

## A Unit on Teaching the Soviet History of Kazakhstan through a film “The Gift to Stalin”

### Part I: Executive Summary



<https://perspectum.info/dalshe-dejstvovat-budem-my/podarok-stalinu/>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5j3rlzh3Hk&t=2121s>

In my project, I want to develop a unit for the course “Intercultural Introduction to Kazakhstan,” which is taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This course is a one-credit course designed for students who are expected to complete the Russian Overseas Flagship Capstone Program in Almaty, Kazakhstan. I want to base my unit on the film “The Gift to Stalin” (*Podarok Stalinu*). “The Gift to Stalin” is a result of joint production between Kazakhstan, Russia, Poland and Israel, which was released in 2008 and directed by Rustem Abdrashev. The film covers such historical events of the Soviet period in Kazakhstan as Kazakh famine of 1931-1933, mass ethnic deportations, Second World War, corrective labor camps and first nuclear trials. I would like to develop a series of lesson plans dedicated to the most significant

aspects of the film which can be analyzed in alignment with the Unit on Soviet History of Kazakhstan.

### **Reference List:**

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### **Part II: Analysis**

The project lies in the framework of the ongoing discussion on how to decolonize and diversify Russian studies by transforming hegemonic and dominant representation of Russia in teaching Russian language and culture courses, covering wider geographies of Russophone cultures. In his article on reimagining Russian syllabus for social justice, Thomas Garza emphasizes that syllabi of Russian language and cultural studies "are appropriate for

decolonization and can be reimagined to reflect more fully the breadth of diversity and intersectional identities in Russia. Deconstructing the colonial history of Russian language, culture and literature courses allows multiple and diverse voices to be both the subject and the object of instruction in order to promote equity and social justice” (44). Therefore, the course “Intercultural Introduction to Kazakhstan,” aimed to introduce students to the rich and unique history and culture of Kazakhstan, demonstrates the application of a decolonizing approach to the Russian curriculum.

My project is intended to broaden the students’ knowledge of the significant events in the Soviet history of Kazakhstan. Studying Soviet history of Kazakhstan unfolds the consequences of imperial, colonial and Soviet rule on its territory, people and culture. Therefore, the film “The Gift to Stalin” is advantageous because it provides an overview of major historical events through the lens of private lives of a Jewish boy Sasha (Sabyr) and an old Kazakh man Kasym. In the film, the deported boy is left alone after his grandfather’s death and is saved by Kasym, who works on the railway station. Kasym takes Sasha to his home village and introduces him to the local life, people and culture. The events occur in the anticipation of Stalin’s birthday and first nuclear trials in Semipalatinsk test site, in 1949.

The film will give the students an opportunity to reflect on those themes, critically discuss and analyze them by combining their knowledge of historical facts together with the artistic visual representation of events in the film. The imagined students possess a high intermediate or advanced level of Russian as the course is taught fully in Russian. Students are expected to be familiar with the culture and history of Russia but they may have very limited knowledge of Kazakhstan. This is why the course “Intercultural Introduction to Kazakhstan” is intended to give a complex overview of its main aspects. University of Wisconsin-Madison is a large public university with a lively student body, which consists of about 68% White, 9% Foreign National, 8% Asian, 7% Other, 6% Hispanic or Latino, and 2% Black or African American student population. Some students who are studying Russian are heritage speakers with two or one parent being from a post-Soviet country. Since the course is designed specifically for Russian Flagship students of the third or fourth year of Russian, the number of students in the course does not exceed ten. In addition, the students at this stage of their studies

know each other quite well, which contributes to a comfortable atmosphere, support and collaborative work in class. Sometimes, the students already completed a pre-Capstone program in Kazakhstan prior to taking this course. I find this very useful because experienced students can share their impressions and thoughts from their trip to Kazakhstan as well as provide unique perspectives and comparisons, which can enrich in-class discussions.

*The proposed content:*

The course “Intercultural Introduction to Kazakhstan” is a one-credit course, which consists of 14 modules or units, including the modules on traditional nomadic culture, history, education, politics and economy, contemporary youth culture, intercultural communication, recent events of 2022 as January protests and the war in Ukraine. The modules are organized chronologically, where the first part of the course covers the period before independence and the second half is entirely dedicated to the contemporary post-1991 agenda.

The proposed module on the film “The Gift to Stalin” will be located between the module on Soviet history of Kazakhstan and the module on post-Soviet period. In this way, the students are already familiar with the main events in Soviet history and, therefore, are able to recognize and reflect on them while watching the film.

The essential content of the module will focus on the critical analysis of key episodes of the film followed by three stages of pre-watching, watching and after-watching activities.

1) Pre-watching activities:

- to research the information about the film (when it was produced and by whom, what time period it covers);
- to brainstorm what kind of possible events the film might depict;
- to think about how and why a Jewish boy found himself in Kazakhstan;
- to try to imagine the plot line based on their knowledge of the historical period.

In the format of a one-credit course, pre-watching activities can be conducted in the online discussion board on Canvas as a part of the homework.

2) Watching activities:

- to create a map of main characters including their names, descriptions, occupations and any characteristic that students find important for the analysis;
- to start thinking about the answers on discussion questions (provided by the instructor).

In the format of a one-credit course, students are expected to watch film on their own as a part of the homework.

### 3) After-watching activities:

- to work with the list of discussion questions about the film in little groups and as a whole class;
  - to rewatch several key episodes and do more close-look analysis:
- arrival of Sasha to Kazakhstan (which nations were deported and when, in which conditions, what happened to Sasha's family);
  - scenes with Kasym (what is Kasym's story, what happened to Kasym's family, what are Kasym's beliefs and motivations);
  - what Kazakh traditions are manifested in the film;
  - soviet multi-ethnicity (who lives in the village and where they came from);
  - images of power (local versus state officials, hierarchy of informal relations);
  - possible reasons for the title "A Gift to Stalin?" What are the gifts?
    - to ask students what they found interesting, unclear, problematic, deserving attention;
    - to write a short response-review about one of the aspects of the film.

In the format of one-credit course, after-watching activities will be conducted in class.

\*If it is possible to enlarge the course to a three-credit course, I imagine having three separate in-class sessions on each type of activity.

### *The instructional goals:*

- to familiarize students with the effects of imperial, colonial and Soviet policies on the territory of Kazakhstan;
- to deepen the students' understanding of the key historical events of the Soviet period in Kazakhstan and connect them with the information from previous modules;
- to share my own story as a descent of deported Korean family and demonstrate the complexity of identities of a Kazakhstani citizen, through this welcoming students to think deeply about the preservation, assimilation and transformation of culture and languages of displaced groups;
- to apply a critical analysis of the film "The Gift to Stalin," its characters, major themes and plot-line;
- to develop their own creative analysis in the form of a written response;
- to identify questions and topics, which were not proposed by me, but which the students, nevertheless, find significant to discuss.

### Part III: Design

*Performance objectives: In this module, students will:*

- critically examine the historical events in Kazakhstan through their depiction and representation in a feature film “The Gift to Stalin”;
- observe the diversity of experiences of different groups of people and analyze their interactions and relations in the context of totalitarian regime and repressions.
- situate the depicted events in the broader context of colonial and Soviet history as well as in the modern time.

*Learning assessments: In this module, students will:*

- participate in class (or online) discussion in small and big groups;
- create a written reflection in the form of a blog post or magazine column.

*Strategies, activities, and methods:*

- Students will be asked to write their written reflections in a free form, so that there is no pressure to conform to a particular grade. In-class or online discussions are also expected to help the students in sharing their ideas either publicly or more privately in a written form.

<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Assessments</b>	<b>Strategies/Activities/Methods</b>
To critically examine the historical events in Kazakhstan through their depiction and representation in a feature film “The Gift to Stalin”	Pass/fail grade assessment	Discussions (online and in-class), group work, written reflections
To observe the diversity of experiences of different groups of people and analyze their interactions and relations in the context of a totalitarian regime and repressions.		
To situate the depicted events in the broader context of colonial and Soviet history as well as in the modern time.		

*Grading*

- All weekly assessments in the course, except the final presentations, are graded on a pass/fail basis.
- There is a minimum number of words that the students need to write a reflection on in order to pass the assignment and demonstrate that they read/watched what was assigned.

- The students are not required to write in a strictly academic style, but nevertheless are expected to follow the basic grammar rules and punctuation.
- I write short comments and correct repeated grammar mistakes (which do not affect the grade) in order to guide students how they can improve their writing in Russian.
- The written reflection should demonstrate student’s engagement with the film, in-class discussion and personal opinions of what they found interesting, puzzling, or problematic.

#### **Part IV: Development**

- The main media resource is the film “The Gift to Stalin,” which is available on YouTube. The class also includes additional materials (interviews with the creators of the film, short videos or articles about the ethnic deportations to Kazakhstan, film reviews and receptions, memoirs on which the film is based) and a written reflection.
- The course has a Canvas page, in which I created a separate page for each module. The module contains an introduction and the list of necessary materials (links to the videos or articles, articles or books for download). There will be a discussion board for students who are not comfortable speaking in class to share their thoughts and ideas in a written form.
- “The Gift to Stalin” contains such sensitive topics as repressions, violence, sexual violence, therefore students will be warned in advance of the film’s sensitive content. If necessary, I will provide time-codes for particular sensitive scenes, which students can choose to skip if they think the scenes are too disturbing to watch. I will discuss this project with the course supervisor in advance.
- Because the film realistically depicts tragic events and scenes of violence or death, the content might be perceived controversial by some people. I will state in the syllabus what kind of topics will be addressed in class and that students should feel safe in delivering their concerns either to the instructor or course supervisor. For students with disabilities, a policy on accessibility is stated in the syllabus. Film assignment will be accommodated for students with special needs.

#### **Part V: Implementation**

- CDIPS program made me think in depth about the principles of equity, inclusivity and diversity, which I want to include in my teaching, designing of courses and materials. Especially, I would like to highlight Dr. Rifkin’s talk on decolonizing foreign language education because it made me reflect on what stays visible and hidden in the Russian curriculum and how we, as educators, can influence and change that. In the context of the course as a whole, I tried to include topics to represent more diverse voices and opinions such as queer and LGBT communities in Kazakhstan, the perception of current war by Kazakhstanis and its impact on Kazakhstani society, current decolonizing manifestations in Kazakh culture.

- Teaching history through film allows the students to work with a different media and implement a critical and creative analysis and interpretations combining them with their knowledge of historical facts and current events.
- The syllabus of the course “Intercultural Introduction to Kazakhstan” includes the Institutional statement on diversity and inclusion as well as GNS+ Department statement which was composed by one of our graduate students Cecil Wilson and which addresses the principles of CDIPS program: “The Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic+ strives to create inclusive excellence by valuing the contributions of people of diverse backgrounds based on their race, ethnicity, culture, veteran status, marital status, socio-economic level, national origin, religious belief, ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, and class. This is an ongoing task that requires each of us to unlearn our socialization in cultures where privilege and opportunity are unequally distributed along many of those lines and then to put that learning into practice in our classrooms, syllabi, decision-making structures, and research. In this classroom, we will strive to respect everyone’s gender and pronoun preferences. You may feel free to request a change in pronouns at any time in the semester if what you decided on earlier is not working out. We encourage you to be attentive to your classmates’ and instructors’ preferences. If someone misgenders you, correct them. If you misgender someone, correct yourself and apologize. We will all make mistakes — in our first languages and in a second language — and we depend on everyone’s respect and goodwill for a positive classroom environment.”
- The course offers various opportunities for students to express their thoughts and opinions, both publicly in class and online in the written form. The course does not impose on students a weight of a particular grade, offering instead pass/fail grading principle and valuing the diversity of the students’ learning styles. Written response is designed to allow students to share their thoughts in a comfortable format of a blog post without being penalized for grammar or stylistic mistakes. I hope that this will help the students to feel safe in our classroom academic environment and also feel encouraged to share their ideas and opinions. I allow in the classroom the use of technology in order to accommodate the students with different learning styles.

## **Part VI: Evaluation**

- I usually rely on the students’ evaluation submitted at the end of the semester. However, I am thinking of giving the students a welcoming survey in the beginning of the course, in which they can list their expectations, interests, experience and learning needs, and a poll in the middle of the semester to make necessary adjustments.
- I have been teaching this course two times so far, and I am really satisfied with the modifications I made for the second time I taught this course, which coincided with the CDIPS program. While teaching the course, I note the topics that interest students and try to incorporate them into the course program.