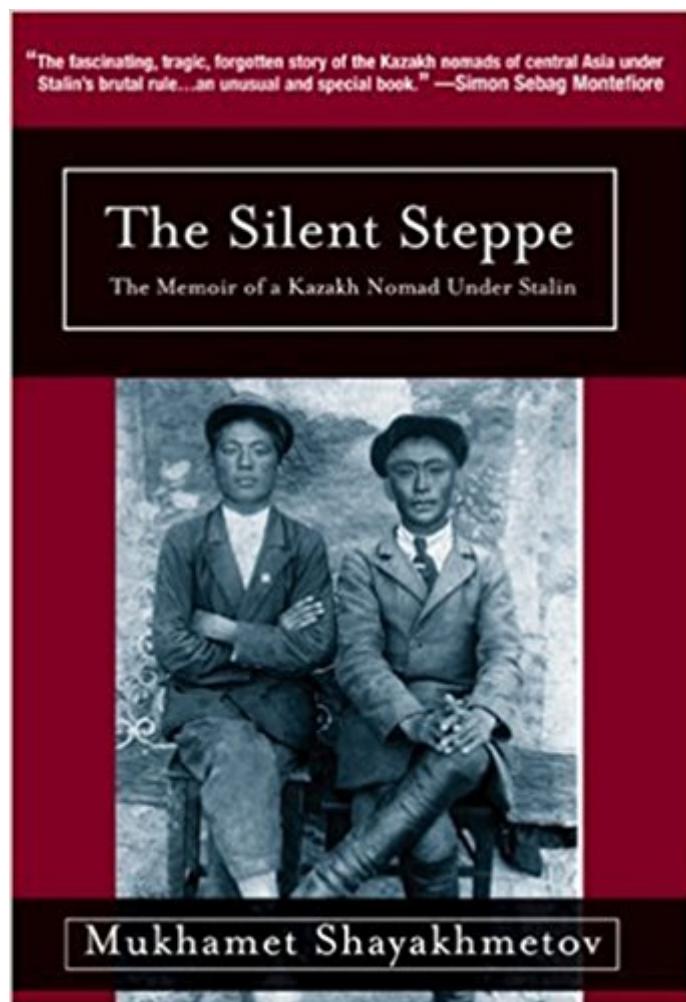


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Silent Steppe: The Memoir Of A Kazakh Nomad Under Stalin



Synopsis

This is a first-hand account of the genocide of the Kazakh nomads in the 1920s and 30s. Nominally Muslim, the Kazakhs and their culture owed as much to shamanism and paganism as they did to Islam. Their ancient traditions and economy depended on the breeding and herding of stock across the vast steppes of central Asia, and their independent, nomadic way of life was anathema to the Soviets. Seven-year-old Shayakhmetov and his mother and sisters were left to fend for themselves after his father was branded a "kulak" (well-off peasant and thus class enemy), stripped of his possessions, and sent to a prison camp where he died. In the following years the family traveled thousands of miles across Kazakhstan by foot, surviving on the charity of relatives. Told with dignity and detachment, this central Asian Wild Swans awakens the reader to the scale of suffering of millions of Kazakhs, and also astonishes and inspires as a most singular survivor's tale.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Silent Steppe is perhaps the best book I've read detailing the plight of the Kazakh nomads under Stalin's rule. Shayakhmetov gives a heart breaking account of the famine, discrimination, and suffering of the 1930s. A smooth read, the narration is crisp and engaging and pulls the reader into the story. I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Kazakhstan, and this book has gone a long way to helping me understand where the people came from and what they lived through. I would recommend this without reservation to anyone interested in learning more about Kazakhstan or the devastation caused by the former Soviet Union.

This is a very interesting picture of how it was for the Kazakhs during the time of Stalin, and how their culture was all but destroyed. The successful were reduced to poverty, having everything they valued taken away from them. This book shows how the former clan / family system was replaced by suspicion, lies, and terror, brother against brother. Very sad and enlightening.

This book was a welcome eye witness account; well organized, poignant. My understanding of the Kazakh people has grown, as has my thankfulness to God for his mercy in preserving a nation amidst such suffering.

I am currently reading this book, and so far it is a great book, and very enlightening on the Kazakh culture and way of life both prior to and during Soviet times. Well worth the read! Mark Conway

Until reading this work, I had never thought of how Stalin's policies impinged on the nomadic peoples of Central Asia. In this memoir, written by the son of a traditional Kazakh herding 'aul' (community), we follow his life from childhood in the 20s - a life of migration, of clan solidarity and traditional ways, to Stalin's disastrous enforced collectivisation in the early 30s. With a combination of corruption, ill-management and drought, there was a mass famine, which the author only survived by the skin of his teeth. "Three years earlier, my mother had ridden a white horse along this same route, sitting astride her silver-edged saddle studded with precious gems, with a child in a travel-cradle fastened to the front of her swaddle, leading a camel by a long rein attached to her left wrist. It was impossible to know what she was thinking now as she traipsed along in a state of semi-starvation." He writes of being banned from school as the son of a 'kulyk' (wealthy peasant), of homelessness, of the freezing winters ... and at last of the onset of World War 2. We know he went on to do well in his chosen career of teaching, becoming a headmaster, and living into old age (this book was written in early 2000s.) As another reviewer states, this is a 'flat', factual recounting of events, rather than an emotional or literary work, but informative, covering a place about which we hear little in the West. The introduction tells us that only "a fragment - perhaps some 5% of the stock-rearing population - has to this day survived." Several pages of b/w photos.

This is an amazing story told by a most remarkable individual. Mukamet Shayakhmetov lived through turbulent times and had heavy responsibilities thrust on him at a very young age, yet he records his survival through harrowing experiences with total equanimity. He bears no resentment against those who wronged him and writes with no bitterness of the massive policy blunders which

resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of his country men and women. Life for the nomadic Kazakh people at the dawn of the twentieth century was always going to change, but the transition could have been far less ruthless than the collectivisation and punitive treatment of successful village communities pushed through by the Bolsheviks. "Silent Steppe" is an evocative account of a young man's journey to adulthood through tragedy, suffering and war. What a life and what a testament.

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