Green Desert
The Life and Poetry of Olzhas Suleimenov
Edited by Rafis Abazov

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GREEN DESERT
The Life and Poetry of Olzhas Suleimenov

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By Naomi Caffee
This book emerged from several years of teaching and of research on cultural and social development in Central Asia for the book *The Culture and Customs of the Central Asian Republics* (2007). Many people—my students, my colleagues, my friends, researchers, and readers from many parts of the world—began asking me if the literature, poetry, and folklore from Central Asia were available in English. I quickly discovered that many works of the most influential and remarkable writers and poets from the region were not available in English, although during the last two decades considerable efforts have been made to translate the literary treasures of Central Asia. My colleagues and I agreed that works of some Central Asia authors should be translated and introduced to the American audience, especially works of those writers and poets who have written from a non-Western perspective and who have significantly contributed to the intellectual discourses in the Eurasian region.

The name of Olzhas Suleimenov, whom Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky (1933–2010) once called “Asia at the steering wheel,” emerged very naturally as the first author for the book series on Central Asian literature. I was fortunate to discuss the idea of the translation with my colleagues and friend from Kazakhstan and I received support and encouragement from them, especially from Kazakh Ambassador Erlan Idrissov. It took several years to arrange a visit of Olzhas Suleimenov to New York and to coordinate a public reading at Columbia University in the fall of 2009. We were all pleasantly surprised to discover a large number of fans and followers of the poet, who had come to meet him from cities and towns across the United States and Canada. This event bolstered my belief that a need exists for a serious translation of Suleimenov’s work. I was delighted that Cognella Academic Publishing and, in particular, Melissa Barcomb, Senior Field Acquisitions Editor, Jennifer Bowen, Project Editor, Brent Hannify, Production Assistant, and many other individuals, enthusiastically supported this project and provided the necessary support to bring it to fruition.

This publication was prepared as an introduction to the literary legacy of Olzhas Suleimenov, one of Kazakhstan's most accomplished writers and poets, to the U.S. audience. Olzhas Suleimenov is well-respected in his native land as an intellectual who authored more than 16 books of prose and poetry during his career, spanning nearly 50 years. Unfortunately,
only a few of his works have been translated into English, despite the fact that most of his poems have been translated into French, German, and other European languages. I took it upon myself to bridge this gap. For this publication, about 50 poems and passages from poems written during different stages of the poet's career were selected. I am fully aware that this is a very small part of Suleimenov's work, and I do hope that our readers will search for his other poems, novels, and philosophical essays to learn more about the poet and the modern literature of Kazakhstan.

This book became possible only through the invaluable contributions and help from many people. My Central Asian colleagues generously shared their thoughts about Kazakh literature and the place of Olzhas Suleimenov in the contemporary intellectual discourse of Kazakhstan and the Eurasian region. I especially appreciate the assistance I received from the librarians with whom I worked while writing this work, including those at the National Library of Kazakhstan in Almaty. Additionally, several colleagues and friends agreed to read and discuss the manuscript and translations during the early stages of this project. Finally, numerous conversations and debates with scholars, poets, and critics enriched my knowledge about the peculiarities of cultural development in Kazakhstan and about modern Kazakh literature.

Ms. Dinara Tuusupova, an intern at the Harriman Institute in summer 2009, helped with the background research at Columbia University library and with the selection of poems for this publication. Kazakh poet Bakhytzhan Kanapyanov agreed to meet with me to discuss various aspects of Suleimenov's poetry and generously shared with me a collection of various publications about Olzhas Suleimenov from his personal archive. President of Kazakh National University Professor Bakhytzhan Zhumagulov hosted me at Kazakh National University, providing an intellectual environment for my work and helping to coordinate an interview with Olzhas Suleimenov. Several faculty members from the university shared their research papers on topics related to this publication. Ms. Naomi Caffee, a Ph.D. student at UCLA specializing in Russophone Central Asian literature and Olzhas Suleimenov's literary heritage, kindly critiqued early versions of the manuscript and contributed valuable comments and suggestions as it took shape. Mikhail Gusev, senior producer at the NTV-America, generously shared his thoughts about the generation of the 1960s—the so-called shestidesiatniki—and about the intellectual and cultural impact of Olzhas Suleimenov. Dr. Alia Alhan, the president of the Cultural Center of Kazakhstan in New York City, regularly invited me to various cultural events on Kazakhstan, helping me to learn more about modern Kazakh art and culture. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchych and Professor Timothy Fry, the former and current directors of the Harriman Institute respectively, Alla Rachkov, and other members of the Harriman Institute, who provided support to this project during its early stage.

I would also like to express my special gratitude to Kazakh Ambassador to the United States Mr. Erlan Idrissov and his colleagues for helping me to gain access to publications
about the culture and literature of Kazakhstan and for assisting in arranging several meetings with prominent cultural figures and intellectuals from Kazakhstan.

Rafis Abazov (Ph.D.)
Columbia University
New York
Dear Readers!

It is with great delight that I introduce you to the first ever U.S. publication of poems by Olzhas Suleimenov—Kazakhstan’s legendary poet, writer, statesman, and intellectual.

Born in 1936, Ambassador Suleimenov has led an impressive and accomplished life. He stands as an influential and widely admired figure in Kazakhstan and the former Soviet Union. Originally trained as a geologist, Ambassador Suleimenov attended Moscow’s prestigious Maksim Gorky Literary Institute in the late 1950s, where he joined a cohort of the brightest emerging stars in Soviet literature including Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, and Robert Rozhdestvensky.

His fame skyrocketed in 1961 with the publication of Earth, Bow Down to Man, a book of poems inspired by Yuri Gagarin’s flight into outer space that same year. Suleimenov had watched in awe as Gagarin took off from Kazakhstan’s Baikonur space base and he wrote the book of poems to celebrate the event as a bold step forward to unlock the mysteries of the universe. In that same year, Olzhas Suleimenov embarked on a reading tour of Europe and the United States, which included a historic public reading at Columbia University.

Throughout the 1970s, Olzhas Suleimenov became increasingly outspoken on matters of politics and the blossoming Kazakh national identity. He scandalized the Soviet Academy of Sciences with his famous tract Az i ia (1975), which refuted long-held, politically charged beliefs about the literary evolution of the Russian language.

He turned to politics in the 1980s, founding the Nevada-Semipalatinsk antinuclear movement of 1989, considered one of the first large-scale grassroots protests against the actions of the Soviet government. This movement played a major role in promoting the eventual denuclearization of Kazakhstan.

Ambassador Suleimenov was among the first Eurasian intellectuals to raise awareness of global climate change, non-proliferation, and the environmental challenges posed by the nuclear arms race. His Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement galvanized public and political
support for the closure of all nuclear testing facilities in Kazakhstan and influenced trends in nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and in the immediate post-Soviet era.

Following Kazakhstan’s independence in 1991, Ambassador Suleimenov continued his outspoken participation in public life. He co-founded the Issyk Kul Forum, a prominent organization of intellectuals from the former USSR, and has steadfastly supported the emergence of secular democracy in Central Asia. He was among the most active founders of the National Congress of Kazakhstan, one of the first political parties that emerged in the early years of Kazakhstan’s independence.

As Kazakhstan’s Ambassador to UNESCO and a supporter of Mikhail Gorbachev’s international environmental organization Green Cross, Ambassador Suleimenov remains a defining political personality in today’s Eurasian sphere, a courageous figure whose thoughts continue to exert a notable impact on the educational, economic, and cultural development of Kazakhstan and our part of the world.

Today, Olzhas Suleimenov continues his literary work. His life’s work has focused on the evolution of human history and he uniquely traces the history of humankind through words. He has published a series of books dedicated to the topic, which he aspires to crown into one major work entitled 1000 and One Word. This is his overarching goal and he is dedicated to achieving it, and I sincerely wish one day to hold in my hands the worthy product of this tremendous intellectual effort.

It is a great honor and pleasure for me, as a representative of Kazakhstan, to introduce the first-ever major English-language compilation of Olzhas Suleimenov’s poems published in the United States. Suleimenov’s life serves as a testament to the indomitable Kazakh spirit, and his work exemplifies Kazakhstan’s rich cultural heritage.

Olzhas Suleimenov coined the phrase: “Let’s elevate the Steppe without belittling the Mountains!” This has been the mission of his life.

Mr. Erlan Idrissov
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the United States.
I was sincerely pleased to learn that a book of my poems was to be published in the United States.

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the people who initiated this publication, to my friends—Professor Rafis Abazov, Ambassador Erlan Idrisov and translators Sergei Levchin and Ilya Bernstein.

Every author, especially in these highly politicized times, hopes that his creative work would provide answers to the quite clear questions of the day. With years, I came to the conclusion that poetry, in all times, was an attempt to find answers to questions that were not born yet in the minds of people.

Nonetheless, exactly these answers took an active part in building the future.

For the third century, the poetry of the American life insists on Freedom as opposed to all form of slavery and domination. Freedom—this is the America's answer to the dark pages of the history of the humanity. Freedom—this is the answer and also one of the challenges of our time, the limits of which has already become known.

By looking deeply into America the world learns itself.

I would like for American readers, by going through the lines of the poems by a Kazakh author, to learn a little more about the unknown before them and facets of their own spiritual life. Because we always

… roam toward ourselves
by recognizing ourselves in the other.

Olzhas Suleimenov
It is exceedingly difficult to write about a poet. It is even more difficult to write about a great poet from a different culture and another century. How does one describe the place of Olzhas Suleimenov in Kazakhstan's literature, the literary world of Eurasia, and the world? How does one convey the meaning of Suleimenov's poetry and philosophy in the intellectual discourse of Kazakhstan and Eurasia in the second half of the 20th century? How does one elucidate the impact of his poetry, prose, and journalism on a generation of people who grew up after World War II—people dreaming about similar things as the American generation of the 1960s, but in a different language, with different cultural symbols, and in a different intellectual environment? How does one define his impact on the political discourse in the country?

When I teach my classes on Central Eurasian culture, I often talk about literature and great writers, poets, and intellectuals from that part of the world. It always struck me that it was almost impossible to explain the richness of the culture and the abundant shades of exotic literary expressions without making links to the cultural and literary background of my American students.

When I tell my students about Suleimenov, my favorite link that helps me to bring the personality of Olzha-ke (the name his friends and admirers give him in Kazakhstan) closer to them is the personality of the great American writer and intellectual Ernest Hemingway.

There are many similarities between these two men. Like Hemingway, Suleimenov is a great writer with a good eye for detail and love for life, who introduced a distinctive and authentically localized flavor to his writing style. Throughout his career Suleimenov infused his works with the unique cultural and geographical particularities of Kazakhstan: its never-ending steppes, its majestic mountains, and the traditional nomadic lifestyle of its people. Like Hemingway, Suleimenov has become a distinguished and well-recognized public figure whose work demonstrates a degree of anti-establishment thought. Although he never went to and never called for going to barricades, he became a symbol for a generation of
students and young professionals who smirked at the Soviet establishment’s call to embrace official ideology. Many of this generation eschewed mainstream Soviet ideology and instead turned to the guitar, forming a brotherhood of free thinkers steeped in the nonconformist values of rock music.

Also like Hemingway, Suleimenov is a well-traveled writer, intellectual, and adventurer who has visited many places and met many people. He loves learning, and even more, he loves sharing stories about his adventures and his observations of people’s lives in different parts of the world—from a village deep in Kazakhstan’s heartland, to the megalopolises of New York and Rome, to the ruins of Babylon—in the captivating way that only talented writers and speakers can.

Olzhas Suleimenov belongs to a generation that was born and educated during the Soviet era, and most of his life and work experiences took place during the era of socialist experimentation. Yet he was well aware of the shortcomings of the Soviet system, and like many intellectuals of his time, he was quite critical of Soviet policies and propaganda. He traveled extensively in his native Kazakhstan and throughout the USSR; he also visited many developed and developing countries, bridging cultures and different political systems during the Cold War era, in an effort to foster what we would call a global culture today.

As a poet, journalist, intellectual, and public figure, he faced a dilemma all too familiar to many representatives of the Soviet-era Russian and non-Russian intelligentsia: how to cultivate his own position toward the Soviet system and Soviet government.

The answers were not as simple as they seemed. Suleimenov lived in the post–World War II and post-Stalin eras, when the system was significantly liberalized during the ‘thaw reforms.’ Kazakhstan went through a golden era of economic double-digit growth, and social changes comparable to social changes in the United States in the 1950s. During this era, many social norms and cultural traditions were pushed aside by robust modern culture and post-industrial era social relations, which radically reshaped family values, the position of an individual in society, and the relations of the citizens to the state and existing political system. In the West, these changes led to passionate and sometimes violent youth demonstrations, anti-establishment and anti-segregation movements, rock-n-roll culture (exemplified by the Woodstock Festival), and protests against the war in Vietnam. Suleimenov and his peers in Alma Ata and Moscow lived with similar anti-establishment sentiments and romantic hopes for change, based on the possibly naïve belief in the power of thoughts, progress in the way that only people who lived long before the earth became disillusioned, spoiled and unable to be surprised and forgot how to cheer simple beauties of life and human achievement. These young people—the so-called shesildesiatniki (the Sixties Generation)—shaped the spirit of the Soviet reformist movement that slowly bubbled and tacitly strengthened below the surface of the Soviet system before it emerged as a powerful network of intellectuals who captured and ruled the minds of the Soviet people during the perestroika era in the 1980s. Suleimenov was very much a part of the shesildesiatniki and became one of their most passionate voices through thousands of lines of poetry and
prose—from philosophical and spiritual, to techno-social and pastoral nomadic, from semiotic inquiries to linguistic studies—which commanded the hearts and minds of people around him.

Suleimenov, like Hemingway, has always believed in the humanistic nature of society and people and in the ability of individuals to change the world around them. As a Kazakh intellectual and poet, he focused his efforts on transmitting his insider’s knowledge of the Kazakh nomadic culture to the outside world.

Olzhas Suleimenov was always a favorite by fortune; yet, behind every achievement and success was his hard work, his thought-provoking ideas, and inspiration, which he drew from the streets of his native city of Alma Ata. It is easy to recognize a rebellious intellectual with mischievous eyes and bushy hair, ready to fight for the cause with his fists, his words, his contrarian thoughts. He believed that being a “thoughtful, knowledgeable, having free opinions and values” intellectual was his destiny, and he remained a non-conformist from his twenties to his seventies.

The early life of Olzhas Suleimenov is typical of many Soviet-era writers, poets, and journalists, as is probably the case for his American counterparts as well. As a student of the Kazakh State University in Alma Ata, he studied hard during the day and wrote his early
poems, short stories, and essays during weekends and free time in the evenings. Then he walked miles and miles, visiting editors of various newspapers, bulletins, and magazines ranging from youthful student periodicals to ‘mature journalists only’ serious and politically correct periodicals. He was persistent, and for every ‘no’ he tried to produce a series of writings with the hope getting a ‘yes.’ The wheel of fortune turned to his favor, as a number of his short stories and essays were published in Kazakhstan—enough to be noticed by serious writers and editors for his fresh, mischievous style. His early works showed indications of talent and intimate knowledge of the symbolic meanings of Kazakh cultural expressions. They also showed signs of tireless efforts toward the transmission of Kazakh cultural expressions into the Russian language, first through translations, and very soon through his own creative writing. For all of this literary work, he received a recommendation to study at the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow.

For many decades during the Soviet era, the Gorky Literary Institute was a dream place of education for thousands of aspiring young poets and writers—a Soviet Harvard, Cambridge, and Sorbonne all in one place—where the cream of the cream of young, talented writers, poets, and journalists from all over the Soviet Union and even some developing countries mastered their writing skills and styles. Olzhas Suleimenov was very fortunate to be offered a place at the Institute in 1959, and to study there with students from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Lithuania, and Russia. He was accepted into the Department of Literary Translation, but he continued experimenting with poetry. Later, he would write in his memoirs that sometimes he would rewrite his poems and give them to a typist “to retype for the twentieth, thirtieth version” and he would continue to polish them under the supervision of critical editors and professional writers and poets. In the summer of 1960, 24-year-old Olzhas published his first short anthology of poems in Literaturnaia Gazeta—Moscow’s equivalent to Time’s Literary Supplement, The New York Times’ Book Review, or New Yorker Magazine. Russian poets Boris Slutsky (1919–1986) and Leonid Martynov (1905–1980) became mentors of this handsome, tall, and cheerful young Kazakh, and they played a big role in introducing him to Moscow’s literary circles and helping him to prepare his selected poems for publication. Soon after, his first collection of poems was accepted for publication by the influential publishing house Sovetskii pisatel’.

But what a character, this young, rebellious intellectual from Alma Ata! In 1960, Olzhas was caught fist-fighting with his fellow students in his dormitory in Moscow. He was immediately expelled from the institute and the publishing house decided to cancel the book contract with the ‘fighter.’

With his life and career in shambles, Olzhas returned to his native Alma Ata and joined the Kazakhstan’s national newspaper Kazakhstanskaia Pravda as a reporter in winter of 1961. The life of filing stories from farms and plants and police stations began, and it could drag forever for the young reporter; yet, the wheel of fortune turned again for the broken poet. On April 12, 1961, the Soviet Union planned to send a human being into outer space for the first time in the history of humanity; even the space engineers were not sure of the
success of this highly risky endeavor. Therefore, very few people knew about it, and among them was Olzhas Suleimenov. Moreover, his editor entrusted him with the task of writing a poem about the event. Olzhas wrote *Zemlia poklonis’ cheloveku* in one breath, burning the midnight oil for a few sleepless nights.

And …

The poem, written in a forceful, rhythmic, Mayakovskian style, became a sensation. It was a hymn dedicated to the unlimited potential of the human mind, progress, and the victory of humans over nature.

Overnight, Suleimenov became a symbol of a generation who romantically believed in science, human ingenuity, and progress, and who did not want to spoil their beliefs with thoughts of politics (which were a very harsh reality of Soviet-era life). Suddenly, he discovered his hidden talents—public speaking and reading. He was invited to read his poems before audiences at universities, schools, bookstores, and book clubs in many cities and towns across the Soviet Union. On top of this, Olzhas was sent to give public readings at universities in Paris and New York in the summer of 1961, a very unusual arrangement at the height of the Cold War.

Upon returning, he found that many doors of editors, periodicals, and publishing houses, which he stormed for years to no avail, were wide open for his poems and essays. Within a short period of time, several of his poetry books were published and millions of copies were sold across Kazakhstan, Russia, and in many other Union republics. Along with many writers and poets in the 1960s, he came to influence the entire generation of *shestidesiatniki*—the Soviet equivalent of the American baby boomers. Yet, he still refused to join the establishment and write politically correct Soviet-style poetry. Even when he was ‘asked’ (which in those days was the equivalent of an order) to write a poem dedicated to the 100th anniversary of Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, he produced a poem called *Glinianaia kniga* (“The Clay Book”)—a long, historical and philosophical work about a priestess of love in ancient Babylon.

The Soviet Party and the Union of Writers bosses were appalled, but they still forgave his unorthodox behavior, the ignorance of the Socialist realist approach to literature, and his free thinking until the day he finally crossed the line. In 1975, Suleimenov submitted his new book, this time in prose—*Az-i-ia*—a philosophical and ethno-linguistic essay on the role of Turkic-speaking people in the cultural and political development of Eurasia since the medieval era. The problem was that, in essence, this relatively short essay rebelled against the state-endorsed Eurocentric view of history in which little attention was shown to Suleimenov’s fellow countrymen—the nomads of the Great Eurasian Steppe and their contribution to the history of Eastern Europe. Not only had he challenged the mainstream historical approach in the interpretation of history, but he also portrayed the Central Asian nomads as major actors in the development of the societies of Kievan and Muscovite Rus.

At first, *Az-i-ia* was published and sent to bookstores across the country. Very soon, however, censors discovered their mistake and immediately ordered the confiscation of the
entire print. The political police worked hard on this case to ensure long imprisonment for Suleimenov, or even exile. Overnight he lost all of his privileges for international travel and all publication rights, becoming one of the most prominent Kazakh dissidents of the 1970s. Despite the confiscation and the ban, some copies survived and attracted the attention of intellectuals all over the Soviet Union, especially in the non-Slavic Central Asian republics. Olzhas Suleimenov was condemned by the Party as a ‘nationalistic’ writer and only the personal protection of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan Dinmukhamed Kunaev saved him from imprisonment. The legend of Olzhas Suleimenov was born, as was his reputation in Kazakhstan as someone who raised and discussed fearlessly ‘the difficult issues in the nation’s history.’

Man of Letters

The conceptualization of Olzhas Suleimenov’s contribution to Kazakh national and all-Union Soviet literature is quite a difficult task. Put simply, his contribution can be characterized as threefold. First, he greatly influenced the development of the Kazakh national literary traditions—both poetry and prose—in Russian language. With it, he contributed to the emergence of bilingual Kazakh literature and traditions and the opening of the modern Kazakh poetic world to Russian and Western readers. Second, Suleimenov, who in the words of Russian writer Boris Slutsky, is a poet with the “[Kazakh] steppe in his blood,” used Kazakh national symbols and national cultural traditions as emotionally rich, modern, poetic expressions in his works. His works contributed to the culmination of the modern Kazakh poetic expressions, which had emerged as post-traditionalist and post-folkloric literary tradition only in the early 20th century. Third, he contributed to contextualizing
Western literary traditions and universal humanistic values in modern Kazakh literature, poetry, and journalism through his creative writing and active participation in major intellectual debates in Kazakhstan.

The emergence of the modern Kazakh literary traditions should be taken in the historical and cultural context of literary development in Kazakhstan. The Kazakhs, like their neighbors, were nomads and thus over many centuries they developed an exceptionally rich body of folklore—heroic epics, lyrical songs and musical compositions (kui—in Kazakh), fables, and ritual songs.6 Traditionally, even the most important pieces of national folklore were never written down, but transmitted orally from generation to generation, from one place to another. This oral tradition was especially important, as written works could vanish in times of war or political calamities and were extremely difficult to preserve in a pastoral-nomadic way of life.

The rise of a modern post-folkloric, post-oral literature—poems, short stories, novels, and essays—was both a reflection of cultural interaction with Western, especially Russian, literary traditions, and of the complex changes in 19th and 20th century Central Asian societies. The early experiments in the modernization of the Kazakh national literary traditions bridged the gap between the classic Kazakh folklore, which traditionally focused on heroic themes and was expressed in certain forms and genres, and the new Westernized literature, which experimented with European themes, especially realistic narratives of the lives of ordinary people and of social changes.

By the 1930s and 1940s, with the formation of modern Kazakh language based on the Cyrillic script and the growth of the Kazakh intellectuals’ enthusiasm about the cultural revolution of the 1920s and 1930s, Kazakh creative writers began experimenting with prose and European-style poetry. In the words of influential Kazakh critic Murat Auezov (1943–), “The Kazakh writers were striving to internalize the new world of cultural values.”7 Many talented Kazakh writers and poets emerged during this era, including one of the founders of the modern Kazakh literary tradition, Mukhtar Auezov (1897–1961). Most of the literature of that era was written and published in the Kazakh language. Their transmission to other languages, especially into Russian—the lingua franca of the Soviet Union—relied on an army of translators. Some translations were excellent and reflected the spirit of the original works; but, on many occasions, although the translations were technically correct, they missed the numerous nuances and characteristics peculiar to Kazakh language and culture.

Olzhas Suleimenov, who grew up in the bilingual environment of Alma Ata in the 1940s and 1950s, clearly understood the challenges of translation. He was well prepared to deal with these issues, as he knew both languages and both cultures. He dreamed of contributing to the development of modern Kazakh national literature in Russian language, bypassing the interpretations and misinterpretations of translators. To explain this difficulty, Suleimenov once gave the following example:8 in the Kazakh tradition, people use the expression: “O, baurym!” (literally, “Oh! My liver!”) when addressing the dearest person in their lives, while
in Western traditions, including Russian, people would probably say: “Oh, my sweetheart!” The reference to the liver would probably be, at the very least, inadequate.

After few experiments with translations from Kazakh to Russian, Suleimenov decided that he would do much better if he wrote his own poetry. His encyclopedic knowledge of both Kazakh and Russian literature and his ability to use this knowledge in his poetry greatly enriched his creative writing. Soon, he became known as one of the first and most talented Kazakh poets who mastered the usage of the Russian language in creative writing, to the level that made his name one of the most recognized in the post–World War II Russian language literature, along with Robert Rozhdestvensky (1932-1994), Andrei Voznesensky (1933–2010), and Yevgeny Yevtushenko (1933–).9

By day the beating heart is dull.
Peace.
Quiet.
Snowdrifts weave their rich tapestries
upon the branches’ loom.
Snowdust drops softly
upon our destinies
like roaring time.
... Don’t go into the streets today—snows swirling round
will ply their frozen strands into your hair.
Why, you’ve grayed overnight! my snow-sweet love …
Don’t go, I beg you …
Bury your cheek instead in the hot pillow,
my breath caressing your hair.
Outside the wind is rising,
the frost is melting …
the frost is melting …

He rejected attempts to departmentalize modern Kazakh literature as ‘oriental,’ ‘Central Asian,’ and ‘other,’ as he strongly supported the Kazakh intellectual circles who promoted the opening of the Kazakh culture, literature, and poetry to the influences of, and exchanges with, the Western and Russian intellectual universe. Suleimenov philosophically conceptualized the idea that the Kazakh national poetry belongs to both the West and the East; and in its expression of universal values, it is as universal and inclusive as Russian, British, or French literature.
WE ARE NOMADS
To Andrei Voznesensky

Here is how I see it:
Makhambet is an arrow stuck in the Chinese wall,
head in the brick,
fringed pants for fletching.
Dread Makhambet,
I envy you not,
no more than a cutout in a hackneyed plot.
Don’t try to make out our queer words,
climb out of that thrice-cursed wall:
you’ve made your hole,
and into the quivers of library stacks—to live an epic in the kingdom of prose,
mending the world with your metaphor,
unbending the crook of the question mark.
Andrey! We are nomads, the two of us—the spaces of cultures and eras
divide us,

we wander different routes,
like god and religion.
I would use my learning to test
the great faiths
that my poor old devil
never suspected.

Olghas Suleimenov actively promoted his philosophical ideas and cultural perceptions through his poetry, countless essays and op-eds, and numerous travels around the Soviet Republics, Eastern Europe, and the developing world. In fact, he was probably among the Kazakh intellectuals of the post–World War II era who brought the world’s attention to Kazakh literature and cultural heritage, interconnecting the literary world of his generation for the first time, despite the Cold War and the existence of the Iron Curtain. Many of his critics and colleagues accepted his poetry and prose as both Kazakh and Russian, or Soviet (when his poems were translated into various national languages of the Soviet Union). Indeed, Suleimenov mastered his depiction of universal human values and emotions in distinctive Kazakh expressions, inviting his fellow countrymen to see themselves as a part of the modern world beyond Kazakhstan, even beyond the Soviet Union or Russia.
Suleimenov as a Citizen

Although Suleimenov was silenced for many years, he did not give up. Only after the beginning of perestroika in the mid-1980s was Suleimenov rehabilitated and allowed to return to public life. He came back full of energy and immediately joined public discourses in Kazakhstan, becoming one of the most recognized and influential public figures in Kazakhstan and the Soviet Union during the perestroika campaign initiated by Michael Gorbachev. One issue of great public concern was the existence of Nuclear Testing Polygon in Semipalatinsk oblast (province) in Kazakhstan.11

The Semipalatinsk Nuclear Testing Polygon was a highly secretive military installment and the cornerstone of the Soviet nuclear program. Almost all Soviet era nuclear tests—about 100 aboveground and more than 400 underground—were conducted at this polygon between 1949 and 1991. By the number of nuclear tests per square mile, the polygon probably hosted more nuclear explosions than any other place on earth. The problem was that a large number of people—the local civilian population and the military—was exposed to various levels of radiation or lived in areas contaminated by it. This happened for numerous reasons, including negligence, poor quality of nuclear test sites and bunkers conservation, underfunding, and unawareness among the civilian population about the dangerous level of radiation in the area. The issue was complicated by the fact that military officials who ran the polygon denied independent observers access to the test site. They claimed that the situation was under control and that there was no threat of nuclear contamination to the
local civil population. However, unofficial reports from the districts around the polygon indicated otherwise as, despite censorship and information restrictions, the news about unusually high levels of cancer among the general population, birth defects, and health problems among children became available to the public. Some experts also argued that the continuation of nuclear tests would lead to mini-earthquakes and, in turn, to the unsealing of old conserved nuclear bunkers and shafts, causing additional and highly dangerous nuclear contamination of large areas in Kazakhstan.

The general public of Kazakhstan, led by Olzhas Suleimenov, demanded more transparency and a freeze on nuclear tests before the completion of the full investigation of the development on the ground in the polygon. Yet the military denied the information about the dangers and insisted on continuing the nuclear tests. In the winter of 1989, an accident at the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Testing Polygon led to a high level of radioactive contamination of some areas, including exposure to the civilian population. On February 28, 1989, Suleimenov organized a large rally in Alma Ata (then the capital of Kazakhstan) calling for a temporary halt of all nuclear tests in the polygon until the completion of a full investigation. On the same day, he announced the establishment of the Semipalatinsk Anti-Nuclear Movement with the ultimate goal of banning all military nuclear tests around the world. It took enormous organizational skills to unite supporters around him into the largest anti-nuclear movement in the former Soviet Union. Fortune was again on his side, as his public activities against the nuclear testing happened during Gorbachev’s era of perestroika and glasnost. Yet at that time it was still not obvious that Olzhas Suleimenov would succeed in defending his cause and silencing the nuclear testing site.

Some Soviet political and military hawks accused him of being unpatriotic. It took personal courage to stand up and defend his native land and his people against the power of the Soviet military-industrial complex. Defiant Suleimenov won wide public support in his native Kazakhstan, in other Soviet republics, and even among anti-nuclear peace movements in other countries. By combining public diplomacy, mass rallies, and negotiations with the liberally oriented Soviet political elite, the representatives of the Semipalatinsk Anti-Nuclear Movement managed to reduce the number of nuclear tests in the polygon by half by the end of 1989.

Once again, Suleimenov took this cause against nuclear testing in his native Kazakhstan and changed it from a local, relatively small case, into an all-Union, even global, cause. Through his writing, speeches, appeals, and mass rallies, he attempted to convince the public that every local environmental disaster—small or large—undermined our planet. They not only endangered the lives of local people, but also those of the entire region and continent. In 1990, a delegation of anti-nuclear activists from the state of Nevada visited Kazakhstan in support of the cause. The Semipalatinsk Anti-Nuclear Movement was renamed the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement (NSM). It organized several highly publicized rallies both in Kazakhstan and the United States, several international congresses, and a series of public debates and discussions, which attracted attention of leading anti-nuclear
movement activists, experts, and a number of intellectuals not only from Kazakhstan and Central Asia, but also from many other parts of the Soviet Union, and from around the world.

Eventually, Suleimenov and his close associates built a critical mass of support among the general public and influential politicians. On August 29, 1991, the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Testing Polygon was officially closed by a decree signed by the president of Kazakhstan. On top of this, only few years later, Kazakhstan would give up its entire nuclear weapons arsenal—the fifth largest in the world—which it had inherited from the Soviet Union.

For Kazakhstan, the importance and impact of Olzhas Suleimenov and of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement goes well beyond the closure of the nuclear testing site. By and large, it was the first independent mass movement in Kazakhstan, which contributed to the strengthening of the national identity and the rise of the national consciousness. As the movement became an all-inclusive organization appealing to liberal intelligentsia in the country regardless of nationality, it also contributed to the peaceful transition and formulation of liberal policies of the government of Kazakhstan on interethnic and intercultural relations after the independence in 1991.

The Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement did not end after the closure of the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Testing Polygon. It is still active in global anti-nuclear and peace movements. In May 2000, the NSM organized a 3rd Global Anti-nuclear Alliance Summit in Astana City in Kazakhstan. In 2006, the NSM played an important role in introducing a declaration proclaiming Central Asia a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. The declaration was signed by representatives of five Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

In addition, the movement plays a role in dealing with the consequences of nuclear testing, as only in the 1990s the scale of the environmental and human disaster caused by nuclear tests finally began to be acknowledged. The government of Kazakhstan began developing a systematic program to help those who were exposed to radiation in dealing with health issues and related social and economic problems.

Suleimenov’s exceptional knowledge of national, regional, and global culture made him a natural candidate to be appointed as the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the UNESCO. He has been at this position since 2001, organizing seminars, workshops, conferences, and other events on cultural issues, cultural interchanges, and population movement, including the international conference the First Great Migration of People.12

**Selected Bibliography**

Suleimenov, Olzhas, Zemlia, poklonis cheloveku! Moscow, 1961.
Notes

1. Alexander Solzhenitsyn was probably one of the best-known members of this group. For a discussion of the thoughts and ideas of the Soviet intelligentsia, see: Elena Zubkova and Hugh Regsdale. Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945–1957. M.E. Sharpe, 1998.
10. The works of another influential Kazakh intellectual—Mukhtar Auezov (1897–1961)—were translated into many languages early, but Auezov belongs to a different generation.
11. The author would like to express his gratitude to Professor Byrkytbai Ayagan for consultations on the political development in Kazakhstan in the 1990s, and the rise of independent public organizations and intellectual discourses in the country in the 1980s and 1990s.

12. For more information see: http://www.firstgreatmigrations.org/letter.php
THE WHELPS

Man made his way.
Day-and-day wandered.
Where bound?
What matter?
Steppe did not say.
Down in a hollow
spotted a body—
wolf—closer—she-wolf—
mother for short.
Thick of the sage brush,
itst throat torn open,
pumping blood,
thicker than mud.
Rival? Wolfhound?
Uncomprehending
labored, groveled
her suckling pups.
Pressed to the wound—
imperious fennel
ruling over—
thick blood, growing cold,
drank in the whelps,
blood mixed with vengeance.
Where bound?
What matter?
Long as it lives.
Each makes its way—
looking for vengeance.