

**Symbolic Capital of the Memory of Communism.**  
**The Quest for international recognition in Kazakhstan**

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*Abstract:*

The article contributes to the theorisation of collective memory involved in building the international representations of a nation, and examines how strategic responses to the legacy of the totalitarian past have been deployed to shape the image of the nations' remembering agency via the connections with other actors within the global memory field. Drawing on the Bourdieusian concept of symbolic capital, the article develops a concept of the symbolic capital of mnemonics in order to uncover the role of memory in enhancing international standing and prestige, a crucial preoccupation for peripheral states emerging on the global arena. While recent scholarship on traumatic memory as a category of social analysis underlines the role of memory in bolstering the collective identity of nations, the article demonstrates how memories of the communist past provide a platform for connections between nation-states through shared meta-narratives. Through an empirical case study that uses an ethnographic approach, participant observation and analysis of media accounts, the article examines how the official commemorative practices of Kazakhstan have served to realign the country's mnemonic agenda with that of the global memory of communism and to redeploy the symbolic capital gained through a shared mnemonics to reassert its legitimacy both abroad and at home.

*Keywords:*

Internationalism, Kazakhstan, Memory of Communism, Recognition, Symbolic Capital.

Established scholarship on the political uses of collective memory has long been focused on domestic narratives that can help people cope with difficulties, provide common frames of understanding and educate future generations (Halbwachs 1992; Confino and Fritsche 2002; Rivera 2008). Politically coordinated and officially sanctioned remembrance of the past, endorsed by elites and shaped by institutional control, constitutes the core of any state's memory politics. Battles over images of the

past are seen as integral to the shaping of collective identity, and to the building of political and cultural legitimacy within societies (Anderson 1983; Gillis 1994; Nora 1989; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Sociological studies of transnational memory, on the other hand, focus on the non-state actors involved in cross-border cooperation, building transnational networks of memory activists, civil society groups and independent memory entrepreneurs (Rothberg 2009; De Cesari and Ann Rigney 2014; Grosescu, Baby & Neumayer 2019). This research, in contrast, examines how a state can operate as a memory agency on the transnational scene by deploying memory in such a manner as to manage its representation to an international audience. Through a case study of Kazakhstani memory politics the article investigates how this country's elites seek to realign their commemorative agenda with that of the global memory of the victims of communism. These elites thereby seek to create and promote a positive image of their country in the international arena, which, in turn, becomes an important lever for reasserting their status and prestige. Drawing on the Bourdieusian concept of symbolic capital, the article uses the case of the official memory politics of the Kazakhstani state to build a model of the symbolic capital of the memory of communism and to explore the utilisation of this capital in the struggle for legitimacy and recognition. This model uncovers the role of memory in internationalisation and the gaining of a global status by state actors that seek to capitalise on their remembrance of the past. I contend that the existence of the field of the global memory of communism creates the conditions for transforming remembrance of the victims of a totalitarian system into a channel for generating international symbolic profit for peripheral states.

Kazakhstan played a very particular role in the history of Stalinist repression and its aftermath. Several Gulag camps, among which Karlag, Steplag, Peschanlag, and ALZHIR<sup>1</sup> were the largest, operated within the territory of Kazakhstan under Stalin's

rule. In addition to political prisoners detained in camps, various ethnic groups were deported to Kazakhstan in the 1930s-1940s from other parts of the Soviet Union, including Poles, Ukrainians, Germans, Koreans from the Soviet Far East, and peoples from the Caucasus. At the outbreak of the Second World War, prisoners of war from various countries were also transported to Kazakhstan and detained in camps for prisoners of war and interned persons, among which Germans, Japanese, Austrians, and Romanians were the largest groups.<sup>2</sup> The collapse of state socialism, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Kazakhstan's declaration of independence, in 1991, not only created an opportunity for commemorating the memory of the victims of Stalinism within individual states, but also rendered borders permeable to transnational remembrance initiatives. Memory of communism, in effect, emerged as a specific field where local, national and transnational dynamics of collective memory interlocked.

This article explores how the official memory of communism in Kazakhstan has been transmuted into a transnational venture providing both space and resources for its interaction with multiple foreign state and non-state actors. The Kazakhstani strategy of using the memory of political repression has been developed in a unique fashion, contrasting with the two major social and political scripts that have dominated the memory of communism since 1989, namely, the ethno-national and the liberal (Verdery 1999; Mark 2010, Mälksoo 2014; Neumayer 2019). The article examines this “third way” scenario and traces the mechanisms involved in the use of memory serving to generate the international symbolic capital that derives from the positioning within the configuration of various actors in the global memory of communism field. It demonstrates that the Kazakhstani memorialisation agenda has been calibrated in accordance with a set of norms and tendencies governing the transnational field remembrance of the victims of communism, which came to be seen as a marker of

successful systemic transformation across the former countries of state socialism. This strategic memory politics has allowed Kazakhstan to manifest its compliance with the imperative of “moral remembrance” (David 2020) and to deploy the symbolic capital generated within this field for managing its reputational shortcomings on the international stage.

The research relies on the empirical study of commemorative spaces, events, and narratives, with a focus on two major memorial sites – Spassky Cemetery and the ALZHIR memorial – in order to explain how memory discourses of multiple foreign states relate and contribute to the international image of Kazakhstan. The analysis is based on a combination of materials and research methods, including participant observation of relevant events and spaces, analysis of speeches, official documents and media accounts. This mixture of methods and materials provides important insights into the process of consolidation of the symbolic capital of remembrance, which develops through the multiple encounters of a specific state with various international actors.

### **The international field and the symbolic capital of remembrance**

Assmann and Conrad propose that we think of memory as an indispensable aspect of globalization, rendering it impossible to understand the trajectories of memory outside a global frame of reference (2010). Memory, however, can be seen not only as a product but also as an important instrument for globalization understood as a strategic purpose for newly independent and peripheral states. With increasing interconnectedness, most countries’ economic performance and development depends on foreign investment and trade, whereas efficient economic collaboration between states is often embedded in common cultural understandings and shared sets of values

that provide a baseline for their interaction (DiMaggio 1990; Zelizer 1997). Ideas of political legitimacy, reliability and global status emerge in this context as constitutive of international perceptions of the country in question, which may affect its economic prosperity and trajectories of development. Where peripheral or postcolonial states that have recently gained independence are concerned, “internationalization,” however, is not simply a condition, but a cherished value that helps to boost their symbolic standing both on the global stage and in the domestic arena.<sup>3</sup>

From a sociological point of view, the concept of the international can be seen as emerging in diverse relations and processes (Basaran and Olsson 2018). It provides insights into the ways in which power aggregates, concentrates and circulates in a world which is fragmented and heterogeneous but also interconnected (Bigo 2017, p. 24). Mechanisms of accumulation of specific types of symbolic capital associated with internationalization have been well researched in individual or social group settings (Berling 2012), but, as this article demonstrates, they can also be traced in the policies of states, particularly those looking for extra means to enhance their prestige and/or legitimacy.

Defined as a leverage that allows the possessors “to wield a power, an influence, and thus to exist in the field, instead of being considered a negligible quantity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 98), symbolic capital can originate from various sources. The relational nature of capital, which exists and functions in relation to a specific social universe, implies that alongside economic, human, social, political, and cultural capital, yet other variants may develop with the emergence of new relational fields (Emirbayer and Johnston 2008, p. 4). A field, according to Bourdieu, is a network or configuration of relations marked by an unequal distribution of power (Bourdieu and

Wacquant 1992, p. 97) and is consequently a space of struggle for domination and/or legitimacy and recognition (Bourdieu 1996).

The transnational context for the promotion of the memory of communism, along with its ideological power, its set of institutions as well as its cultural norms and political tendencies, provides an example of just such a new relational field, where a particular form of capital accumulates and where relations of force of a particular type are in play (Bourdieu 1993, p. 164). Seen as a relatively autonomous field, the memory of communism asserts the moral power and the symbolic capital of remembrance, framed as a commitment to preserve in perpetuity the memory of the victims of past violence. The international neoliberal order, however, tends to erode the relative autonomy of various fields and to consolidate values that are guaranteed in wider ideological terms (Hilgers and Mazgez 2015, p.10). Being subjected to an “external principle of subversion of the field” of this kind (Bourdieu 1992, p. 128), the symbolic capital of the memory of communism acquires a wider ideological and political appeal. Associated with the ideological system of liberal values of the post-Cold war era dominating the paradigm of international order, the memory field of communism allows its actors to be seen to participate in a success story of systemic transformation, which has become equated with an outspoken condemnation of the communist past and an effective ideological decolonisation (Mälksoo 2009, p. 656).

In recent years the emergence of the field of anticommunism has been discussed in the context of communist extrication in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In other words, by virtue of this extrication, previously unavailable forms of symbolic profit have been generated (Dujisin 2020, Zombory 2020). In the context of Central and Eastern Europe, the symbolic capital of anti-communism has thus been deployed in a political instrumentalization of the past driven by the desire of

elites to complete an unfinished revolution (Mark 2010) and to sustain the project of European reconciliation by equating Europeanisation with anti-totalitarianism. Furthermore, within the context of Western Europe, the symbolic capital of the memory of communism capital serves to de-radicalise the Western left (Forsdick, Mark, Spisiakova 2020) and to display a commitment to the promotion of the democracy worldwide.

As this article demonstrates, in the context of semi-peripheral post-Soviet nations, the symbolic capital of the memory of communism has acquired a new operational meaning. For Kazakhstan, where the democratic institutions are weak, where elections are marred by significant irregularities, and where the record of human rights abuses continues to attract criticism from the Western powers, involvement in transnational activities of remembering the victims of communism has been metamorphosed into an important instrument of struggle for international legitimacy and recognition.<sup>4</sup>

### **The rise of the global memory of communism**

Historically, the symbolic capital of remembrance was of crucial importance in building up international relations in the aftermath of the Second World War. States could obtain a strategic advantage as regards the memory of the past via two major strategies, either confessing to having been a “guilty perpetrator”, for those states that were prepared to admit their wrongdoings, or else professing to having been an “innocent victim” (Bachleitner 2018, p. 6). Each stance implied a corresponding form of behaviour, one that might engender the appropriate international image, namely, a responsible display of shame and remorse, on the one hand, or the receipt of recognition and compensation

on the other. Reinterpreting guilt as a debt in international relations thus allowed West Germany to find a way towards reconciliation and the crafting of an plausible image in the international arena.

The role played by Holocaust memory in defining a common European identity, as an intrinsic aspect of European integration, provides the most famous example of memory's involvement in the structuring of the international field (Probst 2003; Trimčev 2017, Levy and Sznajder 2002). If the European Union was to become a unified space, a shared remembrance agenda would have to be mobilised in order to provide the means for a cognitive mapping of a united Europe (Challand 2009; Clarke 2014). The 2000 Stockholm Declaration, signed by the representatives of forty- six different governments at the International Forum, was remarkable not only as a formalised attempt to recognise Holocaust memory as a cornerstone of the edifice of a common identity forged by means of intergovernmental regulations, but also as an important precedent for memory processes becoming a high profile international policy agenda that could have an impact on a country's image and status.

With the collapse of state socialism and the rise of the global memory of communism, various European institutions, including PACE and the Council of the European Union, declared that the remembrance of victims of crimes committed by totalitarian regimes should be shared and promoted as a common core European value (Neumayer 2017). The Monument to the Victims of Communism in Washington DC unveiled in 2007 by US President George W. Bush further broadened the relevance of postcommunist remembrance and facilitated the rise of global memory of the victims of communism. Memorials are not mere objects, nor are they simply spaces, as from their very conception they are intended to evoke in viewers some understanding of the past, and are imbued with particular values and meanings by virtue of their material

form (Young 1989; Gieryn 2000). Made in the guise of a replica of the Goddess of Democracy created in 1989 by students during the Tiananmen Square protest, and bearing the inscriptions “To the more than one hundred million victims of communism and to those who love liberty” and “To the freedom and independence of all captive nations and peoples”, the memorial conveys a social and cultural message of global significance. The Washington memorial’s dedication was organised as a truly transnational memory event, in which members of multiple national communities from across the globe participated - from Chinese and Vietnamese to Estonian, Czech, Latvian, Ukrainian and Belarusian. In a message communicated at the Memorial opening ceremony, the commemorative agenda was linked to present- day struggles and equated the attacks of radical Islamists with the tyrannical rule imposed by communist regimes in China, the former Soviet Union and North Korea.<sup>5</sup> This association of the memory of the victims of communism both with the victory of liberal values over communism in the Cold War and with ongoing struggles, serves to institute the global memory of communism as a new international field where both state and non-state actors can pursue their goals by delineating their position in relation to other actors with clearly defined visions and values. Being more than just another commemorative artefact dedicated to the victims of the totalitarian past, the Monument to the Victims of Communism in Washington DC played a crucial role in constituting the international memory field of the present; it facilitated the emergence of the global frame in which remembrance of the communist past became reinstated as a part of global contemporary concern. A range of judicial instruments of transitional justice implemented by the post-communist countries as a part of their national programmes of historical reckoning with the communist past (Pettai and Pettai 2015; Grosescu 2017; Bekus 2018) was echoed in the international tribunal for Cambodia, which, starting in

2010, convicted several former Khmer Rouge leaders (1975-1979) for crimes against humanity (Grosescu, Neumayer and Pettai 2020). With the erection of the monument in Washington DC, with the rise of commemorative infrastructure in post-communist states, including memorials, museums, as well as national institutions of remembrance, and with the increasingly global reach of discourses of condemnation and criminalisation of communism, the world has witnessed the emergence of a new ideological system of production. This new ideological system promotes a particular set of values and directions, which are however presented as universal interests (Bourdieu 1979, p. 79).

As Vinitzky-Reroussi states, not only is the nature of the commemorated past crucial to understanding mnemonic practices, but so too is the context of commemoration. In her model of the social context of commemoration she outlines three dimensions that shape the mnemonic scenario, namely, the political culture of the commemorating society; the timing of the commemoration and the relevance of the past to the present agenda; and the power vested in the agents of memory (Vinitzky-Reroussi 2002, p. 32). Her understanding of “the present day agenda”, however, is for the most part restricted to the political, social, and cultural context within an individual nation-state. Yet the framework of some commemorative ventures - such as Holocaust memory or the memory of the victims of communism - has long transcended nation-state borders and formed instead an integral part of a transnational system of liberal values and meanings. And just as the conception of memory and the self were woven into the evolution of the modern nation-state system, the emergence of transnational memory, some scholars claim, may offer a chance of developing cosmopolitan democracy (Wendt 2000; Bell 2006) The association of liberal values with the West has done much to shape the symbolic profile of this memory of communism field,

which may provide important reference points for states determined to accumulate symbolic capital, especially when they have diverged from a “normalised” liberal transition and consequently suffer some damage to their international image and reputation.

The interplay between Kazakhstani state and foreign memory actors is influenced by the global field of the memory of communism, which serves as an important point of reference in framing and justifying various different nations’ memory narratives and practices. According to Snow and Benford, a frame provides an interpretative scheme that both simplifies and condenses “the world out there” by selectively interposing and re-imagining objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment (Snow and Benford 1992, p. 137). Framing narratives through inclusion and exclusion of material is part and parcel of the formation and recasting of any commemoration (Vinitzky 2002, p. 35). Commemorative practices in Kazakhstani memory of the victims of communism emerge in this context as a form of connecting and engaging multiple nations’ remembrance narratives and, as this article demonstrates, it is through these mnemonic entanglements that the international image and status of the Kazakhstani state has been shaped.

### **Beyond dominant scripts of remembering victims of communism**

A burgeoning literature on the memory of communism has identified two major social and political scripts in terms of which the memory of communism has been articulated after 1989 - the ethno-national and the liberal. The former locates the commemorating of the victims of communist repression within ethno-nationalist narratives and

transforms the issue of crimes committed by communist states into stories of national suffering (Mark 2014; Kopecek 2008). This phenomenon can also be analysed as an example of the “affective communities” that emerge after traumatic events and are constituted through, and distinguished by, social, collective forms of feeling (Hutchison 2016). Placing past sufferings at the heart of group identity leads to the sacralisation of memory, when a traumatic and/or repressed past is assigned a pivotal role in the enhancement of the group self-image (Misztal 2004, p. 69). The liberal script, on the other hand, situates remembrance of communist crimes within the wider transitional justice scheme that deems historical reckoning and the commemoration of the victims of political violence to be an indispensable part of the political transition towards liberal democracy (Brett et al 2007; Stan 2009; Buckley-Zistel and Schäfer 2014). This approach to memory links commemoration not only to the political or national identity of those who remember, but also to the liberal political project and human rights agenda they are committed to implementing (Bell 2009, p. 352; David 2020). The memory agenda becomes both one of the instruments for facilitating the process of political transition and one of the criteria by which its ultimate success is to be judged (Hite and Collins 2009).

Neither of these mnemonic scenarios – ethno-nationalist or liberal - structures the commemorative agenda pursued by post-communist elites in Kazakhstan. The country has become one of the paradigmatic cases of post-Soviet authoritarianism whereby the old nomenklatura remained in power after the Soviet collapse and established a political system determined to suppress all political dissidence (Cummings 2012). The personalised nature of Kazakhstan’s political illiberalism survived multiple challenges, including the carefully choreographed transfer of the presidency in 2019. This lack of a transition to a democratic political system predictably

impeded the development of a transitional justice apparatus. Kazakhstan, however, has also become a rare exception in the former Soviet space by virtue of its having escaped the “trap” of the state-sponsored ethno-nationalism that had saturated memory and identity politics in post-Soviet and Eastern European nations after the fall of state socialism. A national narrative of remembering the victims of communist repression has become a common component of a broader program of postcolonial othering of the Soviet or socialist past (Todorova 2018; Oushakine 2013). While the process of othering is traditionally analysed as both a contrasting and a constitutive mode of building relations with outside players in the international field (Neumann 1996; Diez 2005), it can also be detected in the way in which post-communist elites rethink their national identity vis-à-vis their own socialist past. Across the post-Soviet space, this mnemonic template of remembering the victims of communism came to be perceived as a main, if not the only, form of genuine post-Soviet postcolonialism (Bekus 2019). Kazakhstan’s official memory, in contrast, avoids the ethnicization of any victimhood narrative but, instead, aims to internationalize memory space with an implicit message regarding the importance of the Kazakhstani state as a remembering agency. Analysis of this mnemonic strategy offers a chance to rethink the postcolonial as a specific moment in the global condition whereby newly sovereign nation-states look for means to advance their emergence within the global arena while at the same time adjusting and adapting to already existing rules of political subjectivity and statehood. This affirmative postcolonial strategy then implies coming to terms with the multifaceted realm of global settings, in which “the advancement of moral remembrance” (David 2020) and “facing the communist past” become part of a reputational strategy deployed by a state to enhance its international symbolic capital and to bolster its global visibility and prestige.

Existing studies of the memory of repression in Kazakhstan focus on the lack of genuine liberalisation incentives for steering the commemorative agenda towards a fully fledged transitional justice programme that would bring to light individual responsibility and result in legal accountability, lustration and court trials. An “incomplete break with the communist past” and elite-driven projects of coming to terms with the Soviet legacy are seen as the major reasons for the shortcomings of Kazakhstan’s historical reckoning programme (Trochev 2018). Some scholars also underline the fact that Kazakhstani official discourse does not exploit the memory of the victims of political repression for the purposes of a Kazakh ethno-national mobilisation and can therefore be seen as non-manipulative and non-instrumental (Kundakbayeva and Kassymova 2016, p. 614). Closer examination of the country’s official memory politics, however, reveals that Kazakhstani elites do in fact use commemoration of the victims of Stalinism as an important instrument of nation- and state-craft. They do so by using memory as a channel for linking international engagement and reputational politics in order to enhance the state’s symbolic capital on the global stage.

### **From the management of impressions to the global frame of memory politics**

State commemoration of the victims of past wrongdoings presented to an international audience has tended to be involved in what Robert Jervis terms the strategic “management of impressions,” implying the state’s capacity and desire to affect the images others may have of a state, and their expectations about its policies and conduct (1989). This memory connotes recognition of past violence as wrong, indicates respect for others and anticipates sympathy in return. People who have positive feelings toward

a state are more likely to frame the country's ambiguous conduct as “neutral, positive, or motivated by circumstances other than hostile intentions” (Crawford 2000, p. 134-5) Conversely, emotional antipathy toward a state may lead to negative evaluations of ambiguous conduct.

As existing incentive structures within the international system imply, countries tend to resort to intentional representations of the past if there are strategic objectives that can plausibly be pursued with the help of commemorative instruments (Bachleitner 2018). In most cases, this occurs when countries need to address the reputation-damaging events that drive the strategy of “covering”, whereby countries manage their stigmas by fostering a strategic self-representation that voids the labels associated with such stigmatization (Goffman 1963, p. 74). Studies of memory concerned with the international management of impressions for the most part tend to focus on countries that use memory to correct or conceal problems that occurred in the past (Rivera 2008; Bachleitner 2018). While Kazakhstan was not directly responsible for any actions that might have brought reputational damage in its own history, it does nonetheless deploy international impressions management in order to re-codify an image somewhat tarnished by present-day issues. One of the most problematic aspects of Kazakhstan’s development, compelling its elites to resort to the symbolic capital of the memory of communism, is linked to the shortcomings of the country’s political system, that is to say, its enduring authoritarian rule, endemic corruption, human rights violations and sundry other failings.

Examination of Kazakhstani memory politics thus provides important insights into the processes of managing the past and national cultural representation in a state that 1) capitalises upon the damage incurred by the totalitarian system in the past with a view to enhancing its international standing and prestige, a crucial preoccupation for

peripheral states emerging in the global arena; 2) deploys memory of the past to divert attention from the deleterious impact of the current system of authoritarian rule upon its image; 3) redeploys the international symbolic capital gained through a shared mnemonics to reassert its legitimacy both abroad and at home. Commemorating the victims of Stalinist repression in Kazakhstan has become a useful mnemonic strategy, serving both to answer postcolonial anxieties regarding the global status of the Kazakhstani state and to assist with its integration into the global community committed to moral remembrance agenda as an equal player. A precondition for this strategy to become viable, however, is the existence of a global memory field with a specific configuration of actors able to communicate a set of associated values and meanings. It is from the relations with these same values that the international symbolic capital of moral remembrance can be generated through connections, associations and interactions.

By engaging in the obligation to remember the victims of communism Kazakhstan follows the common route taken by states deploying the emotional diplomacy often linked with significant negative experiences (Hall 2015, p. 16). While reaffirming the state's condemnation of the defunct totalitarian regime, such a mnemonic strategy serves to delineate the peculiar role played by the Kazakhstani state in the global context of remembering the crimes of communism. In the following part, the article analyses how Kazakhstani official mnemonics evolved as a specific response to conditions in the country at the time of its independence, and to the concerns of its elites, preoccupied as they were with their quest for international recognition.

### **An inclusive semiotic project of memory and identity**

Historical redress for the traumatic legacy of the past had started in Kazakhstan, much as in the other former Soviet republics, with the advent of perestroika in the late 1980s. The authorities of independent Kazakhstan have for the most part come to terms with the legacies of the Soviet past through symbolic commemoration, such as renaming public spaces, building monuments and rehabilitating the victims of the famine of 1931-33, and the victims of the deportations and purges of 1937-1952 (Trochev 2018, p. 92). As a part of state commemorative strategy, the Memorial to the Victims of Political Repression was built in the heart of the recently transferred capital of Astana (today Nur-Sultan), becoming a crucial landmark in official memory politics. The memorial's inauguration at the opening of the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan and its prominent location in the center of the capital city confirmed the monument's high profile in the context of the government's official policy. It manifested the importance of honouring the victims of Stalinist repression, the remembering of them representing a sort of emancipation from the legacy of Soviet crimes. The inaugural ceremony thus served to accentuate the new era of state independence, with the country thus being shown to be rid of the evils of the old system. Paul Brummell, who was the Ambassador of the United Kingdom to Kazakhstan from 2005 to 2009, regarded the monument as one of the major sites of symbolic importance in the new capital Nur-Sultan, and wrote of it as follows in his guidebook to Kazakhstan:

It stands on a rounded hillock, symbolising an ancient burial mound. A flight of steps leads up the hill. This is flanked by a wall decorated with symbolic images: a tree withering in a drought-afflicted land, oppressed people with their heads bowed forward, a list of the Stalinist internment camps on Kazakhstan's territory, and metal birds struggling to free themselves from their traps. A tall metal obelisk rises from the top of the mound

(Brummell 2008, p. 92).

Paul Brummell could not have anticipated that by the time his book was published the memorial would have disappeared from the city. In 2008, the site was renamed the Square of State Symbols and a huge Kazakhstani flag now flies from the summit of the mound. Kazakh memory activists and memorial organisations criticised the decision to remove the memorial from the city centre and saw it as an act of downgrading the status of memory, “repressing the memory of those repressed in the past.”<sup>6</sup>

The dismantling of the memorial dedicated to the victims of political repression in the capital city did not mean, however, that Kazakhstani memory politics had shifted towards disremembering. Twenty other monuments and memorials dedicated to the memory of victims of Soviet repression and the 1932-33 famine have been erected since independence across various different regions of Kazakhstan (Medeuova et al. 2017, p. 201). Some of them were funded by local authorities, while others were sponsored by nongovernmental actors (Trochev 2018, p. 96). A Memorial to the Victims of Famine was unveiled in Nur-Sultan in 2012. Two museums were opened within the confines of former labour camps: the Museum of Memory of Victims of Political Repression in Dolinka, which was established in 2002, and located in the former administrative building of Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp, or KarLag, was officially opened to the public in 2010. A Memorial museum was also created near the capital city and on the site of ALZHIR, in 2007. The two largest cemeteries attached to the Karlag labour camps located in the Karaganda region – the Spassky cemetery of Camp No. 99 (2004) and Mamochkino cemetery (2003) – have been accorded the special status of ‘memorial cemetery’ and later included in the list of the ‘Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan.’

The story of the unmaking of the memorial in the capital city centre in this context can be read not as a retraction of memory, but as a reflection of the strategic rearrangement of historical references within the national identity space. Seen by elites as an important venue for implementing nationalising strategies in relation to Kazakhstani society, the capital city of Nur-Sultan was ascribed a key role in forging the representational image of the nation (Bekus and Medeuova 2017). As with any newly sovereign nation-state, Nur-Sultan, where the capital city of Kazakhstan had been transferred from Almaty in 1997, has been vested with enhanced symbolic importance. For two decades now, the capital has served as the government's favourite showcase of its nation-formation project, designed to impress the outside world and convince the domestic public of the merits of the elite's vision of the nation. Nur-Sultan's built environment with its striking manifestations of national aspirations serves multiple ideological functions crucial for the state (Koch 2010, p. 773). On the one hand, it is intended to be a source of progress spreading throughout the country, as had been the case with, for example, Brasilia in the 1950s (Holston 1989: 18). On the other hand, Nur-Sultan is used to enrich the imagery of national tradition and re-interpret cultural symbols and archetypes in architecture and urban design (Bekus 2017). Nur-Sultan itself, in effect, comes to serve as an important spatial agency in fostering the elite's vision of the Kazakh nation and communicating it to the wider public. In this context, the ceremoniously organised transfer of the Memorial to the Victims of Political Repression from the city centre to the premises of the Memorial Museum in ALZHIR located thirty kilometres from capital conveyed a specific message: the remembrance of the victims of communism, while remaining an integral part of the official mnemonic agenda, was not intended to be a central feature of the symbolic edifice of Kazakhstani nationhood around which collective identity would be

consolidated. By contrast with the memory narratives deployed in most Eastern European and post-Soviet states (Bekus 2019), this uncharacteristic memory format also avoids any fixed ethnicisation of the categories of victim it commemorates. On the eve of Kazakhstan's independence, the first governmental investigative commission - instituted in 1991 in order to explore the causes of the famine - declared in its final statement that it had been an unprecedented man-made catastrophe perpetrated against ethnic Kazakhs and other ethnic groups by the Soviet Kazakh leaders and local officials ("Zaklyucheniye komissii" 1992). This recognition that the victims of the famine had belonged to several different ethnic groups, and the inclusion of the local Kazakh officials as perpetrators, would shape the Kazakhstani politics of memory over the course of the following decades. In a speech delivered by Nazarbayev in 2012 at the inauguration of the Monument to the Memory to the Famine Victims of the 1920s – 1930s in Nur-Sultan, he reiterated the importance of honouring the memory of multiple groups of victims rather than focusing exclusively on Kazakhs: "famine covered not only Kazakhstan, but Russia, Ukraine and Belarus as well, and in total seven million people died of hunger, of which one and a half million perished in Kazakhstan" ("Vystuplenie Prezidenta." 2012).

Unlike in other post-Soviet countries, this inclusive discourse of the memory of Soviet repression in Kazakhstan accords recognition to the memory of the victims of Stalinist repression, but does not glorify them as "Kazakh martyrs" (Kundakbayeva and Kassymova 2016, p. 617). Here the commemorating of the victims of Soviet repression is not deployed within an authoritative discourse to legitimise national independence nor does it serve to frame the narrative of sufferings in ethnic terms (Finkel 2012, p. 296). Stalinist terror is condemned as an incomprehensible crime (" [a] country killing

its own people”) but it is not presented as a deliberate genocide committed against the Kazakh or any other specific nation.

The reluctance of the Kazakhstani elite to anchor their nation-building ideology to the memory of the suffering and alienation of the Soviet legacy can partly be explained by the general orientation of Kazakhstan’s official discourse of the nation, which has been directed towards “a glorious future” rather than its past (Cummings 2012, p. 1091). Kazakhstani national ideology is, indeed, preoccupied with shaping the image of Kazakhs as the citizens of a modern, prosperous, fast developing nation. Such an ambitious project requires a strong, resilient society, possessed of the confidence needed to bring so ambitious a project to fruition. The major long-term strategic objective of domestic memory policy, in this context, is to consolidate national identity through enhanced collective self-assertion. A narrative revolving around victimhood and the experience of powerlessness and shared calamity does not here appear to be an apt way to bolster a national subjecthood that would be “fit for purpose”. Studies of the mnemonic evolution of Israel in the early post-war decades reveal the dominance there of “historiographical triumphalism”. The focus on heroic fighters rather than on victims reflected the societal demand for a specific agency in the process of nation- and state-building in the first decades of Israeli sovereignty (Lim 2010). The notion of victimhood, hinging as it does on the idea of the victim’s passivity and defencelessness, places the emphasis on the innocent suffering in the midst of an asymmetrical violence and is opposed to the active sacrifice or heroism of the defeated (Assmann 2016). “Victimhood” as a specific subject position became one of the characteristic features of the discourses of post-Soviet postcoloniality, and as such may be found in multiple contexts across the post-Soviet and former socialist space (Pavlyshyn 1992; Shkandrij 2001; Kelertas 2006; Uffelmann 2013). Nations have been portrayed as lacking the

agency required to resist or escape the Soviet regime imposed by victimiser and coloniser. Unlike many other post-Soviet nations claiming postcolonial status, the agency of the new Kazakhstani nation in the official ideological interpretation does not derive exclusively from the memory of victims of Soviet crimes, however widely commemorated and officially mourned. The framework of the Kazakhstani national memory narrative is articulated in such a way that it accords equal honour to the memory of those who played active, operational, and often heroic roles during the Soviet period. The nation's subjecthood, in this context, becomes an inclusive semiotic project encompassing those who suffered during the Stalinist terror as well as those who became prominent heroes in the Great Patriotic War or in the post-war rebuilding and modernisation of the country. Not only does this memory convey the story of 'shared glory' in the Second World War, but it also asserts an enduring Kazakh agency within the Soviet project.<sup>7</sup> The portrayal of Kazakh identity, in effect, is borne by a multi-layered discourse that contains elements of both repressed agency and an active participatory experience in the Soviet state project (Kalinovsky 2018). Rather than shaping the collective identity of the nation by focusing on victimhood, the memory of communist repression in Kazakhstan has been transformed into a complex outward-facing policy, one designed to promote the country's emergence on the international stage and to craft its image with the help of the symbolic capital of mnemonics.

### **Status versus identity**

If the UK Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Paul Brummell, paid particular attention to the Astana Memorial Mound in his 2008 guide, it was for good reason. From the start, the memorial attracted widespread international attention. Nearly every high-ranking foreign official coming to Kazakhstan paid a visit to the Mound in order to honour the memory of the victims of communism. In September 2001 the Memorial

was the first destination on the four-day visit program of Pope John Paul II, where he came directly from the airport (“vystuplenie). Being a predominantly Muslim country, with a substantial number of Russian Orthodox Christians but with only about two percent of the population being Catholics,<sup>8</sup> Kazakhstan hosted the Pope in order to celebrate the establishment of official diplomatic relations with The Holy See (Zhunusova 2008). The issue of communist crimes, “the deadly violence of ideology”, and the sufferings of many Catholic priests along with those of all the deportees in the labour camps located on the territory of Kazakhstan were mentioned by John Paul II in the course of his visit, on various occasions (“Meeting the Youth of Kazakhstan” 2001).<sup>9</sup> The Pope, who was of Polish origin, had the reputation of being a powerful player in the context of both Eastern European and global anti-communism, on account of the part he had played in the fall of the communist regime in his own country (Diez 2017; Perrone 2012). The Pope’s visit to the Memorial to the Victims of Political Repression was therefore more than simply a symbolic gesture. It indicated the integration of the Kazakhstani memory of political repression into a global map of the decommunisation that had unfolded after 1989 across the countries of Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet republics (“Address at Apostolic Nunciature” 2001). For Kazakhstan, this memory became yet another channel through which to forge a positive image and establish its reputation in the international arena.

One of the crucial tasks performed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been that of drawing up a commemorative agenda, and in this regard it serves as an intermediary in transferring information about the victims of political repression to state institutions abroad. In certain cases, President Nazarbayev undertook this task himself, thereby demonstrating an official commitment to the memory agenda. In 2001 and 2004 Nazarbayev personally handed over the lists of the relevant victims to the leaders of

Lithuania and Latvia. During his visit to the USA in 1999, when meeting with the presidents of major Jewish organisations, Nazarbayev passed the Lubavitch Library in Brooklyn three folders of files that the KGB had compiled on Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, who had been exiled to Kazakhstan when charged in 1939 with disseminating anti-Soviet propaganda, and who had died in Almaty in 1944.<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson became a prominent commentator on the Torah, a profound kabbalist and a renowned Talmudist, whose righteous memory is honoured by Jewish communities around the world. At the meeting with Nazarbayev in New York, Rabbi Berel Lazar, the chief Lubavitch emissary to the former Soviet Union, praised the leader of Kazakhstan for honouring the memory of Levi Yitzchak Schneerson in Kazakhstan and abroad, and working towards democracy by creating favourable conditions for minorities.<sup>11</sup>

Multiple diplomatic gestures initiated by the Kazakhstani authorities in the international arena became conduits for mnemonic performativity. They laid the foundations for a highly developed “emotional diplomacy”, thus enabling a state to orchestrate the official efforts designed to project the image of a particular emotional response towards other countries (Hall 2015). Emotions generated by the memory of past wrongdoings contribute to the formation of cognitive biases that affect observers' perceptions of other states (Lind 2009). Indeed, the mutual appreciation of multiple nations' difficult and disturbing legacies and the endeavour to assist in the preservation of traumatic memory facilitate the formation of affective communities across borders. A logic of feelings which, according to Emma Hutchison, is traditionally reckoned to be constitutive of political communities within nation-state boundaries is thus transformed into a fabric of connectivity between memory actors across borders (Hutchison 2016, p. 110). These outward-facing mnemonic activities become a part of

an inverted “reputational strategy” (Gugushvili, Kabachnik, Gilbreath 2015), one that permits a capitalising upon enmity towards, and condemnation of Stalin’s Terror that may itself serve to promote a positive image of the new state power and of its elites. Rather than employing a reputational memory politics for burnishing the image of historical figures (Alderman 2002), an inverted strategy enables its protagonists to use the memory of specific negative figures or events to buttress the image of the “remembering agency”, in this case, the Kazakhstani state that commemorates the victim of Stalinism.

### **Transnational memory spaces**

The process of internationalisation of memory space in Kazakhstan had started as early as 1987, when the Japanese government signed an agreement with the Kazakhstani Republic regarding the transfer of the mortal remains of Japanese prisoners of war buried in Kazakhstan to Japan. Upon the completion of this operation the Japanese embassy presided over the erection of a monument to commemorate their compatriots in Spassky cemetery.

Remembering the victims of political repression in Kazakhstan was elevated to the status of official policy in 1997, when the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression was established on 31 May by the Decree of the President of Kazakhstan. Every year on this same date commemorative events are held across the country at the memorial sites. Viewed as an agency of social memory, “memorial sites” accentuate the situated nature of people’s practices of remembering. The spaces occupied by memorials are not simply containers where social memorial actions have, so to speak, been ‘emplaced’, for they do in fact make an essential contribution to the meaning of the actions and the realm of social memory they create (Adams 2017, p.

217). Indeed, most of the iconic memorial sites in Kazakhstan – the Alzhir Memorial, the Spassky Cemetery – may be said to have fashioned an altogether new mnemonic reality, one that reflects not only the sheer scale of the oppressive machinery at work under Stalin’s rule, but also the complex ontology of victimhood and, not least, the impressive role played by the Kazakhstani state as a memory caretaker.

### The Spassky cemetery

According to the archival data, over fifty thousand people, representing some forty or so different nationalities, were buried at the Spassky cemetery. The first Monument on the site was built by the Japanese in 1987. The Germans, the Finns, the French, the Poles, the Lithuanians, the Ukrainians, the Koreans, the Italians, and the Spanish would later follow suit. By 2019, as many as twenty eight different memorials had been built by various different states. These memorials thus became markers of the joint memory work performed by Kazakhstani officials alongside foreign states, which involved multiple actors, including official diplomatic missions, NGOs (such as the French-Kazakh Memory Committee, the Japanese memorial foundation), local national diasporas, such as the Union of Poles of Kazakhstan, the Union of Ukrainians or the Iranian Cultural Center in Kazakhstan, or the Belarusian Cultural Center in Karaganda, religious organizations, such as the Catholic Church in the case of Poland and Slovakia, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, as well as Muslim religious authorities from Azerbaijan, Iran, and Chechnya. The memorial to the Spanish prisoners of war was inaugurated by the Ambassador of Spain but was funded by Spanish companies working in the Karaganda region.

Pierre Nora argued that memorials differ from other public works of art by virtue of their capacity to demonstrate a “will to remember” (Nora 1989, p. 19). They are not mere locations, but places which from their initial conception are imbued with

particular values and meanings through their material form (Gieryn 2000). Memorials, in turn, help construct memory by virtue of their actual design, which plays a critical role in conveying social and cultural messages. Indeed, the material and immaterial representational forms of the monuments erected by many different nations at Spassky cemetery serve to articulate the heritage of their respective communities – through references to national and religious symbols reflected in the shape of the monuments, the materials employed, and their design. Most of them are decorated with national ornaments and architectural elements that refer to their cultural traditions, such as bells on the Ukrainian and Russian memorials, shapes reminiscent of Korean pagodas on the Korean monument, the image of the Menorah on the Jewish memorial etc.

The majority of the foreign monuments in the Spassky cemetery bear inscriptions referring to the nationality of the victims. The twenty- eight monuments dedicated to prisoners of war, deportees and camp inmates built by foreign states over the past decades have transformed the cemetery into a genuinely international space of mourning. In 2004, the local authorities of the Karaganda regions financed the construction of the Kazakhstani monument; its inscription, however, does not single out Kazakh victims but bears an overarching dedication “To the victims of repression who found eternal peace in Kazakh soil.” It can be read as a statement regarding the twofold role played by Kazakhstan in the history of repression – as a place where the tragedies of multiple nations occurred (and where their dead are buried), but also as a country where now the memory of all victims can dwell.

The avoidance of an ethnic focus on specifically Kazakh victims of repression is mirrored in the decision not to project the role of perpetrator of repression on to the Russian state or the Russian people, although a projection of this sort is typical of other post-Soviet national victimhood narratives. The commemoration of Russian victims

among the prisoners held in the labour camps on the Monument at the Spassky Cemetery built in 2004 depicts Russians as being among the victims. Indeed, a substantial number of Kazakhstan's ethnic Russians are the descendants of those persecuted by the Stalinist regime who remained in Kazakhstan after their release.<sup>12</sup>

The manner in which the inscriptions on these monuments have changed over time reflects an increasing openness to foreign nations' commemorative messages: the first memorial dedicated to Japanese prisoners of war carries an inscription in Japanese only. Monolingual monuments, the Polish and Ukrainian memorials among them - enclose the remembrance of their dead within the single national community. The choice of languages, national and Kazakh - can be read as implicit support for the Kazakhstani policy of reviving Kazakh, which requires a limitation upon the use of Russian, still widely used in the country (Sharipova, Burkhanov & Alpeissova 2017). The inscriptions on the 2008 Azeri monument and the most recent memorial built in 2018 by the Czech government appear in four different languages - Azeri or Czech, Kazakh, English, and Russian. Their commemorative statement is meant to be understood not only by their respective compatriots and by locals who speak Kazakh and Russian, but also to reach the wider international community who visit the Spassky cemetery in order to remember their own dead. Being initially created for and addressed to exclusive national communities, called to link their dead buried in Kazakhstan to their national communities, monuments in the transnational space of the Spassky cemetery have gradually been transformed into vehicles of multi-lingual and multi-national remembrance that engage with a complex ontology of victimhood and with the multiparty agency of all those who remember. The monuments do indeed connect the memory of the victims with their countries of origin, but the opposite is also true, as

victims commemorated in the space of the memorial cemetery affiliate their respective countries with Kazakhstan, as its host and custodian.

Table 1. Memorials at the Spassky cemetery built by foreign states

Country	Inscription	Languages
Japan 1987	To fellow Japanese buried here. Japanese memorial foundation.	Japanese
Finland 1994	To Finnish prisoners of war who died in 1941-1944 in Kazakhstan.	Finnish and Kazakh
Germany 1995	To prisoners of war and interned Germans who died away from the motherland.	German, Kazakh, Russian
Romania 2003	In memoriam. To the over 900 Romanian prisoners of war who died in Stalinist camps in central Kazakhstan in 1941–1950.	Romanian, Kazakh and Russian
Hungary	Here found peace Hungarian prisoners of war, victims of the Second World War.	Hungarian, Kazakh and Russian

France 1994	France does not forget her dead sons so far from her.	French and Kazakh
Poland 1996	To Poles, victims of Stalinist Terror who dreamed about freedom but died here in God forever. The Polish state. Union of Poles in Kazakhstan.	Polish
Lithuania 2004	To Lithuanians who were imprisoned and died in Karlag.	Lithuanian and Kazakh
Italy 1994	To Italians who died in Kazakhstan.	Kazakh, Italian, Russian
Israel 2010	In memory of victims of political repression. No future without memory. Shma Israel	Hebrew, Kazakh, Russian
Ukraine 1996	To sons and daughters of Ukraine. Bow our heads to those tortured in captivity. Ukraine will not forget you.	Ukrainian

Czech Republic 2018	In memory of Czech victims of political repression.	Kazakh, Czech, English, and Russian
Slovakia 2013	In memory of Slovakian victims of Stalinism.	Slovak and Kazakh
Azerbaijan 2008	To the memory of 150 thousand Azeri victims of political repression, deported to Kazakhstan.	Azeri, Kazakh, Russian and English
South Korea 2008	To Koreans, victims of political repression.	Kazakh, Korean, Russian and English
Russia 2004	To the memory of Russians, victims of Stalinist repression. Russia mourns you	Russian
Kazakhstan, 2004	To the victims of repression who found eternal peace in Kazakh soil.	Kazakh, Russian, English

The all-encompassing framework of the memory of the victims of communism prevents the multivocal monuments of the Spassky cemetery from falling into the dissent that often afflicts complex commemorative spaces (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). Indeed, the mnemonic agenda of the memorial is articulated in its dedications in such a way that it does not differentiate between the victims of

political repression who were detained in labour camps, on the one hand, and prisoners of war, who had fought on the side of Hitler in the Second World War (most of them returned to their countries in early 1950s), on the other. They all have been remembered as the victims of a communist totalitarian regime. In this way, the categories of perpetrator and victim that featured so strongly in the post-World War II environment and constituted two major perceived states of being for nations – one of guilty perpetrator and the other of innocent (Bachleitner 2018, p. 5) - have been largely sidelined. Spanish and Hungarians, Romanians and Austrians who fought against the USSR in the Wehrmacht have been framed at the Spassky cemetery as ‘victims’. In 2015, the Spanish monument was inaugurated by the Ambassador of Spain to Kazakhstan. During the period from 1941 until 1954, 152 Spanish citizens, former members of the Blue Division, the unit of the German Army that fought on the Eastern Front in World War II, were held in Karlag. 138 of them returned to Spain, but fourteen died in Kazakhstan. The decision to inaugurate the memorial to Spanish prisoners of war on the 31st of May, when the memory of the victims of political repression is observed in Kazakhstan, unambiguously framed the Spanish prisoners of war as victims of Stalin.<sup>13</sup>

The perception of Japanese prisoners of war as the former soldiers of an enemy army was largely overridden by their image as an industrious people who had contributed to rebuilding the economy of Kazakhstan after the war. In 2008, a group of activists in the city of Temirtau in the Karaganda region proposed the erection of a monument to the Japanese prisoners of war in the city center, in order to honour their contribution to building up the metallurgical and chemical industry in that city. The idea was ultimately rejected due to opposition from war veterans, but it signaled the

emergence of different ways of remembering the prisoners of war and reflected a specifically Kazakhstani perspective on their role in the country's history.<sup>14</sup>

Collective memory is often treated as 'performative', that is to say, as coming into existence at a given time and place through specific kinds of memorial activity (Wood 1999). This performative dimension is crucial in the memory work at the Spassky cemetery, where major remembrance activities are traditionally organised as large international gatherings with the participation of foreign officials, including incumbent and former presidents (like the president of Romania Ion Iliescu, ex-president of Estonia Arnold Rüütel, and others), diplomats, representatives of various ethnic diasporas, cultural organisations, religious leaders (Muslim, Orthodox Christian and Catholics), representatives of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and local Kazakhstani officials. Such events are a demonstrative and a representational happening that lend memorialising discourses a collective shape (Wagner-Pacifici 2015). From the perspective of Kazakhstan, these commemorative events involve a particular form of what Erving Goffman labelled a "team performance", bringing together low-ranking Kazakh local officials and senior Foreign Ministry personnel to collaborate in projecting a particular image of their country, its intentions, attitudes, and beliefs (Goffman 1959, p. 80). Likewise, the inauguration of every national monument at the Spassky Memorial Cemetery has also assigned an important role to the members of international communities and to the representatives of foreign official missions. A key element of these ceremonies is both the declaration of moral commitment on the part of the remembering nations, as voiced by their official representatives, and their acknowledgment of the Kazakhstani state's efforts and contribution to the preservation of memory.

In May 2018 two monuments were unveiled to commemorate victims from Iran<sup>15</sup> and Czechia. The Iranian Memorial was constructed with the active support of both the Iranian Cultural Centre in Kazakhstan, a major institution of the diaspora, and the Embassy of Iran in Kazakhstan. At the ceremony inaugurating the monument to the citizens of the Czech Republic, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Czechia to Kazakhstan Elishka Zhigova emphasised that this was the first monument dedicated to the Czech victims of the totalitarian system to be built within the post-Soviet space, and that it could not have been built without the support of the Kazakhstani authorities.<sup>16</sup> Such recognition not only constitutes praise for the proactive mnemonic policy adopted by the Kazakhstani state towards other nations' victims, but also affirms the image of Kazakhstan as an important player in the international memory of communism. The image of the state as the guardian of the memory of communism is reinforced by the presence of Kazakhstani soldiers standing in the guard of honor alongside each monument at the Spassky memorial cemetery during the official commemorative ceremonies.

Cooperation between Kazakhstan and Japan was not limited to building monuments and observing commemorative days. Since 1995, the Japanese government has funded archival and archeological research relating to the burial sites in Kazakhstan. In 2018, Kazakhstani officials ceremonially handed over an electronic archive containing information on about twenty thousand Japanese prisoners of war who had been detained in Kazakhstan, the fruit of a long-term project realised by Kazakhstani archivists. The speech delivered by the Minister of Culture and Sports of Kazakhstan Arystanbek Mukhamediuly provides a striking example of the linking of official mnemonics with the discourse of international self-assertion and the claim to legitimacy, for which memory offers important leverage:

‘A quarter of a century of the country’s independence demonstrated the consistency of our state, in which our own model of political and economic development has been worked out, the shortcomings of the totalitarian past were overcome, the preconditions for future prosperity have been created’. The Day of Memory of Victims of Political Repression reminds us of the difficulties faced by previous generations and help us to fully comprehend the achievements of our independence.<sup>17</sup>

The discourse of commemoration reflects the image that a society seeks to convey of itself (Todorov 2003, p. 133). An important incentive for Kazakhstani memory politics is the creating of the image of the state as a devoted custodian of the memory of the victims of past atrocities. Addressed to foreign audiences, this discourse converts commemoration of various groups of victims into the symbolic capital that can assist a country in promoting the gradual internationalization of its image by virtue of the established associations between the remembering of the victims of communism, the promotion of the human rights agenda, and cosmopolitan liberal values (Forsdick, Mark, and Spišiaková 2020).

#### ALZHIR Memorial

The second important site of “memory diplomacy” in Kazakhstan is the Memorial Museum ALZHIR inaugurated in 2007 on the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Day of Memory of the Victims of Political Repression. The museum is situated within the confines of the former Akmolinsk camp of wives of traitors to the motherland, which was the largest women’s camp on the territory of the USSR. The high official standing of the Memorial was confirmed by the presence of President Nazarbayev at the inauguration ceremony. Unlike the Spassky Memorial Cemetery, where the emphasis of Kazakhstani memorial work is on remembering all

victims, the ALZHIR memorial maps Kazakhstan's own territory of suffering on to the larger picture of the memory of communism. The first floor of the museum space recounts the political history of Kazakhstan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We are presented there with a general picture of the losses that the Kazakh nation suffered in the years of civil war, famine and terror, complemented by individual stories of prominent Kazakh intellectuals and politicians who died in Gulag camps.

The second part of the museum is dedicated to the female prisoners of ALZIR, their experience of detention and their life stories before and after the camp. The very first information a visitor will encounter at Alzhir concerns the "eighteen thousand women prisoners of sixty- two nationalities who passed through the camp", among which were 4390 Russians, 855 Jewish people, 740 Ukrainians and 169 German women. The Museum research centre, whose major aim is to locate the descendants of former prisoners living in various countries and to circulate information about the museum abroad, has become an important vehicle for consolidating an image of the museum's and the country's commemorative efforts in the international arena.

Soviet repression differed from the Holocaust structurally: it was not a coherent, organized project, but included a number of disparate processes, such as the mutual destruction of the Bolshevik old guard, the crimes attendant on brutal state-led modernization efforts (the Kulaks, the victims of starvation), ethnically motivated crimes, crimes relating to World War II and its aftermath, and so on (Zaretsky 2009, p. 204–205). The ALZHIR camp in all its brutal reality witnessed repression against family members of the Soviet political and cultural elites who had fallen out of favour under Stalin, among them women from the family of the Soviet military leader Mikhail Tukhachevsky, the wives of writers Boris Pilnyak and Yury Trifonov, the mothers of the future, very celebrated ballet dancer Maya Plisetskaya and the Noble prize winner

in literature Bulat Akudzhava, the wife of the famous Soviet Kazakh poet Saken Seifullin, the famous singer Ludmila Ruslanova, the writer Galina Serebryakova and others. Alongside various documents from the Kazakhstani archives, the display cases contain numerous personal belongings of camp inmates which were sent to the museum from different countries by former victims and their descendants. These material artefacts – purses, bags, shoes or cosmetics - juxtapose the horror of camp detention with the elegant and lavish lifestyle of these women, members of the Soviet elites, prior to their arrest. These objects’ connotations of normality and of a carefree life lost after arrest is contrasted with the reality of camp life as conveyed by multiple objects used to compose the memorial: a train carriage similar to those used for the transportation of prisoners to the camps, a model of the barracks in which the women prisoners lived, a diorama of “Children taken away from the prisoners at the ALZHIR camp” and several sculptures and compositions like “The Arch of Sorrow”, “Despair and Powerlessness”, a stele entitled “Tears”.

The countries of origin of the privately owned artifacts, sent to the museum by the families of former prisoners, highlighted in the descriptions given of these objects, create a global map of the museum’s remembrance mission – Israel, Russia, USA, UK, Germany, Poland. Memory scholarship has recognised the active role played by material objects in the production of memory, triggering and shaping recollection and linking people to each other across generations (Rigney 2017, p. 474). The artefacts in ALZHIR have been evocative in building connections not only in time, but also in space. They create an important dimension of the museum as a place of global memory encounters, linking it to all those countries from where they were sent to Kazakhstan.

Private memories embodied in personal belongings and the letters of women prisoners have been realigned with the official memory narratives of foreign states in

the commemorative gestures and events. Stories of the individual sufferings of imprisoned women are thus converted into multiple national mnemonics. Fourteen identical monuments commemorating the women victims of different nations - Georgian, Polish, Ukrainian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Latvian, Lithuanian, German, French, Estonian, Korean, Hungarian, Jewish and Belarusian - that were built in the grounds of the memorial complex by foreign diplomatic missions display the intersection of national and transnational remembrance. The inauguration of each of these monuments was attended by representatives of foreign diplomatic missions, representatives of diaspora organisations, NGOs and Kazakhstani officials. Among the foreign visitors to the site were the presidents of several different countries, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania among them, as well as the prime minister of Estonia – and all these visits are featured in the history of the museum as milestones marking the fulfillment of the memorial’s mission.<sup>18</sup> The museum’s exhibition also features the letters of gratitude from the descendants of victims addressed to Nazarbayev, which not only highlight the political will invested in remembrance but also help to integrate the private memories of foreign nationals into the official memory.

By contrast with the Spassky cemetery, where every monument built by a foreign state is different and carries references to the cultural tradition of a nation whose victims it commemorates, the monuments at the ALZHIR memorial have an identical form, one subordinated to the logic of the architectural ensemble of the memorial complex. Just like any cultural objects that gain new meaning by “entering into a conversation with others” (Schudson 1989, p. 164), these monuments form a new and integrated commemorative field (Steidl 2013, p. 753) generated through the co-existence and co-memory of the victims of multiple nations rendered equal in the face of the cruelty of the Stalinist repressive machine. What exactly does the meta-narrative

of these nationalized stories of women's destroyed lives forged within the commemorative space of the ALZHIR memorial convey? This meta-narrative may be said to convey the story of the transnational significance of the memory of communism and of the overarching values linked to it, such as freedom and human rights. The physical space of the memorial complex as an impressive, monumental creation providing an integrative materiality for multiple nations' mnemonics, can be read as a reflection of the growing assertiveness of the Kazakhstani state as a remembering agency. The memorial serves to connect Kazakhstan with the meta-narrative and the set of political and social values it denotes; the global connotations of this metanarrative contribute to the country's symbolic capital of an international nature it accrues through mnemonics. One of the former prisoners, Maya Klashtornaya, the daughter of the banned poet Todor Klashtorny, who was from Belarus, reflected during her visit to the memory site on the contrast between what she had anticipated and what she in fact encountered. She was returning to Kazakhstan after many years, she said, and "with an aching heart", expecting to see a dark place of execution, but found, instead, "the blossoming paradise" of remembrance. Kazakhstan in the perception of former prisoners appears as a country that deserves admiration for its rise from "the camp past to the modern, developed and independent state" (Kuryatov 2017, p. 27).

### **Regaining agency through gratitude**

One of the recent moves in Kazakhstani memory strategy provides an example of the further consolidation of the symbolic capital of mnemonics accompanied by the retrospective affirmation of the agency of the Kazakh people in the Soviet past. The series of "memorials of gratefulness" built across the country and the new observance

of a Day of Gratitude to the Kazakh People established by the Kazakhstani President in 2016 on the 1st of March highlight the role of the Kazakh people in providing support for, and helping to ensure the survival of the deportees and other victims of Stalinism. This new component of the commemorative program illustrates how mnemonic capital serves to reassert the state's image both abroad and at home. Being projected on to the multinational composition of the Kazakhstani people, the transnational meaning of the memory of communism becomes an important element for enhancing intra-societal cohesion as well as the internal legitimacy of the ruling regime.

The first monument of gratitude was built in 2012 by the Korean Association in Almaty region near Ushtobe to commemorate the victims of the first deportation of Korean people from the Far East in 1937, when about a hundred thousand Koreans were forced to move to Kazakhstan, on account of an “ideological distrust” at the time of the Japanese-Korean invasion of China and the tensions on the Soviet border in the Far East. The monument carries an inscription of “Gratitude to the Kazakh people”, in the Kazakh, Russian and Korean languages. Remembering the sufferings of deported nations in this context brings to light the valor of the Kazakh people who shared with newcomers their homes and what food they had, helping them to survive at the most critical and tragic moment in their history (“Koreitzzy v Kazakhstane,” Qazaq Uni 1 April 2019).

In 2015, a monument with a similar message but this time in the name of all nationalities was built in Nur-Sultan to emphasize the role played by Kazakhs in the survival of all oppressed and deported people in the years of the Stalinist terror. The monument in the capital city depicts the figure of a Kazakh woman surrounded by the children of different nationalities whom she protects – two boys representing Koreans and peoples of the Caucasus, and the girl representing the peoples belonging to

European nationalities. Similar monuments of gratefulness were later built across the country, including monuments in Aktobe and Shymkent built in 2017. This formula of commemoration reworks the narrative of collective post-Soviet victimhood in such a way as to allow the Kazakh nation to retain agency throughout the most troubled years of the communist terror. In place of the victim's passivity and inability to resist totalitarian power there emerges the image of people who helped others to survive, and demonstrated heroism while sharing their sufferings.

The legacy of mass deportation to Kazakhstan carried out under Stalin's rule – around 800,000 Germans, 102,000 Poles, 550,000 people from the Caucasus and 100,000 Koreans - contributes to the contemporary demographic composition of Kazakhstan, where people of more than 120 nationalities currently live (Cummings 2003; Kudaibergenova 2016). The ideal of peaceful co-existence and that of the cohesion of the present day multi-ethnic society of Kazakhstan has been an important aspect of governmental policy since the early 1990s, when the rise of ethno-nationalism in neighbouring states provoked inter-ethnic tensions and even wars (Thompson and Heathershaw 2005). To forestall a similar scenario, the Kazakhstani government emphasized the multi-national character of the territory as a positive asset of independent Kazakhstan. This emphasis had been in evidence ever since independence was declared. As early as 1996 the official day of Unity of the People of Kazakhstan has been celebrated on the 1st of May in place of the former Soviet day of International Solidarity of all working people. The Observance of Gratitude Day, in contrast, introduces a historical and commemorative dimension to the celebration of Kazakhstan's multi-national population, and combines elements of remembrance of the victims of political repression with an affirmation of the positive role played by Kazakhs in the life of victims of different nationalities during the Stalinist terror.

“Gratefulness monuments” and multiple events organized on the Day of Gratitude have become commemorative vehicles that project Kazakhstan’s “domestic transnationalism” on to the international scene. The positive experience of various national minorities as conveyed to the outside world help to fashion an image of political and cultural legitimacy and reliability and create favourable conditions for developing cooperation with these nations’ home states. The Korean diaspora in Kazakhstan and the favourable image of the Kazakhstani nationalities policy it communicates serves to facilitate the extensive program of educational exchange and business contacts with South Korea.<sup>19</sup>

In 2014-2016, as a result of cooperation between the state archive of the President of Kazakhstan, Kazakhstani Jewish organizations and the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, a set of copies of about 12,000 documents relating to the history of the mass evacuation of Jewish people from the western regions of the USSR during World War II were transferred to the USA. In the words of the Consul General of the USA in Almaty Mark Moody, this collaborative project opened for millions of Americans “these unknown pages of the Holocaust and the history of the survival of Jewish people in Kazakhstan due to the heroic support of the Kazakh people.”<sup>20</sup> From the Kazakhstani perspective, according to the Director of the Archive of the President of Kazakhstan Boris Japarov, the documents transferred to the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC not only serve to disseminate the story of the hospitality and warm welcome that Kazakh people offered to those who in the past had arrived in their midst, but also worked to enhance the authority of present- day Kazakhstan (Japarov 2017, p. 286). Monuments, commemorative events and collaborative projects dedicated to the history of deported nations and the role played by the Kazakh people in their survival provide yet another example of how the discourse of suffering is construed without

positing a lack of Kazakh agency in the past, and how mnemonic capital has been accumulated and redistributed in order to bolster the image and status of both Kazakhstani society and the state on the international scene.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I argue that memory constitutes an important instrument not only in shaping the collective identity of nations, but also in building transnational linkages between state and non- state actors through the mediation of shared meta- memory narratives and associated values. Drawing on the Bourdieusian concept of symbolic capital the article develops the idea of a symbolic capital of the memory of communism that can be accrued by virtue of possessing established connections with other actors within the transnational memory arena. The article recounts how, following the emergence of the global memory framework of the Holocaust, which had made public contrition for violations of human rights a new global norm (Olick 2007), the condemnation of communist repression as a gross violation of human rights prompted the rise of the global memory of communism. Its genuinely worldwide appeal, which was symbolically manifested in the inauguration of the Memorial to the victims of communism in Washington DC in 2006, broadened the framework of relevance of this memory and confirmed its close association with the liberal set of values. The source of the symbolic capital of mnemonics can thus be tracked at the intersection of the global field of the memory of communism and multiple nations' memory narratives that constitute themselves within the structure of relations within that field.

The article also contributes to the theorisation of the sociological concept of “international”, which represents not only a condition or type of setting in which

individuals or social groups may operate, but also a desirable asset that peripheral or postcolonial states seek to achieve in order to establish their status in the global arena. While built upon an examination of the specific case of Kazakhstani memory politics the article's findings provide important insights into the more general process of capitalising upon the damage incurred by totalitarian systems in the past in order to craft international status and prestige, a crucial preoccupation for peripheral and postcolonial states emerging in the global arena. The article demonstrates how memory of the past has been involved in the strategic management of impressions that renders it possible to orchestrate the emotions aroused by the memory of past wrongdoings and to project the image of a particular emotional response towards other memory actors and their narratives. Due to the inverted mechanism of reputational strategy, remembrance of the victims of communism and condemnation of Stalin's terror in this context serves to shape the image of the "remembering agency".

Two memory sites – the Spassky Memorial Cemetery and the ALZHIR Memorial Complex - have become the sites of immense "commemorative density" (Zerubavel 1995) due to intense performative memory work there and the creation of multiple memory artefacts. The energy of these mnemonic rites, however, is not used for cementing the Kazakh nation's collective identity through the narrative of collective sufferings nor, indeed, for the reinforcement of a political liberalisation agenda. Instead, it assigns Kazakhstan the role of mediator and facilitator of transnational memory encounters, thus making it an important player in the global mnemonic field. Memory is never just a reflection, but is also an orientation and direction, acting as it does both as 'a mirror and a lamp' (Schwartz 1996). In the Kazakhstani case, the memory of Soviet repression serves to project a specific set of values associated with the global

decommunization endeavour and to “cover” a reluctance to comply with the liberal political standards inherently vested in this project.

This article has also used the case of post-Soviet Kazakhstan to rethink the manner in which the postcolonial memory framework operates in the post-Soviet and postcommunist settings. The ethno-nationalist script, currently prevalent in post-Soviet mnemonics, deploys the nation-centered narratives of collective suffering to foster estrangement from the Soviet experience and its legacy. These narratives craft their representations of postcommunist national identities by defining them in terms of the position of a victim deprived of the agency that might have enabled it to evade the Soviet power. The Kazakhstani memory framework, in contrast, maintains the multinational status of those who had suffered under communism and outlines its own global mnemonic mission in providing the space for connections and interactions within this multi-vocal memory space. The symbolic capital of the memory of communism in this context emerges as a response to the quest of peripheral and postcolonial countries for the resources that could boost their emergence in the global arena. It becomes a part of the affirmative postcolonial strategy of coming to terms with the complex requirements of a global reality that capitalizes upon the memory of the totalitarian past.

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Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Karlag is an abbreviation for Karagandinky lager'; ALZHIR is the Russian acronym for Akmolinsk, "a camp housing the wives of traitors to the motherland".

<sup>2</sup> During the period 1941- 1950 fourteen camps operated on the territory of Kazakhstan. Some of them were permanent and some temporary. All such camps were closed by 1950.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion of the rise of a comparable symbolic capital, or "political currency", attributed to the 'global' field in Selchow 2007, Eagleton-Pierce 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch. Kazakhstan. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/kazakhstan>

<sup>5</sup> The event subsequently provoked a series of diplomatic clashes between the US on the one hand and China and Russia on the other: "China blasts Bush tribute to victims of communism", 14 June 2007, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-usa-communism/china-blasts-bush-tribute-to-victims-of-communism-idUSPEK20924820070614>.

<sup>6</sup> "V Astane demontiruyut memorial zhertvam politicheskikh repressii" KTK News, 11 June 2008 <https://www.ktk.kz/ru/news/video/2008/06/11/426/>

<sup>7</sup> Monuments dedicated to the Soviet Kazakhstani heroes of the Great Patriotic War erected in the capital alone include Baurzhan Momyshuly Monument 2008, Aliya Moldagulova Monument 2008, Panfilov Monument 2015, Homeland Defenders 2015, Rakhimzhan Koshkarbaev Monument 2016, Manshuk Mametova Monument 2018.

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<sup>8</sup> Around seventy percent of Kazakhstan's population of 15.5 millions are Muslims, twenty six percent are Russian Orthodox Christians, <http://stat.gov.kz/>

<sup>9</sup> "Meeting the Youth of Kazakhstan," L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English 26 September 2001, 5.

<https://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2kzyth.htm>

<sup>10</sup> "Otkryvaya zavesy tragicheskogo proshlogo," Press-sluzhba KNB RK, 05 October 2012, <http://knb.gov.kz/ru/article/otkryvaa-zavesy-tragiceskogo-proslogo>

<sup>11</sup> "Secret KGB files on father of Lubavitcher rebbe released," The Jewish News, 24 December 1999, <https://www.jweekly.com/1999/12/24/secret-kgb-files-on-father-of-lubavitcher-rebbe-released/>

<sup>12</sup> On the eve of independence in 1991, Kazakhstan was the only post-Soviet republic in which the titular Kazakh population did not constitute the majority. In the last Soviet census, conducted in 1989, Kazakhs in Kazakhstan represented 39.7 percent, while Russians living in Kazakhstan represented 37.4 percent, Ukrainians and Belarusians 6.5 percent and Germans about 7 percent. "All-Union Census of 1989" National Composition of Population in the Republics of USSR, Kazakh SSR, available at: <http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sngnac89.php?reg=5>

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.inform.kz/ru/v-karagandinskoy-oblasti-otkryty-pamyatnye-znaki-ispancam-i-estoncam-zhertvam-politicheskikh-repressiy-foto\\_a2781881](https://www.inform.kz/ru/v-karagandinskoy-oblasti-otkryty-pamyatnye-znaki-ispancam-i-estoncam-zhertvam-politicheskikh-repressiy-foto_a2781881)

<sup>14</sup> „Strasti vokrug pamiatnika,” Vremya, 22 May 2008, <https://time.kz/news/archive/2008/05/22/4788>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.kt.kz/rus/politics/na\\_spasskom\\_memoriale\\_v\\_karagandinskoj\\_oblasti\\_ustanovleno\\_eshte\\_dva\\_pamjatnih\\_znaka\\_zhertvam\\_politicheskikh\\_repressij\\_1153657497.html](https://www.kt.kz/rus/politics/na_spasskom_memoriale_v_karagandinskoj_oblasti_ustanovleno_eshte_dva_pamjatnih_znaka_zhertvam_politicheskikh_repressij_1153657497.html)

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<sup>16</sup>[https://bnews.kz/ru/news/pamyatniki\\_posvyashchennie\\_zhertvam\\_politicheskikh\\_repressii\\_chehii\\_i\\_irana\\_otkrili\\_v\\_karagande](https://bnews.kz/ru/news/pamyatniki_posvyashchennie_zhertvam_politicheskikh_repressii_chehii_i_irana_otkrili_v_karagande)

<sup>17</sup> <https://timeskz.kz/35859-kazahstan-peredal-tokio-arhivnye-materialy-o-yaponskih-voennoplennyh.html>

<sup>18</sup> Author's interview with Anar K., 16 March 2017.

<sup>19</sup> “Association of Koreans of Kazakhstan” involved in cultural and commemorative initiatives, also promotes business partnership, trade and investment. See: Koreiskie organisatzii, <https://koreans.kz/?lang=ru>

<sup>20</sup> Japarov, Boris, „Mezhdunarosnyi den Kholokosta”, Qazaqstan tarihy 27 January 2017 <https://e-history.kz/ru/publications/view/2750>

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