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# The horse as a symbol of cultural identity and resistance in Kazakhstan's colonial history

G. Tokshylykova<sup>1</sup>, A. Abdul Rakhmanuly<sup>2,\*</sup>, S. Assylbekuly<sup>1</sup>, T. Kalibekuly<sup>3</sup>, G. Askarova<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Institute of Philology, Abay Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty 050010, Kazakhstan<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Pedagogy and Humanities, SDU University, Kaskelen 040900, Kazakhstan<sup>3</sup> Department of Theory of Foreign Philology, Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages, Almaty 050022, Kazakhstan\* Corresponding author: A. Abdul Rakhmanuly, [a.abdulrakhmanuly@sdu.edu.kz](mailto:a.abdulrakhmanuly@sdu.edu.kz)

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**Abstract:** This article examines the history of Russian colonization in Kazakhstan, focusing on identity, resistance, and independence within Russia's neo-imperial ambitions. It addresses the socio-political barriers in postcolonial Kazakhstan due to ties with Russia and explores how the Soviet migration policies shaped Kazakhstan's demographic and political landscape. The study outlines the phases of Russian colonization, contrasting Russian narratives of a civilizing mission with Kazakh perspectives on exploitation and cultural erasure. Using postcolonial theory, it deconstructs these narratives and reveals power dynamics. Kazakh literature and poetry are analyzed as mediums of resistance, emphasizing the horse as a symbol of cultural identity. The article concludes by discussing the post-Soviet cultural transformations and the role of literature in nation-building, highlighting the importance of reclaiming cultural symbols and myths for understanding Kazakhstan's colonial history and postcolonial transformation.

**Keywords:** Russian colonization; Kazakhstan; postcolonialism; neo-imperialism; cultural identity

## 1. Introduction

### Russian neo-imperial current

Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula provoked concerns about its imperial ambitions in international relations (Teper, 2015). Some political leaders described it as Putin's "revanchist feelings about the USSR's collapse" (Obama, 2014), while others compared it with "nineteenth and twentieth-century imperialism" (Merkel, 2014). The start of the Russian full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 as an escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War that started in 2014 after the annexation raised these concerns to a new level. Russia's "open denial of Ukraine's political sovereignty" was a significant signal to other post-soviet and East-European countries regarding Russian imperial ambitions in the 21st century (Mälksoo, 2022, p. 471).

Although, in the 2000s, the Kremlin increasingly adopted Prokhanov's and Dugin's neo-imperial ideas into its mainstream and official narratives (Szászdi, 2008, pp. 9–11; Umland, 2010), some academics interpreted this no more than just as Putin's PR tactic to attract nationalists and those fond of its imperial past (Inozemtsev, 2011; Trenin, 2011). Furthermore, they predicted its failure as Russia evolved into a regular nation-state without broad support for imperial responsibilities (Trenin, 2011). However, after annexing the Crimean Peninsula, it became clear that Russia's post-Soviet unification attempts reflected an 'imperial hangover' and 'Soviet nostalgia' among its leaders and majority of population (Krickovic, 2014). In this aspect, it could

be said that “Russia’s imperial and the Soviet legacy drives its post-Soviet integration efforts ... influences its pursuit of regional dominance to maintain its major power status” (Krickovic, 2014, p. 523). As a result, in the last decade, the post-Soviet countries have heightened their concerns towards Russia’s neo-imperial ambitions, and it pushed discussions on their views on the legacy of the Tsarist Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.

The socio-political situation of postcolonial Kazakhstan and decolonisation

Based on the geographical, demographical, economic, historical and socio-political interrelations with Russia, postcolonial Kazakhstan and its political elites could not openly discuss and reflect on its colonial past, including the Russian Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union and start general decolonisation reforms (Cummings, 2003; Kudaibergenova, 2016a; Laitin, 1998). A significant factors contributing to this situation is international relations connected on both geographical and demographic elements, notably the substantial Russian-speaking minority within Kazakhstan and the second longest land border in the world (approximately 7644 km) with its former oppressor (Abashin, 2014; Dave, 2004; O’Beachain and Kevlihan, 2013). Furthermore, throughout each decade of its thirty-year independence, Kazakhstan faced numerous socio-political and economic challenges that hindered the prioritisation of discussions on decolonisation initiatives.

Two years before attaining independence, the census data indicated that Kazakhs constituted about 40% of the total population, a ratio reflecting the demographic composition of Russians in Kazakhstan as per the All-Union population census 1989. This demographic pattern resulted from the systematic internal migration policies enacted by the Soviet Union. Notably, these policies represented a continuation of colonial resettlement strategies that were prevalent during the Tsarist regime. Hence, during the initial decade of independence, this prevailing condition in sovereign Kazakhstan was manifested across both socio-demographic and political spheres. Organisations like “The Russian Community of Kazakhstan, the Russian Union of Kazakhstan, the Republican Slavic Society (LAD) and several communities of Cossacks” promoted different socio-political ideas “from protection of minority interests to secessionism” (Surucu, 2002a, p. 400). It also led to a parliamentary crisis in 1994–1995 between a mostly Russian-speaking cosmopolitan coalition and ethnic Kazakh intellectuals.

Moreover, the Russian government of those years commenced initiatives aimed at bolstering Russian-speaking communities in neighbouring countries and began advocating for dual citizenship for Russian nationalities. These proposals from Russian officials heightened secessionist sentiments within these communities and prompted speculation regarding proposals for a confederate union by cosmopolitan factions. Consequently, amidst the prevalence of separatist sentiments in specific regions and among significant segments of the populace, there was little room for considering decolonisation policies and reflections by the political elites.

In Kazakhstan’s second decade of independence, significant economic growth driven by abundant resources led political leaders to prioritise economic development over ideological issues, echoing Nazarbayev’s earlier “the economy first, then politics” policy—This sidelined discussions on decolonisation and reflections on the colonial past for another decade. Additionally, it allowed tensions with the sizable Russian

population (around 30%) to be avoided; leaders refrained from emphasising Kazakhification in the national discourse (Kudaibergenova, 2016a). Meanwhile, neighbouring Russia's minimal acknowledgement of its colonial past heightened international political sensitivities on these discussions (Abashin, 2020). Given these factors, maintaining the status quo seemed advantageous for Kazakhstani officials.

However, in addition to the world economic crisis of 2008, which woke up Kazakhstani officials from economic success routines, Russia started to prioritise its 'near abroad'. It began its efforts to reunify the post-Soviet region, echoing past Tsarist and the Soviet actions (Gorshenina, 2021a). Furthermore, identity complexities from the Russian populace's unwillingness to consider the shift from an imperial identity to a new modern national identity (Duncan, 2002; Tolz, 2004) backed by official propaganda (Dadabaev, 2020) increased Russia's political officials' rhetorics in their interventions in the decolonisation discourses in post-Soviet countries. Even more, the so-called liberal wing of the Russian political elites advocated for the continuation of a 'historical mission' as a 'liberal empire' in the twenty-first century (Teper, 2015). The evolution of these discourses led to inferiority complexes in Russia's foreign policies in terms of historical issues connected to their colonial past (Kudaibergenova, 2016b). As a result, numerous unresolved questions persist regarding historical events instigated by Russia in Central Asian countries, which remain highly sensitive topics for Russian officials and have the potential to influence their diplomatic posture. Consequently, these events raised concerns of Kazakhstani political and intellectual elites and affected the reactivation of their passive underground decolonisation initiatives.

In the third decade of independence, the complexity of these relations evolved to the next stage. The imperial-nationalist discourse in Russia, intertwined with xenophobia and racism, has been amplified by state media narratives promoting the idea of "collecting Russian lands" (Dadabaev, 2020). This narrative has exacerbated fragmentation and expansionist tendencies among Russian political elites. Consequently, these developments have led to direct involvement in supporting separatist movements in several post-Soviet countries (Dadabaev, 2020, p. 66). These revanchist sentiments, concealed behind economic integration initiatives and Eurasianism ideas, were accompanied by aggressive interventions in the political sovereignty of post-Soviet countries. As a result, local elites became more aware of the need to implement preventive anticolonial measures and apply systematic decolonization mechanisms. One reason the Kazakhstani government may have supported Russian economic integration initiatives was to prevent scenarios like Crimea's annexation and reduce the risk of separatism in northern Kazakhstan. Despite this, decolonization measures were still prioritized, including the switch from the Cyrillic script to Latin, reducing or limiting the broadcasting of Russian channels, renaming streets, train stations, and cities from Russian to Kazakh, and actively incorporating Kazakh symbols, historical myths, heroes, and cultural artifacts into government programs and school curricula. As noted by Kudaibergenova (2016a), trying to find a balance between mitigating aggressive neighbours' imperialist ambitions and taking preventive anticolonial measures inside the country is the case of modern Kazakhstan. However, being in "bilateral economic ties" with Russia "in the Customs and Eurasian Economic Unions (an ideological hybridity on its own),

blurs the historical position and symbol of Russia as the coloniser” and “Kazakhstan’s postcolonial discourse, in this sense” might be “as fragile and insecure as the local process of nation-building” (Kudaibergenova, 2016b, p. 924). Consequently, it can be seen that many decolonisation measures like switching to Latin transcript or the new International Dialing Code (from Russian +7 to +997) sacrificed for some short-term economic or political circumstances by postponing them to an indefinite future. The inconsistency in decolonization policy, shaped by politico-economic realities, has shifted postcolonial academic inquiries away from political and international relations. As a result, these inquiries now focus more on literature and cultural studies, where strong anticolonial rhetoric has been present since the beginning of colonization.

## **2. Materials and methods**

This study employs a qualitative methodology, grounded in the principles of postcolonial theory. The research focuses on historical and cultural analysis of Russian colonization and its impact on Kazakh identity, particularly through literary and symbolic representations of the horse in Kazakh culture. Postcolonial frameworks, as developed by scholars like Said (1977) and Bhabha (2013), have been employed to analyze colonial narratives and forms of resistance in Kazakh literature and poetry. However, since most postcolonial theorists have not specifically addressed Russian colonialism in Central Asia, some of their ideas may not fully apply to this context. Therefore, this study will apply these frameworks with a critical evaluation, adapting them to the specific context of Kazakhstan’s historical and cultural realities.

The study relies on a combination of textual analysis and historical contextualization (Kipping et al., 2014). Texts from Kazakh poets, writers, and historical documents are examined to uncover the layers of meaning that depict the horse as a symbol of cultural resistance. The research integrates primary and secondary sources, including literature, historical accounts, and academic works on postcolonialism and Central Asian history.

A hermeneutical approach is employed to interpret the metaphors and symbols within the selected literary works (McCaffrey et al., 2012). This allows for an in-depth exploration of how the horse, as a cultural symbol, has been utilized to resist colonial oppression and foster national identity. Comparative analysis is also used to contrast Kazakh and Russian perspectives on the colonization process.

The primary materials for this research include Kazakh literary works, poetry, and historical documents that reflect the socio-cultural context of Russian colonization. These texts include:

- Kazakh poetry and literature: Works by renowned Kazakh poets and writers, particularly those who used the image of the horse as a symbol of resistance against Russian colonization. These literary sources are critical to understanding the cultural significance of the horse in the construction of national identity.
- Historical records and colonial archives: Documents detailing the stages of Russian colonization in Kazakhstan, with a focus on policies and practices that influenced Kazakh social structures, cultural expressions, and identity formation.

- Secondary academic sources: Scholarly articles and books on postcolonial theory, Kazakh history, and cultural studies. These sources provide theoretical grounding and historical context for the analysis of literary texts.

The research also engages with previous studies on the role of symbolism in postcolonial resistance, drawing connections between Kazakh cultural narratives and broader themes in postcolonial literature.

### **3. Results and discussion**

#### **3.1. Postcolonial perspectives on the Russian colonization of Kazakhstan**

The history of Russian colonization in Kazakhstan is a contentious and complex narrative, marked by divergent perspectives between Russian, Kazakh and other scholars. This chapter will review and evaluate these differences using postcolonial theories as frameworks. Additionally, historians' knowledge production process under the Soviet Union's dictate on the legacy of Russian colonization will be reevaluated and examined.

##### **3.1.1. Historical overview of Russian colonization**

Overall, the Russian colonization of Kazakh land can be described in three stages based on the characteristics of the actions taken in the specific chronological period. In the first stage, between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 18th century, the Russian Empire mainly concentrated on expeditions and reconnoitring, diplomatic interactions, and building military settlements to establish a frontier in the further Steppe. In addition, one of the main focuses was finding ways to reduce the power of local elites and corrupt political institutions by dividing and providing foundations for differentiations inside the khanate (Abduldabekova, 2007). As a result, in the next stage of the colonization of the Steppe during the 1830s to the 1860s, it was manipulable to build more fortifications and switch from underground diplomatic influences to direct military pressure on the Kazakh khanate's political establishments. Moreover, from that stage, the Russian Empire acquired land for Russian settlements and enacted colonial reforms to limit the movements of Kazakh nomads (Gorshenina, 2021b).

The third phase, from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, was marked by the systematic and severe resettlement of Russian peasants to the Steppe and the forced displacement of Kazakhs from fertile lands. Furthermore, political reforms supported and backed by military dictate took all the power from local elites and laid the foundation to erode the nation's unity. Contrary to the Russian narrative of peaceful colonization, it is crucial to note that Kazakhs actively resisted through direct clashes and political organizations through these stages. This resistance challenges the dominant historical discourse and underscores the complexities of the colonization process.

The Bolshevik Revolution led to a new phase of colonization under the Soviet rule. Liberation from Tsarist imperialism ostensibly ended colonial discourse, yet the Soviet regime quickly reasserted control, integrating the region into the Soviet economic and political system. This period involved significant projects aimed at social progress and transforming the cultural landscape of Turkestan, requiring broad

mobilization of Muslims to support the Bolshevik cause against anti-Soviet national elites (Gorshenina, 2021b).

During the First and Second World Wars, Kazakhs sought independence but faced harsh repression under the Soviet rule. The totalitarian regime implemented ethnic cleansing, repression, and forced labor, leading to widespread suffering and loss of life. The Kazakh population endured forced sedentarization, famines, and linguistic changes, which eroded their cultural and intellectual heritage (Kassymbekova, 2017).

The Stalinist era saw the promotion of “Socialism in one country,” which transformed the USSR into a new socialist empire with a colonial flavor. A discourse of co-optation replaced the anti-colonial discourse, and the Soviet state emphasized the superiority of its regime for Central Asian peoples (Gorshenina, 2021a). It can be seen from the actions of the communists in the 1920s that the emancipation from Tsarist autocracy resulted in a formal severance from colonial rhetoric, governance, and the emblems of the Russian Empire while simultaneously concealing the evident traces of continuity. These notably encompassed the swift reoccupation of territories extending to the former imperial boundaries during the civil conflict, which implies a subtle, covert merging of colonial and class narratives (Sahni, 1997).

### **3.1.2. Russian and Kazakh academics’ perspectives on the history of colonization**

Historically, Russian academic narratives have framed the colonization of Kazakh land as a civilizing mission. For example, based on reviews of Etkind (2015), one of the leading Russian Imperial historians of the late imperial period Historian Vasily Kliuchevsky and his colleagues depicted Russian expansion as a systematic and balanced effort carried out by fur hunters, monks, soldiers, and settlers to bring civilization to the “wild expanse of Eurasia”. This story tends to downplay the brutality and compulsion that came along with Russian colonialism, emphasizing its “alleged goodness” (Gorshenina, 2021a) instead. This was essential to establish the view of Central Asia as an extension of ‘our’ domain or as an ‘internal Orient,’ a notion that later evolved into a contentious concept, especially considering that Western powers similarly regarded their colonies as intrinsic territories, despite the geographical separation from the metropole by oceans. Moreover, Etkind (2015), is also a great advocate and leading promoter of terms like “internal”, which also shows the continuation of the discourse of the imperial historians.

The concept of “internal colonization” is especially relevant in the Russian context, when colonization was portrayed as an extension of Russia’s natural borders rather than overseas expansion. According to Etkind (2015) and Gorshenina (2021a), this idea corresponds with Russia’s self-perception as a “unifier of East and West” and its geographic location, which supposedly made its colonialism less damaging and more compassionate than that of Western oceanic imperialism. From the perspective of Kazakhstan, Russia has always been the external colonial oppressor (Kudaibergenova, 2016b, p. 918), and their colonial violations can be defined very well with Osterhammel’s (2005, p. 15) words: “in which an entire society is robbed of its historical line of development, externally manipulated and transformed according to the needs and interests of the colonial rulers”. For example, Kazakh historians and poets offer a viewpoint focusing on exploitation, suppression, and loss of culture

(Tokşilikova and Abdul rakhmanuly, 2023). Furthermore, Kazakh academician M.K. Kozybaev criticizes the term “lesser evil” established in the Soviet historiography, stating that it represents subjugation, exploitation of resources and genocide. He argues that Russian colonization was just as harmful as other colonial atrocities around the world, opposing the narrative of benevolent rule and underscoring the ongoing oppression from the Tsarist era to the Soviet regime. He states: “Colonialism does not have a human face; colonialism and humanism are antipodes... It personifies national oppression, robbery of natural resources, genocide” (Kozybaev, 2000, p. 100).

Unlike the Russian inclination to divide the 300 years of Russian control between the Tsarist and the Soviet eras, Kazakh narratives frequently see the 300 years of Russian colonialism as a single, cohesive period of colonization. In this aspect, postcolonial historian Tlostanova (2020, p. 135) claimed that “the Soviet Empire was not essentially different from the Czarist one, though it reformulated the main developmentalist slogan in a more radical way, attempting to build a socialist modernity (“to catch up and leave behind”), while also escalating its global geopolitical appetites”. Moreover, the Soviets, compared to the Tsarist regime, were more ruthless and sophisticated, grounded in the systematic eradication of all forms of dissenting thought and existence (e.g., repressions, GULAGs).

Promoting postcolonial discourse is not only beneficial for colonized countries but is also essential for the colonizers to evaluate historical events properly. Being open to different historical experiences and perspectives and recognizing that the metropolis’s perspective is not always absolute is the first step in working with shared history (Kassymbekova, 2017). Furthermore, there are other intricate methods to examine the intertwined histories of Kazakhstan and Russia, including the concepts of history-in-equal-parts (*histoire à parts égales*), shared or entangled history (*histoire partagée*), and cross-over history (*histoire croisée*) (Sidney Mintz et al., 2003). These approaches encourage considering many points of view and identifying connected historical events (Gorshenina, 2021a).

On the other hand, history studies were always under the strict supervision of the Russian colonial administration, and deviation from the ideological direction was not allowed in all ways. Moreover, each thesis in this subject was sent for defence only after passing strict inspection in Moscow (Gorshenina, 2021b). Even in the post-Soviet era, the formation of historical knowledge in Kazakhstan has not undergone profound changes; the main reason for this can be explained by the fact that at the beginning of independence, scientists formed in the Soviet era could not suddenly change their discourses, and new scientists did not come due to various socio-economic troubles after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kassymbekova, 2017). Nevertheless, some scholars have tried to study history and reevaluate concepts from the postcolonial perspective, although this does not directly address the discourses of postcolonialism in the Soviet and neo-imperial Russian contexts. Several Central Asian academics also note these limitations in their research.

Nevertheless, young scientists who have recently become acquainted with Western science and recent postcolonial methodologies are contributing to the emergence of new changes and discourses. With direct access to Western postcolonial ideas and instruments, Central Asian scholars are beginning to reevaluate their colonial past critically. Their research on history was able to contribute to a deeper

consideration of the colonial past, a critical evaluation from a new perspective (Gorshenina, 2021b).

Aside from historians, who are often constrained by political agendas and censorship, the intelligentsia—comprising poets, writers, artists, and other intellectuals—play a distinctive role in expressing historical events and viewpoints. They possess more flexible tools and creative strategies to navigate the constraints of official discourse. Poets, in particular, have consistently reinforced cultural identity through their artistic creations while opposing colonial narratives. For example, prominent Kazakh poets of the second half of the 20th century, such as Yesengali Raushanov, Svetkali Nurzhan, Toktarali Tanzharik, Zhanat Zhankashaly, and Galym Zhailybai, “have utilized horses to express the tension between the community and the individual, existential barriers, and self-restraint” (Tokşilikova and Abdul rakhmanuly, 2023, p. 431). Additionally, Tokşilikova and Abdul rakhmanuly (2023, p. 430) noted that the symbol of the horse was employed and transformed by Kazakh poets in response to historical periods and political shifts, evolving from “expressing social issues to resistance, liberation, self-expression, and extreme emotional outpouring” to “a yearning for autonomy, individualism, and nostalgia for bygone ages”. These lyrical interpretations of the Kazakh people’s lived experiences offer a more personal and human portrayal of colonialism’s consequences, fostering a profound sense of empathy and connection in the audience.

Despite the recent surge of interest in the image and role of horses in Kazakh literature, history, language, and culture within the Kazakh scholarly community, most studies are confined to a single subject area. For instance, articles in the Kazakh language, such as “The Image of a Horse in Kazakh Mythology” (Uskenbaeva and Zhanysbekova, 2023), “Horse Cult in Saka-Kazakh Funeral Style” (Edylovna, 2023), “The Problem of Horses in the Study of Ancient Horse Culture on the Kazakh Steppe” (Amangalieva et al., 2024), “A Horse and Human Fate in Modern Kazakh Stories” (Askarova et al., 2024), and “The Image of the Horse in Kazakh Stories” (Nurjaksina and Shukumanova, 2022), each focus on a particular aspect of the horse in Kazakh culture. However, these works generally lack broader attempts at generalization or exploration of the horse’s more considerable symbolic significance for postcolonial Kazakhstan. In this manuscript, taking into account this gap, we try to discuss and generalize the symbol and meaning of horse for postcolonial kazakhs’ identity and decolonial attempts. As stressed by Hobson (2007) animals can be considered as part of political life and space, so with the symbol of the horse modern Kazakh society and international policy will be reviewed in this article.

### **3.1.3. Edward said’s Orientalism and Central Asia**

The idea of Orientalism, which Edward Said put forward, is still helpful in comprehending the academic Russian viewpoint on Central Asia. This viewpoint produced a manufactured picture of the East and stereotyped the East as being divided into a barbaric, deviant East and a civilized, rational West (Gorshenina, 2021a). The dominance of the colonizing power was bolstered, and with these dichotomies, they tried to justify colonial actions. Central Asian Orientalism appeared through the persistence of dependent relationships and the cross-cultural interference that let nationalism and anti-colonial discourse emerge in the Post-Soviet historical inquiries



(Gorshenina, 2021a). Despite these initiatives, a homogenized worldview that frequently ignored local viewpoints resulted from the Soviet Union's centralized control over historical narratives. The historical events of Russia's colonization of Kazakhstan are debated and characterized by significant differences between Kazakh and Russian viewpoints. Kazakh historians draw attention to the exploitation and oppression intrinsic to the colonization process, in contrast to Russian academic narratives that have historically presented colonization as a civilizing endeavour. Harmonizing these conflicting narratives and advancing a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of Kazakhstan's colonial past will be achievable via the adoption of postcolonial theories and appreciation for alternative points of view. Acknowledging and honouring each other's perspectives on shared history is a crucial first step for postcolonial transformation in the post-Soviet space.

### **3.2. Identity crisis: From horse eaters to kentavros**

As discussed in the first chapter, Russia has long had identity issues as a nation, which have made significantly hard its self-perception and reflection on its colonial actions. As a result, they are impacting today's neo-imperial aggression as well. Unlike the British and French empires, Russia is between Western and Eastern civilizations (Gorshenina, 2021b). Therefore, the complexities and misconceptions surrounding Russian identity, particularly about its inferiority to European countries and superiority towards its Asian part, have resulted in a unique form of imperialism that always feels that it needs to prove itself and find its place in human history.

A major identity crisis was also displayed by Russian elites throughout the Tsarist era, who lacked a distinct concept of civilization or a purpose to civilize their colonies. They eschewed their own tongue in favor of Western cultural standards and spoke French or German frequently in an attempt to gain acceptance from Europe. According to Etkind (2015), this cultural inferiority mentality resulted in colonialism that was motivated more by economics than by ideology. The idea of internal colonization, as proposed by Alexander Etkind, demonstrates the distinctive characteristics of Russian colonialism, which focused as much on integrating internal cultural differences as on extending territorial authority due to the empire's continuous geographic reach. This method stands in stark contrast to the maritime empires of Europe, which had great distances and oceans separating them from their colonists (Etkind, 2015). Applying Etkind's theory of internal colonization to the Kazakh steppe calls into question its validity. In the event that colonization is "internal," it implies a political structure as opposed to an imperial invasion. On the other hand, it is intrinsically foreign and imperial if it is real colonization. By restricting its colonial efforts to economic exploitation and causing little to no cultural or ideological disruption in Kazakh culture, Russian internal colonialism devalued the empire (Gorshenina, 2021a). The main economic reason for colonizing Kazakhstan during the Tsarist era was to settle Russians there and take use of the country's riches. A more ideological type of colonization did not surface until the Soviet control, when socialism was imposed and nomadic Kazakhs were compelled to settle down. Radical change was attempted at this time to impose Soviet modernism and erase cultural distinctions (Gorshenina, 2021a). The colonization programs of the Soviet administration were firmly based in

the socialist ideology, which was incompatible with the values, economics, and culture of the Kazakh steppe. Nearby geographically but culturally far, the Soviet Union aggressively enforced sedentarism, atheism, and Russification of language in an attempt to homogenize its heterogeneous people. These measures, which preserved primarily surface-level cultural markers for exhibition but essentially eliminated many facets of Kazakh identity, were justified under the pretense of modernization (Gorshenina, 2021b). During the Soviet era, narratives that revealed the colonial aspect of Soviet programs were repressed due to the centralized control over academic discourse. Anti-colonial discourses in Kazakhstan were frequently restricted to literature and art due to governmental restrictions (Gorshenina, 2021b). As a result, poets and jyraus developed a rich legacy of folkloristic resistance, utilizing the horse emblem to convey anti-colonial feelings.

Kazakhstan after the Soviet Union has had a difficult time recovering its national identity and cultural legacy. The imposition of the Soviet ideas and the Russification process deeply damaged Kazakh society. In order to restore postcolonial justice, the nationalist movement has placed a strong focus on the rehabilitation of the Kazakh language and the empowerment of the ethnic group bearing the same name (Kudaibergenova, 2018). A rich legacy of nomadic folklore, symbols, historical figures, challenges, and cultural heritage has shaped today's identity of Kazakhs. Benedict Anderson noted that nations are fictitious groupings conceptualized regarding language rather than blood. In this aspect, due to russification policies during the Soviet Union, in the first decade of the independence, Kazakhs had a hard time recovering their language presence in their own country. Furthermore, even after thirty years of independence, challenges in the language front in Kazakhstan are as complex as before. Kazakh literature, symbols and poets have become essential for building national identity through this period, filling in the gaps left by historical narratives suppressed during the Soviet era (Anderson, 1991; Kudaibergenova, 2017).

Russia's and Kazakh history can be examined from a postcolonial perspective, considering that they both experienced a sense of inferiority from their Western neighbours and went through an identity crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia (Tsarist and Soviet) could not bring or introduce any progress to their colonies regarding self-determination and cultural advancement because, as an empire, it did not have a stable mission, apparent agenda and consistent national identity. Furthermore, blind dependence on short-term economic benefits and building an ideology on the maximization of exploitation of colonized countries led to the creation of constructs that did not absorb but attach to the identities of the nations that were involuntary participants of those projects. Throughout the Soviet era, these exploitations were intensified via ideological indoctrination and cultural homogeneity, which also affected the crisis of nations' identity. Consequently, as a nation, Kazakhs lost their cultural and identity differences and gained the same identity issues as their oppressor. This can be seen in independent Kazakhstan's international ambitions, which always try to get recognition from others and measure themselves based on Western standards. Understanding these dynamics is crucial given Kazakhstan's ongoing postcolonial battles to reclaim its cultural history and sense of self. However, the crisis in the case of the Kazakhs was not limited to national identity issues; it also had an impact on long-term ecological, demographical, cultural, and economic aspects

as a result of the super exploitative colonial actions. While Russia's main postcolonial issue after the collapse of the Soviet Union was working with its colonial past and responsibilities and finding its position in new realities of international morale norms. Nevertheless, time has shown that they failed this challenge again, as they repeated the mistakes they made in the 20th century again in the 21st century (Afghanistan war—1979, Ukraine war—2022). According to Tlostanova (2020), postcolonial studies examine the colonial legacies and the transhistorical frameworks that influenced local resistance to colonial power.

### **3.3. The horse as a symbol of resistance to image of independence**

In Kazakh culture, horses have traditionally stood for individuality, resilience, and manner of life. Due to nomadic life, which requires seasonal movements from one location to another, horses could provide Kazakhs with this mobility to carry and protect the life of the Steppe. Therefore, historically and culturally, Kazakhs and horses share a tight bond; metaphorically, they are brothers. After the colonial oppression of Tsarist Russia, this bond started to get symbolic contexts as well. Moreover, in the many works of Kazakh writers and poets, horses became the main characters of resistance against the Soviet Union's forceful sedentarism and economic transformations. The symbol of the horse started to get meaning in the good old days and independent days and manifested the uniqueness of the Kazakh lifestyle. However, the Soviet government tried to advertise industry and quick economic growth; therefore, taking horses for industrial needs was one of the main priorities. As a result of this contradiction in the views, horses became something between industrialization instruments and cultural identification. Nevertheless, through a range of artistic manifestations and actions of resistance, the Kazakh people resisted these significant cultural and social changes brought about by the imposition of foreign ideas and lifestyles (Kudaibergenova, 2018).

Discourses and narrations on the “positive role of colonialism” in postcolonial Russia could be compared with the dubious notion of the benefits of theft. However, this does not stop Russian historians from making arguments that glorify colonialism. It makes them ignore the tremendous harm and upheaval brought about by colonization, including the erasing of colonized peoples' cultures and their exploitation for economic gain (Gorshenina, 2021a). This fable was especially harmful in Kazakhstan as thousands of years of nomadic life traditions, rich folklore, unique ecologic, zero waste lifestyle, customs and cultural heritage of nomadic existence were deprived in the half of the century.

The transition from traditional literary genres such as epic poetry to contemporary ones like cyberpunk exemplifies the evolution of resistance and identity in Kazakhstan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Zhakulayev and Babashov, 2023; Zhakulayev and Takirov, 2022). National identity expression and resistance to colonial and postcolonial oppressions have benefited immensely from literature. Specifically, marginalized voices may challenge dominant narratives and assert agency over their history and culture through postcolonial literature (Helgesson, 2014). It is not sufficient to read postcolonial literature as political domination and power. It serves as an alternative domain and form of authority that permits resistance and the

manifestation of many identities (Helgesson, 2014). Postcolonial literary criticism originally criticized mainstream literature from colonial centers in order to see Western and “other” literary works as unique expressions of the worldwide historical moment of imperialism (Said, 1977; Spivak, 1985). Postcolonialism frequently reduces the literary to the political and asserts a clear connection between literature and history. This method runs the danger of ignoring the formal, stylistic, and aesthetic elements that make literature unique. But these specifics are essential to comprehending how literature functions in both postcolonial and colonial resistance (Casanova, 2005; Helgesson, 2014).

Europe as a memory—a collection of persistent emotional and ideological impacts that mold cultural consciousness—is reflected in the temporalities of literature in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Chow, 2004). Post-socialist cultural producers in Kazakhstan have attempted to recapture discourses that were formerly considered outdated under Soviet frameworks, such as shamanism and nomadism, and have centered their efforts on these aspects (Kudaibergenova, 2018). In this context, authenticity is strongly linked to a society’s values and ideas. Independent artists assert that the absence of governmental sponsorship makes their work more powerful and meaningful and avoids propagandistic practices (Dutton, 2003). The Soviet state’s appropriation of artistic labor for political propaganda gave rise to the authenticity argument (Nauruzbayeva, 2011).

The cultural transformations in post-Soviet Kazakhstan have dramatically influenced the development of cultural production. Artists positioned themselves within the framework of “Art of social relevance,” emphasizing their responsibility to serve society, much like the Soviet call for the social responsibility of art (Nauruzbayeva, 2011). This post-socialist and post-Soviet cultural transformation aimed to distance itself from the legacies of Soviet state domination and censorship, advocating for cultural renewal (Adams, 1999, 2010). Literature has been central to nation-building and the establishment of national identity in Kazakhstan. It serves as the collective expression of society, transmitting both history and cultural identity (Laurenson and Swingewood, 1972). The literary text transcends historical fact, depicting the national heroic past and representing ideology in the lived experience of societies (Bakhtin, 1981; Berger, 2007). The process of interpreting and reinterpreting symbols and myths is crucial in understanding national identity. For example, according to Myadar (2011), in modern Mongolia “the horse as the national emblem representing the essence of Mongolian identity through a process of romanticizing the past” (Podoler, 2024, p. 4). Anthony Smith’s (1988) concepts of myths of ancestry, the Golden Age, and liberation are particularly relevant in this context. These myths aid in defining cultural identity and constructing the national narrative.

The horse represents the intricate relationship between resistance, identity, national glory, drive and independence in modern Kazakh culture. Despite opposition, censorship, and oppression during the Soviet and Tsarist regimes, horses remained a powerful representation of the Kazakh way of life and resistance to tyrannical colonial rule. As in all the national liberation uprisings, horses took an active part and were trusted comrades of protestors. For example, in postcolonial Korea horse became a symbol of “economic success, positive branding, and post-colonial strength, confidence, and legitimacy, by conveying a wide range of images, including beauty,

cuteness, vigor, and valor” (Podoler, 2024, p. 19). So, literature has been crucial in conveying these details since it serves as a vehicle for voicing resistance and national identity. Interestingly, some studies on colonial history in the Arabian peninsula also noted that horses are the symbol of identity and resistance against colonial rulers (Roche, 2020). Society reinterprets the myths’ symbolic structures through a depth-hermeneutical perspective, projecting potential meanings that may deviate from conventional readings (Thompson, 1990). The ongoing cultural changes in post-Soviet Kazakhstan are reshaping and changing these narratives, highlighting the importance of retrieving and reinterpreting cultural symbols and myths in nation-building.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Analyzing 300 hundred years of Russia’s colonization of Kazakhstan provides a complex picture of resistance, cultural repression, the fight for self-determination, numerous dangers to national existence and the ongoing process of postcolonial identity building through the decades. In this article, we tried to review various viewpoints on national identity issues through the postcolonial perspective and evaluate the role of horses in the literature to shape this identity. Kazakhstan has faced multiple challenges in its decolonization process, mainly due to its close economic, demographic and sociopolitical ties to Russia. Moreover, a similar identity crisis in Russia’s postcolonial reality, aggressive policy on their imperial legacy, and inconsistencies with accepting their past colonies’ sovereignty make it more challenging. This complexity is increased because a sizable section of Kazakhstan’s population speaks Russian, and the longest land border with former oppressors isolates Kazakhstan from Russian influence. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan is trying to gradually regain its political and cultural independence, taking advantage of economic achievements and geopolitical turbulence in the last three decades. Attempts to adopt the Latin alphabet and actions to support and engage the use of the Kazakh language at various levels could be examples of these steps as it could be a part of a broader effort to foster a distinct national identity independent of its colonial past.

The symbolic use of the horse in poetry and lyrics represents the Kazakh people’s quest for identity and independence. Horses can be seen as characters far from reality and mostly fictional, but nomadic people always had more significant and profound meanings regarding horses. As Birke and Brandt (2009, p. 195) mentioned, “the combined embodiment of horse and rider resonates with masculinity”, epic poems and poetry never divided rider, hero (батыр), warrior without horse, and this symbol always represented the resistance and willingness to fight against oppression. So, a cornerstone of Kazakh culture, the horse stands for the people’s resilience and fortitude in the face of Soviet and Russian domination; it is easily seen in the works of the poets during Khrushchev’s thaw.

Literary works and artistic expressions serve as podiums for resistance and identity reclamation and work as platforms for avoiding strict censorship dictates. Additionally, they provide excellent foundations for reconstructing national identity in postcolonial reality and finding clear community values for nation-building. For example, the themes of resistance and pride in Kazakh literature have greatly influenced Kazakh attitudes toward colonialism and identifying the nation’s values.

Kazakhstani poets and writers have preserved and shared historical and cultural knowledge that was altered or suppressed during Soviet rule by using their artistic expression, creative thinking, metaphoric characters and national symbols. After independence, this work started to gain a second, more substantial wave by raising national consciousness and bringing buried stories back to life of the more significant population. This work also can contribute to the discussions on postcolonial identity of the Kazakh nation, and reflecting on the past under the occupation. It is also essential to consider today's geopolitical reality and sensitive economic and cultural close ties with former oppressor Russia. Nevertheless, history, especially colonial history, has to be reexamined and reinterpreted from a postcolonial viewpoint if the nation's politics and culture are to prosper and find their way to develop by accepting all the past it passed; that is what makes nations and shapes its unique identity. Based on the discussion in previous chapters we can conclude that the colonial history of Kazakhstan can not be relayed only to historians works of the Soviet Union, as most of them censored by Moscow, and more complex ways of analysis required to do objective conclusions. One of the examples can be poems and novels of that period, as authors could find more creative and symbolic characters as horses to avoid censorship and deliver messages on oppressions and colonization efforts of the regime (Tsaris or Soviet). In this article we discussed the symbol of horse and its evaluation on different periods of colonial and postcolonial Kazakhstan (Zhakulayev et al., 2024). This work can be used as a foundation for future studies on complex, cross subject issues like international relations in Central Asia, poscolonial modern culture and literature studies. In the future studies, in detail examples of poems and novels with the symbol of horse could be analyzed and provided. Additionally, more focus on colonial history of Central Asia as a whole is required, as many interrelated, cross-cultural and historical events can be viewed from a broader context.

All in all, Russia's presence in Central Asia profoundly impacts Kazakhstan's collective mindset and cultural landscape. Despite this, Kazakhstan actively tries to shape an identity that respects its history while aiming for independence and influence by reclaiming its culture and embracing symbols such as the horse. The determination of its people and the strategic use of cultural elements suggest a promising future in achieving true sovereignty and a distinct national identity.

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