

Kazakh-Italian ties: history, connecting thread

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Relations between Kazakhstan and Italy have a long history. Suffice it to recall several hypotheses that the Roman soldiers should have been on the territory of contemporary Kazakhstan as prisoners of war, captured by the Parthians and transferred to the East for border duty. According to Pliny, in 54 BC, after losing at the battle of Carrhae (now Turkey), 10,000 Roman prisoners were displaced by the Parthians to Margiana to operate the frontier (Plin. Hist. Nat. 6. 18).

Another interesting fact is connected with the remains of a Roman legion in Azerbaijan. In eastern Azerbaijan (60 kilometres from Baku) Roman legionaries did an inscription, which reads: “IMP DOMITIANO CAESARE AVG GERMANICO LVCIVS IVLIVS MAXIMVS LEGIONIS XII FVL, Under emperor Domitian, Caesar, Augustus Germanicus, Lucius Julius Maximus, Legio XII Fulminata”.

A unique inscription of Flavian date recording a dedication by “Lucius Iulius Maximus Centurio Legionis XII Fulminatae” has been found on the shores of the Caspian Sea, some 70 km south of Baku, Azerbaijan (AE 1951.0263). The locale is well beyond the limits of Roman control. The inscription was doubtless left by troops sent by Domitian in 75 to help the hard-pressed kingdoms of Caucasian Iberia and Albania. May be they continued their way to the East on the northern shore of the Caspian Sea. Why not? Approximately this inscription on the stone could be made in 84-93 AD.

Another Roman inscription of the 2nd-3rd centuries AD has been found in eastern Uzbekistan in the Kara-Kamar cave complex. It reportedly was made by some Roman soldiers from the Pannonian Legio XV *Apollinaris*: *Legio quinta decima Apollinaris* (Fifteenth Apollonian Legion) was a Roman legion. It was recruited by Octavian in 41-40 BC. The emblem of this legion was probably a picture of Apollo, or of one of his holy animals.

XV Apollinaris is sometimes confused with two other legions with the same number: An earlier unit, which was commanded by Julius Caesar and met its end in North Africa in 49 BC, and a later unit that was present at the Battle of Philippi on the side of the Second Triumvirate and then sent eastwards.

The Roman historian Florus describes the visit of numerous envoys, included *Seres* (Chinese?), to the first Roman Emperor Augustus, who reigned between 27 BCE and 14 CE:

Even the rest of the nations of the world which were not subject to the imperial sway were sensible of its grandeur, and looked with reverence to the Roman people, the great conqueror of nations. Thus, even Scythians and Sarmatians [ancient peoples inhabiting the territory of contemporary Kazakhstan] sent envoys to seek the friendship of Rome. Nay, the Seres came likewise, and the Indians who dwelt beneath the vertical sun, bringing presents of precious stones and pearls and elephants, but thinking all of less moment than the vastness of the journey which they had undertaken, and which they said had occupied four years. In truth it needed but to look at their complexion to see that they were people of another world than ours (Florus *Epitomae* II, 34e).

Serica was described by Ptolemy as bordering “Scythia beyond the Imaum mountains (Tian Shan)” on the West, “Terra Incognita” to the North-East, the “Sinae” or Chinese to the East and “India” to the South. It was in ancient period.

World War I

Nevertheless, relations between our nations deepened in the 20th century and have continued to grow up in the 21st century. Within the World War I Kazakhstan was a colony of the Russian empire. So, the Russian General Staff began to send German and Austrian prisoners of war to Siberia, the Far East, and Turkestan. Because they were not trusted, Romanians and Slavs were also sent there, as were German and Hungarian prisoners of war.

The influx of prisoners of war was directed primarily into the *uezd* centers of the Steppe Krai – Ust'-Kamenogorsk, Omsk, Akmolinsk,

Pavlodar, Semipalatinsk, and Petropavlovsk. In Omsk, there were up to 20,000 prisoners of war¹. The first groups of prisoners of war arrived in the northeastern regions of Kazakhstan in August 1914. In order to prevent escape, it was ordered to settle them far from the Siberian railroad. The adoption of measures to advance the placement of prisoners of war was motivated by a desire to comply with the requirements of the 1907 Hague Convention.

In Akmola *oblast*, more than half of prisoners of war, 14,000 people, were employed in agriculture². From 1915, many worked at the Ekibastuz and Kum-Kol coal mines and in the Ridder mine. Prisoners of war, having become familiar with the situation of Kazakhs and Russians, grew close to them. Later they would take an active part in the Civil War.

According to documents available in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in the spring of 1915, 139,374 junior military officers and 1,882 officers were resettled in the Turkestan Military District. Up until the spring of 1915, it was not possible to organize special camps for prisoners of war in the western regions of Russia and it was decided to relocate them to the east.

In Semirech'e oblast, another group worked on road construction. On July 15, 1915, permission was received from St. Petersburg to use prisoners of war on road construction. According to a report by the Semirech'e oblast administration, prisoners of war built the Georgiev-Arkhangel'sk road in Pishpek uezd and the road between the settlements Pavlov-Kordai and Tat'ianovka-Sergeevka in Vernyi *okrug* (now Almaty and Taraz oblasts in Kazakhstan)³.

On July 27, 100 prisoners of war were brought to a designated place 50 km from Pishpek (modern Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan). Additionally, construction material was required for sleeping quarter, kitchens, a bakery, a cafeteria, and so on.

The second group of 300 people arrived on August 1. They underwent medical examination. The prisoners' clothing was worn out and they

¹ *Uezd*, administrative subdivision of the Russian Empire.

² *Oblast*, province, administrative subdivision.

³ *Okrug*, district, administrative subdivision.

should have been given uniforms, overcoats, hats, boots, shirts, underwear, towels, etc. Nevertheless, they were not issued these items because of the lack of funds. Of the 400 prisoners, only 23 were from Germany, while 377 were from Austria-Hungary. They can be categorized by nationality as follows: 141 Jews, 80 Russians, 54 Romanians, 48 Magyars (Hungarians), 4 Poles, 6 Turks, 4 Italians, and 1 Czech.

The prisoners' labor was used towards the construction of 70 kilometers of roads and the repair of a further 42 kilometers. Nine wooden bridges and seven stone ones were built. In sum, 26,070 rubles were spent on the prisoners, and a further 16,395 rubles was spent on provisioning the guards. On average, 400 rubles was spent per kilometer of road.

In 1915, about 45,000 prisoners of war came to Russian Turkestan. A specially organized committee decided that it would be best to use the labor of prisoners for road works: "bearing in mind the city of Vernyi's urgent need for paved squares and streets, residents of Commercial Street, the city's main artery, were invited to the meeting. The question was raised of paving it, at the homeowners' expense, using the cheap labor of prisoners of war".

By 1916, prisoners of war were assigned to and worked in 33 provinces of *Turkestan Krai*.

The proximity of Semirech'e oblast to China spurred the decision to send a group of prisoners to Tashkent in November 1915. In 1916, the number of prisoners in Turkestan came to more than 200,000 people.

According to data from September 1917, there were 41,285 prisoners of war in Turkestan, of whom 1764 were officers and 39,521 were soldiers. There is virtually no further archival information on the prisoners. It should be noted that some of them remained in Kazakhstan, while others were repatriated.

Kazakh partisans in the Italian antifascist Resistance

During the World War II, hundreds of our compatriots – Kazakhs were moved to Italy and took an active part in the people's liberation anti-Nazi, anti-fascist partisan struggle there. This is confirmed by the

surviving testimonies of participants in the events and archival documents.

Prominent Italian scholar Nazareno Galiè (Istituto Dante Alighieri Tegucigalpa) wrote in his article “Kazakhstan and Italy: the strategic relationship between two friendly countries”:

For example, in Trieste there is a monument that celebrates the 36 fallen Kazakhs inside the Military Cemetery. The participation of Kazakh soldiers in the resistance movement on which the identity of the Italian Republic is based is significant in the contribution of solidarity from this important country of Central Asia⁴.

As I have the opportunity to explain in an earlier work, the Kazakhs fought heroically against fascism during World War II. «More than a million Kazakhstanis participated in the struggle against fascism, help to learn about the fate of people caught in fascist captivity who participated in the European Resistance Movement in France, Italy and other countries. Finding the burials of the deceased heroes, restoring the names of the heroes officially believed to be missing, is an important task for the formation and preservation of the historical memory of the Kazakh people, for the restoration of a real, true history of the World War II»⁵.

Unfortunately not all of the heroes' names have been recovered and made public, and their deeds have not yet passed down to grateful descendants, becoming their pride and possession.

We have fragmentary data about Kazakhs and Soviet prisoners of war who escaped concentration camps and fought bravely in the Italian partisan divisions. In the province of Modena acted a battalion of Soviet partisans. In the region of Tuscany in the ranks of the partisan division “Guido Boscaglia” active in the Arezzo province fought 23 Kazakhstani people, including Takish Alpeisov from Karagan-

⁴ Nazareno Galiè, *Kazakhstan and Italy: the strategic relationship between two friendly countries // Independent Kazakhstan: lessons of 30 years and development prospects. Proceeding of the International conference.* – Almaty, 2022. p. 138-143.

⁵ Gulnara Mendikulova, Evgeniya Nadezhuk, Aliya Akatayeva, *New Documents on Kazakhs in the European Resistance Movements during World War II*, Cumhuriyet Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi, Yıl 15 Sayı 29/Bahar 2019, pp. 205-26.

da, Kaldanbek Dyusenbekov from Kyzyl-Orda, Zhaymak Kulshikov from Aktyubinsk, Topai Sadvakassov and Ivan Kitastov from Akmo-la region, and others.

So how did the Kazakhs and Kazakhstanis get to distant and beautiful Italy?

Therefore, after the brutal suppression of the uprising in Rome and the central regions of Italy, in the autumn of 1943 the country split into two warring camps. In the north, the Resistance Movement began to unfold powerfully, fighting both with the Duce regime – Mussolini and his “black-shirts”, and with the Nazi occupation.

Prominent scholar Mikhail Talalay writes about the situation in Italy at that time: “At the same time, the armed and violent conflict between the partisans and the adherents of the Duce (they were dismissively called “republicans”, ‘repubblichini’, according to the Republic of Saló) more and more acquired the features of the Civil War – a term that was denied in the “left” historiography, which preferred to talk about the “anti-fascist people’s war” and the “guerrilla war”⁶.

As a result, the German 162nd (Turk) Infanterie-Division, which was established on May 23, 1943, was deployed to Italy in the fall of 1943⁷. However, a different date – May 21, 1943 – is used in the monograph “Muslim Legions in World War II” by O.V. Romanko⁸. The researcher adds intriguing details to this fact, saying that Turkoman-Infanterie-Division No. 162 was an experimental unit.

The division was made up of abducted Turkic-speaking Soviet citizens from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The majority of the non-commissioned officers and the division’s entire officer corps, however, were German nationals.

The division engaged in combat with US-British soldiers in the Rimini region in 1944 after arriving in Italy. It also took part in the fights

⁶ Талалай М.Г. Русские участники Итальянской войны 1943-1945: партизаны, казаки, легионеры. – М.: ООО «Старая Басманная», 2015. – 408 с. (С. 16).

⁷ 162. (Turkistan) Infanterie-Division.

⁸ Романько О.В. Мусульманские легионы во Второй мировой войне. – М.: АСТ; Транзиткнига, 2004. – 320 с. (208).

for Bologna and Padua in 1945. When the war was over in May 1945, the division gave up to British forces.

The Kazakhs' reasons for coming to Italy were thus divided into two categories. The first explanation is that Kazakhs were transported to Italy to labor in quarries and on farms while they were held captive by the military. The second option entails arriving in Italy as Turkestan legionnaires who later joined the Italian partisans after escaping their military regiments.

Palmiro Togliatti cited the following statistics to demonstrate the size of the Italian Resistance movement since the second half of 1943: there were a total of 575 Garibaldi brigades, 198 formations of the Giustizia e Libertà organization, 255 autonomous units, 70 socialist units named after Matteotti, and 54 people's brigades⁹. The Italian government's authorities registered 350,425 members of the partisan movement in Italy in May 1945, according to informations provided by the former General Secretary of the PCI, Luigi Longo¹⁰.

The Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan preserves records and evidence of the activities of Kazakhs who participated in the Guido Boscaglia Italian partisan brigade.

Therefore, Takish Alpeisov was born in 1909 in village No. 5 of the Nurinsky district of the Karaganda region. Before the war, he worked as a tractor driver. He was drafted into the Red Army on August 19, 1941, and after serving in the 19th Infantry Regiment in Alma-Ata, and then in Guryev, was sent to the front in March 1942. He was taken prisoner in the fights near Kharkov (Ukraine) in August 1942, brought to Poland, to the Neuhammer camp in Germany, and then, in the middle of 1943, to Italy.

Along with Zhanbai Zhakenov and Kenzhegali Torekeshev, Takish Alpeisov escaped from captivity in the early months of 1944. They were found by Italian partisans after two weeks of stumbling around in the mountains, and they ultimately arrived at the location of the Guido Boscaglio partisan unit.

In addition to attacking enemy installations and camps and taking part in raids on railway bridges and tunnels, Takish Alpeisov and his

⁹ Тольятти П., Итальянская коммунистическая партия. – М., 1959. – С. 75.

¹⁰ Лонго Л., Народ Италии в борьбе. – М., 1951. – С. 16.

companions actively participated in sabotage operations against German soldiers and Italian fascists. He was brought home by Suez, Teheran, and Baku at the end of 1944, together with other Soviet soldiers who had fought against fascism in Italy, with the assistance of the Soviet military mission¹¹.

As a head of fundamental project GF2018/AR05130249 “Kazakhs in the WWII: New Documents from Foreign archives” (2018-2020), supported by Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in May 2019 the author led a comprehensive expedition to Italy.

Within the expedition for the first time in Kazakhstani historiography, 130 Kazakhs who participated in the resistance movement in central Italy were found in Italian archives and identified. I collected documents in fund “Partigiani e patrioti” in Istituto storico della Resistenza in Toscana¹², Istituto Storico Parri Emilia Romagna (Bologna)¹³.

Moreover, the author found 8 Kazakh’s burial places in Passo della Futa (German military cemetery Futapass) and 4 in Costermano (Veneto).

Research group carried out search comparative and analytical work, which were obtained during business trips to Italy and Russia on the participation of Kazakhs in the Italian resistance movement. This work was hampered by the fact that the names and surnames were incorrectly written both in Italian and often in Russian. Therefore, we are posting documents from the OBD “Memorial” and the Data Bank of the dead and missing during the Great Patriotic War, military personnel called up from the territory of Kazakhstan, found by us¹⁴.

¹¹ ЦГА РК. Ф. 1660. Оп. 3. Д. 6. Л. 2 – 4.

¹² Istituto storico della Resistenza in Toscana (Firenze) <http://www.istoresistenzatoscana.it/>.

¹³ Istituto Storico Parri Emilia Romagna (Bologna) <http://www.istitutoparri.eu/en/>.

¹⁴ <https://mod.gov.kz/memorial/pages/a/a1.html>.

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Cognome e Nome	Paternità e classe		Banda di appartenenza	Periodo di appa
ABDI-PATTA	Bararov	912	Cam.Bianca-M.Amiata	maggio-luglio 4
CARIMOV	Kamal	921	" " "	" "
CHACHAMASCILLI	Georg	917	" " "	" "
ADAMIA	Nicolai	919	" " "	" "
MUCHACEV	edankur	922	" " "	" "
BALMURZIN	Anderias	916	" " "	" "
RACEMAROV	Omar	924	" " "	" "
KUDALNERDIEV	Kudaikul	916	" " "	" "
KASIMOV	Ibrachin	909	" " "	" "
ALIJEV	Ajub	918	" " "	" "
SCALMERDENOV	Gilman	917	" " "	" "
MAMBETOV	Galben	923	" " "	" "
ABILHANOV	Silhan	918	" " "	" "
SCITHOGANIEV	Duison	919	" " "	" "
CURAKOV	Klicbai	920	" " "	" "
NAZAROV	iskak	912	" " "	" "
BALIMTOV MOLDA				
CARIM	CARIM	917	" " "	" "
TUCAMBAIEV	Oksikbai	914	" " "	" "
SALAMATOV	Nurbai	916	" " "	" "
ALMATOV	Turlibek	922	" " "	" "
NURMULLIN	Geksembai	921	" " "	" "
MUKACEV	Naurizbai	909	" " "	" "
MEKATAIEV	Rahigman	914	" " "	" "
HALLDOV	Abas	925	" " "	" "
KALINOV	Ahmedgan	918	" " "	" "
UMIRSOKIMOV	Tahic	921	" " "	" "

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Thanks to comparative and analytical processing in the search, 127 Kazakhs were identified, among which 61 members of the Anti-Fascist and Anti-Nazi Resistance Movement in Italy were accurately identified, who were repatriated from different ports in Italy (for example, Bari) to Odessa (USSR) or a transit point in Bender- Shah (Iran).

The rest either died and were buried on Italian soil, or fled to neighboring countries.

The Italian searchers Claudio Spano and Francesca Candioli reached me while I was working in a complex expedition in Bologna, Italy. They informed me about a Soviet partisan who fought between July 1944 and September 29, 1944, in the Stella Rossa-Lupo Brigades, and between about October 10, 1944, and October 30, 1944, in the 63rd Garibaldi Bolero Brigade. On the morning of October 30, 1944, he tragically died in the Battle of Casteldebole.

What kind of warrior was he, still revered and remembered by Italian partisans seventy-five years after the victory? According to the memoirs of the Italian communists who fought alongside him, he was between 25 and 35–37 years old and spoke Italian and German. Since people aged and changed dramatically during the conflict, a large age range is appropriate. He might have been a Soviet officer or a lieutenant, according to the Italian partisans' memoirs. Maybe he was involved with the Republic of Montefiorino partisans in the spring of 1944.

Mario Nanni, 97, and Franco Fontana, 91, two Italian partisans who served during World War II, recalled him in 2019: “He liked to murder the German invaders with a knife so as not to make noise and not to waste cartridges and ammunitions”. On his back, he had scars.

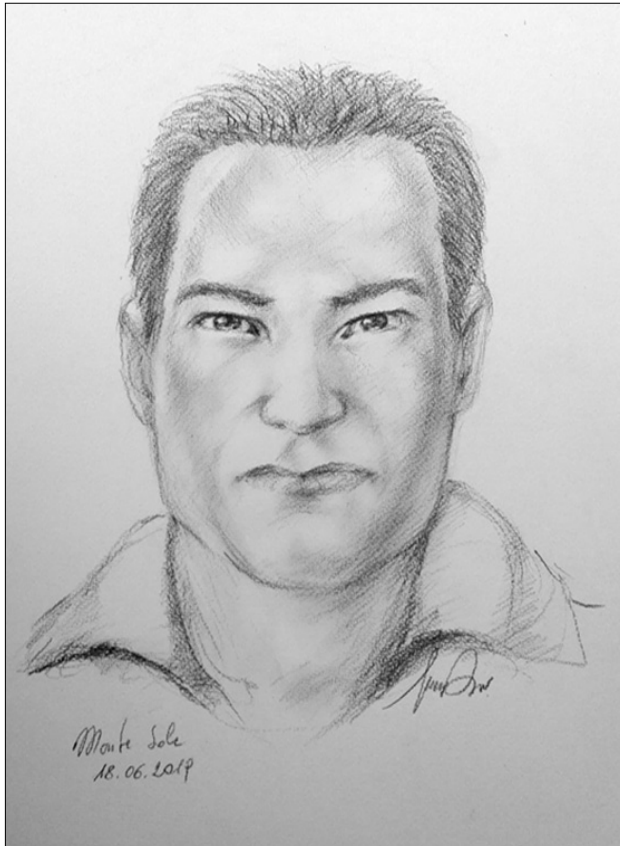
- He was clothed in a German outfit when he was taken prisoner by the Germans [apparently, he took it from a fascist he had killed himself].

- He requested the Italian partisans to teach him some songs and sang arias from operas by Giuseppe Verdi and Giacomo Rossini.
- He did not cross the front after the murder at Monte Sole; instead, he went to the allies, unlike many Red Star guerrillas.
- He made the decision to move to an occupied Bologna, where he joined forces with Italian allies to battle on.
- He was an outstanding rider.

These are the intriguing details that the Italian search engines provided to us, enabling us to begin looking for information in Kazakhstan.

In the nearby city of Casteldebole (Bologna), Karaton tragically died on October 30, 1944. He was a Kazakh, according to the Italian partisans. Another theory holds that he might be one of the men that fled to the partisans in Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, or Romagna after deserting from the 162nd Turkic Infantry Division. There are several

opinions regarding the ethnic background of Karaton, but in my opinion, only evidence from the German archives can throw light on this incredibly intriguing subject.



Therefore, we need to continue our archival searching and collect documents in the National Archives of Italy and archive of the National Association of Partisans of Italy (ANPI) in Rome also.