

The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years

CHINGIZ AITMATOV

TRANSLATED BY JOHN FRENCH
FOREWORD BY KATERINA CLARK

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Aitmatov
The day
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Foreword by Katerina Clark

Readers of Chingiz Aitmatov's *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* might well wonder how this novel ever managed to get published in the Soviet Union. After all, its central plot focuses on Yedigei, a Kazakh worker whose heroic task is to bury an old friend according to the traditional Muslim rituals of the Kazakhs, not to build bigger and better tractors as one might expect. Moreover, this is only one of several themes in the novel that seemingly advocate a revival of national traditions dating from before Russian dominance of Central Asia. The science fiction sub-plot can be read as an allegory attacking the Iron Curtain or the Berlin Wall; the interconnected motifs linking the sub-plot to the main story line (a ring of rockets around the earth to keep out a higher civilization and caps that constrict the heads of captured slaves, depriving them of their memories and sense of identity) suggest Soviet mind control or the subjection of the Soviet ethnic minorities and their cultures to the Great Russians. Indeed, it should be remembered that the novel's setting is the republic of Kazakhstan in Soviet Central Asia, an area that borders Afghanistan, which the Soviets invaded in December 1979, less than a year before this novel appeared.

It is not surprising, then, that the novel created a sensation among the Soviet intelligentsia. Copies of the issue of the journal *Novyi mir* in which it first came out* quickly became so unobtainable in

**Novyi mir*, no. 11, 1980. The novel was republished in book form under the title *The Railway Siding Burannyi* in 1981.

was a pungent smell of piss. Yedigei loosened his fingers from their feverish hold. He threw up at once and, covered with his own vomit, crawled away with a groan and with his vision blurred. He had never told anyone about it then or afterwards. Sometimes he would relive the whole scene in a nightmare, and the next day he would find that he was unable to settle down to anything and did not want to live . . .

Now Yedigei remembered this with a cold shiver. However, he realized that Hawkeye would triumph through cunning and mental superiority. This fact maddened him. While the other was writing away, Yedigei searched for the flaws in Hawkeye's argument. From what Hawkeye had said, one thought struck Yedigei with its lack of logic, its devilish inconsequence. How was it possible to accuse anyone of having hostile memories? For memories were things that happened at some time in the past; they no longer existed. In other words, a man could only remember something which had already happened.

'I want to ask you something,' said Yedigei, feeling his throat go dry from emotion, but forcing himself to enunciate his words clearly, even calmly. 'You say' - he was deliberately addressing the other in the familiar form so that he would understand that Yedigei was in no mood to cringe and cower; after all, he could not be exiled any further out in the wild than the Sarozek - 'you say,' he repeated, 'his memories were hostile. Now, what am I to understand by that? How can memories be hostile or not hostile? As I see it, a man remembers something that happened and how it happened, long ago - it's something long past. Or are we to say: if a thing is good, remember it; if it is something bad or inconvenient, then don't remember it, just forget it? Forget that it has ever been? If, for example, you have a dream, then if it was good, remember it; but if it was frightening and bad, no good to anyone, then . . . ?'

'So that's the sort you are, is it? The devil take you!' Hawkeye was astonished. 'You like to ponder, you want to argue. You're the local philosopher. Oh, well, let me see.' He paused. He seemed to be trying something out in his mind; then he sorted it out and pronounced solemnly, 'In life,

anything can be an historical event in a sense. What we are concerned with here is not *what* happened and *how* it happened. What matters is that when we describe the past, when we speak of it - and even more so when we write about it - we should do so in the way that is needed now, as is appropriate now, for us. Things that are of no use to us at the present time must not be mentioned. And if you do mention them, it means that you are acting in a hostile and antisocial fashion.'

'I don't agree,' said Yedigei, 'that cannot be.'

'But no one needs your agreement. That's by the by. You have asked and I, because I'm good-natured, have explained. I do not have to indulge in such discussion with you. Good - then we'll go on from words to the actual matter under consideration. Tell me, did Kuttybaev when talking frankly, or when you were drinking together, give or tell you any English names?'

'Why do you want to know that?' Now it was Yedigei's turn to be amazed.

'This is why.' Hawkeye opened one of Abutalip's 'Partisan Note Books' and read out the following passage, underlined with red pencil marks: ' "On 27th September an English mission arrived at our post - a colonel and two majors. We paraded before them and marched past. They saluted us, and then joined us for a meal in our CO's tent. He had invited us as foreign partisans serving with the Yugoslavs. When I was introduced to the colonel, he shook me politely by the hand and asked, through the interpreter, where I'd come from and how I'd got there. I told him in a few words. I was handed a glass of wine and we drank together. Then we talked for a long time. I was pleased to find that the English were simple, direct people. The colonel said that it was a great good fortune - his actual words were, 'an act of Providence' - that all of us in Europe had united against fascism. And that without this, the battle against Hitler would have been even harder. Possibly, if nations had remained isolated and standing alone, the war could have ended in tragedy." And so on in that sort of vein.'

Hawkeye put the book on one side, lit another *Kazbek* and sat in silence, puffing away. Then he continued.