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## The Powers of Soviet Puppetry

In 1941, the Alma-Ata government puppet theatre had a problem with Lilliputians. Nadezhda Pavlovna Amori, director of the recently-formed theatre in the young Soviet capital, wrote a letter to the Management of Artistic Affairs of the SNK KAZSSR to complain that, when touring, the puppet theatre frequently ran into private theatres in various parts of the Kazakh steppe. One such act called themselves “The Illusionist Apollo and the Lilliputians,” but it seemed the latter were simply small children. A family circus, the Vinogradovs, boasted a puppet theatre, lions, and bears. The lions never appeared, the bears didn’t do anything except fuss and struggle, and there were only 3 puppets, similarly disgusting, Amori wrote.

The director worried that these hacks endangered the pedagogical and political work her own troupe was carrying out. On October 10, 1935 the Narkompros Kaz. SSSR had declared that a puppet theatre be established for the extracurricular education of children, with a budget of 14,000 rubles. By March 1936, the theatre was already collecting reviews from schools, collective farms, and workers’ organizations the troupe was visiting around Kazakhstan.

### Bigger Problems in the Kazakh SSR

Rogue theatres were presumably not the main concern of most residents of Soviet Kazakhstan during this period. During the first post-Revolutionary years, Soviet authorities worked to settle Kazakh nomads by forcing herders to take up work on collective farms and stripping *bais* (or beys) of wealth and power by diminishing their livestock. Famine, between 1930 and 1933, claimed the lives of many, with the Kazakh population suffering the most. Starvation caused further flight to neighbouring areas.

The Kazakh steppe also became the site of gulags for suspected enemies of the people, along with the destination for forcibly deported “special settlers” (*spetspereselentsy*) of various ethnicities—Koreans, Chechens, Poles, Balkars, Meskhetian Turks, and others. They, too, were placed on collective farms in the 1930s. In 1941, an executive order forcibly moved Soviet citizens of ethnic German descent east to Kazakhstan and Siberia to prevent them fighting with German forces.

In light of the struggles of most citizens to stay alive during this time, the government’s establishment of the puppet theatre seems surprising.

### Puppet Enthusiasm in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

However, the theatres were in line with a Soviet commitment to re-appropriate this form of popular entertainment to educate the masses and children on socialist principles. It moreover grew out of pre-Revolutionary enthusiasm for puppetry in Russian metropolises. The puppet was an inspiration to avant-garde theatre makers such as Vsevolod Meyerhold. Artists such as Natalia Simonovich-Efimova worked to establish puppetry as high art.

Children’s culture, more broadly, was a place where avant-garde writers, artists, and theatre makers were quite active in the Soviet Union. In the early Soviet period, children’s literature offered a format for collaboration across modalities of language and illustration. As

socialist realism took over as the dominant form for adult literature, children's literature was the only place where experimental writers such as Daniil Kharms could publish work at all.

The Alma-Ata theatre was but one of many government puppet theatres established during the 1930s. The government puppet theatres in Yerevan, Baku, and Kazan, for example, all trace their origins to this period.

During the early Soviet period, the Russian carnival puppet *Petrushka* – an adaptation of the Italian *Pulcinella* tradition that would become known as “Punch” in England – became remediated for Soviet puppet theatres. Praised for his (pre-Revolutionary) anti-authoritarian stance, he nonetheless appeared in books encouraging children to attend Soviet nurseries.

### The New Central Asian Puppet Theatre

Puppetry was hardly new to Central Asia. Uzbek, Tajik, and Kazakh traditions all included their own forms of puppetry in their repertoire. The Kazakh form of *orteke*, however, hardly resembled the hand puppet *Petrushka*. *Orteke* puppets were carved wooden figures – most often a goat – with a mechanism to animate them while playing traditional Kazakh music. This form, according to puppeteers I met during my fieldwork in Kazakhstan, was suppressed by Soviet authorities because it was considered too spiritual.

Kazakh identity was still present in the theatre, nonetheless. The theatre has always been bilingual. At first, it consisted of two troupes – one Russian-speaking and one Kazakh-speaking. The Kazakh troupe performed a play about *Aldar Kose*, a traditional Kazakh folk hero. Other early productions included a Soviet adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* and a puppet version of a beloved Chekhov story about a dog, *Kashtanka*.

Early reviews of the theatre written by spectators from the schools, collective farms, or factories that the troupe had visited were full of praise for the troupe for its efforts in “reeducating” its viewers, which seem to have included not only children, but workers, as well. An Almaty factory moreover offered suggestions for the troupe, encouraging them to use puppets to dramatize a comparison of pre-revolutionary versus Soviet schools, drawing scenes from the satirical plays of eighteenth-century Russian playwright Denis Fonvizin. They also suggest that Narkompros organize no less than one puppet theatre in each oblast in Kazakhstan.

The director of a school for machinists in Berëzovskii, in East Kazakhstan, writes in 1936, “We live in such faraway places, that no theatre has ever visited us...and we were for the first time able to see the puppet theatre in Kazakh language...those who watched the spectacle from the workers collectives were very happy with the visit of the puppet theatre...” They request for someone to come from such theatres to help them organize their own theatres like this.

In 1940, Amori boasts, “Both collectives of the theatre have significantly grown in the last half year and could develop further if not for the lack of space.” The lack of space appears frequently in Amori's descriptions of the theatre at this time, for it seems that during these few years they were constantly moved from one space to another, never given a theatre of their own. They were moved from one place to another, sharing space sometimes with the Uighur Theatre or at the House of Pioneers. Rehearsals and performances were interrupted by others' meetings, and they had to leave their props and sets outside, where they got ruined in the rain. Amori held that it was only the theatre workers' love of the theatre and their sincere wish to entertain children that prevented them from quitting.

### Gradual Institutionalisation of the Puppet Theatre

Before a separate space for the theatre could be built, let alone establish more all over the Kazakh SSR, World War II seems to have brought the troupes' work to a temporary halt. It was revived through the work of the State Theatre for Children and Youth of Kazakhstan in 1944. It seems it was not until 1967 that an independent puppet theatre re-emerged in Alma-Ata.

The puppet theatre would eventually find a home in the heart of Alma-Ata, near Panfilov Park, and puppetry became increasingly institutionalized over the course of the twentieth century. Whereas earlier puppet artists came from all manner of previous professions, puppetry became a subject one could study at art school for three or four years.

### Renovations and Endurance

By the time I arrived in Almaty for my ethnographic fieldwork in 2012, the theatre had more than 20 full-time puppeteers, a large team of puppet-makers, and a complex staff of administrators. During my first year of ethnographic fieldwork there, the theatre building was undergoing a massive renovation, and the puppeteers again found themselves in a temporary rehearsal space, at the city zoo.

The renovation prompted directors to push for new plays and new approaches to puppetry. The new shows that premiered after the renovation included, nonetheless, new versions of classics, including *Aldar Kose* and *Kashtanka*.

Based on my examination of the archives and my work with the puppeteers at the contemporary theatre, the theatre endures, just as it did during Amori's directorship, thanks to the artists' commitment to offering children a theatre as part of their education.