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**ESIMDE AND MEMORY: RECONSTRUCTING STALINIST REPRESSION IN POST-SOVIET KYRGYZSTAN**

ЭСИМДЕ ЖАНА ЭС: ПОСТСОВЕТТИК КЫРГЫЗСТАНДАГЫ СТАЛИНДИК  
РЕПРЕССИЯЛАРДЫ РЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯЛОО

ЭСИМДЕ И ПАМЯТЬ: РЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯ СТАЛИНСКИХ РЕПРЕССИЙ В  
ПОСТСОВЕТСКОМ КЫРГЫЗСТАНЕ

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## ESIMDE AND MEMORY: RECONSTRUCTING STALINIST REPRESSION IN POST-SOVIET KYRGYZSTAN

### Аннотация

This paper explores the largely overlooked Stalin-era deportations from Kyrgyzstan to Ukraine, shifting focus from archival research to contemporary memory practices in Kyrgyz society. Through interviews with historians, researchers, and members of the Esimde Research Center in Bishkek, it highlights grassroots efforts to preserve this marginalized history. In the absence of state support or public discourse, individuals and organizations engage in memory work through oral histories, exhibitions, and community events. These initiatives aim to reclaim suppressed historical narratives and ensure their transmission to future generations, reflecting a localized response to Soviet and post-Soviet historical erasure and repression.

**Key words:** Repressions, Esimde, Memory Politics, History, Stalinism, Ukraine

*Эсимде жана эс: постсоветтик кыргызстандагы сталиндик репрессияларды реконструкциялоо*

*Эсимде и память: реконструкция сталинских репрессий в постсоветском кыргызстане*

### Аннотация

Бул макала Кыргызстандан Украинаны көздөй сталиндик доордогу көчүрүлүүлөргө көңүл бурбай келген тарыхый окуяларды карайт жана изилдөө багытын архивдик материалдардан коомдук эс тутум практикаларына бурат. Бишкекте жайгашкан Эсимде изилдөө борборунун мүчөлөрү, ошондой эле тарыхчылар жана изилдөөчүлөр менен интервьюлар аркылуу автор бул маргиналдуу тарыхты сактоого багытталган жергиликтүү демилгелерди көрсөтөт. Мамлекеттик колдоо же коомдук талкуунун жоктугунда, жеке адамдар жана уюмдар оозеки тарых, көргөзмөлөр жана коомдук иш-чаралар аркылуу эс тутумду сактоого аракет кылышат. Бул демилгелер репрессияланган жана маргиналдык тарыхый окуяларды кайра калыбына келтирүүгө жана аларды кийинки муундарга өткөрүүгө багытталган, Совет жана постсоветтик тарыхты жок кылууга каршы жергиликтүү реакцияны чагылдырат..

### Abstract

В статье рассматриваются малоизученные сталинские депортации из Кыргызстана в Украину, при этом акцент смещается с архивных исследований на современные практики памяти в кыргызском обществе. На основе интервью с историками, исследователями и участниками исследовательского центра «Эсимде» в Бишкеке освещаются инициативы гражданского общества по сохранению этой маргинализированной истории. В условиях отсутствия государственной поддержки и широкой общественной дискуссии, отдельные люди и организации ведут работу памяти через устные рассказы, выставки и общественные мероприятия. Эти инициативы направлены на возвращение забытых исторических нарративов и их передачу будущим поколениям, отражая локальный ответ на советское и постсоветское забвение.

**Ачык сөздөр:** Репрессиялар; Эсимде; Эс тутум саясаты; Тарых; Сталинизм; Украина

**Ключевые слова:** Репрессии, Эсимде, Политика памяти, История, Сталинизм, Украина

## Introduction

The opening of Soviet archives had a profound impact on scholarly research, revealing events that had been suppressed by Soviet authorities until the final years of the regime. This access significantly transformed Western historiography of Soviet social history, shifting the field from one constrained by limited and inaccessible sources to one characterized by a wealth of data. As a result, historians were required to adopt new methodologies and were able to develop more nuanced interpretations (Fitzpatrick, 2015). Despite the substantial progress made in the study of Soviet history since 1991, certain aspects of this past remain underexplored. One such area concerns the repressions that took place during the years of collectivization, a period particularly harsh for Soviet peasants in regions such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan. (Pianciola, 2009; Graziosi, 2015). Although deportations as a punitive measure during collectivization have been widely examined, particularly those involving population transfers from the western parts of the Soviet Union to the east, there remains an overlooked case involving the deportation of families from Central Asia to Ukraine. This episode has received very limited scholarly attention. In 2015, a law mandating the opening of archives in Ukraine allowed researchers from Central Asia to access previously unavailable documents and revisit this neglected history. While the existing literature on this topic remains scarce (Zholdzhibek, 2022; Alimova, 2006), some archival records concerning these deportations have come to light. In Kyrgyzstan, the *Esimde* Research Center has played a central role in recovering and preserving this history. One historian in Kyrgyzstan, Algakalozy (2021), examined the political and economic objectives behind these deportations and contributed to restoring this forgotten narrative.

This paper argues that the case of deportations from Central Asia to Ukraine represents not only a historiographical gap but also a unique opportunity to explore how the memory of Stalinist repressions is constructed and sustained in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The narrative surrounding these deportations has remained fragmented; yet, in the past decade, grassroots initiatives, particularly the work of the *Esimde* Research Center, have played a central role in reanimating public discourse around this episode. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with researchers and individuals, this study traces the ways in which memory is preserved and mobilized. Rather than focusing solely on state narratives or textbook historiography, it highlights the personal, communal, and non-institutional forms of remembrance that challenge dominant narratives or fill their absence. These actors rely not only on archival traces, but also on oral histories, commemorative practices, and public engagement to keep this past alive. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions about the politics of memory in post-Soviet spaces. It raises important questions about who gets to remember, how memory is curated in conditions of historical erasure, and what it means for marginalized communities to reclaim a place in national and regional histories. By focusing on memory rather than solely on historical facts, this work emphasizes the dynamic and contested nature of how the past is made meaningful in the present.

## Methodology and challenges

This research adopts a qualitative methodology to explore how memories of Stalinist-era deportations from Kyrgyzstan to Ukraine are remembered, reconstructed, and transmitted in contemporary Kyrgyz society. The study prioritizes civic and personal narratives over institutional historiography, with a particular focus on grassroots efforts led by the *Esimde* Research Center. *Esimde* serves as both a site of historical recovery and a civic actor engaged in reconstructing silenced or marginalized memory. To investigate this phenomenon, the study relies on a combination of oral interviews and documentary analysis. Primary data includes four in-depth interviews: three semi-structured conversations with *Esimde*'s director, a senior researcher, and a Ukrainian journalist, who was the first one in Ukraine to talk about these deportations, and one open-ended, narrative-style interview with a descendant of a deportee. The interviews, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, were conducted in Russian, the lingua franca of the region, except for one which was conducted in English, prior to reciprocal consent. All interviews were audio-recorded with verbal consent, transcribed, and translated into English by myself. Participants were informed that the information would be used solely for academic purposes and that their identities would be anonymized, although none expressed specific concern about confidentiality. Supplementing the oral data are primary and secondary documentary sources: a family memoir written by a historian, a collection of deportation-related documents from the Ukrainian State Archives, and published literature on “dekulakization” and Soviet repression in Central Asia. The analysis is guided by Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, which frames memory as a socially constructed and group-mediated process. Halbwachs (1980) argues that memory is never purely individual but shaped by the cultural and institutional frameworks within which individuals exist. This theoretical lens allows the study to interrogate how personal, familiar, and communal memories of deportation persist across generations. While Halbwachs offers a foundational framework for understanding the social construction of memory, this paper also engages with Hirsch's (2008) notion of *postmemory*, which refers to the intergenerational transmission of trauma, to examine how *Esimde*'s oral history initiatives connect personal recollection with inherited narratives of repression.

The researcher's positionality also plays an important role in shaping the epistemological approach. As someone positioned outside the immediate historical and national context, I approached the subject with a combination of academic detachment and ethical responsibility toward the communities whose stories were being told. My own background informed my sensitivity to trauma narratives and to the complexities of post-Soviet identity politics, while also allowing a critical distance to interpret memory beyond nationalist or ideological frames. Ethical considerations were central throughout the research process. In addition to securing verbal consent, I was careful to explain the aims and scope of the project, assure anonymity, and give participants space to speak freely.

A significant limitation, however, emerged in the form of communication gaps with the *Esimde* platform itself. Although initial interviews were successful, subsequent attempts to re-engage with the organization, either for clarification or collaborative feedback, were met with silence or delays. This disconnect points to an epistemological issue that affects not only this research but broader academic work in post-Soviet civil society contexts. Resource scarcity,

political pressures, and institutional instability often contrive the ability of civic organizations to participate fully in long-term scholarly exchange. In this case, the difficulty should not be interpreted as resistance to inquiry, but as a reflection of the precarious landscape in which historical memory work unfolds. Organizations like *Esimde* face scrutiny, and some researchers expressed concern about how terms like “repression” could be politically misinterpreted. This climate of uncertainty may have also influenced participants’ willingness to elaborate on sensitive topics. Moreover, access to archival materials in Ukraine was limited due to ongoing conflict. The partial destruction of regional archives such as Kherson significantly curtailed the availability of key documents.

Lastly, the reliance on oral history, while methodologically appropriate for a memory- focused study, introduces inherent challenges of subjectivity, trauma, and selective recall. While these narratives are vital for reconstructing the lived experience of repression and exile, they are not always verifiable through institutional records. Nevertheless, the convergence of oral testimony, archival fragments, and civic activism offers a rich, if partial, window into the politics of memory in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.

## 1. Deportations from Central Asia to Ukraine

In 2025, Ukraine marked 95 years since the Soviet regime initiated repressive actions against the peasantry, initiated by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of the Bolshevik party through a resolution dated February 5, 1930.<sup>1</sup> This resolution launched a massive campaign of forced collectivization and deportation, initially targeting around 170,000 so-called kulak families, although the actual number of deportees significantly exceeded this estimate. While most historical studies have concentrated on dekulakization within Ukraine, far less attention has been paid to the deportation of non-Ukrainian ethnic groups to Ukrainian territory. Among those forcibly relocated were Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz from Central Asia, who were settled in underdeveloped areas of southern Ukraine and employed in labor-intensive cotton farms. These farms were created as part of the Soviet strategy to develop domestic cotton production in response to international economic isolation. Although cotton had been cultivated in Ukraine since the nineteenth century, it was not until the 1930s that industrial-scale production took off, particularly in the Kherson, Kakhovka, and Skadovsk regions. The deportees faced extreme hardship, including inadequate housing, lack of medical care, limited access to education, and ethnic discrimination. In many cases, they were housed in buildings previously seized from Ukrainian kulaks. Productivity remained low in the early years due to disorganization and resistance among local collective farmers, but yields improved significantly by the end of the decade, largely due to the coerced labor of special settlers. (Collection of documents, 2019; 5-10).

Officially, these deportations affected around 6,000 families, half of whom were relocated to Ukraine, and the other half to the Northern Caucasus. According to Alagozkyzy (2021), the deportations were driven by two primary motives. The first was political: deporting populations to remote areas functioned as a preventive strategy against possible future dissent, serving as a form of self-defense against perceived hostile elements. In the aftermath of the October Revolution and the Civil War, the Communist Party's Central Committee, under Lenin and later Stalin, established a dictatorship focused on maintaining power at all costs. The second motive was economic: through dekulakization and forced resettlements, the regime aimed to mobilize labor and improve the country's socio-economic conditions. In the 1930s, able-bodied individuals from Central Asia, particularly those skilled in cotton cultivation, were targeted by these policies and deported to southern Ukraine, helping to alleviate local labor shortages. According to a certificate issued by the OGPU's Special Department for the Deportation of Kulaks dated August 30, 1931, the majority of deportees from Uzbekistan were relocated to Ukraine (Collection of Documents, 2019:7). This decision was primarily based on the Uzbek deportees' expertise in cotton cultivation.

As further documented in a top-secret certificate issued by the OGPU's Special Department on August 30, 1931, the operation to seize and deport kulak-bai households from Central Asia began simultaneously across all districts on August 21–22. The coordinated timing was intended to prevent the escape of those marked for resettlement. Deportations from

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<sup>1</sup> By the resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party "On Measures for the Elimination of Kulak Households in Areas of Complete Collectivization." (*Pro zakhody shchodo likvidatsii kurkul's'kykh hospodarstv v raionakh sutsil'noi kolektyvizatsii*) [in Ukr.]

Turkmenistan, with the exception of the Tashauz districts, were temporarily delayed pending the disarmament of Basmachi insurgent groups. By August 27, a total of 5,015 households had been confiscated across four republics and were transported to either the Ukrainian SSR or the Northern Caucasus region.

| <b>Region</b>                       | <b>Households<br/>Seized</b> |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Uzbekistan                          | 3,328                        |
| Tajikistan                          | 638                          |
| Kyrgyzstan                          | 619                          |
| Tashauz<br>Districts                | 430                          |
| <b>Total</b>                        | <b>5,015</b>                 |
| (Collection of documents, 2019; 11) |                              |

| <b>Destination</b>                  | <b>Tr<br/>ain<br/>s</b> | <b>Househ<br/>olds</b> | <b>Individ<br/>uals</b> |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Ukrainian SSR                       | 3                       | 698                    | 3,640                   |
| North Caucasus<br>Krai              | 2                       | 519                    | 3,262                   |
| <b>Total</b>                        | <b>5</b>                | <b>1,217</b>           | <b>6,902</b>            |
| (Collection of documents, 2019; 11) |                         |                        |                         |

The report described the transit of deportees from Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian regions to Ukraine as proceeding without major incidents: no escapes, illnesses, or deaths were recorded, and food supplies were adequate for the journey. However, there was a severe shortage of footwear, leaving many deportees nearly barefoot upon arrival in Ukraine, where relatives were pressured by authorities to provide shoes. In the Ukrainian resettlement zones, Soviet officials described the political situation as stable, citing what they perceived as support from poor peasants and local party activists: increased collective farm enrollment, faster grain deliveries, applications for party membership, and public declarations of loyalty to party institutions. Problems, however, were reported in the departure areas of Central Asia, including cases of abuse during deportation (e.g., denial of bedding and clothing), attempts by kulaks to bribe officials to substitute poor peasants on deportation lists, the spread of provocative rumors about war and further dekulakization, mass liquidation of livestock and assets by families anticipating arrest, and multiple escape

attempts, including one foiled mass breakout and several successful emigrations to Afghanistan. (Collection of documents, 2019, 14-33).

In response to these issues, the Central Asian Bureau of the Communist Party proposed disciplinary action against officials responsible for procedural violations. The OGPU issued new directives aimed at curbing abuse, ensuring deportees received required provisions, arresting individuals engaged in counterrevolutionary agitation and speculation, and conducting propaganda efforts to reinforce ideological discipline. These measures underscore the dual function of deportation during this period: not only as a mechanism of economic exploitation and forced labor, but also as a tool of political control and repression.

These settlers also were closely monitored by state security and subjected to strict movement restrictions. During the height of Stalin's Great Terror in 1937 and 1938, many deportees became targets of fabricated charges and mass executions. After World War II, the Soviet government began easing restrictions, allowing some deportees to return to their native Republics. The publication "*An Economic Book*" by the *Esimde* research platform offers in-depth details about the return of Kyrgyzstanis to their homeland in 1944. It includes records of families who were repatriated and outlines their economic engagements. The repatriation process extended until 1947. Some Kyrgyzstanis, however, chose to stay in Ukraine voluntarily (Database of Dekulakized, 2022). Interviewees explained that those who stayed were not only ethnically Central Asian but also included ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, who had decided to remain in the region for various reasons. Many of these individuals were not originally from Kyrgyzstan; rather, they had been deported to the area during imperial times and later settled there. (Niyazov, 2024).

## 2. The role of *Esimde* in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

The historical background discussed above helps to frame the processes through which certain events are remembered, forgotten, or pushed to the margins in post-Soviet memory. While state archives provide insight into the official mechanisms of repression, they often leave out the personal experiences and ongoing effects of deportation. This is where grassroots organizations like *Esimde*<sup>2</sup> in Kyrgyzstan play a key role by turning gaps in the archives into spaces for collective memory. As part of this research, I interviewed two professional historians connected to *Esimde*. Their reflections offer valuable insight into how the memory of Stalinist deportations has shaped both their academic work and wider understandings of historical justice in Kyrgyzstan. To gain a fuller picture of *Esimde*'s work, I also spoke with the organization's founder and one of its researchers.

The director and founder of the center provided particularly significant insights into the intellectual and institutional origins of the center. Tracing her professional journey from working in a state-run analytical body to co-founding a center for geopolitical studies *Polis Asia* and later *Esimde*, she emphasized a persistent commitment to interrogating the structural limitations of post-Soviet academic and civic discourse. *Esimde*, she argued, was not established solely as a research institution but rather as a civic intervention and effective response to enduring silences in national memory. Influenced by her engagement with the field of memory studies during a fellowship in Japan, she and her colleagues sought to develop a locally grounded, participatory, and inclusive framework for historical inquiry, one that foregrounds the voices of marginalized communities and decenters subjects of repression. As she noted, "We did not want to just document stories. We wanted to create a space where people could find meaning in their own histories."

One of the foundational themes of *Esimde*'s research concerns Stalinist-era deportations, which consistently emerged in oral histories collected across regions of Kyrgyzstan, such as Issyk-Kul. Despite the scope of this historical experience, much of it remains unacknowledged

<sup>2</sup> The website of the institution can be found here, where most of their initiatives are presented: <https://ru.esimde.org/>

in official discourse and institutional memory. According to the Director, “Almost every family we visited in Issyk-Kul had been affected by some form of repression, but people did not talk about it, even among themselves.” The reluctance to speak, she explained, is rooted in a combination of generational trauma, residual fear, and internalized stigma. Through its efforts to collect oral testimonies, archive personal documents, and analyze multigenerational trajectories of displacement, *Esimde* has played a critical role in rendering visible these suppressed narratives. Fieldwork conducted by the *Esimde* team in Ukraine prior to the 2022 invasion was particularly instrumental in this regard. “We couldn’t find any archival confirmation of these stories in Kyrgyzstan, so we wrote letters to Ukraine, and their archives responded. That’s when we realized this history is much bigger than we thought.” The subsequent destruction of more than half of the Kherson archive during the occupation underscored both the fragility of historical evidence and the urgency of transnational archival collaboration.

Importantly, *Esimde*’s engagement with memory is not limited to historical retrieval but also involves a sustained critique of the ideological frameworks that have shaped collective understandings of Soviet repression. The researchers emphasized that the normalization of such violence, often framed in Soviet narratives as developmental necessity or class purification, continues to influence popular and institutional perceptions. As the researcher remarked, “We’re trying to reframe these deportations not as unfortunate necessities but as violent acts that fractured families, cultures, and futures.” In this sense, the work of *Esimde* represents both a scholarly and ethical intervention, aimed at challenging the epistemic legacies of Soviet historical discourse. The center’s approach is grounded in the recognition that memory is temporally contingent and generationally mediated. As the researcher observed, “Memory lasts three generations,” and it is at this intergenerational threshold that many Kyrgyz families are now beginning to confront their historical pasts. Interviewees frequently emphasized the symbolic function of memory as a form of familial and cultural reparation. Descendants often seek to restore the dignity of their ancestors by recalling them as community leaders, scholars, or figures of respect, countering the official labels of ‘kulak’ or ‘enemy of the people.’

This tension between personal and official memory is compounded by the absence of institutional recognition. The team pointed to the discontinuation in 2017 of Kyrgyzstan’s Day of Remembrance for Victims of Repression, which was replaced by a more generalized “Day of History and Memory of Ancestors.” This shift, they argued, reflects a broader reluctance to confront the full extent of Soviet violence. Educational curricula, public monuments, and national museums continue to highlight a narrow canon of “founding fathers,” while the vast majority of victims remain unnamed and unacknowledged. As one interviewee explained, “There is no national Day of Repression in Kyrgyzstan anymore. It was abolished in 2017 and replaced with a vague remembrance day that does not explicitly address repression or political violence.” The only official government building which has a memorial for Stalinist repression is the Ata-Beyit complex, right outside of Bishkek. This complex however is part of a bigger complex commemorating different acts of repressions that span from 1916, which is when *Urkun* took place, to the end of the Soviet era.



**Figure 1:** Monument commemorating Stalinist Repressions at Ata-Beyit Complex. Photo taken on 07/07/2025

by

*Pietro Pontecorvo*

The political climate in Kyrgyzstan has further constrained historical inquiry. Following the passage of a foreign agents law, *Esimde* has been labeled accordingly, leading to heightened self-censorship among its researchers. The historian noted, “We are afraid to write the word ‘repression’ without saying ‘Stalinist,’ otherwise the government might think we mean the present.” The center’s public expression of support for Ukraine in the wake of the 2022 invasion further exposed it to criticism and backlash, including accusations of political bias and selective solidarity. These dynamics illustrate the increasingly precarious position of civil society organizations operating at the intersection of memory politics, historical justice, and transnational advocacy.

Despite these challenges, *Esimde* continues to pursue innovative strategies for democratizing historical knowledge. The choice to name the center “*Esimde*,” which means “I remember” in Kyrgyz and other Turkic languages, signifies a deliberate move away from externally imposed academic vocabularies and toward culturally embedded expressions of memory. Through oral history projects, public memory walks, podcast series, community archiving, and an open-access digital database, *Esimde* seeks to render historical knowledge both participatory and accessible. As the director emphasized, “We want people to know that their family’s story matters; that they are part of history, not separate from it.” In doing so, *Esimde* not only challenges state-centered narratives of history but also affirms the political and epistemic significance of individual memory. The center thus operates at the intersection

of decolonial scholarship and grassroots civic engagement, working to reclaim silenced histories while fostering a pluralistic and justice-oriented memory culture in Kyrgyzstan.

### 3. Untold history as a tool for memory searching

The role of *Esimde* however did not only create a push for democratization in the country, despite the significant challenges, as aforementioned, it also helped individuals to recreate their own family story. One of the interviewees was able to retrieve archival materials that confirmed family stories that up to that day were only told orally. This process of archival discovery allowed for emotional closure and identity reconstruction. As the interviewee recounts, “In 2021, the *Esimde* team visited Ukraine and found archival materials... They found my grandfather’s letter too, and it turned out he was executed in 1937.” This sharply contrasted with the official version the family had received for decades, that he had died of “cardiac paralysis” in 1944. The truth not only validated family memories but reshaped them. “We always thought he might come back... They told us he was gone for ten years, and then silence,” she explained. The impact went beyond factual correction; it extended into generational self-understanding. “My interest in history came from my grandfather... He always told these stories, but we didn’t fully understand what ‘kulak’ meant,” she reflected, revealing how *Esimde*’s intervention transformed abstract trauma into concrete historical narrative. Through accessing institutional memory, personal history was reclaimed, as “we knew the story from family tales, but *Esimde* gave us documents.” This is the story of Moltoev Akmat. Moltoev Akmat was a Kyrgyz community leader and *volost* (district) administrator who lived during the early Soviet period. Known in his community as a *manap*, a traditional mediator and leader, he was a respected figure who traded across borders (even traveling to China by horse) and supported neighbors in need. He had two wives, an indicator of both social status and economic stability at the time.

In the 1930s, during Stalin’s repressions, Akmat was labeled a kulak, meaning an enemy of the people due to his land, livestock, and leadership status. In 1931, he and his entire family were deported from Kyrgyzstan to the Ukrainian SSR, specifically to the village of Chalbasy in Kherson oblast. They were transported in harsh conditions in freight wagons, alongside other Kyrgyz deportees. Upon arrival, they were placed in the ‘*Novy Put*’ (New Path) kolkhoz and scattered across various settlements until repeated petitions led to their regrouping by region. Despite the hardship, Akmat worked in the kolkhoz and, for a time, was seen as a productive laborer. He was even awarded a one-month leave to return to Issyk-Kul, suggesting his temporary rehabilitation. However, in 1937, amid the height of the Great Terror, he was arrested in the evening along with other deported Kyrgyz. The family was given no explanation. For decades, they were told he had been sentenced to ten years and had died of cardiac paralysis in 1944. The truth, discovered only in 2021 with the help of the *Esimde* project, was that he had been executed in 1937. His arrest shattered the family. His wives and children remained in Ukraine during the war and only returned to Kyrgyzstan in 1944, again in freight wagons. His younger wife died shortly after returning, and his young son, the interviewee’s grandfather, became an orphan. Raised by his stepmother, this son never stopped searching for answers. In 1960, he wrote a letter to Soviet authorities seeking information about his father’s fate, a letter later recovered in Ukrainian archives by the *Esimde* team.

Председателю Президиума Верховного Совета СССР  
 тов. Н. Е. Ворошилову.

От учителя истории 40 летия Кавказского  
 Кавказского совета Кавказского района  
 Омской области Кузнецкой ССР  
 Акматава Акена.

Заявление.

Мой отец Молтоев Акмат, будучи комсомольцем колхоза  
 "Новый путь" села Табасарское Складовского района Николаевской  
 ныне Керченской области Украинской ССР, был  
 арестован ночью вместе с другими мужиками села  
 в 1937 году.

И по сегодняшний день это осталось неизвестным  
 как, почему и во что были арестованы люди.

Поскольку мне тогда было всего 5 лет, у меня не  
 осталось памяти об отце.

Знаю я о нём лишь по рассказам мамы-старухи,  
 безграмотной пенсионера.

Очень прошу Вас сообщить мне о том, какая  
 судьба постигла моего отца.

Прошу не отказывать.

20/1-1980 год.

**Figure 2:** Letter retrieved in the Kherson State Archive by the Esimde

For decades, Moltoev Akmat's story lived only in whispered memories, shaped by fear, pain, and silence. His posthumous rehabilitation came after the collapse of the USSR, but his family's full understanding of his fate only arrived with the aid of civic memory initiatives.



Figure 3: Document retrieved by Esimde in the Kherson State Archive, explaining the arrest of Akmat Moltoev

#### 4. The role of independent actors in memory restoration

Despite the work that *Esimde* has done, there are other actors involved in recovering these blank spots of history. In parallel with the civic efforts spearheaded by *Esimde*, individual scholars and family members have played a vital role in recovering the silenced histories of repression, exile, and return. One such figure is the historian Aida Kubatova, affiliated with the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences and herself a descendant of victims of Stalinist repression. Her work offers a deeply personal yet historically rigorous account of one family's forced displacement to Ukraine, drawing from oral histories, archival research, and intergenerational memory. Kubatova's narrative, which centers on her husband's grandfather Niyazaly Ashyr uulu, exemplifies how personal memory can function as both historical evidence and a mode of resistance against institutional forgetting. Labeled a kulak in the 1930s, Niyazaly was deported along with his two wives and children to the village of Chalbasy in southern Ukraine. Despite severe conditions, the family struggled to adapt, eventually building new lives amid hardship. However, in 1938, during the Great Terror, Niyazaly was arrested on fabricated charges of belonging to a counterrevolutionary nationalist group and was executed, an event unknown to his family for over 75 years. Kubatova's account reconstructs not only the socio-political forces that led to the family's exile and loss but also the intimate, emotional aftermath that shaped the lives of his descendants.

Her research is notable for the way it combines personal testimony with empirical documentation. Drawing on interviews with elders, memories passed down through generations, and recently uncovered archival records from Ukraine, Kubatova reconstructs a granular portrait of exile, suffering, and survival. The story highlights the psychological burden carried by Niyazaly's children, raised without a father, stigmatized as "children of enemies of the people," and forced into silence. The emotional climax comes in 2013 when the family, with the assistance of researcher Zukhra Altymyshova, uncovers documents from the Kherson State Archive confirming Niyazaly's execution in 1938, contradicting the official story that he had simply 'disappeared.'

Crucially, Kubatova's contribution illustrates how independent scholars can bridge the gap between academic inquiry and lived experience. Like *Esimde*, her work reveals that the search for memory is not merely about documenting the past, but about affirming human dignity, restoring familial bonds, and challenging hegemonic narratives that continue to marginalize victims. In doing so, she joins a growing network of researchers, descendants, and civic actors who are collectively redefining the terrain of historical justice in Kyrgyzstan.

## 5. The 2015 archive law in Ukraine

The 2015 opening of Ukraine's archives marked a foundational moment in reclaiming suppressed histories of Soviet-era repression, not only for Ukrainians but for communities across the post-Soviet region. For the first time, researchers, journalists, and descendants of deported people, especially from Central Asia, were able to trace stories that had been buried under decades of silence and deliberate erasure. "Ukraine gave huge opportunity not only for own historians but for many other researchers," explained one journalist, whose work uncovered the forced relocation of Kyrgyz families to Ukrainian villages like Vinogradovo,<sup>3</sup> a topic virtually unknown in both countries' public discourse. Prior to the archival law, such research would have been impossible, as Central Asian states, under continued Russian influence, maintain tight restrictions on access to Soviet-era documents. The opening of Ukrainian archives not only enabled transnational investigation but also disrupted the monopoly over historical narrative long maintained by Moscow. "Russia still tries to close documents about repressions and now they glorify Stalin and other murderers," he observed, pointing to a larger effort to sanitize Soviet crimes while discrediting independent inquiry. This contrast between Ukraine's archival transparency and Russia's ongoing historical suppression is made even starker by the physical theft and destruction of archives during the Russian occupation of Kherson. "Russians won't give any access and also it's not acceptable for me to try to get this access because if I apply to Russians, I acknowledge annexation," he said, emphasizing how access to history is entangled with contemporary questions of legitimacy and sovereignty. The archives, therefore, do more than preserve the past; they serve as contested sites of memory, political resistance, and historical justice, especially for those whose stories have been excluded from national narratives both at home and abroad.

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<sup>3</sup> The new name for the village of Chalbasy

## Conclusion

This study has not aimed solely to provide new historical insight into the deportations from Kyrgyzstan to Ukraine during the Stalinist period. Rather, it has sought to understand how and why such a significant episode was erased from public consciousness and how it is now being rediscovered. What became most evident during my time in Kyrgyzstan is that the absence of public discourse surrounding this history was not due to a lack of interest, but rather the consequence of prolonged political suppression and a lack of institutional avenues for remembrance. The individuals interviewed, particularly those affiliated with the *Esimde* Research Center, showed a clear and enduring desire to reclaim a past that had been intentionally excluded from both Soviet and post-Soviet narratives. Their work has helped establish a space where people can speak openly, share family stories, and begin to process a collective trauma that had remained unacknowledged for decades.

Kyrgyzstan stands out in the Central Asian context as the first country where grassroots initiatives like *Esimde* have taken root and flourished. It remains the most active site of community-led memory work in the region. It is also significant that the only Ukrainian journalist who has covered this topic in depth was born in Kyrgyzstan. Although ethnically Ukrainian, he maintains a strong connection to the country of his birth. This connection highlights the extent to which silenced histories, once engaged with through personal memory and moral conviction, can resonate across national boundaries and foster new forms of civic and historical engagement. The recovery of these forgotten episodes has filled an important gap in Soviet historiography while also allowing individuals and families to reclaim their stories, reconnect with lost identities, and participate in a broader conversation about truth and justice.

However, this work remains deeply vulnerable to current geopolitical realities. Much of the archival material that made this research possible was located in the Kherson region of Ukraine, which is now under foreign occupation and inaccessible to researchers. This development illustrates that memory is not shaped only by historical events, but also by access to the documents and narratives that make them legible. It also reinforces the idea that historical memory is inherently political. Had Ukraine not enacted its 2015 archive law, it is unlikely that many of the stories uncovered in this chapter could have been told. The loss of access to these archives reminds us that the power to remember is often contingent upon political will and institutional openness.

Ultimately, the Kyrgyz case reminds that memory is not simply a private or individual experience. It is shaped by collective dynamics, political structures, and historical contingencies. Although memory can be suppressed and obscured, it can also be revived through the work of dedicated individuals and communities. The story of *Esimde* illustrates how grassroots initiatives can respond to historical silences by creating participatory spaces for remembrance and reflection. These efforts not only recover lost histories, they challenge dominant narratives and reaffirm the importance of historical justice. Memory, in this sense, becomes an active force that connects the past to the present, fosters dignity and understanding, and resists the mechanisms of historical erasure.

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