

**“The Language of the Sword”:  
Aleksandr Bek, The Writers Union and  
Baurdzhan Momysh-uly in Battle  
for the Memory of *Volokolamskoe shosse***

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*Abstract:*

The Great Patriotic War served as a defining moment for the Soviet Union, changing the locus of legitimacy for both regime and individual and also the way that this multi-ethnic state defined itself. The following paper examines the conflict between two men who constructed narratives of this war, first collaboratively, then separately. Both aspired to create an authoritative, authentic version of events. One of these men, Aleksander Bek was a professional writer of Russified Danish origin. The other, Baurdzhhan Momysh-uly, was a soldier and a Kazakh, representing a recently modernized, yet “backward” ethnic minority. Their story provides a window into the changing meaning of what it meant to be a Soviet person as well as the battle over who had the rights to tell the story of the war.



The central question throughout the entire book... is battle and its psychology, a person in combat... the people in battle, the nobility of the Soviet warrior, conscience, honor, the moral face of Soviet people, Soviet warriors, the feeling and consciousness of duty, initiative, the psychology of command and subordination. In brief, the strength of Soviet patriotism in the examples of Soviet people, soldiers and officers of our multinational, but united Red Army, which in the days of the immense test of 1941 first eloquently told the whole world – our friends and our enemies –who they are; the Soviet nation, the nation of warring Bolsheviks, struggling for human truth, worth and justice. This was not shown on the pages of forms, but by the language of fire, the language of the sword, by all the means of the heart, by all the human essence of the Soviet people. And on the earth of the Moscow region these facts were recorded in sacred blood shed by our soldiers and officers.<sup>1</sup> - Guards Colonel B. Momysh-uly, 08.XII.1944

I have no doubt that Baurdzhan Momysh-uly was unfair with me in this case. I wanted the same thing as him: the truth. – A. Bek, *Panfilovtsy na pervom rubezhe*<sup>2</sup>, 1943

Bek can open people like cans of food! – Viktor Shklovsky<sup>3</sup>

In December of 1944, with the victory of the Red Army already at the threshold, a conference was held at The Writer's Union in Moscow to discuss how best to codify the experience of the Great Patriotic War. Entitled the "Image of the Soviet Officer", this four-day gathering was dedicated to a discussion of the new type of officer that had emerged from the battlefields of the Great Patriotic War and to literary works that had best displayed his qualities.<sup>4</sup> The agenda centered on a discussion of two books, Konstantin Simonov's *Days and Nights* and Aleksandr Bek's *Volokolamskoe shosse*.<sup>5</sup> The latter was declared "the best book written about the war" by Viktor Shklovsky, despite one major flaw that was consistently censured in the course of discussion.<sup>6</sup> Those present lauded Bek's ability to show the development and internal, psychological world of his protagonist, but questioned his choice of the object of such analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Baurdzhan Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, (Alma-Ata, 1990), 169-170.

<sup>2</sup> Bek, "Panfilovtsy na pervom rubezhe," *Znamia* 5-6, (Moskva, 1943), 199-234. 201.

<sup>3</sup> Tatiana Bek. *Do svidaniia, alfavit*. (Moskva, 2003), 142.

<sup>4</sup> "Literaturnaya kritika: Obraz sovietskogo ofitsera (Otchet o diskussii v Soiuze sovietskikh pisatelei)," *Znamia* 1, (Moskva, 1945), 200-205, 200-201.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-202. Saburov, the hero of *Dni i nochi*, was dismissed as too flat and without psychological depth, and as such did not become a major theme of discussion.

<sup>6</sup> "Literaturnaya kritika: Obraz sovietskogo ofitsera (Otchet o diskussii v Soiuze sovietskikh pisatelei)," 203.

At the center of the critique of *Volokolamskoe shosse* was one very conspicuous man, who, in a repeat performance of his appearance a year before, made quite a memorable impression in the Halls of the Writer's Union. This man promised that "[w]hen the war ends, the war on the literary front will begin. That which you considered war was a mere skirmish."<sup>7</sup> He had declared the majority of writers "cowards" and "corporals of literature" for fearing the truth and pulled a gun on a war correspondent to prove that fear is something real.<sup>8</sup> Finally, he had promised to cut off the right hand of one of the authors present – should that author not tell the absolute truth about his story.<sup>9</sup> His name was Guards Colonel Baurdzhan Momysh-uly, and of the names appearing in the minutes and extant speeches, he is one of only two "Non-Russians"<sup>10</sup> and one of only two among those present to appear on the pages of the books being discussed.

The other man to appear both in the hall and on the page was Aleksandr Bek, the author, or, in Momysh-uly's appraisal, the "stenographer" of *Volokolamskoe shosse*, of whom Momysh-uly said: "if the literary front were a real front, where cowards are executed on the battlefield, he would have long ago ceased to live".<sup>11</sup> This was more than morose humor, as Momysh-uly had executed men at the front. In his addresses at the conference, Momysh-uly railed against the literary establishment, attacked Bek personally, and challenged the ability of

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<sup>7</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 173.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 151, 201.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 173. The other "Non-Russian" was Momysh-uly's close friend Malik Gabdullin. The term "soldiers and junior commanders of non-Russian nationality" was adopted in 1942 by the Political Department of the Red Army, recognizing the special linguistic and cultural needs of soldiers who did not speak Russian and peoples who had not been drafted into the Army prior to the draft law of 1939 (*Zakon o vseobshchei voinskoi obiazannosti*. 01 sentiabria 1939 goda). Interestingly, the definition of "Non-Russian" did not apply to Jews, Belorussians and Ukrainians, given the linguistic closeness of the Slavic peoples and level of assimilation of Jews into Soviet culture. See for example "Direktiva GlavPU RKKKA Nachalnikam politupravleniy MVO, PriVo, IuzhUrVo, SAVO o rabote sredi voynov nerusskoi natsional'nosti v zapasnykh brigadakh okrugov. No.85. 22 maia 1942 g." in *Russkiy arkhiv: Velikoi Otechestvennoi voini* T. 17. (Moskva, 1996), 139; see also V.A. Muraidin. *Bratstvo, skreplennoe krov'iu*. (Moskva, 1969), 68-85. N.V. Pupyshv. *V pamiate i v serdtse*. (Moskva, 1986) 76-83.

<sup>11</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voiny*, 143.

those who had not served at the front and become dutiful soldiers to add anything meaningful to the record of the war and thus to teach its lessons to the next generation of Soviet warriors.<sup>12</sup>

Over the next forty years, Bek, Momysh-uly and their allies would be engaged in battle for control of the memory of the Great Patriotic War. Ironically, while agreeing as to which story needed to be told, who its heroes were and why the Red Army was victorious, they disagreed as to what form the story should take and who had the rights to it, a disagreement that ultimately went beyond the petty bickering of two men. Their battle was among the first shots exchanged in a greater conflict between writers, the state and veterans. Bek's fiction drew on the experience of a concrete person, whom Bek often painted as a noble savage, while his subject, Momysh-uly, time and again asserted his agency and identity through polemic and his own literary works. The Colonel insisted that the truth could be revealed only by a writer who was author, narrator and active participant, while Bek and his Writers Union colleagues asserted the right to creativity on the part of a skilled, professional author and the professional author's preeminence over the amateur. Their struggle reveals much not only about remembrance of the war, but allows us to question who the narrative of the war belonged to, how to identify its authors, and indeed how identity itself was formed at the convergence of cultural, professional and ethnic vectors in the Stalinist and Post-Stalinist Eras. In their struggle, truth was essentially on the line, but this truth existed in the context of how they identified themselves and each other, for one or another version of events was inevitably and intimately linked with identity – with the specific rights and responsibilities of the author, veteran, Russian or Kazakh.

### ***Volokolamskoe shosse: The Collaborative Work***

The work that Bek and Momysh-uly produced, *Volokolamskoe shosse*, was to become an immensely popular book not only in the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact Countries, but one

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22-23, 28-31, 134.

that could also be found in the pockets of revolutionary Cuban machine-gunners and Israeli Settlers.<sup>13</sup> It told the story of the 316<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division's metamorphosis into 8<sup>th</sup> Guards Rifle Division (more popularly known as "Panfilovtsy" in remembrance of their fallen commander, Hero of the Soviet Union I.V. Panfilov). The narrative follows the division during the defense of Moscow, told from the perspective of Baurdzhan Momysh-uly, who commanded a battalion of the Division's Talgarsky Regiment.<sup>14</sup> Written as a series of interviews in which Momysh-uly recounts his and his men's daring feats in desperate times, it was lauded by Soviet officers and writers alike, presenting an intimate, deeply psychological narrative of an officer's coming of age and his battalion's transformation from a ragtag band of civilians into hardened soldiers.

Conceived as a four-part novel, the work was initially released in serial form. However, it would be nearly eighteen years from conception to completion, by which time its authors had ceased collaboration and independently brought the work to fruition in two different genres. The first installment, "Panfilovtsy na pervom rubezhe (Panfilovtsy on the front line)" was published in the May-June 1943 issue of *Znamia*, and was labeled a "sketch" (*ocherk*), implying that it was reportage rather than a fictional account. The second, appearing a year later in the same publication, bore the title of the work at large, "Volokolamskoe shosse," and was already referred to as a novella (*povest'*). Momysh-uly would be the first to produce a version of the story's continuation, doing so in his memoirs *Za nami Moskva: Zapiski ofitsera (Moscow is Behind Us: An Officer's Notes)* in 1958. Bek, after a prolonged hiatus, returned to his version of events, publishing two novellas in *Znamia* in 1960, the first full version of the book being published in 1962. Momysh-uly did not revisit anything from their wartime collaboration,

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<sup>13</sup> A. Krivitskii. "Koe-shto o pisatele i ego geroe," *Znamia* 2, (1962), 65-76, 66; Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*. (Princeton, 2004), 329.

<sup>14</sup> Named, unusually, in honor of the place where the regiment was formed and trained, the Talgar Mountain. Geographic titles in the Red Army tended to be given for towns and cities liberated by units, and much less frequently their point of origin.

beginning his sequel, like Bek, at the moment that the 1944 novella ends.<sup>15</sup> From the beginning of their relationship, Momysh-uly would publicly and privately assault Bek's character, eventually claiming that his book "was not long to live" and writing letters of complaint about Bek's conduct.<sup>16</sup> The latter action occasionally led to investigations, which made Bek's post-war life quite difficult.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, Bek would continue to speak warmly of Momysh-uly, writing about him even as the former assaulted his character and intermittently demanded that he cease to use material to which he had no right.

*Volokolamskoe shosse* – "a story of fear and fearlessness", is a remarkable work.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to much of the propaganda and literature produced before and some during the war, it was not concerned with showing its heroes as consistently brave, super human creatures who were born to consummate acts of immense heroism, in every way superior to their foe, and sullenly prepared to die for their country. *Volokolamskoe shosse* wartime texts also avoided the sentimentality of many works destined to become classics of the war. The aim of this work was an investigation of the psychology of battle, the internal struggle of men under fire. As a result, foibles were to be laid bare to make the characters more believable – especially those who end up committing acts of bravery.<sup>19</sup> The difficulties of becoming a soldier and unnaturalness of military service are emphasized and fear is at the center of their work.<sup>20</sup> As Momysh-uly

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<sup>15</sup> In the English translation Momysh-uly is listed as co-author. Baurdzhan Momysh-uly, Aleksander Bek, *Volokolamsk Highway*, (Moscow, 1950).

<sup>16</sup> Dmitry Snegin, *Nash Baurdzhan*, (Almaty, 2002), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Dmitry Subbotin, "Po kraiu zemli, Zapiski starika," *Ural* 4, (Ekaterinburg 1999), 103-155, 125-127; Tatiana Bek, "Publikatsiia. Vospominaniia. Soobshcheniia. On liubil slushat' i sprashivat'," *Voprosy literatury* 3, (Moskva, 2001), 235-247, 238-239.

<sup>18</sup> Bek, "Panfilovtsy," 199.

<sup>19</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 142.

<sup>20</sup> As Momysh-uly told his lover, V.P. Stroeva: "A soldier's life is difficult, there are no words to express it – and not every one can bear the glorious path, preserving their honor and dignity." "Na voine rozhdatesia samaia sil'naia liubov'...": Perepiska V.P. Stroevoi n B. Momysh-uly 1944-1965 gody". *Kinovedcheskiie zapiski* 72 (2005): 50-85, 57.

explained to an audience in Alma-Ata in 1944: “The psychological experiences which bring a soldier to shame or glory must be revealed.”<sup>21</sup> Momyshev-uly, in Bek’s telling, found that war correspondents and authors had no concept of fear, and wrote about bravery as something that simply appeared: “Perhaps you think that heroism is a gift of nature? Or that the quartermaster, along with overcoats, doles out fearlessness”.<sup>22</sup> The Guards Colonel even posits fear as a source of heroism: “If there were no fear, there would be no valor”.<sup>23</sup> The first novella is tracked as much as a battle with “General Fear” as a story of the battalion coming together as a fighting unit. Time and again, throughout the series, the internal struggle of the narrator and the psychology of both the group and the individual take center stage.<sup>24</sup> In the end, fear is not something that is overcome once and forever, it is not a change of state and dialectical shift as per Marxism, but rather a constant battle, something akin to the Stalinist need for constant vigilance. This need for vigilance goes alongside an enshrinement of discipline as the key to survival and victory, being more important than numbers, personal bravery and armaments.<sup>25</sup> In this scheme, the role of the officer becomes key, although his task is not so much to command on the field as to think long and hard before the troops are in place, for, as General Panfilov said: “Victory is forged before battle”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Momyshev-uly, *Psikhologiya voini*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 202.

<sup>23</sup> Momyshev-uly, *Psikhologiya voini*, 151-152. For an example of how propaganda was tracking the idea of fear, see “Pis’mo kazakhskogo naroda frontovikam-kazakham,” *Nakaz narodov*, (Moskva, 1943), 26: “We Kazakhs do not know what cowardice is. If one is found among us who embarrasses himself in front of the enemy, his name will be cursed among our people.”

<sup>24</sup> Momyshev-uly, *Psikhologiya voini*, 152; Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” on General Fear: 202, 234; on group psychology: 204, 220.

<sup>25</sup> Momyshev-uly, *Psikhologiya voini*, 150-152; Bek “Panfilovtsy,” 219, 220-224. An illustrative example of this is the soldier Pashko, who while capable of acts of incredible bravery, is eventually executed for spreading panic among the troops (for having a weak will). Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 178-181.

<sup>26</sup> Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 172. The General’s command style is reminiscent of Tolstoy’s Kutuzov in *War and Peace*, which Bek claimed as one the major inspirations for his work. “O proshlom vo imia budushchego,” *Voprosy literatury* 5, (Moskva, 1965), 3-57.

The teacher-student relationship between officer and soldier had a telescopic quality in Bek's story, with Panfilov as teacher to Momysh-uly and Momysh-uly as mentor to his men. The job of these teacher-officers is not so much to give orders and to control as to raise cadres, who can function independently, explain to them in detail what must be done and rely upon them completely to execute their orders, with minimal involvement on the part of commanders.<sup>27</sup> The soldiers and officers, often acting on their own initiative, separated from their commanders, are the decisive factor in battle.<sup>28</sup> In this they are assisted by military regulations, which take on a special importance as a scripture like "collection of wisdom," but which ultimately, like the Torah, New Testament or Koran are enriched by new experience which gives new knowledge and brings new success in battle.<sup>29</sup> As a result of the flexibility of command and initiative of lower ranks, discipline becomes the key to victory, with subordination being its watchword and the external appearance of soldiers being highly significant as a sign of their discipline. The psychological reformation of soldiers is borne out in the visible signs of their self-discipline; the properly oiled weapon and the correctly folded overcoat show that he understands that discipline is for his sake.<sup>30</sup> The concentration on the minutiae of soldier's life and enshrinement of the professional "soldier" (*soldat*), as opposed to the more common pre-war refrain "fighter" (*boets*) signifies a new model for the military, in line with other signs that the revolution and revolutionary panache were giving way to more traditional hierarchies and military decorum.<sup>31</sup> This emphasis on learning and discipline paradoxically challenges Soviet propaganda, as

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<sup>27</sup>For the most salient example of this tendency, see the short story "Begin", in which Momysh-uly gives only one command in the course of an entire battle, the order to start an artillery barrage. "Nachinaite" in Aleskandr Bek, *Na fronte i v tylu*, (Moskva, 1965), 154-164.

<sup>28</sup> Bek, "Volokolamskoe shosse," 104, 110.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>30</sup> Bek, "Panfilovtsy," 223. Bek had noticed Momysh-uly's obsession with his men's appearance early on as his diary from 22 June, 1942 attests. Bek, "Iz voennikh tetradei," 223.

<sup>31</sup> Bek, "Volokolamskoe shosse," *Znamia* 5-6. (Moskva, 1944), 105.

Momysh-uly sees one's military education as a break with their pre-war life in stark contrast with the idea that the Stalinist system had steeled its citizens for battle.<sup>32</sup> The emphasis on learning encompasses frequent discussion of mistakes and failures – including moments when even battle-tested troops ingloriously take flight. In *Volokolamskoe shosse* “my troops are my academy” and the commanders professors.<sup>33</sup> At times the entire story has the feel of a discussion at a military academy, and a certain abstraction of the related experience takes hold, in which the art and psychology of war are all that concerns the narrator.<sup>34</sup>

This tendency towards abstraction and rationalism fosters an unusual relationship to the enemy, who is neither a dragon, nor a monster, nor even faceless. Momysh-uly is interested in his foe, spotting his German counterparts across no man's land and noting minor details such as to which side he wears his pistol.<sup>35</sup> Panfilov's and Momysh-uly's approaches to tactics rely on empathy with one's foe, on putting yourself in his shoes in order to understand what you would do in his position and how to counter these maneuvers. As a result, the enemy is seen as both a worthy opponent and a human being, as a creature of flesh and blood who is vulnerable (and hence able to be killed), just as the Red Army men facing him.<sup>36</sup>

Death is a constant presence in this narrative, as emphasis is placed on survival and also on the interrelationships of people constantly in mortal danger. Momysh-uly is capable of killing his own soldiers. In the third chapter of “Panfilovtsy on the frontline”, tellingly called “Judge Me”, Momysh-uly executes a fellow Kazakh for cowardice in front of the battalion

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<sup>32</sup> Bek “Panfilovtsy,” 221.

<sup>33</sup> Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 94-198, 194.

<sup>34</sup> S. Shtut. “Dusha gerioia”. *Voprosy literatury* 12. (Moskva, 1959), 24-49.

<sup>35</sup> Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 134-135.

<sup>36</sup> ““Na voine rozhdatesia samaia sil'naia liubov'...” 57 : “I love you more than my stallion, more than the most steadfast opponent... with whom I am satisfied”. See also Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 49-50, 154-155; Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 230-232.

before their first battle.<sup>37</sup> This soldier, Barambaev, in whom he had immense pride as a skilled mechanic, needed to be amputated from the body of the battalion, yet this task was difficult for Momysh-uly, and he describes in great detail a fantasy in which he let this man live. Paradoxically, Barambaev is put to death (by the squad he himself had commanded!) in part because he lacked the will to live:

...he began to undo his overcoat. This struck me. No, he, who it seemed thirsted for life most of all, had no will to live. He diffidently accepted his death. It came to mind: perhaps cowards have an inability to thirst for life; to strain their will to live is beyond them. No, this is what we, those who have decided to struggle, have mastered. We will meet death differently, killing those who want to kill us with bullets, grenades and bayonets!<sup>38</sup>

Barambaev is a coward, unable to overcome the natural fear that haunts all soldiers at the front and thus Momysh-uly was forced “to kill his son [Barambaev]” for the sake of his “hundreds of sons [the battalion].”<sup>39</sup> However, the nearness of death also fosters a bond of love and respect that requires the men to be courteous to each other, and much of Momysh-uly’s criticism of himself centers on moments when he was too harsh to his subordinates. A sense of intimacy permeates the initial novel and looms even larger in the independent sequels of both authors. With death all around, the lives of soldiers ironically become immensely valuable, as one goes into battle– a heroic death is not to be sought: survival is the goal and duty of soldiers. As Panfilov says to Momysh-uly in the first novella:

A soldier doesn’t want to die... He goes into battle not to die, but to live. And his commander should be the same way... But you have said so flippantly “I will die with my battalion”... In a battalion, Momysh-uly, there are 700 people. How am I to entrust them to you?... Will you take them into battle not to die, but to live?<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” “Sudite menia” 205-212; He also later expanded the conditions under which officers could execute their men while in encirclement and was prepared to kill his wounded comrades in order to avoid their capture. Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 159.

<sup>38</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 207.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 219.

In *Volokolamskoe shosse* the heroes are not victims of history, they are agents who exercise control over their fate in a world where nothing is accidental.<sup>41</sup> Discipline, harsh discipline, is what guarantees survival, and time and again Momyshe-uly finds he must be cruel to be kind – he cannot be the kind person that comes naturally, and must artificially project an image of severity and indifference, scold when he wants to embrace.<sup>42</sup> “To pity – is not to pity”, in the paradoxical world of the commander.<sup>43</sup> Fear is a parasite, an infection that must be destroyed by discipline.<sup>44</sup> This renunciation of fear leads to suspicion of outsiders and destruction of those incapable of making the difficult transition into becoming a slave of subordination.<sup>45</sup> Soldiers who had retreated from the border are not given a place in Momyshe-uly’s battalion until they prove themselves in battle as a separate unit. Their crime was that they did not keep their organization intact and spread fear throughout the battalion, telling exaggerated stories of the enemy’s prowess.<sup>46</sup> In the context of 1941, when many units of the Red Army melted away in encirclements, losing their will to fight before they could be considered physically defeated, such sentiments were salve to the psychological wounds of the Red Army.

Finally, it must be noted that *Volokolamskoe shosse* follows an unusual unit, one formed in Kazakhstan at the beginning of the war as something comparable to a *narodnoe opolcheniie* (home guards) formation – raised beyond the schedule of mobilization, in a very short period, and at the expense of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>47</sup> As a result, the

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<sup>41</sup> Momyshe-Uly, *Psikhologia voini*: 142 on the obsession with a beautiful death for the main character; 150 on how nothing is by chance and war is not a meat-grinder; 40 about how there is no such thing as coincidence in war.

<sup>42</sup> Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 121; Bek “Panfilovtsy,” 205-212.

<sup>43</sup> Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 101.

<sup>44</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 208; Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 165-168.

<sup>45</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 221-223.

<sup>46</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 208; Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 165-168.

<sup>47</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 218.

proportion of “non-Russians”, especially Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, was unusually high (varying in Bek’s and Momysh-uly’s accounts).<sup>48</sup> This meant that the organization was formed and forged under new wartime conditions, in which there was little time for preparation. Furthermore, this division was among the first large cadres of non-Russians which would come to take up a larger and larger proportion in the army as the Red Army’s initial Slavic cadres fell and the army was forced to rely more on men who until recently had been deferred from military service.<sup>49</sup> Their relationship to the *Rodina* (motherland) takes on different dimensions as men, both Slavic and Turkic, from the deep interior of the country find themselves defending the Soviet capital (which they have never seen) far from their homes, a strong sense of regional identity often supplants a greater Soviet sense of self. While Momysh-uly himself says in the beginning of the 1944 novella, “Let’s not use phrases like ‘the motherland commanded,’ ‘the motherland demanded’... I want to be miserly when speaking of love for the motherland”, he still must explain to his men why they are fighting and what exactly they are defending.<sup>50</sup> When Momysh-uly asked his men to define the motherland, no one can give a coherent answer. One says “our Soviet Union, our territory”, another “where I was born... How should I say...”, and a third stammers:

- The motherland? That’s our Soviet government... It’s... well take for example Moscow... We are defending her now. I haven’t been there... I haven’t seen her, but that’s the Motherland...
- So that means you haven’t seen the motherland?... He was silent.<sup>51</sup>

Momysh-uly gives his own definition of the Motherland:

The Motherland is you [ty]! Kill those who are trying to kill you! Who needs to do this? You do! Your wife, father and mother, your children need you to do this! The Motherland is you

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<sup>48</sup> Momysh-Uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 153; Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 221; Momysh-uly, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, (Alma-Ata, 1986), 15.

<sup>49</sup> Momysh-uly himself seems to have come to the army through the Komsomol, as he had been in the army since 1932, several years before Kazakhs became subject to the draft.

<sup>50</sup> Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 95.

<sup>51</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 211.

yourself, your family, your wife and children. But you ask me, why I worry about you, why I try to make sure that you survive? Because I also want to live.<sup>52</sup>

While propaganda of the time had shifted to a certain degree to the local and the intimate in appeals to soldiers (especially in appeals to Non-Russians), this interpretation represents an extreme expression of this tendency, rejecting the state and even Moscow as the *Rodina*, and asserting that the motherland is *only* the family and the military unit.<sup>53</sup> These soldiers are defending their lives and killing for the sake of returning home, with the defense of Moscow as an auxiliary goal. Honorable survival (“honor is stronger than death” Momyshev tells his men in Kazakh, then in Russian), personal and (since many of the people in question are minorities) national pride (expressed as “duty”) take precedence over the standard narrative of defending the Soviet Capital, becoming a key motif of the story.<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, once the battalion is formed into a formidable host, it is not described as being of iron or steel – the typical clichés of a hardened unit, but of *bulat* – “damask steel” – accentuating its Eastern roots.<sup>55</sup> However, the narrative *Volokolamskoe shosse* pays more attention to the coming of age of an individual, its narrator, than the unit itself.

The ripening of a Kazakh officer under the tutelage of a Russian *muzhik* (peasant, regular guy), who had served from private in the Imperial Army to general in the Red Army, represents a passing of the torch to a new kind of cadre. Propaganda among the nationalities, i.e. promoting the friendship of the peoples, increasingly emphasized that the “brotherly help of the Great Russian People” had been essential to the cultural and revolutionary progress of the non-

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>53</sup> “Pis'mo kazakhskogo naroda frontovikam-kazakham”; Lisa A. Kirschenbaum. "Our City, Our Hearths, Our Families": Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda "Our City, Our Hearths, Our Families": Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda. *Slavic Review* 59. (Winter, 2000), 825-847.

<sup>54</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 122.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 230.

Russians, a theme which many Kazakhs seem to have internalized.<sup>56</sup> While the relationship between Momysh-uly and Panfilov need not be politicized, it does fit snugly into this trope of Stalinist propaganda. Panfilov, the gentler, wiser foil to Momysh-uly, often (especially in Bek's independent works) questions, then ultimately endorses the harsh methods of his Kazakh subordinate.<sup>57</sup> A special relationship is noted between Momysh-uly and the General, who takes an unusually intense interest in a Lieutenant, giving him a battalion, grooming him for command and asking his advice frequently. The two reconstruct past battles, examining them and exploiting them as a learning process. Panfilov's command style is gentle and kind, he ends every discussion not with the standard "execute", but with the tone of a teacher: "Have you understood me?"<sup>58</sup> Panfilov looms large as teacher, father figure, internationalist and the major Russian character of *Volokolamskoe shosse*.<sup>59</sup> His Russianness and internationalist nature are highlighted in his simplicity and gentleness, especially in moments of relaxation behind a samovar, next to a *pechka*, or in the way he enjoys plow in the traditional Uzbek manner – with his bare hands.<sup>60</sup> Panfilov is a man of Soviet international culture, at home everywhere in the Soviet Union.

Throughout the narrative, Panfilov is the kind man that Momysh-uly would like to be, the kindly grandfather to Momysh-uly's necessarily stern, tough-love father image. The two

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<sup>56</sup> "Pis'mo kazakhskogo naroda frontovikam-kazakham," 18; Bhavna Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, language and power*, (New York, 2007), 41, 51; G. Abishev, *Rabota partii bol'shevikov po vospitaniuu chuvstva sovietskogo patriotizma u voinov-kazakhov v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voini*, (Alma-Ata, 1950).

<sup>57</sup> Bek, "Panfilovtsy," 214.

<sup>58</sup> Bek, "Panfilovtsy," 215. Panfilov became famous for "being able to command not by shouting, but by his mind, having been a private, he maintained his soldierly modesty unto death..." Aleksander Bek, *Sobranie sochineniy*, Tom 4, (Moskva, 1976), 516.

<sup>59</sup> Indeed the General reminds Momysh-uly of his recently deceased father. Momysh-uly, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Tom 1, 16-17.

<sup>60</sup> Bek, "Panfilovtsy," 214; Bek. *Volokolamskoe shosse*. (Moskva, 1962), 433-447; Momysh-uly, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Tom 1, 182-184.

complement each other in a way that makes for very gratifying reading, much in the vein of good cop, bad cop like Sharapov and Zheglov in *Mesto vstrechi izmenit' nel'zia*. With its complementary heroes, engaging and exotic narrator, economic yet passionate style, psychological depth and urgent tone *Volokolamskoe shosse* was an instant success.<sup>61</sup> But success brought with it complications as both author and narrator were propelled into celebrity status, with their disagreements becoming grist for rumor mills from Moscow to Alma-Ata.<sup>62</sup> Tension was growing over who owned the story: the author who had recorded it or the man who experienced it.

### **The Image of the Soviet Officer: The Writer's Union Weighs In**

In the Halls of the Writer's Union, there was no doubt as to who owned the story, and in many ways, the discussion there would set the tone for the future conflict. Bek was, according to the members of the Writer's Union, the sole author, who had written a very interesting book about the war, but had become a slave to his all too eccentric protagonist, Momysh-uly. Professional authors criticized Bek's stenographic realism; going so far as to tell Bek, that "we have some doubts as to your authorship."<sup>63</sup> While those present praised Bek for showing the evolution of a Soviet officer in combat and his internal psychological world, they criticized Bek's documentary style, stating that he had become Momysh-uly's stenographer, too close to his subject and that the narrative style was too primitive.<sup>64</sup> The choice of Momysh-uly as the central figure was criticized on several counts. He was considered to be merely the sum of

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<sup>61</sup> See T. Khmel'nitskaia, "Bek. Volokolamskoe shosse," *Zvezda* 3, (Moskva, 1945); Shtut "Dusha geroia".

<sup>62</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 135.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 168-169; "Literaturnaya kritika: Obraz sovietskogo ofitsera (Otchet o diskussii v Soiuze sovietskikh pisatelei)," 203-205.

<sup>64</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologiia voini*, 171-172; "Literaturnaya kritika: Obraz sovietskogo ofitsera (Otchet o diskussii v Soiuze sovietskikh pisatelei)".

military ideas, an overly rational loner, a new Pechorin<sup>65</sup>; he was not a comrade, but one who “blotted out” the collective of soldiers with his egomania.<sup>66</sup> The Kazakh was also seen as too cruel, lacking empathy towards his comrades in arms.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, he was considered too atypical to serve as the template for Soviet officers, as Nikolai Tikhonov, the Secretary of the Writer’s Union, said in his concluding remarks:

Momysh-uly – in life as in the book – is concentrated on himself, on his ideas, rules, dogmas. The function of an officer, new for him at the beginning of the war, obliged him to search for some sort of special way of relating to people. With Kazakhs Momysh-uly conducts himself as a brother, with Russians – as a brother in arms.<sup>68</sup>

In the summation of the Writer’s Union, Momysh-uly, due partially to his ethnicity, but more so for his stubbornness and pride, was an unsuitable image to project into the future and around the world. Tikhonov seems to imply that the Colonel has an inappropriately cold relationship to his Russian comrades, an increasingly unforgivable sin in the era of Russians being “first among equals”.<sup>69</sup> Momysh-uly’s supposed indifference to his Russian comrades was all the more alarming in view of the fact that during this period the Party was voicing apprehension about growing local nationalisms. In a December of 1945 report concerning ideological work in Kazakhstan, Momysh-uly’s friend and comrade-in-arms, Hero of the Soviet Union Malik Gabdullin, had received severe criticism for his portrayal of the Battle of Moscow. It was claimed that in the manuscript of “My frontline friends,” Gabdullin, a Political Officer, had

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<sup>65</sup> Lermontov’s egoistic protagonist, the superfluous man from *A Hero of Our Times*. Dairedzhev’s criticism of Momysh-uly as a Pechorin figure was roundly criticized by his colleagues. *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>66</sup> “Literaturnaya krika: Obraz sovietskogo ofitsera (Otchet o diskussii v Soiuzе sovietskikh pisatelei)”.

<sup>67</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologiya voini*, 174; “Literaturnaya kritika: Obraz sovietskogo ofitsera (Otchet o diskussii v Soiuzе sovietskikh pisatelei)”: The criticism here centers around an episode where a group of soldiers from devastated units having fought since the frontiers are refused a place in his unit, in violation of regulations, as he viewed them as cancerous agents spreading fear through his battalion. Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 166.

<sup>68</sup> “Literaturnaya kritika: Obraz sovietskogo ofitsera (Otchet o diskussii v Soiuzе sovietskikh pisatelei),” 205.

<sup>69</sup> David Brandenberger. *National Bolshevism: Stalinist mass culture and the formation of modern Russian national identity. 1931-1956.* (Cambridge, 2002), 130-133.

denigrated Russian soldiers, many of them being executed (by Momysh-uly himself) for cowardice, and portrayed events as if “only Kazakhs had struggled heroically in the Battle of Moscow.”<sup>70</sup> Speaking too loudly about the heroism of Non-Russians, and not recognizing the supremacy of the “Great Russian People” were becoming increasingly problematic as the war came to a close, and Russian cultural tropes became ever more dominant in Soviet culture and especially the military.<sup>71</sup>

The conference was rumored to have negatively affected Momysh-uly’s career. After time in the rear recovering from wounds, he was not sent to his old division, or to one that would take Berlin. Instead he became deputy commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Guards Rifle Division (of which Bek wrote in *The 8<sup>th</sup> of December*), which was liquidating the Courland Pocket in Latvia. Momysh-uly spoke bitterly about Viktor Shklovsky, who inaugurated the discussion of the Colonel’s inadequacy as a model officer, but rejected the idea that his fate relied on anything other than his art as a soldier.<sup>72</sup> Positioning himself as a soldier in opposition to the writing establishment, at the 1944 conference the Colonel not only defended himself, but went on the offensive. He announced that he was part of “a reconnaissance in force” of the “writing-*frontoviki*” that would eventually overtake the writing establishment.<sup>73</sup>

Momysh-uly rejected the notion that this work belonged exclusively to Bek, as well as accusations that he was a cruel, egomaniacal, Pechorin-like figure. He reminded his audience that under current Red Army regulations, a commander was allowed to refer to his unit using the pronoun “I”, and that, as Bek had written in “Volokolamskoe shosse” he had “truly put all of my

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<sup>70</sup> “Dokladnye zapiski v TsK VKP(b) o sostoianii ideologicheskoi raboty v Kazakhstane (1945 g.)” *Voprosy istorii* 5, (Moskva, 2002), 3-13, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Brandenberger, 129.

<sup>72</sup> ““Na voine rozhdatesia samaia sil’naia liubov’...”” 56-57.

<sup>73</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 173.

‘I’ [myself] into the battalion. It is what I have created on earth”<sup>74</sup>. As for his apparent cruelty, Momysh-uly declared: “I am glad and lucky that Dairedzhiev [leading the critique on this question] wasn’t my commissar, he would not have allowed this. I spoke of cruelty and necessity, and this occurrence is partially the fault of the senior lieutenant [Momysh-uly], but partially it was a necessity”.<sup>75</sup> With regard to Bek as exclusive author, he asserted that he was also a writer and that he and Bek had established strict rules governing their collaboration.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, he claimed that “the author of this book is neither Bek, nor I, but the war... I repeat, the book is being written by the war. Aleksandr Alfredovich is the writer-author, I, as the material, am his assistant. We work conscientiously”.<sup>77</sup> Beyond his somewhat metaphysical explanation, Momysh-uly lauded Bek’s status as scribe as the highest honor possible when one is recording the truth, a concept developed throughout Momysh-uly’s wartime and post-war writings. Momysh-uly defended the book’s style as the only method of preserving the truth and fulfilling his duty before his fallen comrades.<sup>78</sup> That the book seemed engorged with Momysh-uly’s introspection and that he was forever discussing his mistakes, were strengths of the book.<sup>79</sup> It added to the work’s realism and central theme of the evolution of citizens into professional soldiers. In his summation:

The war served as a mirror that showed us and others. The war presented a laboratory of forms for practical experimentation, an examination of oneself and others by personal experience. We conducted hundreds of experiments on ourselves and others in order to understand the form of the Soviet people; that is to understand ourselves. Most of all, we diligently trained ourselves in self-analysis, in self-understanding.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 171; Bek, “Volokolamskoe shosse,” 173.

<sup>75</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 174-175.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 141, 143, 171-172.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

That Momysh-uly was immodest, was, as he himself admitted, one of his weaknesses, but one that he had strived to overcome since the Battle of Moscow. He cited his own diary from December of 1941:

“Don’t say “I did this”, - this was done by thousands, do not say “this was done by thousands” – this was done by the brave (*smelye*), this was done by the people (*narod*). If I was not from the thousands, and the brave from the people, who would have done this?”<sup>81</sup>

Momysh-uly thus attempted to place himself within the collective that he was accused of blotting out. At the conference in 1943, when his criticism of Bek had been much sharper, Momysh-uly stated that he was uncomfortable being referred to as a *hero* or character of the story – as he had declared: “I am the narrator, the heroes [of the book] are the soldiers”.<sup>82</sup> With this statement Momysh-uly reaffirmed not only that this work was not his attempt to garner himself glory but also his status as co-author – that he was a real person, with whom Bek had a partnership, not a character subordinated to Bek’s authorship.

However, the verdict of the writers present was that Bek should distance himself from his hero, not being merely his scribe, but allowing his imagination to create a more typical, well rounded representation of the Soviet officer than the actual Soviet officer that stood before them.<sup>83</sup> That Bek was Momysh-uly’s scribe is declared in first chapter of *Volokolamskoe shosse*’s: “In this book I am merely a diligent and honest scribe”.<sup>84</sup> The choice to become, or rather position himself as Momysh-uly’s scribe was not out of sloth or lack of talent, it was rather a key part of Bek’s technique.<sup>85</sup> Having cut his teeth as a writer in Gorky’s *History of*

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>83</sup> “Literaturnaya kritika: Obraz sovietskogo ofitsera (Otchet o diskussii v Soiuzhe sovietskikh pisatelei),” 202-205.

<sup>84</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy na pervom rubezhe”, 199.

<sup>85</sup> Tatiana Bek. *Do svidaniia, alfavit*, 142. As Bek stated in his methodological article “Life gives you hints”: “I now know even more firmly: if they don’t tell about themselves, then we, the writers can’t tell

*Factories* Project, Bek found the fictionalized biography, drawn from prolonged association with his subject, to be his forte.<sup>86</sup> As Bek would claim later, he always intended to write a novel, and his claim to be a scribe was mere literary artifice.<sup>87</sup> Whether artifice or afterthought, Momysuly did not see himself as Bek's junior partner, and would likely not have agreed to work with him had he known what Bek really had in mind.

### **Collaboration**

*Volokolamskoe shosse* opens as Bek first asks Momysuly to tell him his story: "No, - curtly said Baurdzhan Momysuly – I won't tell you anything. I can't stand those who write about the war using someone else's stories [*chuzhykh rasskazov*]"<sup>88</sup> Momysuly then proceeds to tell Bek that, not having served at the front, he knew nothing of love, conscience or internal conflict, and that he, as a soldier, couldn't countenance how authors were portraying the war, discarding a journal with an article about his own unit. "No, I can't stand lies and you won't write the truth".<sup>89</sup> Eventually, the author prevailed.

Bek first arrived at the front in a Home Guards unit and subsequently, after the disastrous retreat from Vyazma in the autumn of 1941 and disbandment of this unit (an experience that produced no prose) he became a war correspondent with *Znamia*. From his time in the Home Guards, he had acquired the nickname "the brave soldier Bejk", as his appearance was so un-soldierly as to recall Hašek's Švejek.<sup>90</sup> Tortured by his unclear status, Bek was

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their stories". Aleksandr Bek. "Zhizn' podskazyvaet". *Voprosy literatury* 3 (Moskva, 1960), 146-153, 152.

<sup>86</sup> Bek, "Zhizn' podskazyvaet".

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-153. Bek had lost most of his notes in 1942, and claims that this led him "to give freedom to his imagination." Aleksandr Bek. *Sobranie sochineniy, Tom 4*, (Moskva, 1976), 518.

<sup>88</sup> Bek, "Panfilovtsy na pervom rubezhe," 199-200.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-200.

<sup>90</sup> A. Krivitskiy. "Koe-shto o pisatelei I ego geroe." *Znamia* 2 (1962), 65-76, 66.

suffering from a lack of confidence but felt himself on a mission: “I must be a *frontovik*”.<sup>91</sup> He had been forced to rewrite his first piece of the war, “The 8<sup>th</sup> of December”. Bek was disappointed with the results, as the edited version was in “the spirit of a primitive feature, hurrah-victory”. Despite his efforts the work was still in limbo when he began *Volokolamskoe shosse*.<sup>92</sup> His reservations about the form in which “The 8<sup>th</sup> of December” was eventually published were clearly on his mind as he returned to the front in search of new material.<sup>93</sup>

### **Bek’s Conception of *Volokolamskoe shosse***

By the Spring of 1942, Bek had decided that he needed to write about the Battle of Moscow – which he considered to be the preeminent event of the war – in an intimate way: “I need a narrow plan – as if the story is about one division or battalion, and as if in passing, by chance (as if the author himself doesn't recognize it) – a picture of the whole Battle of Moscow is revealed”.<sup>94</sup> At the beginning of Bek’s narrative, he sets the stage by zeroing in on what he was after: “I sought for a long time a person who could tell me about the Battle of Moscow, - a person whose narration would embrace the scheme and meaning of the operation and who could also lead me to the place where everything is proven and decided – into battle”.<sup>95</sup> In March of 1942, Bek returned to the front, to the famed 8th Guards Rifle Division, made legendary for their defense of the Volokolamsk Highway the previous year. It was here that Bek and Momysh-uly were first to meet.

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<sup>91</sup> Aleksandr Bek, “Iz voennykh tetradei’,” 217-218: “I am neither a military man, nor a civilian, nor a frontline-writer, nor a fraud...”

<sup>92</sup> Aleksandr Bek, “Iz voennykh tetradei’,” 218

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 216, see 28.03.1942 entry.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 215; According to Krivitsky, Bek came to him in order to ask permission to write a novel about “the 28 Panfilovtsy” – the legendary soldiers who had perished while stopping a German armored column in 1941, providing the 316<sup>th</sup> Division with national renown and Moscow with a rallying cry. Krivitskiy, 66-67. This legend has subsequently been widely discredited, e.g. N.Petrov and O.Edel’man. “Novoe o sovetskikh geroiakh,” *Novyi Mir*, No. 6, 1997 ([http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi\\_mi/1997/6/petrov.html](http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1997/6/petrov.html)).

<sup>95</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 200.

Arriving at the front in the uniform of a private and looking like a fish out of water, Bek immediately became fascinated with Momysh-uly and his Commissar, Logvinenko, intending to feature them and Panfilov as the central figures of his narrative.<sup>96</sup> Bek, as was his method, played the fool in order to get those around him to open up to him, accentuating his ignorance and making a point to be constantly in the way of his projected protagonists.<sup>97</sup> By all accounts, Momysh-uly had no real desire to work with Bek. But the author persisted, hanging around the Kazakh and his staff for weeks as Momysh-uly and his subordinates exposed Bek to life on the front line and enemy fire, hazing him while they tested his mettle.<sup>98</sup> Once Bek was accepted into the collective, Momysh-uly gave Bek interviews between battles (they were 300 kilometers into enemy lines, fighting their way through an encirclement much as they had in 1941) and later from his hospital bed.<sup>99</sup> When Bek left the division, Logvinenko warned him that: “You have been in the eagle’s nest. See that you don’t turn out to be a mere fledgling”.<sup>100</sup> Bek’s interviews with Momysh-uly and Logvinenko continued through the spring of 1942, with the aim of their collaboration in the view of his respondents being a History of the “Talgarsky Regiment”. This, much like Logvinenko’s presence as a character in the book, fell into oblivion.<sup>101</sup> Bek, by this point, had lost his status as a correspondent, and was in an unclear position, slowly writing his work while the Red Army was in its second great retreat of the war, with the fate of the Soviet Union looking increasingly bleak.<sup>102</sup> However, even in these dark

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<sup>96</sup> Bek “Iz voennykh tetradei,” 222.

<sup>97</sup> Bek, *Do svidaniia, alfavit*, 142; Krivitsky, 68-71.

<sup>98</sup> Krivitsky, 70; Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 149.

<sup>99</sup> Bek, “Iz voennykh tetradei,” 219, 223; Krivitskiy, 70-71.

<sup>100</sup> Bek, “Iz voennykh tetradei,” 220.

<sup>101</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 135; Bek “Iz voennykh tetradei,” 222.

<sup>102</sup> Krivitsky, 70-72.

days he had a sense that what he was writing could be significant, that it was a *needed* work.<sup>103</sup>

Having found his muse, Bek set pen to paper.

### **How Bek Perceived his Hero**

Part of Bek's attraction to Momysh-uly was clearly his anomalous nature – Kazakhs in the Red Army had been a rarity before the war, and indeed riots had erupted in 1916, when Kazakhs were to be drafted into auxiliary forces under the old regime. Bek took opportunity whenever possible to highlight the strangeness of Momysh-uly, titling the first chapter of what would become *Volokolamskoe shosse* “The man without a last name”. In this chapter, Momysh-uly's *otherness* sets the stage for one of the major points of contention during their disputes of 1943: Momysh-uly as a noble savage. The first chapter is rife with colorful statements about the man without a last name:

I remembered something from my childhood. On the hard blue spines of a collection of Mayne Reid or Fennimore Cooper the profile of a very thin Indian was squeezed. The profile of Momysh-uly, it occurred to me, resembled this engraving... His swarthy mongoloid, slightly high-cheeked [face], was often opaquely serene, especially in moments of anger, and was decorated by exceptionally wide black eyes. Baurdzhan would jokingly call his shiny black hair, his stubbornly wild mane, a horse's mane... [Finally, Momysh-uly said:] “If you're going to write about me after all, call me by my Kazakh name: Baurdzhan Momysh-uly. Let it be known: [that I am] a slant-eyed Kazakh, a shepherd, who chased rams across the steppe: a person without a last name.”<sup>104</sup>

Throughout the first sketch of *Volokolamskoe shosse*, Momysh-uly's status as a Kazakh is reasserted, as he tells tales of his native land, uses Kazakh sayings, and comes to be known as “*aksakal*” – or grey beard, a term of endearment and respect or “*Shan-Times*’” – “the one dust can't catch” – a reference to his childhood nickname and a legendary stallion.<sup>105</sup> Bek had found a character who was not only unforgettable – a brooding, passionate, attractive man, who was uncompromising in his opinions and both brutal and sensitive, but who also combined the

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<sup>103</sup> Bek, *Do svidaniia , alfavit*, 149; Bek “Iz voennykh tetradei,” 224-225.

<sup>104</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 200-201.

<sup>105</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 200-201; Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 164.

contradictory qualities of modernity and anachronism. Parts of his character – especially his physiognomy, gruffness, and horsemanship – remind one of an ancient nomad. This took on an even more dramatic tone when Bek wrote independently, especially in short sketches that didn't make it into *Volokolamskoe shosse*, where he notes that Momysh-uly had not seen bread until he was ten and had carried a saber throughout the Battle of Moscow.<sup>106</sup> Yet Momysh-uly had been educated in a Soviet boarding school (*internat*), traveled extensively through the Soviet Union, served the Red Army for most of his adult life, and spoke Russian without error.<sup>107</sup> Bek's interpretation of Momysh-uly straddled the line between noble savage and Soviet officer, between “other” and “us”. While Momysh-uly was a brave Soviet warrior, he was also the product of the “a-historic” and “backward” world of Kazakh nomads, who had been forcibly settled by Soviet authorities – at great cost of human life – during Collectivization.<sup>108</sup> Paradoxically, in choosing Momysh-uly as the hero of *Volokolamskoe shosse*, Bek celebrates a way of life destroyed by the very power they are defending.<sup>109</sup>

The Guards Colonel maintained elements of the naïve savage untouched by civilization, which made him a very attractive and memorable hero.<sup>110</sup> Momysh-uly represented an outsider who had come into the fold, the ultimate success story of Soviet nationalities policy, “I remember how they made me, a willful Kazakh, a stallion of the steppe who couldn't stand a

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<sup>106</sup> Bek, *Na fronte i v tilu*, 157.

<sup>107</sup> As an artillery officer before the war, Momysh-uly was, by regulations in spurs and with a *shashka*. Aleksandr Bek. *Volokolamskoe shosse*. (Moskva, 1962), 262; Momysh-uly, *Psikhologiya voini*, 169.

<sup>108</sup> On backwardness in the Soviet Context see Yuri Slezkine. “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism”. *Slavic Review* 53. (1994), 414-452; Terry Martin. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. (Ithaca, 2001); Brandenberger; Adeeb Khalid. “Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective”. *Slavic Review* 65. (2006), 231-251.

<sup>109</sup> Panfilov was from the peasantry, whose way of life was also destroyed at the same time and by the same means.

<sup>110</sup> Yuri Slezkine, *Artic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*, (Ithaca, 1994), 34.

bridle, into a soldier”.<sup>111</sup> If a nomad of the steppe could be turned into a Soviet soldier, and then a Soviet commander and Communist Party member, then anyone could be integrated into the most elite institutions of the Soviet Union. Anyone, then, could become a fully-fledged *Homo Sovieticus*. Or could they? Difference still seemed to persist, as Momysh-uly is constantly positioned not in regard to what he has achieved, but rather where he came from. It is as though he attempted to leave his rightful place within the Kommunalka of the Soviet Union, to go from his niche to the grand hall, to use Yuri Slezkine’s metaphor.<sup>112</sup> Or perhaps his place was still being defined, as he was one of the first of his kind, coming into being before there were standards of how to interact with those such as he. Raised in a backward environment, Momysh-uly had certain qualities that his wholly modern comrades lacked, possessing a window into truth beyond the reach of others: “In Momysh-uly’s character, I want to show how monstrous will is united (can be united) with the ability to see the truth (and speak it).”<sup>113</sup> In this journal entry from June 11, 1942, Bek seems to presage the criticism of the Writers Union. According to Bek himself, his protagonist is a man possessing a “monstrous will” (even if it is combined with a certain perspicacity). This monstrous will can be seen as the source of Momysh-uly’s unshakable volition and occasional cruelty, according to him necessary attributes of an officer at the front in the greatest conflict the world has ever known.<sup>114</sup> Significantly, this journal entry also indicates that, even at the initial stages of their collaboration, Bek saw Momysh-uly as a character over which he had control, a stark contrast to the Guards Colonel’s understanding of their relationship.

### **Momysh-uly’s Criticism of Bek**

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<sup>111</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy,” 223.

<sup>112</sup> Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment,” 443-444.

<sup>113</sup> Bek, “Iz voennykh tetradei,” 224.

<sup>114</sup> Bek, “Iz voennykh tetradei,” 223: “Is everything in him [Momysh-uly] subordinated to his mind? No! There is something stronger than the mind. Pride!”

In a playful moment, Momyshev-uly had described Bek's relationship towards him as follows: "You are insulting the one you want to caress. It's the tenderness of a hippopotamus."<sup>115</sup>

In a much more serious and critical 1944 letter to Bek's editor, Momyshev-uly laid out one of his two major objections to the way Bek had written the story of *Volokolamskoe shosse* – Bek's portrayal of Momyshev-uly. The first complaint related to Bek's emphasis on ethnicity:

I commanded a multinational formation. I depersonalized myself out of a desire to be the same to all of my soldiers; my anger and heart was the same for all. Otherwise all soldiers wouldn't look at me as their own commander – Ukrainian soldiers would not call me "bat'ko", just as Kazakhs call me "aksakal" (I hope that this downright truth will not be taken as immodesty as truth in general is not bragging). This is the essence of the political face of the Soviet officer and the particularity of the union and brotherhood of the Red Army. This is Bek's political mistake, a product of his internal chauvinism, and therefore sometimes the author's annoyance is sparked and one gets the impression [that he wants to say]: "look at this Asian in an officer's rank, who for 26 years did not understand the Soviet system; that communists are good soldiers, who contradicted political work, who is stubborn like a bull, narrow-minded, ignorant, apolitical but a brave soldier and other such nonsense".<sup>116</sup>

As we can see from this passage, Momyshev-uly had taken notice of Bek's attempt to identify him as a noble savage. Momyshev-uly saw himself first and foremost as a Soviet officer, and as such, a man of *Soviet* culture, able to communicate and empathize with all his fellow citizens (perhaps better even than his Russian comrades). He was, in his summation, the intellectual and social equal of any representative of one of the nations of the Friendship of the Peoples, not a backward "national" or "black Kazakh".<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, he was a dedicated socialist, and since 1942 a member of the Communist party who was politically conscious in addition to being personally brave. That he accused Bek of chauvinism is at once surprising, given the spirit of the times, yet also to be expected – given Momyshev-uly's tendency to speak his mind regardless of the reaction of his interlocutor. As we shall see later, Momyshev-uly did not reject his Kazakh identity – his

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<sup>115</sup> Momyshev-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 138.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-164: "It doesn't make sense to get distracted by the exoticism of the figure, to accentuate the color of his skin and other non-European peculiarities... An officer should be Soviet independent of his nationality – he should be faceless and abstract in this sense".

independent work and personal correspondences are filled with reference to his people, their customs and his homeland – but he claimed rights to this identity's usage, much as he claimed rights to exclusivity over *Volokolamskoe shosse's* narrative.

The other pretension that Momyshev addressed towards Bek concerned the former's inability to properly tell the story – essentially against Bek as an independent author.<sup>118</sup> While denigrating Bek's ability as a writer, he claimed the right of final edit; that Bek must “present the novella to my viewing and only after my consent give it out to print”.<sup>119</sup> *Volokolamskoe shosse* was not to be a novel, but “a document, most of all political, literary, historical and military-biographical...of our day”, the demands of which would “severely limit the author's fantasy” and “restrain the stylistic manner of his pen”.<sup>120</sup> Bek had violated their contract, as “Bek is a person with a weak, unprincipled character”, who, under the influence of a “certain circle of journalists” who had “called into question his authorship, [Bek] is acutely suffering through the absence of his ‘I’ – this person, having lost the creative pride of a true writer, sometimes falls into the depths of unconscious internal chauvinism”.<sup>121</sup> Momyshev was certain that Bek, a civilian with limited knowledge of the war and no personal experience, had allowed his fantasy to run wild, destroying the beauty of the text and assaulting its veracity.<sup>122</sup> In his December 1943 speech – the first time he was to address such an auditorium – Momyshev continued to attack

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<sup>118</sup> Snegin, 18. In a May, 1944 letter to his friend, Dmitry Snegin, Momyshev made the following commentary as to the prose styles that he and Bek were arguing over: “I, who experienced this with my own blood am more of an artist than he is. Therefore my style is the iron-clad language of war, and not the nickel plated, flattened language of a newspaperman.”

<sup>119</sup> Momyshev, *Psikhologiya voini*, 136-137: “I don't know how popular Bek is as a writer among his colleagues, but I know that the reader in general did not know him until today. He is, so far, one of the untitled sloggers among comrade artisans. The Writer's Union refused him a deferment. He so far gives me the impression of an honest worker, a conscientious stenographer and photographer. I don't know him as an artist. It is better to work with an honest artisan than with a master whose taste has been ruined, one with perverted feelings, with falsely high self-esteem – this made us closer... Don't think that it is easy for Bek to work. He's very limited, as the material is sometimes beyond his ability”.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

Bek for his desire to fictionalize events, most of all for attempting to add a love story to the events near Moscow: “There are a lot of books about love, but I have yet to encounter [books] about battle, its psychology, about nurturing courage”.<sup>123</sup> The reasons for Momyshev-uly’s disgust with Bek were two-fold. Firstly, Momyshev-uly had a dogmatic approach to truth and its relationship to useful versus useless literature, which he expressed both in public and private.<sup>124</sup> Secondly, Momyshev-uly’s concept of what exactly they were writing differed significantly from Bek’s vision. While Bek sought to record the epic of the Battle of Moscow and express himself as an artist, Momyshev-uly engaged in the task of recording the deeds of his fallen comrades and furthermore creating a “handbook for military enlightenment (and not simply a novel), giving the possibility to understand the truth [*istina*] about the war”.<sup>125</sup>

The Colonel did not want to be the main character of *Volokolamskoe shosse*, merely its narrator. He refused to give many details of his life before the war:

“I am not telling [all this to] you.” “Not me?” “Not [just] to you, but the generation. I am telling the story of what we lived through near Moscow, of the feats of heroism of a battalion of Panfilovtsy. It would be stupid and dishonorable to shove in my personal biography”.<sup>126</sup>

Momyshev-uly saw this project as something larger than himself or Bek, “a book for the wide masses, with the goal of educating the nation”.<sup>127</sup> As such, *Volokolamskoe shosse* would include a detailed discussion of Momyshev-uly’s and other’s mistakes, it would also concentrate heavily on the psychology of battle, exploring the intricacies of what goes on in the mind of men under fire

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 147: “Comrade Bek hammers away at romance, I at realism, and we have yet to agree. If you will continue to speak of romance, then our paths are not the same, and since you felt it necessary to declare, that you do not want to be a slave of thought – my slave, I should say, that I do not want to be your slave – a slave of romance.” Ironically, a love story did come out of Bek and Momyshev-uly’s collaboration – Momyshev-uly, who was married and with a son in 1943, began an affair with V.P. Stroeveva, who he met during his lecture series in Alma-Ata in 1944 and corresponded through the 1960’s. “Na voine rozhdatesia samaia sil’naia liubov’...”: Perepiska V.P. Stroevoi n B. Momyshev-uly 1944-1965 gody”.

<sup>124</sup> Baurdzhan Momyshev-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 7, 134.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 138, 150.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 141.

and contradicting the standard paradigms of both fiction and propaganda. Bek took notice of the Guards Colonel's grandiose intentions early on, noting in a diary entry from June 14, 1942: "His idea is a socialist military dictatorship; an unyielding dictatorship, like the control of a rider over a horse".<sup>128</sup> The success of *Volokolamskoe shosse* gave Momysh-uly a platform from which to preach his transformative vision of the war.

## **Fame**

*Volokolamskoe shosse* propelled both Momysh-uly and Bek into fame, turning Momysh-uly into a public figure of the All-Union level and becoming Bek's "calling card".<sup>129</sup> Bek had gone from a figure "unknown to the reader" to the author of the "best book written about the war", with two conferences dedicated to his work, a steady stream of (mostly positive) attention from critics, frequent publications and a mandate to assert himself as an author from the Writer's Union. Momysh-uly found this fame to be more complicated, as it led immediately to an affair with a Russian woman he met in Alma-Ata during his lecture circuit at the Academy of Sciences, a divorce with his wife (with whom he continued to live), and a later identity crisis as he found that he could not separate himself from his source of fame – Bek's fictionalized, eternally young version of him.<sup>130</sup>

## **Momysh-uly's Memoirs**

By 1945, Momysh-uly was, at least for a time, no longer willing to share his stories with Bek, and began work his own version of the rest of the story, completing a rough draft by 1949.<sup>131</sup> Initially under the title *The Notes of an Officer*, later renamed *Za nami Moskva: Zapiski ofitsera*, Momysh-uly finished the story of the battle along the Volokolamsk Highway in the

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<sup>128</sup> Bek, "Iz voennykh tetradei," 225.

<sup>129</sup> Bek. "Publikatsia. Vospominania. Soobshcheniia. On liubil slushat' i sprashivat'," 242.

<sup>130</sup> Snegin, 15; Bakhytdzhan Momysh-uly. *Voskhozhdeniie k ottsu*. (Alma-Ata, 1986), 153.

<sup>131</sup> Snegin, 57.

laconic, artless prose typical of post-war officers' memoirs. Momysh-uly debated whether to write in his native or service language, then realized that he had few friends in the Kazakh literary establishment and Kazakh Soviet bureaucracy:

I told all my bosses where they could get off and began to write. I became a writer because I was doomed. Kazakh idiots (not the people, but their leaders) humiliated me, and I decided to scoff at them, to punish them. With whose help? With the help of my Russian friend Ivan: I started writing in Russian, and Ivan has understood from the Baltic to the Japanese Seas.<sup>132</sup>

Momysh-uly's decision to write in Russian was in contrast to his reputation by this point as a nationalist, allowing him to reassert his internationalism while reaching a wider audience.<sup>133</sup>

Vasily Subbotin, a *frontovik* and writer who was friends with both Bek and the Colonel, claims that while Momysh-uly was a gifted and unique writer, difficulties with the Russian language complicated the Colonel's ability to create.<sup>134</sup> The Colonel had spoken of the notes he had been taking during the Writer's Conference of 1943, and that he had grand plans to construct a document of "military enlightenment".<sup>135</sup> However, *Za nami Moskva*, while emphasizing tactics, gritty reality and the minute details of military life, reads as simply a continuation of the narrative of *Volokolamskoe shosse*. Where Momysh-uly's memoirs differ from the earlier narratives is that they include a parade of his comrades and subordinates who are discussed in greater detail than in earlier works, as he seems to have taken part of the criticism with regards to him blotting out the collective to heart. Momysh-uly also highlights the intimacy he feels with his men – that he is a comrade not a despot. Frequently calling his men by their first names, he also refuses to ride his horse except in battle, sharing in their suffering through frigid forced marches.<sup>136</sup> Much of the work is dedicated to fallen comrades, the deaths of whom he refuses to

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>134</sup> Subbotin, "Po kraiu zemli. Zapiski starika," 125-126.

<sup>135</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 147.

<sup>136</sup> Momysh-uly, *Sobraniiie sochineniiny v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, 54, 57.

recall.<sup>137</sup> Overall, the tone of this continuation and image of Momysh-uly are much softer and gentler than Bek would describe him.<sup>138</sup> Momysh-uly's goals, as ever, differed from Bek's: while Bek wished to finish his narrative in a creative, literary manner, Momysh-uly sought to finish recounting the story, without falsities and fictionalization.

Characteristic of Momysh-uly's approach is his epigram: "In these notes I want not only to share my experience, but also to talk about my personal mistakes".<sup>139</sup> It seems that Momysh-uly was still concerned with creating pedagogical material for future warriors and as such felt that discussing his mistakes would be key to making his document useful.<sup>140</sup> Never meeting the same success as *Volokolamskoe shosse*, *Za nami Moskva* in the words of Tatiana Bek, poet and daughter of Aleksandr Bek, "remained a book of the periphery".<sup>141</sup> While this appraisal should, given its source, be taken with a grain of salt, it does seem fair to say that Momysh-uly's memoirs were no more popular than the average military memoir. What is remarkable about Momysh-uly's account, and indeed the major difference between his narrative and standard Soviet military memoirs, is the increased emphasis he places on ethnicity.

Momysh-uly consistently asserts not only his Kazakh identity, but the Central Asian identity of his fighting force. Momysh-uly's narrative begins with his men retreating through a small town near Moscow in low spirits, they begin to sing a song of the Civil War ("Bravely, we go into battle"), yet those they are defending don't recognize them as their own:

–"How is the old woman to know that the majority of those marching are the descendants of Muslims?" I said to Tolstunov in Kazakh.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>138</sup> O. Grudtsova, *Aleksandr Bek: Kritiko-biograficheskiy ocherk*, (Moskva, 1967), 23.

<sup>139</sup> Momysh-uly, *Sobranie sochineniy v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, 12.

<sup>140</sup> He does indeed discuss his mistakes, and in one significant instance, where Bek's continuation shows a risky maneuver as a triumph, Momysh-uly describes the events as a near catastrophe. See Momysh-uly, *Sobranie sochineniy v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, 141-142; Bek. *Volokolamskoe shosse*, 495-505.

<sup>141</sup> Bek, *Do svidania, alfavit*, 158.

Hearing unfamiliar speech, the old woman recoiled slightly from us, looked hard and inquisitively at us and tentatively asked: “Are you ours?”  
–Of course, we are yours, mum. What, do you think? – Answered Bozzhanov, laughing.  
–Our swarthy / dirty [*chernomaziie*] Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, - joked Tolstunov, - and there are quite a few Russians, too, mum. Don't you see? You don't recognize your own?<sup>142</sup>

While this potentially tense situation is defused with humor, the very fact that Moscow is being defended by Kazakhs and Kyrgyz seems somehow anomalous, an indicator that the situation was out of order and indeed desperate. It stands to note again that these are all ethnic groups that had not been drafted into the Tsarist Army, first being drafted into Red Army only in 1939, groups with no place in the Russian military tradition, other than as foes. On the shoulders of these Muslim descendants are “Russian rifles”, thus marking the military as something inherently Russian, as Russian was the language of command and Russian military traditions were increasingly coming to be the traditions of the Red Army. Indeed, Momysh-uly agreed with the official stance that Russian was the only language of the army, the only possible language of command and the legitimate All-Union language.<sup>143</sup>

According to his close friend and eulogist, Dmitry Snegin, Momysh-uly identified himself as a “Russian Kazakh”, “Russian Colonel” and “Russian writer”; however on the pages of *Za nami Moskva* it is revealed that Momysh-uly spoke a variety of Turkic languages with his soldiers and that Kazakh was as likely to be spoken with his staff as Russian.<sup>144</sup> More than in earlier works, non-Russian languages have a position of prominence. A memorable moment from “Panfilovtsy on the Front Line” is the execution of Barambaev; when his fellow Kazakh’s pleas to spare his life in his native tongue are met with Momysh-uly’s admonition: “We are not

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<sup>142</sup> Momysh-uly, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, 14.

<sup>143</sup> Momysh-uly, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1,12; Snegin, 46-47; Bek, “Panfilovtsy na pervom rubezhe,” 207; ““Na voine rozhdatesia samaia sil’naia liubov’ ...”: 70-71.

<sup>144</sup> Snegin, 20; Momysh-uly, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, 75: even Sinchenko, his Ukrainian groom, speaks Kazakh.

in the *aul* (Central Asian Village). Speak Russian”.<sup>145</sup> In *Za nami Moskva* Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Ukrainian are heard alongside Russian on the march, battlefield and in camp. Kazakh traditions continue to be cited as a source of inspiration and battlefield success, as in his public lectures and earlier work with Bek.<sup>146</sup>

Alongside of this celebration of ethnicity is a deflation of the myth of Moscow as the imperial city, the epic space where “people meet like rivers in the ocean” and unforgettable friendships formed.<sup>147</sup> Momysh-uly had let his hostility towards Moscow and Muscovites known in 1943, claiming that the capital’s denizens were completely self-absorbed bureaucrats.<sup>148</sup> In his recounting of his actions in the defense of Moscow, the Colonel mentions that the landscape of Moscow pales in comparison to the epic mountains and rivers of his native Kazakhstan, to where his thoughts often wander.<sup>149</sup> Not only is Moscow rejected as *Rodina*, but also seen as a geographically inconspicuous, somewhat blank space, significant only for the heroic deeds performed there. Despite this deflation of the Capital, Momysh-uly’s relationship with Panfilov, his Russian teacher, remains preeminent. At one point their closeness is emphasized as the Russian general reminds the Kazakh of his deceased father, replacing him within the military family.<sup>150</sup> It was not Moscow that was the source of all things Momysh-uly held dear, but the multinational army that defended it.

### **Bek’s Fiction**

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<sup>145</sup> Bek, “Panfilovtsy na pervom rubezhe,” 206.

<sup>146</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 41-48; Momysh-uly, *Sobraniie sochineniiy v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, 80. Momysh-uly cites the cult of elders among Kazakh soldiers as a cultural tradition that leant itself excellently to making Kazakhs into soldiers.

<sup>147</sup> “Pesnia pro Moskvu” from the film *Svinarkha i pastukh*. (Mosfilm, 1941).

<sup>148</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 147-148.

<sup>149</sup> Momysh-uly, *Sobraniie sochineniiy v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, 51, 40: “What is with this Russian tendency to call a knoll a mountain and a brook a river?”

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Bek's return to *Volokolamskoe shosse* marked, by some accounts, a rapprochement between the Colonel and the author, and then an intensification of conflict with Momysh-uly after an armistice that was secretly brokered by Vasily Subbotin.<sup>151</sup> According to Bek, Momysh-uly himself had demanded a continuation of *Volokolamskoe shosse*, even after *Notes of an Officer* had been published, claiming that Bek was "swimming in a different river" with his fictional work. Bek claimed that he had been unable to finish the work because his hands were tied by the rules of fiction – he had told his readership exactly who he was writing about. His claim to write about a *real, unimagined* personage had led to him defrauding his readership, as the hero that emerged from his works was not the same man who stood before him. Momysh-uly is then alleged to have offered Bek to change his name and then ultimately to have given him his blessing, ordering him to report their meeting to his readers. The veracity of this reported exchange could be questioned, but references to meetings with Momysh-uly in the 1950's appear in Bek's diary. Momysh-uly here conducts himself in stark contrast to his public persona, but of course this persona was but one aspect of his multidimensional personality. Besides that, by the late 1950's, when this event is said to have taken place, Bek had already blurred the line between the two Baurdzhans to such an extent that one can no longer tell exactly which actions belong to which Baurdzhan.

Whether or not the two authors had actually agreed as to share the story, they decidedly shared a vision as to the meaning of their stories. When asked in 1965 why he had returned to *Volokolamskoe shosse*, Bek answered much in the tone of Momysh-uly's wartime speeches. He wanted to answer one of the burning questions of Soviet literature: "The world

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<sup>151</sup> Subbotin, 126-127.

wants to know who we are. The West and East ask: who are you, Soviet person?”<sup>152</sup> Recasting his work in terms of this perpetual question of Soviet identity (in an era when what it was to be Soviet had yet again been redefined), Bek stated that the first two installments were merely setting the stage for the fourth book, which he considered the most significant, depicting the “birth and crystallization of our tactics”.<sup>153</sup> Centering on “creative people” as his characters, the emphasis of the later works moves from Momysh-uly to General Panfilov as positive hero.<sup>154</sup> This has multiple implications, which need briefly be discussed here. The first is that by centering on Panfilov as the “creative person” of the story, Momysh-uly is largely relegated to the position of student and executor. Secondly, the necessary cruelty of war is foregrounded by a hero of savage origin, estranging violence from the civilized Russians. Tatiana Bek stated in reference to *Volokolamskoe shosse*’s sequel that: “Bek, at times as if changing into his hero-Kazakh, shows the cruel truth of war; through his [hero’s] nationality and by a multitude of allusions to folklore, [Bek] clearly exposes the culture-coded nature of military hierarchy”.<sup>155</sup>

This portrayal of Momysh-uly is all the more striking given that his Russian foil, Ivan Vasilievich Panfilov, represents one kind of, more accurately the preeminent, noble savage of the Soviet imagination: the *muzhik*. The General was also from an “a-historic,” “backward” world: the largest group of “backward” people in the Union – the Russian peasantry.<sup>156</sup> As such he was also capable of seeing and speaking the truth in a way beyond the scope of the fully “civilized” man, albeit in a much kinder and gentler way than his nomadic comrade. Like the heroes of other works of Soviet war literature (such as *Chapaev*, *Vasily Terkin*, *Days and Nights*, *In the Trenches*

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<sup>152</sup> “O proshlom vo imia budushego,” 18. This is repeated in his published diaries and other post-war articles. Bek, *Sobranie sochineniy*, *Tom 4*, 516-522, 539, 545.

<sup>153</sup> “O proshlom vo imia budushego,” 17.

<sup>154</sup> Bek, *Do svidaniia, alfavit*, 160-161; “O proshlom vo imia budushego,” 18.

<sup>155</sup> Bek, *Do svidaniia, alfavit*, 153; Continuation: “the joy of a soldier who has killed the one that he had feared, the one who had come to kill him”.

<sup>156</sup> Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment,” 424-425.

of *Stalingrad* and films such as *Two Warriors* and *The Ballad of a Soldier*), the General's peasant (and thus authentically Russian) simplicity is not only part of what makes him so sympathetic, but a key asset, his giant peasant heart allowing him to see that which is unclear to others and commanding the love and loyalty of his men.

Momysh-uly's noble savagery, however emphasizes the savage over the noble, as an instrument to show the ugly, uncultured acts of violence that are necessary for victory. The transformation of civilized Soviet citizens into people who could kill (and in Bek's interpretation, enjoyed killing), waxed, as a new, gentler age was ushered in and the image of Soviet warriors increasingly centered on their sacrifice. The war had its intact cults – among the most prominent the cults of martyrs and of leaders. Momysh-uly fit into neither, as the cult of leaders were the leaders of the highest ranks, the marshals. Men of Momysh-uly's stature were best remembered as martyred heroes or literary figures, the prototypes of which were unknown, permanently frozen in the hour of struggle.<sup>157</sup>

Bek cited the end of the Cult of Personality as one of the major impetuses for returning to the work; an irony given some of his friends' charges that Momysh-uly's attempt at constructing a personality cult had negatively impacted *Volokolamskoe shosse's* reception.<sup>158</sup> Bek wrote his continuation much in the style of the era. Unlike the laconic, urgent, compressed text of the original two novellas, there is a sentimentalism and floweriness in Bek's tone that marks the events being described as something long past and make them seem less real. Gore, conspicuously absent from the more cerebral wartime works, has a role in opposition to the Colonel's statement that "war is not a meat grinder".<sup>159</sup> The epic nature of events takes more

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<sup>157</sup> See Nina Tumarkin. *The Living & The Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*. (New York, 1994).

<sup>158</sup> Bek, "Publikatsia. Vospominania. Soobshcheniia. On liubil slushat' i sprashivat'," 238.

<sup>159</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 150; Bek, *Volokolamskoe shosse*, 310.

emphasis and descriptions are richer, but at the cost of pace and freshness.<sup>160</sup> The distance between the author and his subject is apparent, and the voice and tone as a result significantly differs from the earlier texts. Bek's daughter has posited that in his continuations "the polemic (or more simply – the difference) between the hero-narrator and author-scribe constantly forces itself into the open".<sup>161</sup> Detailed descriptions overtake the smooth, psychologically centered prose of the original two novellas. This is clearly a thaw era work that celebrates "new humanism", what Vera Dunham has described as a retreat from dogma and celebration of human kindness over ideology.<sup>162</sup> In this regard Momysh-uly comes across as a retrograde character, still obsessed with "his ideas, rules, dogmas".

Bek, in pronouncing Momysh-uly a "composite character" and publishing Momysh-uly's blessing to be an unfettered artist, freed himself from any further duties as a scribe and took more liberties than he had previously.<sup>163</sup> At several points Bek seems to openly mock Momysh-uly, writing his character in what at times seems to be direct response to and parody of the Colonel's criticisms.<sup>164</sup> Bek's continuation emphasizes his Kazakh protagonist's stubbornness and backwardness. Momysh-uly's will is at times intransigent, as when he declares that "I am Soviet power!", while stripping a man who outranks him of his rank. This is all the more striking as the officer in question is a non-combatant doctor accused of cowardice after his total

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<sup>160</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologia voini*, 160-166; Khlemitskaia; Snegin, 18.

<sup>161</sup> Bek, *Do svidania, alfavit*, 160, This is all the more interesting given Shklovsky's 1945 criticism that the author and his subject had become too close, see "Literaturnaya krika: Obraz sovetskogo ofitsera (Otchet o diskussii v Soiuzhe sovetskikh pisatelei)," 203-204.

<sup>162</sup> Vera Sandomirsky Dunham. "Insights from Soviet Literature". *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 8. (1964), 386-410, 398.

<sup>163</sup> "O proshlom vo imiia budushchego," 17.

<sup>164</sup> Bek was fond of getting vengeance on his subjects through irony, for example he gave the literary incarnation of a man who threatened to break his leg a limp. Bek, "Publikatsia. Vospominania. Soobshcheniia. On liubil slushat' i sprashivat'," 245.

exhaustion.<sup>165</sup> As the Colonel had complained earlier, the tension between him being a positive, willful (*vol'nyi*) character and a negative, stubborn (*upriami*) one is acute, with the latter often winning out.<sup>166</sup> In other instances, he orders the execution of an officer for cowardice or refuses to allow a woman into his battalion, stating that a woman has no place at the front.<sup>167</sup> In the former incident, the kinder, wiser members of his staff and Panfilov himself eventually prevail in convincing Momyshev-uly to spare the man's life, while this character, Zaev, acquits himself on the battlefield. In the case of the woman, Varia, Bek implies a future love story, which is in direct opposition to the Colonel's criticisms.<sup>168</sup> In Bek's recounting of events, Momyshev-uly is clearly not quite "conscious" and still a "spontaneous" figure being tempered under the tutelage of the wiser Panfilov not only as a commander but also as a Soviet person.<sup>169</sup>

### **The Aksakal and the Author: The fates of our two heroes**

Momyshev-uly's post-war life was quite difficult. Estranged from his lover, suffering from old war wounds and forced into early retirement in 1956, he left the army that had given

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<sup>165</sup> Bek, *Volokolamskoe shosse*, 363-364. In many ways the continuation has a feel of a story of the Russian Civil War (in which Bek had participated), with the willful commander overstepping his mandate for the greater good of the cause, establishing order in chaos.

<sup>166</sup> Momyshev-uly, *Psikhologiya voini*, 163.

<sup>167</sup> Momyshev-uly had invited his lover to the front as a correspondent and served as Panfilov's aide when the General requested women's clothing for those women sent to the front with the Division, including the General's daughter, hence such a characterization is clearly artistic license on the part of the author. "Na voine rozhdatesia samaia sil'naia liubov'...": Perepiska V.P. Stroevoi n B. Momyshev-uly 1944-1965 gody," 56-58; Momyshev-uly, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, 169-173.

<sup>168</sup> Zaev, is a fictionalization of Kraev, one of Momyshev-uly's lieutenants, who in Momyshev-uly's memoirs is never accused of cowardice. Bek, *Volokolamskoe shosse*, (about Zaev) 252, 390-408, 493, 511, (about Varia) 417-425, 562; Baurdzhan Momyshev-uly, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, (about Kraev) 33, 253.

<sup>169</sup> Katherine Clark. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. (Bloomington, 2000). The idea of a dichotomy between the spontaneous and conscious is a recurring theme in Clark's book. It is interesting to note, that the wartime version of *Volokolamskoe shosse* reveals it to be on the cutting edge of trends in Soviet literature. Clark posits the master narrative of the post-war era to be the passing of the baton from one generation of leaders to the other, the main character being an organization man. However, given the 1960's novels positing of the hero as backwards and spontaneous, we see a return to the master-plot of the 1920's. See Clark, 195-205.

him prominence and purpose.<sup>170</sup> His post-war life seems to have been a series of attempts to define himself within the context of his many possible identities. Having been away in the Army until 1956, he seems to have had few connections with Kazakh *apparatchiki*, while his treatment of Bek had alienated him from many potential comrades in his new profession as writer.<sup>171</sup> In the Army and more so in retirement he found himself, with his uncompromising attitude, in the midst of controversy. As a detractor of the Cult of *Malaia Zemlia* – Brezhnev’s narrative of the Great Patriotic War which posited the First Secretary as *the* hero of the war – he made powerful enemies in the Soviet military establishment, which deprived him both of the possibility to return to the army and to receive his Gold Star (Hero of the Soviet Union Medal) in his lifetime.<sup>172</sup> Momysh-uly often half-jokingly lamented that he was alive, as he would be easier to deal with if he were already dead. In death, he reasoned that he would no longer be the source of so much controversy, would be shut up, and become “good”.<sup>173</sup> These conflicts, especially his feud with Bek, took a toll on the Colonel’s psyche and health. According to Subbotin, by Bek’s funeral Momysh-uly was a shadow of a man: “this struggle with a person who exalted him so highly cost him his life”.<sup>174</sup> Momysh-uly, as a man who knew only how to be direct, did not understand that his manner alienated him from those surrounding him, or simply did not care, taking principle over politesse, thus Bek’s pronouncement of his hero’s ability to see and speak the truth seems to have been the curse of the Colonel.

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<sup>170</sup> Bek wrote in 1959: “Momysh-uly is seriously ill, his old spinal wound has let itself be know.” Bek, *Sobranie sochineniy, Tom 4*, 517.

<sup>171</sup> Subbotin, 125-126. According to Dave, the Kazakh nomenklatura was particularly autonomous, lacking answerability to Moscow or the people, and hence especially corrupt and closed. Dave, 95.

<sup>172</sup> Snegin, 23-25, 61-64; Bakhytdzhan Momysh-uly, *Synovia velikanov*. (Alma-Aty, 2004), 97.

<sup>173</sup> Momysh-uly, *Psikhologiya voini*, 166-167; Snegin, 12-14. Interestingly, when his father died, Bakhytdhan Momysh-uly imagined him dying at the front. Momysh-uly, *Voskhozhdeniie k ottsu*, 12.

<sup>174</sup> Subbotin, 127.

Frustrated as an author (many of his projects did not reach fruition), unable to orient himself in the thaw, and troubled by family problems, the Colonel took to drink and womanizing.<sup>175</sup> His actions were as often self-denigrating as self-exaltant. Characteristic of this period of his life is an utterance to his friend Dmitry Snegin: “I miss Russia, I miss my Russian wives. Poor Russia, who hasn’t offended your daughters?”<sup>176</sup> Here he both pities himself, remembering the place where he acquired his fame and glory, but also vilifies himself, numbering among those who had taken advantage of “Russia’s daughters”.

Unable to find his niche outside of the Red Army (in fact fantasizing about a return to it), and only comfortable around his wartime comrades and family (his 1941 definition of *Rodina* still seemed to be the only one that fit), Momysh-uly seems to have eventually gravitated towards the role of *aksakal*, or wise elder.<sup>177</sup> According to Snegin, Momysh-uly decided to retreat into obscurity in the 1970’s. Exhausted by civilian life, Momysh-uly was trying to escape from what he saw as a conspiracy to “close the tap of the sworn brotherhood of veterans”, and to come to terms with himself.<sup>178</sup> Clearly Bek's continued popularity and the co-option of the war's memory by the Party and The Writer's Union was a blow that the Colonel was unable to take. His writing interests occasionally turned from the army to the life of Kazakh nomads – his other major work, unfinished at the time of his death, was *My Family*, the story of his childhood as a Kazakh nomad.

Interestingly, his son, with whom he had an immensely complicated relationship, became a writer himself. Bakhytdzhan Momysh-uly has dedicated a significant part of his career

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<sup>175</sup> Snegin, 59, 62.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 54.

to his father's memory, writing a trilogy of biographies about the Colonel and his friends.<sup>179</sup> These biographies are fascinating in that they reposition Momyshev-uly, emphasizing one or another of his identities to suit the times. In his first biography Momyshev-uly travels the "rails of the party", in a Perestroika-era text he is a nascent nationalist who respects Russia, while the final work, published in 2004, reveals both Momyshev-uly and Dmitry Snegin to be Sufi mystics.<sup>180</sup> Interestingly enough, in Bakhytdzhan's works, his father's struggle with Bek gets virtually no mention.

Bek's post-war life continued to be marked by conflicts with his subjects, and his second major work, *Novoe naznachenie*, which his daughter describes as a reaction against the extreme discipline of *Volokolamskoe shosse*, could not be published within his lifetime due to objections from his subject's spouse.<sup>181</sup> Despite this, Bek's personal life and professional life seems to have gone more smoothly than Momyshev-uly's. Professionally, he could rest on the laurels reached as the author of one of the canonical texts of the Great Patriotic War – *Volokolamskoe shosse*, a text that would be remembered time and again by Soviet literary critics and authors as a masterpiece. Personally, Bek lived out the rest of his life comfortably in the company of friends and family (including his daughter Tatyana born in 1949) all of whom remembered him fondly and resented his Kazakh muse immensely.<sup>182</sup> In the end, it was his version of events that gained purchase among the Soviet readership, as he seemed to presage in the last lines of *Volokolamskoe shosse*:

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<sup>179</sup> Bakhytdzhan Momyshev-uly, *Voskhozheniie k ottsu; Deti velikanov; Vo imiia otsa*.

<sup>180</sup> Momyshev-uly, *Voskhozheniie k ottsu*, 98; Momyshev-uly, *Deti velikanov*, 15-16.

<sup>181</sup> Bek, "Publikatsia. Vospominania. Soobshcheniia. On liubil slushat' i sprashivat'," 239-240. This was due to the wife of the man on whom it was based lodging multiple complaints against Bek. The story deals with a high level Soviet official getting shelved and his reflections on his career after he realizes how little control he has over his own life.

<sup>182</sup> Bek, "Publikatsia. Vospominania. Soobshcheniia. On liubil slushat' i sprashivat'".

... Well, the book is finished! And in the future I can only promise you one thing...

Placing his chiseled wrist on the hilt of his saber, Momyshev drew his blade with one unexpected movement. In the twilight of the dugout the decorated steel shimmered - the same steel that had just shone in the last chapter of this book.

"Only one thing", repeated Momyshev. "If you lie - place your right hand on the table. Boom! I will cut off your right hand! Do you agree?"

I hid my smile. My ferocious Baurdzhan, you are true to yourself, to the character, created under my quill, created by attention and imagination. However, a scribe should be modest.

"I agree", I said.<sup>183</sup>

Bek's completion of *Volokolamskoe shosse* is in many ways the ultimate insult to his muse, the point at which he not only mocks him, but claims - once in for all - his dominance over his subject. Bek not only states firmly that Momyshev as he appears in the stories was crafted under his plume, but also highlights the Kazakh's backwardness and mocks his principles. Here, as in their public struggles, Bek accentuated his meekness and modesty, making the Colonel's strict moral code, his "dogmas", seem absurd and outmoded.

Bek and Momyshev engaged in protracted polemic for control of the narrative of the past, creating a scandal that was the talk of the Soviet literary world. The work that they created together made them, unknown and obscure men before the war, into Soviet and indeed international celebrities. As a man of Russified Danish origin, who had served in the Red Army during the Civil War and subsequently became a writer under the tutelage of Gorky, Bek seems to have had more social capital than his Kazakh story-teller; despite the fact that he had come up under socialism and heroically defended the Soviet Union's capital in its darkest hour. Bek was supported by the Soviet Writing establishment as a professional, as one who had a right, indeed a mandate to "engineer the human soul", by recording the past, to create a transcript of events and wisdom, like Regulations but with an artistic flare. When Bek did find it necessary to resist, he did so quietly and with humor, often by the irony with which he treated his literary heroes. While Momyshev found support among his fellow soldiers, his inability to "play along" with the

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<sup>183</sup> Bek, *Volokolamskoe shosse*, 571-572.

system, to “speak Bolshevik” at the proper register, relegated him to a position of marginality, and made it easier to paint him as an exotic other first and a Soviet officer second, a mantle that he ultimately came to embrace himself, if only in part.<sup>184</sup>

In his last letter to his lover, Vera Pavlovna Stroeveva, Momysh-uly identifies himself in verse form: “I am one of the sinful sons / of the Great Family of Kazakhs / My name is Baurdzhan Momysh-uly...O, great Allah, / It was your wish to create me / The famous Soviet Colonel. / I thank you...”<sup>185</sup> This statement by Momysh-uly, the last communication with a lover who had supported him through the end of the war, highlights the contradictory nature of his many identities, and the fact that he saw no contradiction between them. A Soviet Colonel thanking Allah seems incongruous to the outside observer, but to this Russian Kazakh Communism and Islam were somehow reconcilable. In the army, he claims that he had depersonalized himself for the sake of victory, as fulfilling at the level of the individual the Soviet prophecy of withering away of the nation and its evaporation into the greater Soviet identity. Unfortunately, Momysh-uly made this claim at a time when Soviet leaders were reevaluating the meaning of “national” and assigning it an essential, inescapable quality, along with a hierarchy that placed Russians clearly at the top.<sup>186</sup> As a result, Momysh-uly could not be “national in form, socialist in content”, but instead became socialist in form and national in content. Momysh-uly’s identity as a veteran versus Bek’s as a civilian was often ignored after the war, as his case had always been slightly exaggerated, given Bek’s service in the Civil War.

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<sup>184</sup> “Speaking Bolshevik” is the term coined by Stephen Kotkin, denoting the politics of self-identification under Stalinism, a means of expressing one’s self and especially one’s personal interest in official terms. Stephen Kotkin, “Speaking Bolshevik,” *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*, (Berkeley, 1995), 198-237.

<sup>185</sup> “Na voine rozhdatesia samaia sil’naia liubov’...,” 83. This was not a conversion late in life, his letters to his lover reveal Momysh-uly to be a loosely practicing Muslim during the war; “Na voine rozhdatesia samaia sil’naia liubov’...,” 54-55.

<sup>186</sup> Slezkine, “The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment,” 448-450.

Furthermore, while service at the front was *the* form of legitimization after the war, those who had gone to the front with a pen, rather than a rifle in hand ultimately enjoyed the same official legitimacy after the war, and, as part of the literary establishment, correspondents ultimately had greater influence over the means of shaping the past.<sup>187</sup> Indeed veterans had few inroads with which to voice their own narratives of the war; often the only choice was to become a writer, as did numerous *frontoviki*. That Momysh-uly could resist the hegemony of writers and the shifting tropes of the Party was serendipitous, as he had survived the war, while many of the other heroes of *Volokolamskoe shosse* had perished on the battlefield. It is not inconceivable that Panfilov would have complained about the way he was portrayed as well, but he had no chance to appeal as he had fallen in November of 1941. Thus, the General was a convenient, silent subject, much safer to write about than a living person who could challenge the author's narrative.

The war with writers that Momysh-uly had promised never came. Nor did the dictatorship that he had envisioned. The fame that he enjoyed at the hand that he threatened to cut off outlived him, but did so only in Kazakhstan, where a city, numerous streets and the National Military Academy all bear his name. In 2008, a massive monument was erected in his honor in Astan, the Republic's new capital, while his bones lay in the old capital of Alma-Aty. Having failed to become a lasting figure of All-Union Status, he became a symbol of the new "accidental" state of Kazakhstan, one who is tremendously popular among the people.<sup>188</sup> Never having found his niche outside the ranks of the RKKA, it is unlikely that this turn of events would have pleased the Russian Kazakh: somehow even in death he remains hard to trace, as his son's copious biographies attest. His *Rodina* was in the end a temporal, not a spatial phenomenon. Therefore, it is on those pages from 1943-1944 that the Colonel, then a Lieutenant,

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<sup>187</sup> Amir Weiner. *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*. (Princeton, 2001).

<sup>188</sup> Dave, 8.

is in his element, forever young, among his troops and in command; engaged in an unambiguous struggle and spared the scandals that were to follow. It is perhaps fitting and ironic that the work that he railed against has immortalized him in the happiest period of his life.