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**SHERKHAN MURTAZA’S DIARY ENTRIES AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE OF THE  
EARLY PERIOD OF INDEPENDENT KAZAKHSTAN**

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**Abstract. Introduction.** One of the current trends in contemporary historical scholarship is the study of ego-documents as valuable sources for analyzing sociocultural transformations. In this context, the diaries of prominent cultural and public figures emerge as significant testimonies that capture the spirit and dynamics of their time. This article explores the diary entries of writer and public intellectual Sherkhan Murtaza, emphasizing their relevance for understanding the political and ideological landscape of Kazakhstan in the early years of independence. *Goals and objectives.* The main goal of the article is to analyze Murtaza’s diaries as important historical sources for studying the sociocultural and political transformations during Kazakhstan’s formative post-Soviet period. The study focuses on such key issues as the collapse of the Soviet Union, language policy, national identity, and the moral and emotional climate of transitional society. Murtaza’s diaries are interpreted not only as a record of personal reflection but also as a civic position and intellectual response to historical change. *Results.* By applying historical-anthropological and hermeneutic methods, Murtaza’s diary is introduced into scholarly discourse as an ego-document that enables a deeper investigation into the ideological and political shifts of the early independence period. These personal narratives offer a unique lens for understanding the spiritual and sociopolitical atmosphere of the era. The approach also opens new methodological directions for analyzing personal narratives in the post-Soviet space, revealing intersections between historical memory and civic consciousness. *Conclusion.* Sherkhan Murtaza’s diaries represent an essential historical source that, through a deeply personal lens, reveals the social and political climate of early independent Kazakhstan and offers valuable insights into national memory and cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Sh. Murtaza, diary, historical source, independent Kazakhstan, identity, language, parliament, nation-building



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## ШЕРХАН МҰРТАЗАНЫҢ КҮНДЕЛІК ЖАЗБАЛАРЫ ҚАЗАҚСТАН ТӘУЕЛСІЗДІГІ АЛҒАШҚЫ КЕЗЕҢІНІҢ ТАРИХИ ДЕРЕККӨЗІ РЕТІНДЕ

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**Аңдатпа.** *Kіріспе.* Бүгінгі таңда тарих ғылымында әлеуметтік-мәдени өзгерістерді зерделеудің өзекті бағыттарының бірі эгодокументтерді дереккөз ретінде қарастыру. Бұл ретте көрнекті мәдениет және қоғам қайраткерлерінің күнделіктері өз дәуірінің рухын, тарихи үдерістерін айшықтап көрсететін маңызды дереккөзіне айналады. Мақалада жазушы әрі қоғам қайраткері Шерхан Мұртазаның күнделік жазбаларына талдау жасалып, олардың Қазақстан тәуелсіздігінің алғашқы жылдарындағы саяси-идеологиялық жағдайды бейнелеудегі маңызы айқындалады. *Мақсаттар мен міндеттер.* Мақалада аталған күнделік жазбалары Қазақстан тәуелсіздігінің бастапқы кезеңіндегі әлеуметтік-мәдени және саяси трансформацияларды зерттеуге арналған құнды тарихи дереккөз ретінде саралау. Күнделік жазбалары арқылы Кеңес Одағының ыдырауы, тіл саясаты, ұлттық бірегейлік мәселелері, сондай-ақ өтпелі кезеңдегі қоғамның моральдық және эмоциялық ахуалын талдауға алынады. Шерхан Мұртазаның күнделіктері жеке рефлексия мен азаматтық ұстанымның тоғысынан туған ішкі күйзелісін, тарихи кезеңге деген көзқарасын бейнелейтін бірегей дереккөзі болып есептеледі. *Нәтижелер.* Тарихи-антропологиялық талдау мен герменевтикалық әдістерді қолдана отырып, Шерхан Мұртазаның күнделік жазбалары Қазақстан тәуелсіздігінің бастапқы кезеңіндегі саяси және идеологиялық өзгерістерді зерттеуге мүмкіндік беретін дереккөз ретінде ғылыми айналымға енгізілді. Бұл жазбалар қоғамда орын алған үдерістерді жеке тұлғаның көзімен бейнелеу арқылы сол дәуірдің рухани, саяси-экономикалық ахуалын тереңірек түсінуге жол ашады. Осы тәсіл посткеңестік кеңістіктегі жеке нарративтерді сараптауға жаңа методологиялық бағыт ұсынып, тарихи жады мен азаматтық ұстанымның тоғысқан тұстарын айқындауға мүмкіндік береді. *Қорытынды.* Шерхан Мұртазаның күнделіктері тәуелсіз Қазақстанның алғашқы кезеңіндегі әлеуметтік-саяси ахуалды тұлғалық таным арқылы сипаттайтын, тарихи жады мен ұлттық болмысты түсінуге жол ашатын маңызды дереккөз болып табылады.

**Түйін сөздер:** Ш. Мұртаза, күнделік, тарихи дереккөз, тәуелсіз Қазақстан, бірегейлік, тіл, парламент, ұлт құру

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## ДНЕВНИКОВЫЕ ЗАПИСИ ШЕРХАНА МҰРТАЗЫ КАК ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ ИСТОЧНИК РАННЕГО ПЕРИОДА НЕЗАВИСИМОГО КАЗАХСТАНА

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**Аннотация.** *Введение.* Одним из актуальных направлений современной исторической науки является изучение эгодокументов как источников для анализа социально-культурных трансформаций. В этом контексте дневники видных культурных и общественных деятелей становятся важными свидетельствами, отражающими дух эпохи и исторические процессы. Настоящая статья посвящена анализу дневниковых записей писателя и общественного деятеля Шерхана Муртазы, в которых раскрывается политико-идеологическая атмосфера первых лет независимости Казахстана. *Цели и задачи исследования.* Рассмотреть дневники Муртазы как ценный исторический источник для изучения социально-культурных и политических трансформаций в начальный период постсоветской истории Казахстана. В центре внимания распад Советского Союза, языковая политика, вопросы национальной идентичности, а также морально-эмоциональное состояние общества в переходный период. Дневники интерпретируются как результат личной рефлексии и выражение гражданской позиции интеллектуала. *Результаты.* Посредством применения историко-антропологического анализа и герменевтических методов дневники Муртазы вводятся в научный оборот как важные эгодокументы, позволяющие глубже осмыслить идеологические и политические изменения раннего этапа независимости. Эти тексты отражают личное восприятие общественных процессов и открывают новые методологические подходы к изучению индивидуальных нарративов в постсоветском контексте. *Заключение.* Дневники Шерхана Муртазы представляют собой значимый исторический источник, раскрывающий через призму личного восприятия социо-политическую атмосферу раннего независимого Казахстана и способствующий осмыслению национальной памяти и культурной идентичности.

**Ключевые слова:** Ш. Муртаза, дневник, исторический источник, независимый Казахстан, идентичность, язык, парламент, национальное строительство

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### Introduction

In the context of the post-Soviet reconfiguration of identity, historical memory, and forms of political legitimation, particular significance is attributed not only to archival and institutional sources such as legislative acts, parliamentary protocols, and party documents, but also to subjective narratives that allow for an understanding of historical transformations through the lens of personal experience and individual perception. It is through such texts as diaries that one can trace how major political, social, and cultural shifts are reflected in everyday consciousness and experienced at the

level of the individual (Hellbeck, 2006; Confino, 1997). In the Kazakhstani context, one of the most substantive and representative examples of this type of source is the diaries of Sherkhan Murtaza – a writer, publicist, civic figure, and parliamentarian who was not only a witness to but also an active participant in the formation of independent Kazakhstan.

The historical significance of Murtaza’s diaries stems not only from their chronological breadth but also from the author’s political and intellectual stance. As a member of parliament and a prominent representative of Kazakhstan’s cultural and national intelligentsia, Sherkhan Murtaza had unique access to decision-making circles. His texts reflect a blend of civic concern, cultural introspection, and ethical resistance.

Of particular interest to this study are the early years of independence, marked by attempts at institutional and ideological reorientation. This period witnessed the redefinition of key categories such as nationhood, statehood, language, and cultural affiliation. These processes are recorded in Murtaza’s diaries not in the form of abstract theorizing, but through observations of parliamentary speeches, travels to rural villages, private conversations, and personal reflections. As a genre, his diaries oscillate between autobiography, public commentary, and political essay, while consistently demonstrating a moral orientation an aspiration toward truth, cultural authenticity, and the defense of Kazakh identity.

These texts are written predominantly in the Kazakh language, employing vernacular phraseology, aphoristic expressions, and a rhetorical style typical of linguistic advocacy. This not only grants the diaries ethnographic and linguistic value but also positions them as expressions of the specific intellectual climate of their time. Within them, one finds not only personal reflection but also a chronicle of social, political, and cultural upheavals.

Such a combination corresponds to the framework proposed by Philippe Lejeune in his definition of autobiography as a genre. As he emphasizes: “The subject must be primarily individual life, the genesis of the personality; but the chronicle and social or political history can also be part of the narrative. It is a question here of proportion, or rather of hierarchy...” (Lejeune, 1989: 5).

It is precisely the hierarchy of emphasis between the personal and the public that determines the genre identity of the diary, while simultaneously allowing room for transitions into other forms of personal writing, such as memoir or essay. In this sense, Sherkhan Murtaza’s diaries are not merely records of private life, but deeply politicized and culturally engaged texts in which the author’s “I” resonates with the collective fate. Such texts, according to Philippe Lejeune, fall within the category of “ego-documents” written testimonies that express both the formation of the self and the spirit of the era.

Consequently, the diaries of Sherkhan Murtaza constitute a valuable historical source due to their capacity to offer scholars access to the internal, subjective dimension of the nation-building process. In contrast to formalized and editorially filtered official documents, these texts allow for the reconstruction of the emotional and moral contours of the time the “structures of feeling” that underpin societal and political transformations yet remain invisible in parliamentary transcripts or party reports. Diary writing here becomes a site where not only private reflections emerge, but also the hidden tensions, ideological fractures, and internal conflicts that shaped the trajectory of early sovereign Kazakhstan.

The article argues that Sherkhan Murtaza’s diaries combining personal testimony, cultural critique, and political reflection constitute a unique historical source for examining the transformation of Kazakhstan’s political culture, national identity, and moral landscape during the critical years of 1991–1995.

The aim of this study is to trace how Murtaza’s diary entries reflect the key challenges and moments of the transitional period: the drafting of a new Constitution, language policy, the ideology of the nation-state, the socio-economic crisis, as well as issues of cultural continuity and the legitimacy of power.

The methodological justification for selecting the diaries as the principal body of sources lies in the need to move beyond an institutional perspective and turn to the microsocial level of analysis, where politics is expressed through language, tone, suffering, and hope. These texts are not merely

reflections of events they participate in their construction, constituting a cultural-political gesture that shapes an alternative historical lens.

### Materials and Methods

This research is based on a qualitative analysis of ego-documents, with particular emphasis on the published diaries of Sherkhan Murtaza, primarily covering the years 1991 to 1995 a critical phase in the formation of the political and cultural identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The primary source utilized is the fourth volume of Murtaza’s collected diary entries, which includes his reflections, observations, and commentaries on key events during the early 1990s (Murtaza, 2023).

The research draws upon the methodology of historical-anthropological analysis and hermeneutic interpretation, grounded in theoretical approaches that view ego-documents as vital sources of cultural memory and individual historical consciousness (Hellbeck, 2006; Lejeune, 1989). The diary is examined not merely as an autobiographical text, but also as a political and moral narrative that captures the internal conflicts and ethical dilemmas of a transitional epoch.

At the core of the analysis is the transformation of national identity, with particular attention given to language policy as a symbolic arena for competing identity models. The study further investigates the moral-political interpretation of the socio-economic crises of the post-Soviet period. Central to the analytical framework is the figure of the intellectual as a bearer of counter-memory—an alternative and often marginalized version of historical experience.

Accordingly, the methodological orientation of the article lies at the intersection of intellectual history, cultural anthropology, and narrative analysis. This approach enables a reconstruction of the subjective structure of lived historical time and reveals the tensions between official narratives of nation-building and their individual, moral reinterpretation, as captured in the diaries of Sherkhan Murtaza.

### Discussion

The study of diaries as historical sources occupies a significant place in contemporary humanities, particularly within the broader discourse on the transformation of collective memory, historical consciousness, and identity. Within interdisciplinary frameworks that integrate ego-document studies, cultural memory, and historical anthropology, diaries are increasingly viewed not as marginal or supplementary narratives, but as legitimate historical sources that offer insight into the inner experience of an era (Lejeune, 1989). This approach is especially pertinent in post-totalitarian societies, where personal writing often functions as a space of “inner resistance” and a vehicle for articulating moral anxieties (Hellbeck, 2006).

Despite the growing interest in ego-documents within post-Soviet studies, Kazakhstani historiography is only beginning to engage with diaries as analytical material. This is particularly evident in the case of Sherkhan Murtaza, a writer, journalist, public intellectual, and parliamentarian who not only witnessed but actively shaped Kazakhstan’s political and cultural agenda during the formative years of independence. Nevertheless, the diary component of his legacy remains largely unexplored in a systematic scholarly manner, despite its clear potential for political-anthropological and historical-discursive interpretation.

Existing studies on Sherkhan Murtaza’s work are predominantly situated within philological and literary domains. The most substantial contribution remains the monograph by T. Mamaseit, which provides a biographical and professional account of Murtaza’s life and career (Mamaseit, 2002). While the author addresses Murtaza’s work in journalism and parliament, the diary material is treated only fragmentarily and without consideration of its generic specificity, thereby limiting its utility for historiographical analysis.

Contemporary philological-cognitive approaches to Murtaza’s oeuvre increasingly emphasize his pivotal role in shaping post-Soviet Kazakh identity, particularly through the lens of language as a carrier of symbolic and mental constructs. A noteworthy example is the study by Kembaeva and Zhubai, which offers a cognitive interpretation of the concept of “Қазақ халқы” (Kazakh people) in Murtaza’s works. The authors demonstrate how the collective “self” is constructed through a system



of cultural symbols, ethnospecific stereotypes, and linguistic markers. This perspective invites us to consider the diaries not merely as private memoirs, but as representative texts articulating national subjectivity amid postcolonial reorientation (Kembaeva, Zhubai, 2024a).

Following this line of inquiry, another study by the same authors explores the conceptualization of “Rukh” (spirit) within Murtaza’s linguistic universe. The study emphasizes how metaphysical categories such as conscience, honor, and dignity are integrated into the political and value-laden discourse of the transitional period. In the morally and institutionally uncertain context of the 1990s, these categories acquired not only lyrical and ethical dimensions but also normative civic significance (Kembaeva, Zhubai, 2024b).

This research paradigm is further enriched by another study by Kembaeva and Zhubai, which analyzes the transcripts of Sherkhan Murtaza’s parliamentary speeches. The authors persuasively argue that these texts occupy an intermediate genre, bridging the gap between official procedural records and personal reflection. Their emotional depth, rhetorical expressiveness, and ideological orientation endow them with a distinct character of cultural subjectivity, making them valuable for the study of political discourse as lived experience (Kembaeva, Zhubai, 2024c).

The ethical and philosophical underpinnings of Murtaza’s worldview are explored in the work of Sauryqov et al., who trace the intellectual lineage between his writings and the spiritual legacy of the “Abai School.” They emphasize a continuity of humanist paradigms that shaped his literary and journalistic output, thereby situating Murtaza within a broader tradition of Kazakh moral and intellectual thought (Sauryqov, et al., 2022).

Murtaza’s role as a voice of national narrative is most comprehensively addressed in the study by Zhaxylykbayeva and coauthors, where the focus is placed on his publicistic writings. The authors interpret his texts as an “infrastructure of national identity,” in which personal writing becomes a collective speech act, voiced on behalf of the nation. This analytical lens also allows for the inclusion of Murtaza’s diaries as a distinct form of testimony one that unites the individual and the representative dimensions of historical expression (Zhaqsylyqbaeva, et al., 2022).

An instructive example of the literary representation of political history can be found in the work of Dadebaev and Musala, which examines Murtaza’s novel “Qyzyl Zhebe”. Through an analysis of the narrative strategies used to depict the biography of Turar Ryskulov, the authors demonstrate how personal biography is transformed into a framework for interpreting collective historical transformations. By analogy, Murtaza’s diaries can likewise be seen as a space in which political history is articulated through personal experience and affective engagement (Dadebaev, Musaly, 2015).

A separate avenue of inquiry concerns the pedagogical and ethical potential of Murtaza’s legacy. Tamabayeva et al. explore his works as foundational material for cultivating spiritual and leadership competencies among future Kazakhstani professionals. Within this framework, the diaries are reinterpreted as a moral-didactic resource that fosters patriotic ethics and personal responsibility, thereby expanding their functional significance beyond historiography and into civic education and ethical formation (Tamabaeva, et al., 2025).

From a theoretical and methodological standpoint, the interpretation of Sherkhan Murtaza’s diaries aligns with the principles of historical microhistory, wherein local, subjective, and “small-scale” narratives serve as interpretive keys to understanding broader socio-cultural transformations (Ginzburg, 1993). A comparable framework is offered by Alon Confino’s conception of memory as unfixed, contested, and selective. His perspective enables us to view diaries not as passive reflections of events, but as active instruments of historical production and selective remembrance (Confino, 1997).

The existing body of scholarly literature demonstrates the significant interdisciplinary relevance of Sherkhan Murtaza’s oeuvre. Nevertheless, a notable gap persists with regard to his diaries as sources for the political and cultural history of independent Kazakhstan. The present study seeks to address this lacuna by approaching Murtaza’s diary entries as a distinctive form of intellectual testimony, texts that both document and shape the moral, ideological, and historical consciousness of the early post-Soviet period.

## Results

The diary entries of Sherkhan Murtaza represent a unique phenomenon in the cultural and intellectual history of Kazakhstan. Far exceeding the bounds of a conventional autobiographical genre, these writings evolve into a multilayered historical source encompassing several epochs from the postwar Stalinist era to the formation of an independent Kazakhstani state. Spanning more than six decades, the diaries are distinguished by their breadth, internal candor, and rich interweaving of cultural and political allusions.

A distinctive feature of Murtaza's entries is their concise and fragmentary form. Each note functions as a complete observation, dense with meaning and often contained in a single sentence or two. Beneath this brevity lies philosophical depth, sharp perception, and profound cultural reflection. Thematically, the diaries are highly polyphonic, blending seamlessly reflections on politics, language, culture, national identity, daily life, religion, nature, and even personal dialogues and memories.

Understanding Murtaza's diaries as a historical source necessitates situating them within the context of their creation, as well as employing theoretical and methodological approaches from contemporary historiography. These entries emerged at the intersection of two formative epochs Soviet and post-Soviet each framing its own cultural norms, political imaginaries, and structures of historical consciousness. In this context, the diary becomes a mediating genre: one that bridges personal memory and collective past, subjective experience and structural realities.

It must be acknowledged, as with any ego-document, that Murtaza's diaries bear the marks of selectivity, personal interpretation, and literary stylization. Yet it is precisely this subjectivity that constitutes their value. Rather than offering a conventional factographic chronicle suited to classical political history, the diaries grant access to the emotional architectures of the era dimensions that remain inaccessible through official records and institutional narratives.

Within this analytical framework, the transformation of national identity emerges as a central concern arguably one of the most critical dimensions in the formation of independent Kazakhstan. Among the first symbolic and institutional milestones on this path was the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan in January 1993. This foundational document was intended not only to codify the principles of statehood but also to define the symbolic boundaries of a new national community. In a diary entry dated January 25, 1993 apparently prepared as a draft for a parliamentary speech Murtaza sharply criticized the preamble's phrasing: “Biz, Qazaqstan halqy...” (“We, the people of Kazakhstan...”) (Murtaza, 2023: 23). He perceived this formula as a vestige of Soviet ideological discourse, reminiscent of the elusive construct of the “Soviet people,” which had been used to blur ethnic specificity and had effectively disappeared along with the USSR.

According to Murtaza, the term “people of Kazakhstan” represented an artificial and historically unjustified construct that obscured the foundational role of the Kazakh people as the titular nation. He argued that the Constitution should explicitly acknowledge the Kazakh nation, without infringing upon the rights of other ethnic groups. In place of the existing formulation, he proposed the following wording: “We, the Kazakh people and representatives of other peoples residing in Kazakhstan” (Murtaza, 2023: 24). This formula, he asserted, would restore historical accuracy by recognizing the Kazakhs as the nucleus of the nation, historically linked to Kazakh statehood, while simultaneously offering an inclusive mention of the country's multiethnic composition. “The Kazakh people have never done harm to representatives of other peoples... So why is it that now we are denied the right to clearly name ourselves ‘the Kazakh people’?” he wrote, voicing his anguish (Murtaza, 2023: 24).

Murtaza's position reflects a broader post-Soviet tension between civic and ethnic definitions of the nation. Many members of the political elite, shaped during the Soviet era, favored the ethnically inclusive concept of “the people of Kazakhstan,” while nationally oriented intellectuals such as Murtaza sought to affirm Kazakh identity a dimension long suppressed under Soviet internationalism.

Language policy represented another crucial aspect of the 1993 Constitution to which Sherkhan Murtaza devoted significant attention in his diary. The draft Constitution, reflecting Kazakhstan's demographic realities, stipulated the designation of Kazakh as the state language and Russian as the “language of interethnic communication.” Murtaza firmly opposed this formulation. In his diary entry

dated January 25, 1993, he posed a direct question: “Why is only Russian designated as the language of interethnic communication? Are German, Ukrainian, or Tatar languages somehow inferior to Russian?” (Murtaza, 2023: 25). He contended that this special status for Russian perpetuated the unjust linguistic hierarchy inherited from the Soviet era.

Furthermore, Murtaza noted that many Turkic languages are mutually intelligible to a certain extent knowledge of Tatar, for example, facilitates communication with Uzbeks, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and other neighboring peoples. In making this point, he sought to demonstrate that Russian is not the sole medium for interethnic dialogue. In his view, privileging the Russian language was both inequitable toward other languages and conceptually unwarranted. He insisted that “there is no need to single out the Russian language” in the Constitution, as the general protection of language rights would suffice.

This position reflected the views of the national-patriotic segment of the Kazakh intelligentsia, whose representatives believed that the Russian language already held a dominant position in public life and feared that its formal recognition in the Constitution would hinder the revival of the Kazakh language. At the same time, a significant portion of the political elite and the Russian-speaking population insisted on preserving the official status of the Russian language for the sake of administrative functionality and interethnic stability.

As history has shown, the compromise reached in the 1993 Constitution declared Kazakh the state language, while assigning Russian the role of the “language of interethnic communication”. Simultaneously, the Constitution prohibited any form of discrimination based on the lack of proficiency in either language. In principle, the primacy of Kazakh was affirmed, but in practice, the legal codification reflected the continued dominance of Russian, a model that would persist in subsequent revisions of Kazakhstan’s Constitution (Al’zhanova, 2020: 19).

Although the Kazakh language is officially designated as the state language in constitutional documents, in the practical reality of post-Soviet Kazakhstan, this status remained largely declarative. Sherkhan Murtaza, whose civic courage was matched by a deep sense of historical responsibility, repeatedly documented painful instances of institutional indifference toward linguistic sovereignty in his diary. One particularly striking example is found in his entry dated August 23, 1994, which reflects on a Cabinet meeting of the Republic of Kazakhstan attended by then-Prime Minister Äkezhan Kähzygeldin.

At this meeting, Murtaza deliberately spoke exclusively in Kazakh, intending to emphasize the symbolic importance of using the state language in the context of national independence. However, as he bitterly noted in his diary: “Throughout the entire meeting, I was the only one who spoke in Kazakh... But no one even flinched” (Murtaza, 2023: 59). The situation appeared paradoxical to him: “I felt like some kind of foreigner from abroad, in my own country, on my own land.” This episode, in which the Kazakh language was institutionally ignored, became for Murtaza a powerful metaphor for the incompleteness of the decolonization process: “There is no point in calling Kazakhstan independent. We will still be slaves for another forty years” (Murtaza, 2023: 59).

In another entry, he emphasizes that parliamentary work is conducted almost entirely in Russian, despite the absence of formal prohibitions against using Kazakh. The root of the problem, he argues, lies not in legal constraints but in entrenched psychological dispositions: “Many Kazakhs speak Russian even better than the Russians. The psychology of subordination, of servitude, has seeped into our very bones. A disease that entered by the pound leaves only by the drop” (Zhaqsylyqbaeva et al., 2022: 40).

In this context, it is especially relevant to turn to Kamila Smagulova’s analysis of postcolonial identity in Kazakhstan. She notes that “language remains a battlefield of decolonial struggle in Kazakhstan: through Kazakh, both trauma and hope are articulated, and the reluctance of institutions to support its development reveals the persistence of symbolic domination” (Smagulova, 2023: 7).

Such an interpretation finds support in earlier studies of Kazakhstan’s language policy. William Fierman, for example, observed that despite the formal institutional backing of the Kazakh language in the post-Soviet period, real mechanisms and social practices continued to operate within a Russophone framework, especially among elite and bureaucratic circles (Fierman, 1998).

This narrative aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of "postcolonial heteroglossia," wherein the disjuncture between official political rhetoric and lived experience becomes a symptom of incomplete decolonization (Bhabha, 1994). In this light, the diary emerges as a space where individual reflection acquires the status of collective memory, and language becomes the arena for struggles over cultural sovereignty.

In Murtaza's diaries, the theme of Kazakh relations with other ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan is addressed with particular urgency, especially in the context of cultural dialogue mediated through language. A striking example of his reflections on this issue is found in the entry dated October 31, 1994, marking the 60th birthday of the writer Gerold Belger an ethnic German whom Murtaza, by his own admission, calls "a Kazakh in spirit." In this fragment, Murtaza expresses admiration for Belger's deep respect for the Kazakh language and culture, highlighting his genuine engagement with the spiritual life of the Kazakh people. "If every citizen from among the many nationalities living in Kazakhstan understood, knew, respected, and cherished Kazakhstan, the Kazakh people, their language, traditions, customs, land, and waters as Belger does, then this country would be inhabited by those chosen by God and paradise would descend," he writes (Murtaza, 2023: 67).

In these words, Murtaza conveys not only gratitude toward a particular individual but also articulates a broader civic ideal: every resident of multiethnic Kazakhstan should not merely formally acknowledge but deeply know, understand, and respect the culture and language of the state in which they live. For Murtaza, cultural solidarity and linguistic affinity are essential conditions for harmonious coexistence in a post-Soviet republic. In this context, the image of Belger assumes the role of a moral exemplar, a counterpoint to those who display indifference or even disdain toward Kazakh culture.

Nevertheless, Murtaza's view on this issue was far from nihilistic. His diaries reveal a consistent advocacy for interethnic harmony and equitable coexistence among all peoples of Kazakhstan. However, he believed that such harmony must be underpinned by the dignified status of the state language and by ensuring that the national interests of the Kazakh people are not compromised.

Beyond questions of national identity, Murtaza's diaries address with particular urgency the issue of safeguarding Kazakhstan's territorial integrity and natural resources, especially land which he regarded not only as a practical concern but also as one imbued with profound symbolic meaning. In the early 1990s, the republic was engaged in active debates regarding the introduction of private ownership of land, as well as constitutional provisions concerning the potential alteration of state borders. These developments caused Murtaza deep concern.

In an entry dated January 27, 1993, written during deliberations over the draft of the new Constitution Sh. Murtaza harshly criticized a clause allowing for the possibility of changing state borders through parliamentary decision. In his view, such a provision posed a serious threat, potentially repeating the painful episodes of territorial concessions experienced by Kazakhstan during the Soviet era. "One who has been burned drinks cautiously", he notes, invoking the Kazakh proverb "Auzı küigen ürlep işedi" as a warning born of historical trauma. His reflections particularly focus on the transfer of the fertile Bostandyk District, part of southern Kazakhstan to the Uzbek SSR, as well as the subsequent reassignment of three additional border districts. "Thanks to the generosity of the Supreme Soviet, four districts went to Uzbekistan. Bostandyk, a paradise on earth, was the first to go, followed by three more", he writes with bitterness (Murtaza, 2023: 26).

These events, as confirmed by contemporary research, were accompanied by intense pressure from the central Soviet authorities and were implemented despite the objections of the Kazakh Party leadership during the 1950s and 1960s (Kabul'dinov et al., 2024: 309). Drawing upon this traumatic historical experience, Murtaza insisted on the necessity of eliminating any possibility of unilateral or parliamentary decisions concerning territorial changes. Instead, he advocated for a mandatory mechanism of popular will: "Let the local, indigenous population decide through a referendum" (Murtaza, 2023: 26). In this way, he supported a vision of democratic sovereignty, believing that only direct democracy could prevent the repetition of historical injustices.



The issue of land occupies a unique almost sacred place in Murtaza’s diary narrative. Amid the severe economic crisis of the early 1990s, when Kazakhstan’s political circles were actively debating the liberalization of land ownership, including the possibility of buying and selling land as a means to stimulate the agricultural sector, Murtaza took a resolutely opposing stance. For him, land was not merely an economic resource but a vessel of historical memory, ancestral continuity, and national dignity. He persistently called for the inclusion in the Constitution of a brief but emphatic phrase: “The land shall not be sold” (Murtaza, 2023: 25).

The sale of land particularly to foreign investors was perceived by Murtaza as a moral betrayal and a direct assault on the nation's future. In one of his diary entries, he bitterly observes: “Sell the land, the mountains, the stones anything to feed the people... And now everyone wants to grab a piece for themselves” (Murtaza, 2023: 25). He was also deeply alarmed by external threats to Kazakhstan’s territorial integrity. In a diary entry dated November 23, 1994 serving as a draft of a parliamentary speech Murtaza harshly condemned a rally organized by Cossack associations in Almaty, at which openly separatist slogans were voiced, calling for the annexation of Northern Kazakhstan to Russia. “A rally with malicious intent... First, they reached for Northern Kazakhstan, and now they want to swallow the entire country. In doing so, they have broken the spine of our Constitution,” he wrote (Murtaza, 2023: 70). In his interpretation, such actions posed a threat not only to Kazakhstan’s territorial integrity but also to the very idea of Kazakhstani statehood, as embodied in the Constitution a foundational symbol of sovereignty.

The diary entries of Sherkhan Murtaza offer exceptional research value in capturing the internal logic and dramatic unfolding of one of the most ambitious political projects of Kazakhstan’s early independence the decision to relocate the national capital from Almaty to the northern city of Akmola. On July 6, 1994, coinciding with his birthday, President Nursultan Nazarbayev formally presented this initiative to the Supreme Council. As Murtaza records, the announcement sparked animated and ambivalent reactions within the parliament, where the proposal was interpreted both as a powerful national symbol and as a source of apprehension amid widespread social instability.

The deliberations, as documented in Murtaza’s diary, were framed by a wide-ranging set of historical, cultural, and geopolitical arguments. Some legislators invoked the figure of Asan Qayghy, a legendary Kazakh sage who wandered in search of a land of prosperity for his people. This cultural reference was mobilized to legitimize the project as an act of historical continuity and national renewal. Comparative analogies were also drawn with other countries that had relocated their capitals for purposes of modernization and administrative centralization such as Ankara in Turkey, Islamabad in Pakistan, Brasília in Brazil, and Moscow in post-imperial Russia.

Proponents of the relocation emphasized Almaty’s objective shortcomings as a capital: its overpopulation, seismic vulnerability, environmental degradation, and peripheral location in the far southeast of the country. By contrast, Akmola was viewed as a more strategically positioned city, situated closer to Kazakhstan’s geographic center and offering spatial and infrastructural capacity for future development.

Nonetheless, the proposal met with sharp criticism from segments of the parliament. Murtaza, in his role as a meticulous chronicler, recorded the arguments of both supporters and opponents. The critiques were often emotionally charged and socially grounded. Against the backdrop of the profound economic crisis of 1994 marked by hyperinflation, industrial collapse, and rising unemployment – the idea of building a new capital was seen by many as an unjustifiable extravagance. As Deputy Boris Marinushkin bluntly stated: “This is not the issue of the day – this is no time to build palaces.” Echoing this sentiment, V. Galenko emphasized, “The people don’t need this issue. The people need food.” Particularly emphatic was T. Toqtarov, who exclaimed: “When the people are suffering what is this madness?” (Murtaza, 2023: 51).

Despite the wave of criticism, proponents of the capital relocation initiative argued that the decision was strategically justified. They maintained that Almaty had lost its viability as a political and administrative center, and that the project’s implementation would be largely financed through foreign investment and loans, thereby minimizing pressure on the national budget and mitigating public discontent.

Sherkhan Murtaza, assuming the role of an impartial chronicler, refrains from offering direct judgments but meticulously documents the atmosphere of the parliamentary debates, the spectrum of positions voiced, and the latent symbolism of the moment. His diary entries make it clear that, despite the polarization of opinions, the proposal ultimately gained parliamentary approval: 124 deputies voted in favor, 12 opposed it, and 7 abstained (Murtaza, 2023: 51). Notably, this vote occurred on July 6 the birthday of President Nursultan Nazarbayev. During the debates, some deputies asserted that the initiative did not merely reflect the president's personal will, but rather a long-standing political vision that embodied the aspirations of the people "a long-cherished dream of the Kazakh nation," as some described it.

One particularly symbolic moment was recorded when the Chairman of the Supreme Council, Abish Kekilbayev, upon concluding the discussion on the capital's relocation, took the opportunity to extend birthday wishes to the President. In a ceremonious tone, he proclaimed: "Here is a gift for your birthday!" (Murtaza, 2023: 51). This scene infused with rituals of political loyalty and undercurrents of personalist symbolism was captured by Murtaza with subtle precision in his diary. The nature of the deliberations and the emotional tenor of the session closely echoed the rhetoric found in contemporary mass media of the time (*Qazaqstannyn astanasy...*, 2012).

The relocation of the capital from Almaty to Astana, as R. L. Wolfel has noted, was not merely an administrative maneuver but a profoundly ideological act. It functioned simultaneously as a tool of nation-building, a mechanism for geodemographic redistribution, and an act of political symbolism. As Wolfel emphasizes, the capital's transfer served as Nazarbayev's strategy for nation-building and the spatial reconfiguration of the new political center (Wolfel, 2002; 485).

Beyond political and cultural reflections, Murtaza's diaries provide extensive testimony on the socio-economic conditions of Kazakhstan during the early years of independence. These entries serve as a unique internal source that stands in contrast to official reports. Through Murtaza's personal observations, candid tone, and vernacular voice, readers gain rare insight into the everyday realities of the transitional period.

In the mid-1990s, Kazakhstan, like many other post-Soviet republics, experienced a profound socio-economic crisis. In his diary entries, Sherkhan Murtaza provides a frank and unfiltered account of the country's dire condition. His writings function as a form of historical testimony: the pages are filled with scenes of rural poverty, economic collapse, and the despair of ordinary people amid sweeping national transformations. Murtaza asserts bluntly that Kazakhstan was not inherently a poor country "we have everything!" but that its people were plunged into humiliating destitution due to the wholesale looting of the republic's wealth (Murtaza, 2023: 60). As he put it, the nation had become "a naked pauper sitting atop a chest of gold," while others secretly absconded with its treasures.

A central concern in Murtaza's journal is the collapse of the agricultural sector. During the summer of 1994, while traveling through his native villages in the Zhuaŭ region of Zhambyl Oblast, he encountered a paradoxical situation: despite a bountiful harvest, farmers could not collect their crops due to an acute shortage of fuel. Everywhere he went, he heard the same lament, there was no diesel, no gasoline, and machinery lay idle. In a country that produces oil, villages were suffering from what he called "a disease named fuel." Combine harvesters and tractors sat abandoned in the fields, while farmers had to resort to hauling hay by horse or even donkey-drawn carts.

Murtaza bitterly described the situation as a form of sabotage an economic blockade seemingly designed to strangle rural life. Whether in Merke, Kulan, or Sarysu, the story was the same: without fuel, "even metal cannot move." He suspected that someone had deliberately paralyzed the agricultural economy, depriving it of its lifeblood (Murtaza, 2023: 60).

One of the most painful themes in his diary is the catastrophic impoverishment of rural villagers. Lacking even basic means, they were forced to auction off their last possessions or engage in barter to survive. Murtaza recounts a heartbreaking example: by autumn, his brother Baiyeke needed to stockpile six tons of coal to heat his home through the brutal Zhuaŭ winter. Since coal could only be purchased with cash, Baiyeke calculated that he would need to sell his two cows, the sole source of milk for his grandchildren to afford the fuel. Murtaza was stunned by the absurdity of the situation: "Why is coal so expensive and a cow so cheap?" He observed that Karaganda coal lay unsold in giant

mounds, while livestock in district markets was going for next to nothing. This disparity was quickly exploited by traders from neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, who "had divine luck on their side", scooping up prime animals at rock-bottom prices to resell them at a premium back home. As a result, Kazakh villages were being drained of their livestock with little to show in return (Murtaza, 2023: 54).

Factory goods, meanwhile, had become prohibitively expensive. Murtaza compared prices with disbelief the government paid farmers only 1.10 tenge per kilogram of wheat, while a single bottle of soda in a shop cost 5 tenge. An elderly woman named Gülshay from his village sold two dried ox hides to a middleman one fetched only 5 tenge, while the other was rejected due to a small hole. "What can you buy for 5 tenge?" the author asks incredulously. "Not even a packet of tea." Thus, the labor and raw materials of the countryside were utterly devalued, while manufactured goods had become unattainable luxuries for rural families (Murtaza, 2023: 54).

Such examples led Sherkhan Murtaza to the conclusion that rural communities were being deliberately driven to ruin. He described the situation not merely as a crisis, but as the intentional impoverishment and plundering of the aul. As villagers sold off their last livestock and harvest for a pittance, they were losing the very foundation of their traditional way of life for centuries, Kazakh prosperity had been inseparable from livestock ownership. Murtaza's diary conveys a deepening anxiety: without livestock or grain, even the spiritual well-being and blessing of the village would vanish. He pondered bitterly whether this was in fact the government's intention whether the authorities actually sought to push the people to the brink. He likened the state to an "ill-tempered, stingy old woman" who cared for no one's fate. These bitter metaphors reflect a profound sense of betrayal: villagers felt utterly abandoned by the government to fend for themselves (Murtaza, 2023: 56).

Murtaza also documented concrete episodes of how the state attempted to settle its debts to workers without money. In one instance, a large truck filled with young sheep (toqty) drove through the streets of his village. The vehicle stopped at each household to distribute one sheep per worker as a substitute for unpaid wages. "What is this?" asked Murtaza. The villagers replied sarcastically, "It's our paycheck." All remaining livestock from the state-run collective farm was being sold off or handed out in lieu of salary. But what could one do with a single sheep? Murtaza observed that it would most likely be slaughtered for food or hastily sold at the market, since people desperately needed money for clothes, school supplies, and medicine. Not selling was also not an option: how else could one survive? This reversion to a barter economy evoked memories of war communism or other eras of catastrophe. "What happens next?" Murtaza asked grimly. When the sheep are gone, the very last reserves will be liquidated, and then "what comes after that?" The collapse of a rural way of life, sustained for centuries by pastoralism, would be complete. Murtaza concluded bleakly: "At this rate, the Kazakh in the village will lose everything" (Murtaza, 2023: 56).

Murtaza also delivered a scathing critique of the government's economic policies, which he believed had directly led to this rural collapse. Farm directors, he wrote, constantly complained to him. Once respected leaders, they had now been reduced to "mere errand boys", scrambling for resources and markets. Instead of support, the state "tied their hands and feet" with endless regulations. Though the kolkhozes and sovkhozes continued, by inertia, to deliver goods to the state, they did so on terms that Murtaza described as bordering on mockery. Villagers labored to produce grain, meat, wool, and milk only for state procurement agencies to seize these goods at meager prices. Moreover, payment was delayed for months, leaving farm managers unable to pay their workers, plunging them into even deeper poverty.

Credit was also inaccessible. The government either refused to issue loans or did so at usurious rates up to 500% interest per annum, Murtaza notes. Worse still, collective farms were not even permitted to sell their produce on the open market for a fair price everything had to be delivered under the state procurement plan. To Murtaza, this system constituted an economic sabotage against the peasantry. Small wonder, he notes with dry resignation, that one village director turned to heavy drinking and locked himself indoors in despair. "In such hopeless conditions, how could one endure otherwise?" he writes. The state's rural policy had clearly reached a dead end, culminating in what

he calls "the very limit of stagnation," beyond which no further retreat was possible (Murtaza, 2023: 56).

The economic collapse extended even to the law enforcement system. In his August 1994 diary entries, Sherkhan Murtaza records a startling fact: in one district, the police had become virtually inoperative due to poverty. Local officers lacked the most basic resources: no ammunition, pistols without cartridges, no service vehicles, and no fuel for the few cars still running. Even police uniforms were missing; officers came to work dressed in whatever clothing they owned. Salaries were so meager that no one had the motivation to fulfill their duties diligently. "If our police are in this state," Murtaza writes with despair, "how can there be any order in the country?" He bitterly remarks that Kazakhstan, a land rich in lead and copper, had to import bullets for its law enforcement from Russia (Murtaza, 2023: 58).

The consequences of economic collapse were felt across every level of society, prompting a wave of high-level resignations and reshuffling. In autumn 1994, President Nursultan Nazarbayev dismissed the entire cabinet, publicly acknowledging its failure to implement reforms. At a session of the Supreme Council, Murtaza documented Nazarbayev's sharp criticism: the ministers had proven incapable, had ignored presidential decrees, become mired in internal power struggles, and prioritized their own material comfort over the needs of the people. Murtaza observed that an increasing number of Russophone residents were considering emigration. As for ethnic Kazakhs, he noted with bitter irony: "Where can the Kazakh flee? Where could we go?" One does not abandon one's own land (Murtaza, 2023: 70).

Against the backdrop of this deepening economic crisis, Murtaza's diary entries began to reflect growing political anxiety. He did not believe the chaos was solely the result of structural transition or global trends; rather, he suspected deliberate intent behind the disorder. In his article of 10 June 1994, "Imperianyn uly jemisi" (The Poisonous Fruit of Empire), published in the state newspaper *Egemen Qazaqstan*, Murtaza openly claimed that the prevailing lawlessness was not spontaneous, but the outcome of a coordinated, destructive campaign (Murtaza, 1994).

In this article he was particularly scathing in his critique of the accelerated privatization programs, which he compared to Stalin's forced collectivization of the 1930s. In his words, national resources had ended up "in the hands of those who grabbed them and in the mouths of those who managed to take a bite." He described these policies as the "most treacherous and repugnant", arguing that their true objective was not economic reform, but the deliberate weakening of Kazakhstan, possibly as a means to pressure the country into reintegration with Russia.

Amid this political instability and social despair, Murtaza insisted on urgent and decisive action from the state. In parliamentary sessions, he called for an end to speculative sales of national wealth, the correction of price imbalances between industrial and agricultural goods, the timely payment of wages to collective farmers, the abolition of exploitative state procurement quotas, and the granting of full economic autonomy to rural producers.

Murtaza's diary offers a candid, often painful chronicle of Kazakhstan's early independence years. Day by day, it records the lives of ordinary people stunned by sudden poverty in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. Through vivid metaphors and unflinching depictions of daily life, he conveys the full drama of the era: abandoned farms, rusting machinery without fuel, hungry families trading sheep for coal, and intellectuals helplessly watching the disintegration of a once-formidable economy. Despite the bleakness of his assessments, the entries are imbued with genuine anguish for his homeland and a persistent hope for civic awakening.

Murtaza's moral admonitions to power and his appeals for justice may have remained a "voice crying in the wilderness," yet his documentation of the people's anguish in the 1990s now stands as a priceless historical source. His diary allows contemporary readers to experience the emotional and social atmosphere of that critical transitional period: one marked by loss and suffering, but also by resilience, dignity, and an unyielding drive to preserve the country's independence and spirit. Such firsthand testimony is invaluable for any serious understanding of the social and economic condition of Kazakhstan in its formative post-Soviet years.



## Conclusion

This article has argued that the diary entries of Sherkhan Murtaza constitute a unique corpus of ego-documents, in which personal perception is transformed into a form of collective memory. Far from being mere autobiographical notations, Murtaza's diaries record not only the chronology of pivotal political developments such as the relocation of the capital, constitutional reforms, and language and land policies but also the emotional and ethical dimensions of these processes. They enable a reconstruction of the “structures of feeling” that characterized Kazakhstani society during the formative years of its post-Soviet transformation.

As not merely an observer but an active participant in the country's political and cultural life, Murtaza emerges in his writings as a moral voice of the Kazakh intelligentsia. His diary narrative functions as an articulation of counter-memory, offering an alternative mode of historical consciousness that challenges dominant state discourses. Through linguistic expressiveness, aphoristic reflection, and allusions to collective trauma and cultural symbolism, Murtaza constructs a textual space where the personal becomes public, and private writing is elevated into a civic gesture and an act of cultural resistance.

Therefore, the diaries of Sherkhan Murtaza should be recognized as a fully-fledged historical source, combining documentary precision with cultural reflexivity and political insight. They open new avenues for research into post-Soviet identity formation, the development of Kazakhstani statehood, and the moral imagination of the transitional era. Incorporating this material into scholarly discourse not only deepens our understanding of the turbulent 1990s, but also offers innovative methodological pathways for interpreting ego-documents within societies undergoing profound transformation.

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