

Abstract

OASIS OF THE FUTURE?

THE ATOMIC CITY OF SHEVCHENKO, 1959-2019

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Point of departure: After the death of Stalin, Khrushchev renewed the utopian promise to create an ideal communist society living off the superior wealth it created with the mastery of technology and the skillful use of natural resources (1961 program of the CPSU). Especially the atom fueled feasibility fantasies of enormous scope, promising to turn deserts into gardens and spread Soviet civilization into the wilderness. The city of Shevchenko delivered on these promises. Dating from the late 1950s, it was founded in arid western Kazakhstan on the Caspian Sea to exploit the rich uranium and mineral oil deposits that had been discovered there, and eventually grew to nearly a quarter of a million inhabitants. Provided with an atomic powered water desalination plant, it became a spectacular oasis in the desert that was marketed as a marvel of Soviet technological prowess and a development blueprint for Third World countries. Generously supplied with scarce goods, it showcased an abundant Soviet way of life, and attracting specialists and workers from all over the USSR, it was celebrated as a hotspot of Soviet peoples' friendship. Upon closer inspection though, Shevchenko also reveals the flip side of late Soviet modernity. Forced labor was exploited both for uranium mining and the construction of the city, incidents at the atomic plant threatened the city on several occasions, and the Moscow-based management of the project betrayed a heavy-handed imperial attitude towards the non-Slavic periphery of the Soviet Union, putting to question its emancipatory discourse.

Structure: The story of Shevchenko is to be told in four chapters: *Envisioning and Promoting Communism* looks at the ideological context that gave birth to Shevchenko, and then tracks the affirmative discourse that used the model city to exemplify the Soviet project. *Building and Compromising Communism* investigates the "grand design" (Kotkin) that guided the technocratic construction of an (allegedly) ideal communist future by means of industrial and urban construction as well as social engineering, and proceeds to juxtapose it with the realities of forced labor, technological hubris etc. that revealed to what extent it remained stuck in the Stalinist past. *Living and Negotiating Communism* seeks to grasp the city's history in terms of a negotiating process between authorities, citizens and various interest groups. A closing chapter, tentatively entitled *Overcoming Communism?*, explores the post-Soviet fate of the city, investigating how the exemplary Soviet chronotope fared when it was suddenly robbed of its supportive framework, and how recent development plans renew the idea of a hyper-modern, atomic-powered city of the future ("Aktau City").

Aims and importance of the project, expected results: The atomic city of Shevchenko makes for an intriguing case study destined to enhance our understanding of the post-Stalinist Soviet

Union and its heritage. On the level of political history, it provides an urban-industrial microcosm on which to trace the successive attempts of Khrushchev's, Brezhnev's and Gorbachev's administrations to simultaneously perpetuate and redefine the Soviet project, examining both the discursive-symbolic and the socioeconomic dimensions of their respective development strategies. It will also provide insight into the uneasy relationship between political and technocratic leadership (CPSU and *Minsredmash*, the mighty atomic ministry) and between central and local authorities (Moscow and the Kazakh republican and local authorities). Moreover, it will shed light on the hitherto largely unstudied Soviet *push to the south*. In terms of cultural history, an interpretation of Shevchenko will show how the *construction of communism* proceeded *ex nihilo* at a local scale, highlighting aspects such as infrastructural construction and societal development from a pioneering base camp to a privileged model city. Following this process in the material, social and discursive space will highlight the post-Stalinist Soviet idea and experience of modernity. This will reveal to what extent the late Soviet Union continued to build on the Stalinist model, and to what extent it explored new strategies. It will also help to set the Western experience of technocratic *modernity* into comparative perspective.