



Conservative Resistance: Looking Behind the Veil of Memoir in Soviet Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This essay looks at Mukhamet Shayakhmetov's, a Kazakh headteacher in the 50s and 60s, memoir through the lens of James C Scott's Everyday Forms of Resistance. In using Scott's argument, the essay reveals the subconscious tools and strategies employed by the working class in a struggle against the powerful bureaucracy of the Soviet Union. Even among ideologues, whose perspective of post-war Stalin policies contrasted greatly with common Western conceptions, forms of resistance were employed so subtle as to be almost unrecognizable.

Keywords: Conservative resistance, Memoir, Kazakhstan, Soviet, Collective farming

Introduction

Mukhamet Shayakhmetov's *A Kazakh Teacher's Story* (2012) offers a rare view into the post-world war II environment of a working professional in a Kazakh village. Despite the considerable amount of time his memoir covers, it portrays a relatively objective view of his experiences. While these memories are often contrary to negative Western conceptions, he allows the reader to develop his or her own perspective of the events. In a tone maintained throughout the memoir, Shayakhmetov reflects on the many contradictions within his story when he asks, "How do you make sense of it all? That's up to the reader to decide." (151) As Shayakhmetov was a staunch proponent of communism, his memoir offers a rare perspective where resistance is not the primary focus of his typical Soviet life. The apparent absence of overt forms of resistance in the memoir, position James C. Scott's essay *Everyday Forms of Resistance* as a useful tool in analyzing Shayakhmetov's portrayal of the constant, but silent, class struggle operating in the average life of a rural Kazakh villager. Shayakhmetov's memoir offers unique insight into the conservative yet resistant worldview that could be representative of others living in Soviet Central Asia.

James C. Scott argues that resistance can take on subtle, "everyday forms." His essay positions poaching against state encroachment on public lands in the case of the English dynasty, smuggling food from collectivized farms under the Soviet Union, and sending inedible tithes to the state as part of a Malaysian national project, as prime examples of everyday forms of resistance. Feet dragging, laziness, ignorance, sabotage, and a multitude of other nonconfrontational actions constitute some of the various forms of Scott's definition. (Scott 34) An oversimplification of these everyday forms of resistance might lead one to believe any act of self-preservation or self-interest could be construed as resistance. To this, Scott reiterates his position that "class conflict is, first and foremost, a struggle over the appropriation of work, property, production, and taxes." (37) If self-preservation acts against the interests of an entity of power, then it fits Scott's definition.

It is through looking at Shayakhmetov's memoir that Scott's analysis proves particularly rewarding. Shayakhmetov has no political agenda in explicating the forms of resistance in his village, often quite the contrary. As a party member and supporter of the socialist vision, he devoted his life to the service of his fellow countrymen and women. Because of this uncritical conservative portrayal of the era, we find everyday forms of resistance in the backdrop of his life story. Shayakhmetov wouldn't have aggrandized resistance as a struggle against an enemy force, but saw survival as a reality of the period. Scott quotes an official during the Stalinist period saying,

"A ruthless struggle is going on between the peasantry and our regime. It's a struggle to the death. This year was a test to our strength and to their endurance. It took a famine to show them who the master is here. It has cost us millions of lives but the collective farm is here to stay. We've won the way." (Scott 48)

As Shayakhmetov's memoir takes place during and after Stalin's regime, it is apparent "the war" never ended. The overt forms of resistance referred to in the quote simply became subtler in their strategies.

Resistance is Not Revolution

Scott's argument is radical in the frame of grander narratives of resistance and revolution. He posits revolutions as largely enacted by "actors," and the forms of resistance of the common layman: the lower and middle classes, the uneducated, and the weak, has not only been overlooked in the annals of history but is altogether more effective than spectacular events. (Scott 33) He is precisely interested in subalterns and their unique and often overlooked strategies in which they resist those in power. Keeping this framework and definition of resistance in mind, forgetting the traditional forms of resistance as equating rebellion or revolution, we find class struggle throughout Shayakhmetov's memoir.

The primary actor of state power instituted in Kazakh villages in the 30s and 40s was that of the collective farm. The collective farm came into being on the Kazakh steppe in the 1930s when the party forced nomadic families to adopt sedentary lifestyles and work in agricultural production. This period of forced collectivization was particularly brutal. Estimates range between forty and fifty percent of the total Kazakh population died from famine, disease, and starvation. (Shayakhmetov 4) With that cruel history embedded in Shayakhmetov's memory and all Kazakhs of the time, the collective farm represents the most public and harshest aspect of the state. It is the collective farm that recurs throughout Shayakhmetov's memoir, despite him having never worked or participated in one. In a story containing sixty years of the author's life, the collective farm bears a considerable amount of ink. This is precisely the representative body of the state where resistance reveals itself most explicitly. The collective farm, being central to community life in rural villages, was the most public and familiar representations of the state.

Scott's definition of resistance becomes apparent early in the memoir when Shayakhmetov addresses collective farms. In a short anecdote he states,

"To help their workers with provisions, some of the collective farm chairmen defied strict government bans and allowed them to grow millet and potatoes surreptitiously on collective farmland, lending them motorized transport, and helping them in other small ways. Some of these independent-minded chairmen had been prosecuted for supposedly serious breaches of 'agricultural association rules.'" (Shayakhmetov 13)

Shayakhmetov later states that these types of breaches in association rules by chairmen were uncommon. The author wishes there had been more chairmen willing to break the rules on behalf of the people because of the constant hunger the village workers possessed. A man who self-identified as an ideal communist saw the bending of the rules as not only permissible, but a matter of life and death for his fellow villagers. Through these seeming contradictions we can begin to find the paradoxical nature of conservative resistance.

Bent Rules

Shayakhmetov's depiction of chairmen skirting the laws of the state fit perfectly within Scott's definition. The collective farm was often the heart of small village communities and integral to class relations. The farm acted as a hub where the lowest of laborers and highest of officials interacted. As Scott reminds us, "the disposition of scarce resources is surely what is at stake in any class conflict." (Scott 36) The collective farm is central to the distribution of labor and resources as it is not only central to the employment of the village but a source of dismay for the villagers unable to reap the benefits of their work. Scarce food resources such as grain, milk, and fermented mare's milk (*kumys*), were all something the workers lacked and sought out. The individual acts of self-preservation, and the chairmen's acts of charity, both subverted state power by attempting to redistribute the relationship between labor and production.

We can extrapolate from this anecdote that this may have been more common than Shayakhmetov initially proposes by quoting him once more. "Amazingly," he recalls, "even in our war-ravaged country you could still find people trading grain." (Shayakhmetov 27) Shayakhmetov's disbelief lends itself to a possible underground grain market. If all collective farms had been strictly observed, as Shayakhmetov himself describes, and surplus grain was not allowed to be taken by the farmers, there shouldn't have been extra grain to trade. His surprise that people still traded grain suggests the strict agricultural association rules had often been subverted. Given that planting, growing, and selling grain is a time-consuming process, an underground grain economy implies a vast network of sources subverting the regulations of the association. We can take Shayakhmetov's only mention to this type of grain market as symptomatic of internal issues which withheld grain from the labor force who helped to create it, thus invoking class struggle through Scott's everyday forms. The true beneficiaries of the collective farm were those who lived in far-away cities. While local Kazakh and Russian farmers gruelingly labored in these demanding collectives, they went hungry. Resistance didn't percolate to a boil of protests and confrontations with authority

figures but instead kept just enough heat to fill the bellies of the people. If endurance meant living on the brink of starvation, resistance was the only alternative option.

This appropriation of resources is again apparent when Shayakhmetov notes, “Milking collective farm animals was not officially allowed but the livestock breeders did so anyway. The shepherds on the horse farms kept the mares separately, and made *kumys*, and shared it with other livestock breeders.” (82) Despite the “strict rules” Shayakhmetov warns against, there seems to be a multitude of ways in which local workers re-established relations with food production in small villages, undermining state domination of resources. It seems unlikely there was complete obliviousness on part of the administrative units overseeing the collective farms. As Scott reminds us, “The nature of the acts themselves and the self-interested muteness of the antagonists thus conspire to create a kind of complicitous silence which may all but expunge everyday forms of resistance from the record.” (Scott 50) This implies complicit agreement on part of the chairmen who would rather deal with these issues internally instead of raising these conflicts to higher ranking officials.

Separate from the physical act of taking grain or milk from the collective farm, we see additional forms of resistance through worker’s inefficiency. Shayakhmetov admits a frustrating aspect of the collective farm when he writes, “Collective farm workers’ reckless, wasteful and irresponsible attitude to community property was one of the main causes of the lack of progress in collective farm production.” (Shayakhmetov 89) This “lack of progress” fits Scott’s forms of resistance as a quintessential example of an anonymous plurality undermining a system whether or not they are aware of it. While Shayakhmetov never goes into depth regarding the ways in which farm workers were “reckless, wasteful, and irresponsible,” we can surmise his dismay to be representative of other proud party members in authority positions hoping for the resistance to stop. Interestingly, we find Shayakhmetov resisting in class struggles as well, revealing the conflict of someone who supports the system while also subverting it.

Personal Paradox

In his twenty-five years as a school headteacher, Shayakhmetov found innovative, sometimes subversive, ways to work within a bureaucratic system. Even though he was a true believer in the Soviet project, we find recurring examples of challenges for the distribution of labor and production in his attempts to form a better school for his students. Shayakhmetov writes of having students work in the boarding school to help maintain it, lamenting how,

“the district education department...started putting obstacles in our way. They accused us of exploiting child labor and launched a campaign against the collective farm chairman accusing him of personally taking over collective farm machinery and illegally putting it at the disposal of other organizations.” (133)

Here the resistance shifts away from a struggle over the goods of production but rather the labor force that enables it. Shayakhmetov is trying to carve out a piece of labor force away from the collective farms. Even in gathering students to enroll in classes at the boarding school he notes, “We had literally to pry them from the collective farm management’s clutches.” (41) Not only was curating a small workforce from students a difficult task, but the simple act of enrolling students became a fight against the collective farms for labor resources.

Shayakhmetov also maneuvered the complexities of Soviet bureaucracy in two other instances. The first being when he found and built new premises behind the backs of officials. (Shayakhmetov 154) The second being an instance when he recruited graduate level educated instructors as subject instructors, to the amusement of other local school headteachers. (Shayakhmetov 171) These additional events place Shayakhmetov as subverting the hierarchy of the power structure, a structure he willingly operated within and supported. Despite his allegiance to the party, resistance to the state came through and around bureaucratic means as well.

As Shayakhmetov operated as somewhat of a middleman in his position as a school headteacher, he undermined the means of production as well as labor in his occupation. In his struggle to keep his students fed, Shayakhmetov decided to make the issue public in the hopes of garnering grain. When speaking to a meeting of collective farm chairmen, Shayakhmetov managed to convince them to deliver over seven tons of grain to the school within a few days of his request. (Shayakhmetov 131) He mentions the wasted leftover grain from the harvest as being enough for the students and ends up with much more than he asked. This episode occurred during a particularly good harvest year in Kazakhstan but is still a remarkable example of a diversion of state resources to a small boarding school for the sake of charity. While Shayakhmetov never saw himself as resisting or subverting the state, Scott’s definition clarifies the point in elucidating the contention for resources as critical in resistance.

For Scott, the matter of individual agency and intention bears little weight in discussing the relations of power and subalterns. It is here that anecdotes of Shayakhmetov and other people in his memoir can shed light and pose interesting questions to larger discourses of resistance. By Shayakhmetov’s own account, he was a faithful party member embarrassed by his “kulak upbringing.” (150) He also vents his abhorrence of those who climbed the party ladder for the wrong reasons, “It sickened me that some were joining the party for selfish ends.” (59)

Shayakhmetov clearly held firm beliefs in Soviet ideology and yet supported chairmen allowing illegal usage of collective farm resources and going around the bureaucratic means of the school structure to use students as labor resources. This seeming paradox deserves further exploration.

It is important to add Shayakhmetov's own social and political views in this essay to flesh out the often-anonymous agents of Scott's resistance. The romanticized vision of the swashbuckling revolutionary captivates our imagination, but through Shayakhmetov, and his contemporaries, we find an almost radically conservative populous participating in these forms of resistance. Even during the Kafkaesque episode of moving his brother's deceased body back to his village, Shayakhmetov never railed against the system that forced him through an unnecessary and frustrating bureaucracy. This could be simply because he is an exceedingly patient man, but we see Shayakhmetov venting his criticisms to the *individuals* who didn't express condolences over his loss, and not to the nightmarish over-arching bureaucracy that problematized his situation at every turn. Shayakhmetov overlooks the problematic aspects of the system and criticizes the callousness of the individuals who operate within it. While the author admits faults in the system at times, as they often spring up in his narrative, he ultimately finds comfort in it, wishing people would not take advantage of the system and execute their role. This conservatism also reveals itself in his attitudes towards the post-Stalin political discourse.

Contrary to the West

Following Stalin's death, many citizens of the union felt wholly disillusioned in the wake of Khrushchev's reforms. In a chapter titled "Lost Faith," Shayakhmetov outlines a multitude of feelings expressed in the wake of Stalin's vision. Khrushchev's open criticism of Stalin's policies "sowed the seeds of doubt in the infallibility of the people's leader." (158) Stalin's greater socialist vision was lost and the impact of this ideological shift manifested itself on a personal level even to the degree of the village laborer. The critical claims were difficult to believe even in the wake of mass famine under a forced collectivization effort responsible for the deaths of millions. This illustrates the conservative nature of villagers in '50s and '60s rural Kazakhstan who struggled to believe Khrushchev's accusations despite the atrocities they endured. (Shayakhmetov 163) While the West praised the opening of borders, lessening of political purges, and freedom of speech reforms, many conservative citizens saw Khrushchev as lesser than his more ideologically driven predecessors. Shayakhmetov admits near the end of his account, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that the years Gorbachev denoted as "years of stagnation" were actually a "blissful time." (Shayakhmetov 196) He writes "rural people often used wistfully to say, 'It turns out, we had Communism. But by the time we realized it, it was over!'" (196). Understanding the mindset of Shayakhmetov and others like him adds valuable perspective to Scott's argument.

By looking at other individuals of similar social standing in the memoir, the conflict of personal ideology and resistance becomes apparent. Yusuf Vasilievich Cherkasov, a Circassian of middle age, was the director of the village's mine. He often helped workers and had received a favorable reputation by the community through his charity. In a short anecdote, Shayakhmetov describes a moment when a group of mine workers ran to Cherkasov and asked for his help in stopping the representatives of the Council of Ministers from confiscating the mine workers' potato crop. Cherkasov confronted the women taking the potatoes yelling, "Stop this unlawful nonsense!" (Shayakhmetov 76) In the confrontation, he shoved a woman and broke the manager's rib by pushing him away. After regaining composure, Cherkasov realized the gravity of his actions and apologized to the chairman, thus formally exchanging a ton of coal to prevent taking the incident to authorities. Cherkasov relented and things were smoothed over without escalation to higher powers.

This episode illuminates the attitudes of authority figures, like Cherkasov, who occupy difficult positions. They support the law and aspirations of the party, but sometimes react with frustration when workers are forced to endure hardships. This story supports Scott's argument of complicit resistance on part of the authorities and workers. In maintaining a sympathetic view towards the workers and their hardships, chairmen like Cherkasov would turn a blind eye to grain cultivation and illegal milking in order to sustain the security of their workers. Cherkasov's intentions and frustrations are clear in Shayakhmetov's retelling, but it is the paradox of both supporting a conservative ideology as well as harboring feelings of frustration towards those occupying higher positions of power within the state that warrants closer analysis within Scott's argument.

We find a similar man who was well respected by the community when Shayakhmetov describes Yakov Spiridanovich Samarin, a local chairman.

"Once the sowing had been done and the terms of the five-year plan met, Samarin would allow needy collective farm workers to sow millet and potatoes for their own consumption on a small plot of collective farmland... This was considerably risky for a collective farm chairman as any violation of the law was a serious crime." (25)

It is possible these two men remain as outliers in Shayakhmetov's mind as men who went out of their way to help their workers, but for this chairman and director there had to be a degree of complicit silence for them to have

lifelong successful careers. The memoir makes a single mention of chairmen, directors, or workers being punished by authorities, but doesn't follow through on the details of their punishment, implying the penalties weren't extreme enough to stick out in his memory. This is the foundation of Scott's argument.

Although these men, Samarin, Cherkasov, and Shayakhmetov, all supported communist ideology and party politics, they were active participants, and complicit in class struggle against the collective farm and other state agencies. Professed ideology is one thing, but the competition for scarce resources, be it labor or grain, opposes the socialist notion of endurance for a greater cause. Individuals needed to survive, first and foremost. Whether or not their intentions were to resist the state, their actions directly influenced the distribution of scarce resources.

Conclusion

None of the threads of this essay took center stage of Shayakhmetov's memoir. His intention, in a memoir completed shortly before his death in 2010, was that of showing a small part of life for a Kazakh school headteacher in a Soviet village. Well after the fall of the Soviet Union and the death of the communist ideal, the author still presents the post-war Stalin era as an era where there was hope for a brighter future. This is a radically positive portrayal compared to the West's obsession with gulags, purges, and politics; a positivistic portrayal that strengthens Scott's argument by showing even amongst ideologues there were still forms of resistance so subtle as to be almost unrecognizable as such.

Shayakhmetov's account provides nuance to Scott's argument because it challenges the idea of agency and intention. Everyday forms of resistance assume a position that most of those participating in this type of resistance are somewhat aware of their opposition to the power structure. This memoir, and other memoirs like it, can provide insight into a question of individual agency when the perpetrators of these acts of resistance are in support of the over-arching power structure. This isn't feigned ignorance on part of chairmen, directors, and school headteachers, but instead a real need of self-preservation on behalf of the workers and students. What Scott gives little attention to in *Everyday Forms of Resistance* is what looking at individual accounts can elucidate: the contradictory nature of intention and action.

A Kazakh Teacher's Story adds a valuable firsthand account to a seemingly contradictory argument as postulated by James C. Scott. Everyday forms of resistance are not always taken on by actors who actively and *intentionally* resist against power and domination. What Shayakhmetov's account adds for us is what these "weapons of the weak" look like when they are instituted by those who ideologically support the power of the state. This complicates the nature of resistance to a matter of intention and belief. While Scott gives little credence to beliefs as influential on these forms of resistance, this memoir can help to elucidate the paradoxical notion of those who support the ideology of the state, and yet are complicit in resistance against it.

Works Citation

Scott, James C. *Everyday Forms of Resistance*. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies, Vol 4. 1989. Electronic Resource.

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