



Fabrizio Soggetto

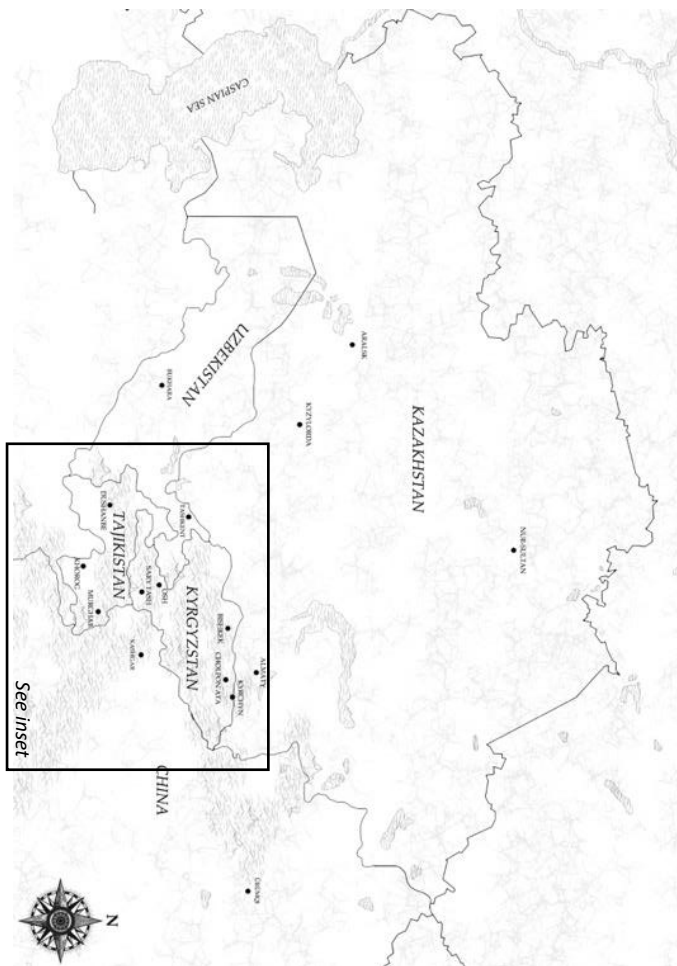
Turn Left at Lenin's Statue

Travels in Central Asia

Fabrizio Soggetto was born in Italy and has lived in the United Kingdom for many years. Inspired by travellers such as Sara Wheeler, Peter Robb and Anthony Bourdain he has journeyed to more than fifty countries in the world.

He collaborates with *Huffington Post Italia* and chronicles his travels on the blog *Are We There Yet?. Turn Left at Lenin's Statue* is his first book.

This is an excerpt from the book and does not constitute the full body of the volume. If you wish to read more you can find copies of this book on sale, both as paperback and Kindle E-book, on [Amazon](#).



Five Fingers

Lights are always too bright in airports. Neon tubes glare white with an unsettling whirr that echoes of hidden cameras and spying eyes. Perhaps that was the reason why the sole customer sitting in the café located at the far end of Almaty airport's international arrivals wore sunglasses.

She drank beer from a one-litre *Maßkrug*, sucking in the liquid with a straw. The bartenders – a dour, skinny man and a plump woman – gazed at her with barely concealed hostility. That entire place – the yellow wallpaper, gold drapes, laced tablecloths covered with plastic sheets – oozed resentment, though my order of an Americano had been met with a solemn nod of approval. It was early morning and, outside, it was as if night had just fallen.

Less than five hours separated Kiev from the corner of Kazakhstan where I sat, waiting for caffeine to titillate my synapses, although the flight had taken a lot longer. The Ukraine International jetliner skirted around Russian airspace, obeying the rules of geopolitics, and as it did the four Kazakhs sat behind me proceeded to empty the two bottles of vodka they had bought from the duty free, passing along the occasional shot poured in a glass decorated with Saint Volodymyr. The Woody Guthrie impersonator sitting further up in the cabin did not grow bored: notes from his harmonica wafted from up front throughout the sleepless flight.

Yet, despite all the discomforts and the STASI waiting room décor of the café, I felt an irrepressible sense of excitement, a feeling of accomplishment. For this was the realisation of a promise I had made myself some twenty years prior.

Back in those days when history could be made by anyone with a mullet, a pickaxe and a concrete wall to whack it at, an Italian broadsheet published an atlas. The logic was, I suppose, to guide readers in this brave new world where the Iron Curtain was no more and countries we had spent years learning about had suddenly disappeared. Whether the initiative reaped the hoped-for results I do not know, although it was to be the spark that lit a fire inside an eight-year-old boy whose mother had scrupulously collected and bound every instalment. Me.

The exact circumstances of the discovery of that atlas now escape me; I remember it lying, abandoned and almost forgotten, under a pile of woollen jumpers, smelling faintly of naphthalene. I remember picking up the large volume, bound in purple cloth, and opening it up. Pages rustled softly as I turned them. It was not long before I became fixated with Central Asia; with hindsight, there was no other option.

For starters, the region appeared so *vast*. The A3 pages of the atlas showed a landscape either remarkably empty – endless swathes painted faint green or amber where not a road, railway or canal dared to venture – or incredibly convoluted, a hotchpotch of valleys, cordilleras and glaciers with borders crashing into each other in a constellation of enclaves. Then there was the fact that nothing, seemingly, was known about it. My only source of information was a geography textbook, the kind of volume that has taught generations of Italians to hate the subject with a passion. Though it took pride in listing the amount of bauxite extracted by Australia or the heads of

cattle in Argentina, it said nothing about Kazakhstan's main export or the population of Uzbekistan. Obscure plots coalesced in my pre-teenager mind, dark thoughts of the Ministry of Public Education looking at the region sandwiched between Russia, China, Iran and the Caspian Sea and declaring it unworthy of mention in its curricula.

Three decades after the Soviet portcullis went up and it felt as if we had made little progress. What did it mean to be Kazakh, Tajik, Kyrgyz or Uzbek? How successful were these countries in creating national identities in lands where no such concept existed before the Russian colonisation? Borders had sprouted where they never existed, uniting enemies and separating friends: what was their impact?

It seemed, to me at least, as if we collectively decided that Sacha Baron Cohen's Borat Sagdiyev was the archetypal Central Asian, and no further insight was needed. I felt it absurd, as absurd as considering a moustached plumber from a Japanese videogame the prototypical Italian. I decided to find out more.

A second Americano followed the first whilst the other patron screamed something at the lady behind the bar. Another beer mug joined the first one, now empty but for a ring of congealed foam.

Halfway through my cup I decided that waiting for dawn was pointless, for it seemed that dawn might never come; the sky was as dark as it had been during landing, hours before. As I stood to leave, the woman burped her support from behind her dark eyeshades. Outside, a Dacia cab waited. It was snowing and, judging by the state of sidewalks, it looked as if it had been going on for a while. It would not stop for days.

The cabin of the Dacia basked in the kind of warmth that makes

a cat snooze, were it not for the music blaring out of the speakers. We thumped out of the airport and into a wide boulevard turned into a tortured battlefield of snowy trenches; beyond the lampposts, Almaty slept, invisible. The stereo moved from a Russian dubbing of *Voyage Voyage* to Sabrina Salerno. In the pre-dawn darkness of this corner of Kazakhstan my silent driver and I cruised towards town whilst the minx from Genoa rode a riot of synthesizers and repeated that she was looking for a good time at a volume high enough to crack the Dacia's windshield.

The block was dark but for a sign hanging from the side of the drab building next to where the taxi had come to a stop: my hostel. Dawn, when it eventually came, unearthed a world blurred into a white nothingness, as if suspended in a bottle of shellfish juice: the hostel occupied the upper floors of an office building but the view did not stretch further than the other side of the road.

Snow fell incessantly for the four days I was there, turning this city of two million into a Brueghel painting and shrinking the horizon to a mere hundred metres. There were mountains out there, and a sleek, 1960-sci-fi TV tower, but their presence could only be imagined, guessed. Snow was all there was in town.

There is something oddly fascinating, I cogitated whilst the snow tapped on the hood of my windproof jacket, in the concept of *Sotsgorod*, the Socialist city conceived by the urban planner Nikolay Milyutin in the 1930s. Not in the depressing parade of *Khrushchyovka* blocks, the soulless boxes that manage to appear both monolithic and brittle, damp concrete scarred by rust and decades of neglect. No, the beauty of the Socialist town lay in the harmony of its wide boulevards lined by multiple rows of trees, or in the parks that breathe cool air

into the streets as trucks wash away the dust by spraying a thin layer of water. The beauty of Soviet cities was their omnipresent verdant canopy, there to hide drabness, shoddy brickwork, desperate DIY repairs and failure.

Almaty, I sensed, possessed all that in spades, but I could not see it. The snow kept on falling: sometimes in tight formations, twirling in the invisible whirlpools generated by currents bouncing between buildings; or sometimes it just pummelled the city in a soundless carpet-bombing that turned me blind. Under this relentless assault the boulevards disappeared in the mist, sidewalks shrinking to a trench in which pedestrians marched in Indian file and streetlights glowed like bulbs behind a frosted glass.

I walked for hours in a state of perennial wonder, feeling very much like Italo Calvino's *Marcovaldo*. Around me, Almaty functioned without a hitch: trolleybuses cruised the avenues, appearing like icebreakers through the mist and leaving a turbulent trail of pulverised snow in their wake. Crews of city workers, wrapped in Day-Glo orange overalls, ploughed snow away from the streets and, with the help of belt conveyors of the kind that I had only seen in corn fields, heaped it into trucks. Traffic glided in organised waves, stopping scrupulously at the pedestrian crossings. Two cars collided at an intersection, an older Lada T-boning a much more modern Kia. The two drivers emerged and, with an aplomb worthy of officers on the Titanic, began surveying the damages. Men and women smiled behind their scarves and hats when I stepped into the unpacked snow to let them pass.

'Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic country, like America'.

Leila wore the clothes of the semi-permanent patron comfortably. Originally from a town close to the Uzbek border, she all but lived in the hostel, lounging on the sofas during the

day and sometimes patrolling the front desk at night.

‘There are Russian, Ukrainian and Koreans’ she added as she cut a pickled gherkin in thin slices. ‘They came here in Soviet times’.

I looked at her, expecting to discover in her eyes the resentment I could not hear in her voice, but found none. Her wide features were arranged in a pleasant smile, a delicate interplay of cheekbones and lips that belied nothing but a quiet satisfaction.

‘Weren’t they deported here by Stalin?’

She shrugged. ‘Some yes, like the Chechens or the Koreans, but many came by their own. And now we live together... like that’.

A flurry of hands gestured declared the conversation closed.

Leila’s words opened a new world. Slowly, as I traipsed the streets, I began noticing the fogged-up windows of cafés appearing like golden embers. Behind the glass panes I could make the outlines of people reading, drinking and chatting, an irresistible invite. There were dozens of cafés and restaurants peppered around downtown Almaty, offering not only safe haven from the weather but also the chance of seeing the city’s inhabitants unburdened by scarves, hoods, hats and heavy coats.

Sitting around the tables, holding mugs or tucking into meals, were some of the most interesting people I had ever seen. Men and women, their flowy black hair and slanted eyes looking ethereal, like Buddhist icons secluded in Himalayan monasteries. They conversed in a language that had the soft vowels and guttural sounds of the idiom spoken along the shores of the Bosphorus but they could as easily switch to Russian whenever a blond interlocutor sat amongst them. I drank coffee and gazed in fascination at the unexpected cosmopolitanism of Almaty. The brutality of Russian

colonisation felt forgiven, its legacy a society of mixed-race men and women of such beauty that I gazed at them in mute fascination. They had hazelnut or dark blond hair and eyes the colours of emeralds. It sure looked as if Tolkien's elves had been modelled after the Almaty restaurant crowd.

What remained of seventy years of USSR besides a penchant for double lines of trees and majestically drab tenements? Leila did not know.

'I don't think there are any statues of Lenin left. It was the past and it didn't make any sense to keep it'. She stopped mid-sentence, thinking. 'But there's still the monument in Panfilov park... if that's what you're looking for'.

A row of marble steles, tombstones with a red hammer and sickle on top, led towards a shadow that, the closer I got, eventually morphed into the fairytale shape of Ascension cathedral. The wooden building looked remarkably at ease in those conditions, dozens of pigeons taking refuge in the overhangs beneath the onion domes and elaborate carvings of the roof. Leila had made no mention of it.

I had expected it to be deserted. Instead, a steady stream of Russian ladies marched in to light candles and pray. The prayer hall was bright, airy and – utterly unlike the day out the door – filled with light. Before a crowd of headscarved *babushkas* lost in prayer the iconostasis rose to the roof in a riot of gold and holy figures. A mother guided her two young children towards the altar, their faces masks of seriousness and circumstance. A cleric, young but already ascetic in his black robe and long beard, eyed me and pointed to his head. Blushing, I lifted the hat I had forgotten to take off upon entering; ice flew off and tinkled on the stones of the floor.

Metres away from the cathedral stood the temple I had come

to see, the one dedicated to the religion that held sway, here, for seven decades: Communism. Directly opposite the church, wrapped in a solid embrace of red granite replete with eternal flame sprouting out of a brass star, stood the monument perpetuating the memory of Panfilov's Twenty-Eight Guardsmen.

"Russia is a vast land yet there is nowhere to retreat: Moscow is behind us!" screamed a brass inscription. Above it a dark bronze statue erupted in an explosion of arms, heads and weapons: half Cerberus, half Kali and 100% Soviet, it did an almighty good job of looking threatening, a sure-fire promise of destruction to be visited upon anyone who dared invade the Motherland, such as those German soldiers who came to face the 316th Rifle Division near Dubosekovo in the autumn of 1941.

The twenty-eight Soviet soldiers stationed there, most of whom hailed from Central Asia, opposed a desperate defence that cost them their lives but extolled an equally large tribute on the Nazis: eighteen tanks and their advance.

As it often happens, this story was apocryphal. As a killjoy inquiry found out after all was said and done, not all Guardsmen died. Some lived on to fight another day; one became turncoat, serving in the collaborationist *Hilfspolizei* in occupied Ukraine. One particularly unlucky soldier was captured, thrown in a German prison camp, escaped, returned to the Russian lines only to be sent to a Gulag by his own state for the grave crime of having surrendered. The wonders of Stalinism.

Regardless of what actually went down that day in the outskirts of Moscow, Panfilov's men elbowed their way in the atheist pantheon of the Soviet Union, earning a plethora of brutalist monuments scattered throughout the country.

Whatever it might have been in the past their time, on that snowy morning, seemed to have come and gone: much in the same way as it had been for fearless cosmonauts and gesticulating Lenins the Guardsmen felt forgotten, the eternal flame warming a scene of which I was the only spectator.

A lone council worker scraped snow from a staircase leading away from the monument, clearing up a path and sprinkling it with grit. I followed his progress and watched him disappear under a colonnade, a series of willowy pillars that looked too flimsy to support the monolithic building that rested on top of them. They certainly felt too thin to be holding the monstrosity that sprouted out of its façade.

A golden star shone at the centre of the Brobdingnagian frieze that adorned the building. It lay centrepiece in a Soviet pediment that featured laurel wreaths, ribbons, hammers, sickles and spears. I stood in its shade, half-blinded by the driving snow, aware that this entire piazza had been designed precisely with the intent of instilling the awe I was feeling right then. Panfilov's bronze effigy was the personification of the USSR's explosive strength; the frieze the ineluctability of its supremacy. Squashed between these two forces I, squinty little imperialist, only had two chances: to succumb or be crushed.

But no one but me prostrated in adoration towards one or the other; and the flag that flew above the frieze was no longer the crimson banner with the star, the hammer and the sickle. It was sky-blue, with an optimistic sun, an eagle flying beneath it and a band of delicate *koshkar-muiz* ornaments, its mast ending with a three-pronged concoction that sank its roots in a tradition much older than the USSR: *tug*, the banner of Genghis Khan.



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The clouds that hung above Almaty dissipated almost as soon as the airplane left the mountains. Underneath, the Kazakh steppe gleamed under a glorious sun. Everything was whiter than a Hollywood A-lister's smile and a lot harder to look at. As we touched down at Astana's Nursultan Nazarbayev Airport, the temperature at midday was -26 centigrade.

I ambled into the terminal in a dream-like trance, thinking of an encounter that happened as I had been skating and shuffling towards Almaty's airport a few hours before. He was coming the opposite way, ageless in his baggy trousers and

blue overcoat, felt boots with tips pointing upwards, a white turban and a black beard. He looked like a Silk Road sage and the smirk that he wore said to the world that he was well aware of the irony of his situation. As our eyes locked, he brought his right hand to his chest and said *'As-salaam alaykum'*.

It was only after I entered the terminal that it occurred to me that I ought to have replied *'Wa alaykum as-salaam'*.

Astana lay still in the freezing air. From above, this city looked like the remarkable enterprise it was: a large sprawl in the featureless steppe, a conglomeration of neatly organised blocks bisected by large avenues. Neighbourhoods of smaller, detached houses lay scattered between more built-up areas. A line of skyscrapers rose roughly halfway through the sprawl. Even from such a distance it was clear that whoever commissioned them had given free rein to their designers' fantasies; there were spires, globes, curves and an abundance of gold. This was to be Kazakhstan's business card to the world and no expense was to be spared. But, from the windows of bus no. 10, the capital belied its modest Tselinograd, as it once was called, origins: a few minutes after setting off from the airport the bus turned left, leaving the wide boulevard flanked by the building site of a light rail line that, a sign proclaimed proudly, was meant to be inaugurated the year prior.

We trundled along a patched road describing a wide loop around a neighbourhood built to house airport workers. A few withered poplars raised their skeletal branches to the sky and, beyond them, stood a handful of stocky *Khrushch'yovka* flats. Grey and yellow were de rigueur: walls in nude, rat-fur concrete and faded golden inserts installed around windows, doorways and everywhere a repair had been done. Glass

panels had been replaced with silvery insulating materials, new window frames had been fitted in with exuberant use of expanding foam.

Communal gates were left open or slightly ajar, heavy metal doors revealing views of derelict, vandalised staircases painted in two tones of green; yet, what could be glimpsed of the actual apartments revealed scenes of great care and scrupulous upkeep.

Cars lay parked on the sidewalks or in vacant lots. For the most part they were older Volkswagen models – Corrado, Scirocco, Passat – or knock-off Japanese vehicles with right-hand drive. Here and there it was still possible to see the straight lines and pastel colours of a Lada. A number of vehicles, their engines left running, stood outside a simple *izba* garnished with colourful ads depicting food and Beeline SIM cards, although I doubt there were many takers on the ice creams. A few commuters hopped on at the two stops that we were to make in this suburb. They marched on to the bus quickly, wrapped in leather jackets, scarves and woolly hats, followed by whiffs of painfully icy air; only their almond-shaped eyes remained visible.

A new city sprouted south of the old one, a new city that would not, could not be associated with Tselinograd. The bus continued northwards, towards what used to be the city's centre but that, now, had become suburbs; I alighted, ready to witness the new Kazakhstan.

Universities and research centres ran along the boulevard. Smooth, aerodynamic shapes of sporting arenas mirrored each other across a park in suspended animation. Sleek metal, polished stone and gold-plated panes shone in the clear, cold air. Three space rockets – Soyuz, Proton, Zenit – stood to

attention outside the sleek headquarters of an aerospace company.

The epicentre, the heart of this new city transplanted in the body of the previous one was, without a doubt, Nurzhol Boulevard. From the vantage point of the overpass that crossed it, the boulevard had all the magnificence of a Roman forum built on Lando Calrissian's Coruscant: a deep canyon of skyscrapers running from east to west, peppered with golden spires, blue glass overhangs and white minarets. A Chinese pagoda stood on top of an International Style high rise.

Hemicycles of buildings, walls of offices clad in stone and glass, closed the perspective on both ends. To the east was a white palisade, fifteen storeys high, with windows placed at regular intervals. A wide gap in the middle allowed the eye to wander towards a neoclassical building squashed by an oversized blue cupola and golden spire: the Presidential Palace.

The western end was, in my opinion, even more impressive; here Nurzhol Boulevard poured into a vast, circular piazza rimmed by a continuous rampart of buildings, white stone and dark, burgundy windows. Two towers rose at either side of a monumental arch which revealed the astonishing silhouette of a man-made volcano, a tepee designed to withstand the vacuum of space. The Khan Shatyr shopping centre.

Nothing but steppe existed here before 1997, and nothing would have been built were it not for the will of a single man: President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Thirty minutes was my limit outside; past that my face would cease to feel anything, closely followed by hands, ears and other extremities. From afar the luminous sign of Kishlak restaurant looked like a promised land. Slipping on a coating of snowflakes, wizened by the cold to the size of grains of sand,

I tiptoed my way there.

Kishlak was to set the trend for most of the restaurants I would be visiting in the region. From the outside it had a wholly uninspiring look: a glass façade occluded by thick curtains and a dusting of dirt, snow and powdered mud: from afar, it resembled more an abandoned car dealership than a temple for the senses. But, once inside, past the dressing room that also served as an airlock, the drab looks were replaced by the most luxurious and extravagant décor I had seen in a very long time.

Kishlak was an irregular assembly of side rooms and indoor patios bathed in a warm, golden light. I now am unsure of whether there had been skylights or windows allowing for natural light, but I distinctly recall a feeling of being under a lush pergola on a hot summer day. Every surface had been painted to resemble a Kazakh garden at the peak of the season: mulberry trees, exposed brickworks, wood and old farming implements crowded the walls. The ceilings were painted blue with faint clouds and, from the trellis, some ingenious mind had hung fake vines and dozens of white drapes. A waiter escorted me across a humpback bridge, past a gurgling stream and to a table towards the end, a booth from where I had a great view of half the restaurant. Private alcoves ran along the wall to my left, almost hidden from view by curtains. I could see a low table with thick carpets and pillows arranged all around in the fashion of a *topchan*, a bed-like platform that is both very ancient and widespread in the region; they were occupied by groups of men tackling the largest amount of food I had seen with the exception of Neapolitan weddings. A menu, as thick as the phone guide for a medium-sized town, landed at my table with a thud.

‘Our cuisine is 100% Kazakh’, announced the waiter proudly.

Pages after pages filled with lengthy descriptions in Russian and Kazakh, an English one-liner at the bottom. The drinks section occupied a good third of the space and included champagne and Armenian cognac as well as a good dozen brands of vodka. All by the bottle. Luckily, I knew what to ask for.

Paternity of *Beshbarmaq* is claimed by both Kazakhstan and neighbouring Kyrgyzstan: settling those opposing claims would not only be impossible but also a guarantee of at least one hour of heated debate. What is undeniable is that no other dish is as tied to nomadic life as *beshbarmaq*, “Five fingers”, is. Though there are many different approaches to it, the main ingredients of *beshbarmaq* remain the same: thick flour noodles, onions, broth and meat. Plenty of it, in fact. Kishlak’s version featured lamb, sheep and horse, the first two boiled and the last salted and dried in the pure air of the steppe to the point of becoming akin to jerky. A potato also made an appearance perched like a cherry atop the enormous plate that the waiter delivered with an air of approval. A side bowl of meat broth, or *sorpa*, was also served. I was asked if I also wanted some *kurt*, salted balls of fermented cow milk curd. They soon were sloshing about with the noodles and the meat. A strict protocol governs the simple act of eating *beshbarmaq* at home. There are rules for bringing the food to the table and for cutting portions; specific meat cuts are destined to selected individuals – the sheep’s head to the most honoured guest, the ears to the children, the muscles around the eyes to the older members of the convivium and so on and so forth. This time, though, I had no one but myself to share the dish with.

I must admit: I had doubts. The ensemble of meat, noodles, translucent broth and white *kurt* balls had nothing of the visual brilliance of a *moqueca* or of an aubergine tajine. There were

no colours but for the white of the noodles and the browns of the meat, a palette that I – biased by the harlequinade that is a trademark of Mediterranean cooking – was quite unsure about. But the waiter, who in the meantime had summoned another colleague to bear witness, was looking on quite eagerly. I dug in, using fork and spoon in lieu of the hand whence the dish got his name.

It is not an everyday event to be finding tastes so different from one's own yet so viscerally familiar: that day at Kishlak was one such, happy, coincidence. I had never tried a combination of salty, sour and ever-so-slightly spicy before, but there was no doubt: it was something designed to exalt the human spirit on a bitterly cold day. Each cut of meat added layers of taste to the dish: the boiled sheep and lamb brought a soft undertone whilst the air-dried horse had the texture and taste of wild game. One was mellow and veined with fat, the other lean and chewy. By themselves, they would be lacking; together, they complemented each other perfectly. Onions and *kurt* added another layer of sour with just an aftertaste of lemony acidity while the noodles were the base that brought all the ingredients together, the nourishment that made the dish whole.

I am neither a tidy eater nor I am capable of pacing myself through a good meal. It was not long before I started shovelling large portions of meat and onions. Noodles sloshed around. I stopped only to slurp on the *sorpa* broth from the bowl in which it had been poured and to have another sip of beer. At some point, without me ever asking for it, another pint appeared, *Karagandiskoe* written in Cyrillic on the glass. Then another.

I do not remember ending the meal or paying for it. I do remember, however, the very act of stepping outside the

second door that led to the square. The day had progressed and now the lights were much lower, shadows longer and the cold, if possible, even worse. The torpor from the heat, the alcohol and the meal disappeared as quickly as if I had jumped into cold water.

Centrepiece of the outlandish architecture of Nurzhol boulevard was the Bayterek.

It was meant to be a stylised poplar but, even when rendered uncritical by a few beers, I found impossible to reconcile it with any tree. A 90-metres tall pole surmounted by an uncanny golden sphere, the Bayterek was the kind of structure that, to my mind, was meant to be to be orbiting the Moon. In the violent light of that afternoon it was so reflective, white and gold as it was, to be almost impossible to look at.

A dapper young man waited in the subterranean lobby, his steps echoing as he walked over the polished marble that covered every single surface. But for a surly officer secluded in a glass tickets booth we were alone. He smiled and started speaking in Russian, switching rapidly to a lightly-accented English, asking me if I knew the story of the Bayterek. A name badge was pinned on his lapel.

‘Bayterek is a Kazakh legend, the tree of life. Its roots are in the ground, the trunk is the present and the branches are in heaven’. He looked up, as if expecting to see a stairway to the Almighty. I copied him.

‘Bayterek is also where Samruk, the holy bird, made his nest. Every year he would lay a golden egg, but the dragon that lived on the ground would eat it. And so it went on, year after year, until Samruk helped a man escape from hell; to pay him back, Yer Tostik – that was his name - killed the dragon. So, by working together, Samruk and Yer Tostik saved the egg; this is

the meaning of this monument, a tree with the holy bird's egg in the nest'.

A lift rose up the trunk into the observation deck that had been created within the egg. Beneath, Astana shimmered in the late afternoon light, views unobstructed if only the golden hue of the windows did not made you feel if you had been peering from behind Elton John's sunglasses.

Crowds up top were on the thin side every time I visited. Yet, there was always going to be a beeline for the real party piece on this structure, a cherry on this multi-layered cake of oddity: a golden cast of a hand, placed on a podium overlooking directly the presidential palace. It was cast from President Nursultan Nazarbayev's likeness and, I heard, if one pressed his hand in the cast, a tumultuous applause would reverberate through the Bayterek, a recording of one of Nazarbayev's many inaugurations. But, every time I succumbed to the cheesiness of it all, not a squeak emerged out of the concealed speakers. Perhaps you needed to have the right touch.

Bayterek was not just a nod to a folk tale, a mythological divertissement: much like every such building since the Parthenon, it served a purpose, it sent a message. 'By working together, by cooperating, Samruk and Yer Tostik saved the egg', said the young man. Cooperation, mutual assistance, kindness were the ideals that the Bayterek was meant to embody, principles that were to govern Kazakhstan. The guide did not need to say that: it was Nazarbayev himself who did in his book *The Kazakhstan Way*.

On the eve of independence, if Kazakhstan were a person and went to a fortune teller to have his hand read, even the most dishonest of the clairvoyants would have had a hard time peddling visions of wealth, peace and happiness. Kazakhstan

had been used as the Union's dumpster, prison and testing ground for the best part of 60 years. An area as big as Wales had been turned into a radioactive wasteland after 450 nuclear bombs were detonated there. A parcel of steppe the size of France, south of Karaganda, was turned into a gigantic gulag where a still *unknown* number of men and women were worked to death. Two disastrous attempts to collectivise agriculture, in 1919-22 and again in 1931-33, killed roughly half of the population; the empty space they left was filled with forced transfers of peoples – *kulaks*, Ingrian Finns, Koreans, Azeris, Jews, Poles, Germans, Chechens and countless other Caucasus ethnicities – deported on the whim of Stalin. Even Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned here.

A brutalised land inhabited by a patchwork of different peoples, a past marred by violence and tyranny: it was easy to fear, in those confused days of 1991, a future of civil war, pogroms and ethnic cleansing. But none of that happened, thanks in small part to one person.

Nursultan Nazarbayev was the epitome of the self-made man. Born into a peasant family, young Nursultan soon was shipped to a boarding school and, from there, to an apprenticeship in the Temirtau steelworks. This was no cushy job, for that plant was as close an example to William Blake's *Satanic Mills* as it ever got. Workers would have thought twice before starting a riot for the sake of improving safety and working conditions, but that was what they did in 1959.

Nazarbayev was not there. As his colleagues burnt tires, threw Molotovs and built barricades he was pursuing further training in Ukraine; when he returned, his spotless record and humble origins opened for him the doors of the establishment. Full member of the Party in 1962; Committee secretary for the Karaganda metallurgic hub in 1972; Second Secretary of the

Karakanda regional Committee in 1976. The farmer's boy turned blast furnace worker had quickly become an *apparatchnik*.

His ascent through the Soviet food chain was as steady as a rocket's. In 1984 he was appointed Prime Minister of Kazakhstan and five years later he landed the top job of leader of the state's Communist party. The last days of the USSR required political finesse and Nazarbayev played his cards very carefully. It is claimed that he turned down Gorbachev's offer to be his vice-president, opting instead to stay local. As time passed and Kazakhstan shed its Communist paraphernalia, he was nominated first president of the Republic, winning 95% of the votes in December 1991.

It was the start of a thirty-year kingdom, a tenure that turned Kazakhstan into the wealthiest, most stable Central Asian nation, a beacon of development whose praises were sung non-stop by foreign investors and international organisations alike. Nazarbayev rode a natural resources boom that trickled down to ordinary Kazakh citizens: from a not-so-distant past of famine and mass imprisonment they could afford homes, cars and package holidays to Sharm El Sheikh.

In a region whose leaders rivalled each other for kleptocracy, authoritarianism and ineptitude it was easy to fall in love with Nazarbayev. He presided over a remarkable economic boom and steered clear of the dangerous shoals of ethnic unrest and Islamist extremism. If the price to pay was a penchant for magenta ties and a knack for naming everything (airports, universities, museums, boulevards and stations) after himself, well, so be it. Fact was, the world considered Nazarbayev to be the most presentable of Central Asian leaders and he had a photo album to prove it: over the years he was seen schmoozing with anyone from Presidents Obama and Bush, EU

Commission President Juncker and even Queen Elizabeth. Old Nursultan could claim the title of world's favourite Central Asian leader.

Khan Shatyr shopping centre was a few hundred metres away from the Bayterek but it felt a much longer schlep. The granite steps that led to it must have looked brilliant in the architect's renderings but now, covered as they were with a dusting of powdery snow, they were incredibly, murderously, slippery. I inched forward like a penguin on an ice floe until I found safer ground. A chimney above me burped puffs of white smoke: as soon as the smoke exited the pipe it froze in place and had to be pushed aside by another puff, which in turn froze as well. Every chimney in town, be it a small boiler or a hulking power station, was busy creating its very own cloud system.

It was hard not to be impressed by this 150-metre semi-transparent tent, a nod to this nation's nomad past. Inside a shopping mall and aqua park basked in 27C, a 55C temperature excursion. An elaborate entrance worked as a decompression chamber; inside, glowing in the refracted light of the sun, the burghers of Astana strolled by shops of the kind one could find in a Dubai or London mall, whilst from up above rained the laughs and shouts of those splashing about the swimming pool.

Nursultan Nazarbayev saved the country from the spectre of violence and, in doing so, built a wealthy society. In response, Kazakhs voted for him in droves whenever he deemed necessary to call for an election. He won with 81% of the ballots in 1999; 91% in 2005; 95% in 2011 and a whopping 97.75% in 2015.

There were critics. Eyebrows were raised when news broke of

his 2015 victory. *“I apologise that for super-democratic states, such figures are unacceptable”*, Nazarbayev was quoted as having said, before adding *“But I could do nothing. If I had interfered, I would have looked undemocratic, right?”*. To paraphrase freely from the late Tupac Shakur, he did not choose popularity. Popularity chose him.

Yet, behind his sombre suits and polished manner something much more sinister lurked. Zamanbek Nurqadilev, former minister and Almaty mayor, dared to run for president in the 2005 elections. Three weeks before the ballots were due to be cast, and soon after having accused Nazarbayev of corruption – *“I have proof”*, he proclaimed publicly – he was found shot in his apartment, two in the chest and one in the head. The investigators recorded a verdict of suicide.

Or take the case of Altynbek Sarsenbayev, a bookish, soft-spoken figure who had been minister and ambassador to Russia before chairing an opposition party that was seen by some as a credible alternative to Nazarbayev’s *Nur Otan*. In February 2006 he disappeared, together with his driver and party spokesman. Their bodies were to be found soon afterwards, abandoned in a dumpsite with hands tied behind their back and a shotgun blast to the head.

And how about the strange regularity with which journalists seemed to fall victim of traffic accidents? At least five died, hit by cars, buses or trucks in the early 2000s. All they had in common was, evidently, an unhealthy disregard for road safety and being close to the opposition. Ashkat Sharipzhanov was found with a cracked skull and other injuries in downtown Almaty in 2004. Police said he had been hit by a car; those close to him concurred, but also pointed out that his injuries looked as if he had been hit with a metal pole in the head *before* having been run over. Incidentally he had just wrapped up an

interview with opposition leaders Nurqadilev and Sarsenbayev, whom we have already met, on the topic of corruption. Neither his reportage nor the transcripts of the interviews were ever found, while his interviewees were soon to be dead too.

But worse still was the tragedy that befell the striking miners of Zhanaozen, a desert town in the oil and gas fields of Mangistau not far from the Caspian Sea. In December 2011 the town was gearing up to celebrate Independence Day, for which a party had been planned in the town's main square. However, that very square was being occupied by striking oilers who were staging a protest against mistreatment and delayed wages. Scuffles broke out and then in came the riot police. The blurry videos of the incident are ominous: black-clad figures with shields and long weapons, firing into the crowd. Eleven unarmed miners died and the world was deafening in its silence on this massacre. A few months later Nazarbayev, in Seoul for a meeting on nuclear security, met with Barack Obama. No mentions of Zhanaozen were made and Obama left with a Kazakh amulet that, the *Aikyn Gazeti* reported, helped him win his second term in office.

Still, I thought there was a redeeming factor for Nazarbayev's foibles. I sat on a bench in front of an ice-cream parlour, next to two teenagers that could have represented Kazakhstan if texting were an Olympic sport. Shoppers strolled past us without a care in the world: Tatars with Astrakhan hats drank minuscule cups of coffee; fair-haired girls, stumbling in their boots, ran after their parents, giggling in delight; other ethnicities and a smattering of expats completed the mix. There, in a shopping galleria that echoed with the sounds of bathers dive-bombing in the pool above us, Samruk and Yer

Tostik came back to mind: working together for a common goal, in spite of their differences.

'Not everyone is Kazakh, but everyone here is Kazakhstani', Leila commented that morning in Almaty.

This is the end of Chapter I. If you want to read more, you buy *Turn Left at Lenin's Statue* on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and local Amazon websites worldwide

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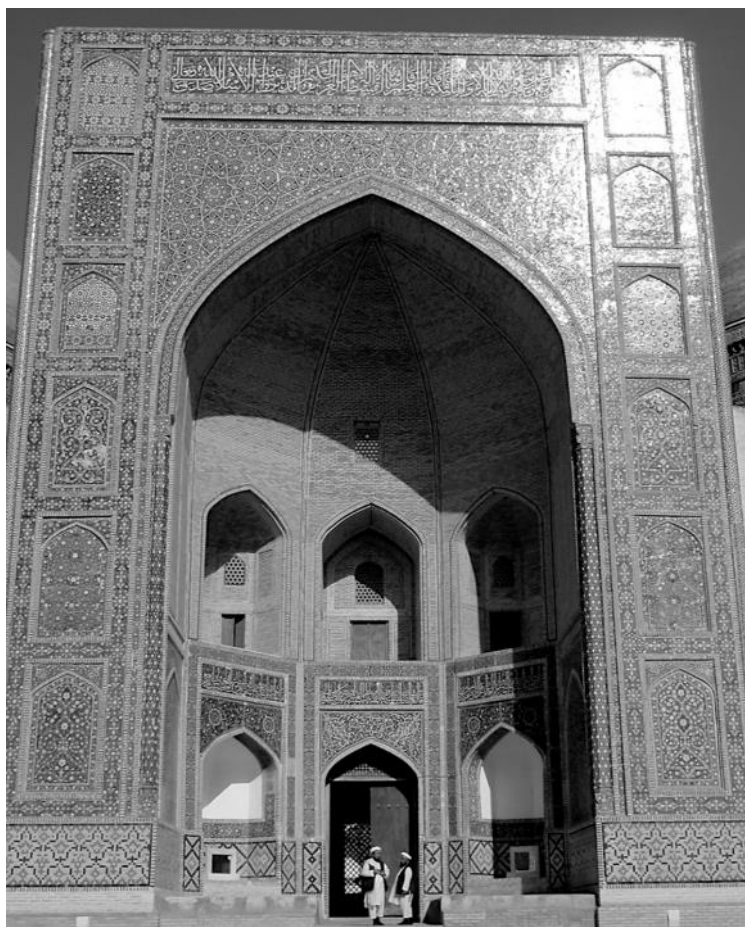
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