good old times" in his country to achieve political ends. Therefore, a more curious look into the subject is advisable, as it could be an eye-opener for many Russian and Western folk.

"The Muscovite state emerged thanks to the Tatar yoke"

For starters, this is the opinion of the famous Russian linguist, philosopher and historian, Nikolai Trubetskoy. He also asserted: *"The Russian Tsar was the heir of the Mongolian Khan...he became the bearer of this new form of Tatar statehood."* [1]

But the core point that has been overlooked is that Kazakh people are on a crucial stage of reviving their national culture and identity, completely oppressed and distorted by the Soviet Empire before their independence. Local as well as foreign scientists and experts have begun discovering Kazakh statehood and history, largely due to the state program "Cultural Heritage" initiated by President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 2004. During a conversation, my Kazakh associate exclaimed: *"In the USSR period, the textbook 'the History of Kazakhstan' fit into 20 or something pages! Today the nation is overwhelmed with a flood of artifacts and historic documents, collected from archeological sites around the country, as well as from Chinese, Iranian, and European sources. 'Nomadic Civilization' has become a buzzword and*

new historic knowledge about it hardly manages to fit into many published volumes". By the way, today Kazakhstan is the only country that has scientifically systemized the many-centuries national folklore - "Babalar sozi", and issued its academic editions in a 100-volume series. [2]

Did you say uncivilized?

In Soviet times the infamous former "chief ideologist" of the USSR, member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Mikhail Suslov declared: *"Kazakhs are nomads, and nomads don't have a history or culture. Hence, no need to undertake archeological excavations in Kazakhstan."*

In spite of this dogma, the "Golden Man", a young Scythian Prince from 4th or 5th century BC, wearing some 4,000 gold ornaments, was discovered by the Kazakh archeologist K.Akisev, outside of Kazakhstan's commercial capital, Almaty, in 1969. In 2010 in the Karaganda region researchers uncovered the tomb of a gold-clad ancient Scythian warrior, nicknamed "The Sun Lord", whose torso was entirely covered with gold. In Eastern Kazakhstan archeologists discovered the ancient grave of a young woman buried with numerous gold and silver treasures, most notably a gold headdress ("Princess of the Scythians", 2013). In all, there were seven similar archeological findings of "golden men" in the country.

The dispute between authorities in Crimea and Kiev on cultural heritage - the trove of Scythian gold belonging to four Crimean museums taken to the Netherlands for the exhibition last year, and "held hostage" there because of the Ukrainian conflict, has yet to be resolved. Ironically, it could be fair enough to sign the exhibits over to the "third party", to the modern descendants of the Scythians - the Kazakhs. Huge amounts of Scythian golden masterpieces, found in the burial kurgans on the territory of modern Kazakhstan are displayed in the Hall of Gold at the Central State Museum in Almaty and the National Museum in Astana already. These and other findings, which were considered to have been created by Greeks for the Scythians were shown to have predated their contact with Greek civilization. [3]

Further, "bronze, iron, silver, and electrum artifacts demonstrate Scythian knowledge and mastery of metal casting, plastic shaping, joining, decorative, and finishing techniques". [4] Logically, since metal ores deposits, as well as a large number of ancient smelting furnaces were found in Central Eurasia, the above-mentioned treasures, most probably, were brought by Scythians-nomads to Crimea, South Russia, the Caucasus and elsewhere, not vice versa.

To this day, irritated and with a great degree of arrogance, many Russians continue to repudiate these and other new evidences and historical findings. They post degrading comments on Internet forums about the "primitive, barbarian" lifestyle of the nomadic tribes, limited by "empty steppes" and the yurt - traditional portable nomad's house. In response, historically conscious locals simply refer to the

artifacts exhibited by the country's museums - ceramic pipes used for water supply or sewage in ancient cities of Kazakhstan such as Saraishyk, Otrar, Taraz etc.

...The prominent Arabian geographic scientist and traveler Ibn Batut wrote in 1334: "Saraishyk is the biggest city in the world after Bagdad. The khan's palace is located in the center. It has four mosques and a lot of caravansaries. Eleven meters high defensive wall towers around the city, the thickness of which is four meters. But the most amazing thing is that every house is supplied with water". [5] Meanwhile, people in Europe and Russia had no clue about such conveniences yet.

The library of Otrar, which housed a collection of some 33,000 items, including Babylonian clay tablets and Egyptian papyrus scrolls, was considered sufficient to rival the legendary library of Alexandria.

Al-Farabi, a prominent ancient intellectual, scientist and philosopher born in Otrar, was recognized as the "Second Master" after Aristotle.

Forgetting history lessons

To date many considered Kazakhstan as Russia's staunch ally, completely in the orbit of Moscow. But Putin's remarks galvanized Kazakh nationalists, arousing a strong negative reaction against Moscow. Poet Akbergen Elgezek published an article posing "Questions for Putin": *"If Kazakhs never had statehood who did the Russians pay tributes to?... If we did not have a state, did the Russians present it as a gift to us?... If we did not have a state what Khanate was ruled by Kerey and Janibek? If we did not have a state, for whose lands did our batyrs (warriors) shed their blood, defending themselves against the Dzhungars, the Chinese, or Kokandians and the Russians?"* [6]

There is a popular opinion of Kazakhs having a weaker sense of nationalism than Georgians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Uzbeks or others. On the contrary, national patriots stress that the uprising of the Kazakh youth on December 16-17, 1986 was the first one in the Soviet Union against the totalitarian regime. The anger was sparked by Moscow's appointment of a new party leader for Kazakhstan, an ethnic Russian, Gennadyi Kolbin, instead of choosing a native leader. It was only then that revolts followed in Sumgait, Tbilisi, Baku and Vilnius, leading to the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

During an interview, the Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, among other things, warned president Putin not to mess with Kazakhs, "well-known as good warriors". But the "geopolitical macho" knows better, and is used to having an upper hand in any dispute. Entering a new one, the diplomatic row over Auschwitz, he declared: "Of course, the Russian people suffered the most in the fight against Nazism". Again, my Kazakh acquaintance clarified: "With all due respect, according to new data, first of all from Russian sources, 601,939 Kazakhstan military men died

in this war, which was 12% of their population. The toll of their Russian brother-soldiers was also about 10-12% of Russia's population".

If the Kremlin's goal was to create discourse between Russia and Russian speaking citizens in other countries, including Kazakhs, then it has been successfully achieved. But President Nazarbayev is famous for using any opportunity to turn the table to his advantage too. Last year, Kazakhstan's leader announced the "*Mangilik El*" (the Eternal Nation) idea. It sounds highly ambitious and even exotic - as many of Astana's other initiatives do, but...just wait and see. The celebration of the 550-years of Kazakh Khanate might well jump-start the process of making this a national idea, uniting Kazakhs and other peoples of the country.

Kazakhs have only turned a few pages of their fascinating history - a core part of the Nomadic civilization, which can be portrayed and recounted in numerous volumes. But the challenge is "to be worthy of their great predecessors", and build upon their achievements to truly become a *Mangilik El*.

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[1] http://ethnobs.ru/en/library/237/_aview_b18269

[2] <http://www.kazpravda.kz/en/news/culture/100-volume-series-of-kazakh-folklore-babalar-sozi-presented-in-almaty>

[3] <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/530361/Scythian>

[4] <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/530382/Scythian-art>

[5] <http://culturemap.kz/en/object/muzeiy-zapovednik---han-ordaly-saraiychik>

[6] <http://e-history.kz/en/biography/view/29>