

Mustafa Chokay: “The Executioners of Freedom” Or “The Forgotten People Of Turkestan”

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Abstract: This paper explores Mustafa Chokay’s “Executioners of freedom” (1917, Fragments of Memory), focusing on his reflections on the events of 1917. As a Kazakh enlightener and intellectual who supported the Turkestan Autonomy and resisted the Soviet regime through both theoretical discourse and practical struggle, Chokay’s memoirs are examined to reveal his ideological stance and historical perspective on the national liberation movement.

Keywords: Mustafa Chokay, “Executioners of freedom”, documentary prose, “1917, Fragments of Memory”, Turkestan autonomy, political figure, Turkestan national liberation, nationalist, new enlightener.

Introduction: MUSTAFA CHOKAEV (July 1, 1891, Akmasjid – December 27, 1941, Berlin) – a lawyer, a prominent representative of the Turkestan Autonomy, a statesman, publisher, and journalist. He was a well-known representative of Turkestani emigres, a political figure, and a patriot and nationalist who devoted his life to the struggle for the independence of Turkestan.

This documentary prose, based on Mustafa Chokay’s memoirs, was initially published under the title “1917, Fragments of Memory” in the periodical “Young Turkestan”, and later issued as a separate book in Berlin in 1937. It was subsequently republished in Ankara by the Turkish scholar Professor Saodatkhonim Isakiy, and later, in 1989, printed in Germany in Russian script. In Uzbekistan, the work appeared under the title “Executioners of freedom”, edited and introduced by the Jadid scholar B. Kasimov. The scholar ended his preface with these words: “We think that the recollections of our devoted compatriot staunch opponents of the Bolshevik regime in Turkestan, who spent most of their lives in exile and whose memories of 1917 are filled with grief and longing will leave no fellow countryman indifferent.” [4. P. 5].

M. Chokay was among the first to understand that the 1917 Russian Revolution, which had initially filled the people of Turkestan with joy and hope, would bring

them no real benefit. Together with Jadid intellectuals such as Makhmud Khoja Behbudiy, Abdulla Kadiri, Chulpan, Munavvar Kari Abdurashidkhanov, Hamza, and Tavallo, he realized that the revolution only led to disillusionment and despair among the Turkestan intelligentsia. Perceiving that the “promised happy life” proclaimed by Russia was nothing but deception, Chokay referred to this political situation as a “great national tragedy.” [4. P. 16].

In his memoir “Executioners of freedom,” Chokay placed the problems of “national destiny” and “national independence” at the very heart of his narrative. While traveling from Petrograd to Orenburg, he witnessed the plight of Turkestani forgotten and abandoned along railway lines and in wagons and was struck with horror and pity. As he recalls: “Here, dozens of wagons full of Turkestani workers had been pushed aside. They had been left behind before reaching their destination, forgotten, sitting in despair, not knowing what to do.” [4. B. 16].

Moved by this scene, Chokay was filled with compassion for his compatriots. He regarded helping them as his patriotic duty, spoke with officials, and made efforts to arrange their safe return home. He also took part in the First All-Kazakh Congress in Orenburg, where he listened to Munavvar Kari Abdurashidkhanov’s speech, later recalling it as “an

unforgettable experience.” In his memoir, M. Chokay emphasizes that he was born and raised in the multi-ethnic city of Oqmasjid, and that he enjoyed great trust and respect from the Kazakh people: “Akmasjid is the city where I grew up and first entered school. I knew almost all the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tatars, Russians, and Jews living there. The entire population knew me even better. According to our people’s custom, ‘One should show respect to the son of a respected man,’ the townspeople treated me with great respect. The Kazakhs, in particular, regarded me as their natural representative and defender.” [4. B. 20].

In the fourth part of his memoir, M. Chokay presents factual accounts about several Russian generals General Dukhovsky, General Ivanov, General Samsonov, General Martins, and General Kuropatkin who governed Turkestan and treated the local population with arrogance and contempt. For instance, Chokay writes: “After the Andijan uprising of 1898, General Dukhovsky gathered all the Andijan ulama and clerics in the main mosque and forced them to kneel in prostration. Among them were some of the most respected scholars, and Dukhovsky himself trampled over their bowed heads.” [4. B. 27]. Through such examples, M. Chokay exposes the inhumane and degrading behavior of the Russian generals who ruled over Turkestan, showing their complete disregard for Muslims and the native population. In his memoir “Executioners of Independence,” he records each general’s cruel and shameful acts in detail. Speaking about General Samsonov, he notes: “This was a man who used to say, “Even a Russian peasant thief is better than any Turkestani even better than his saint.” As for General Ivanov, Chokay recalls that he repeatedly instructed his subordinates not to show pity toward the local people, constantly reminding them that they must “demonstrate the power of the Russian fist,” which, in practice, meant frequent beatings and humiliation of the Turkestanis. [4. B. 27].

In his memoirs, M. Chokay vividly describes the arrogant and demeaning attitude of both the Russian Tsarist regime and the Soviet government toward the people of Turkestan. He exposes the colonial mindset and inhuman behavior that insulted the dignity and pride of the native population. In recounting the period under General Kuropatkin, Chokay portrays the situation of the local people as one resembling the relationship between slaves and their masters. He writes: “When passing by the residence of the Governor-General, the people of Turkestan were required to walk with their hands clasped and their heads bowed, showing gestures of deep submission.” [4. B. 16]. Through such passages, M. Chokay reveals how the native inhabitants were humiliated in their

own land, reduced to subjects of a foreign power that sought to suppress their national pride and human worth.

M. Chokay considers himself a “nationalist.” In response to the Minister of Internal Affairs’s remark, “You are a scoundrel revolutionary,” he replies: “That is possible. Within the framework of your understanding of Russian revolutionaries, I feel that I am more of a nationalist than a revolutionary.”

The Turkestan region, in favor of the “Revolution and its victims,” was also heavily taxed and violently plundered by the people, as recorded in M. Chokay’s memoirs: “If they see any of us with a good horse, valuable carpet, fur coat, gold and silver, they take it away. There are many cases of women being abused. For even the slightest delay in fulfilling the demands of our organization members, the entire village is punished, we are constantly kept in fear of the punitive detachment. Hunger has begun in the district, they are not giving us grain.” [4. B. 47].

M. Chokay also recounts several historical and political events connected with his own life. According to the memoirist, a Russian officer named Ogaporov accused him of being a “Turkish agent, Pan-Turkist, Pan-Islamist, and enemy of Russia.” Following these accusations, the Council of Soldiers and Workers decided to execute M. Chokay by shooting. However, District Commissioner Preobrazhensky, who had been closely observing the political situation, opposed this decision and declared: “Comrades! There is unrest in the city. The Kazakhs have surrounded the villages. The local population is moving toward the railway station. If you act against Mustafa Chokay, a disaster will occur throughout the city—the situation will become uncontrollable.” [4. B. 50]. Preobrazhensky understood that M. Chokay held great authority and respect among the people, and that any injustice against him could provoke a large-scale uprising. Realizing the potential danger of such unrest, the commissioner rejected the proposal to execute M. Chokay, thereby preventing a serious political catastrophe.

For M. Chokay and his associates, two issues were of paramount importance: the establishment of the “Turkestan Autonomy” and the development of “national cadres.” In his memoirs, Chokay describes their understanding of autonomy in the following way: “At our congresses, we did not speak openly about autonomy. However, within our National Center and provincial committees, this was the subject that occupied us the most. We understood autonomy at that time as the right for Turkestan to have its own administrative and executive institutions that is, a legislative parliament and an executive government.

Foreign policy, finance, railways, and military affairs were recognized as the responsibility of the All-Russian Federation government. Education, local roads, local administration, justice, and land issues, however, were considered the responsibilities of the local autonomous government. We attached particular importance to the land issue. We also intended to introduce several reforms regarding the structure of the army. For instance, while remaining under the general command of the All-Russian forces, we wanted the Turkestanian soldiers to serve within Turkestan and remain there — this was a matter of great importance to us.” [4. B. 54] Thus, the establishment of the Turkestan Autonomy, as envisioned by M. Chokay and his contemporaries, was in essence a struggle for full national independence.

The Soviet government planned the destruction of the Turkestan Autonomy, which is why it attacked Kokand with heavy fire. At that time, M. Chokay was in Kokand. In his memoirs, he also recounts the events of the armed confrontation with the Bolsheviks, including their ultimatum and the response given in return. Addressing the Bolsheviks, M. Chokay declared: “Power is on your side. As for us, for now, we possess no power other than the recognition of our national rights. There is no doubt that you will defeat us in this struggle. Nevertheless, we reject your claim to authority and refuse to recognize Soviet power in Turkestan...” [4. B. 58] Through these words, Chokay expressed his moral resistance and steadfast commitment to the idea of national self-determination, showing that even in the face of armed force, he would not compromise on the independence and dignity of Turkestan.

In the 9th part of the memoir, memoirist M. Chokay writes about the incident of “Mirmuhsin”. According to this incident, a young man from Turkestan, named Mirmuhsin, writes an article criticizing the fact that the teaching system in the old madrasas is completely outdated and the education system is backward. The Tashkent qazikhans cannot stand this criticism and issue a sentence to cut off Mirmuhsin’s finger. The district commissar objects to this sentence of the qazis. The old city police chief finds Mirmuhsin and arrests him. Mirmuhsin’s life is in danger from all sides. The deputy chairman of the Regional Executive Committee, the Bolshevik Anferov, orders the police chief who threatened Mirmuhsin and caught him to be sentenced to death. Nalivkin also agrees with this opinion. On the advice of M.Ch., the issue of Mirmuhsin is resolved peacefully. That is, the solution to this incident is explained in the memoir as follows: “Release this person from his post (the chief of police - the explanation is ours. M.K.), and appoint a Russian in his place, which will slightly increase the excitement of the Tashkent residents,” he advises. M.Ch. thus saves the

life of young Mirmuhsin. Mirmuhsin is released. M.Ch. shows in his memoir that the Turkestan judicial system (the system of the Qazikhans) is in ruins. M.Ch., writing about the “Mirmuhsin issue”, tells the story of “political ignorance” in Turkestan, the struggle between the old and the new with a clear life fact.

In his memoirs, M. Chokay wrote about an incident in order to shed light on the internal political struggles between the “Scient Society” and the “Soviet of Islam” societies in Turkestan: “I remember now that once Ubaydullo Khoja and I attended a rally in the courtyard of the Shaykhantohur mosque. He addressed the speaker at the meeting, one of the leaders of the ulema society, the “Soviet of Islamiya” of Tashkent city, and its head, Munavvar Kari, and said words unworthy of speaking near the mosque. Ubaydulla Khoja, who was more heated and enthusiastic than me, could not control himself and jumped up: “You, the people of the “Sxcients Society,” who elected a Russian anarchist as the city of Tashkent, should be ashamed!” he shouted.

“A commotion broke out. There were shouts from all sides, and among them were harsh words directed at us. In response to Ubaydulla Khodja’s remark, the speaker from the “Scient Society” exclaimed: “A Russian monarchist like Markov is better than the Jadid Ubaydulla Khodja!”

...I recount this incident only to show what our internal relations were like during one of the most crucial moments of our history. Among the Muslim-Turkic population of Tashkent, a part represented by the “Scient Society” preferred a Russian monarchist over a Jadid reformer. The tragedy of the situation lay not only in this preference itself, but also in the fact that those who favored a Russian monarchist over a Jadid were at the same time zealously promoting the campaign of “Faith in Islam.” [4. B. 76] In these reflections, M. Chokay exposes the tragic contradictions and internal divisions within the Muslim community of Turkestan, where certain conservative factions, under the guise of religious devotion, aligned themselves with imperial interests against their own national reformers.

M. Chokay and his contemporaries who supported the Turkestan Autonomy were deeply concerned about the fate of Turkestan. Reflecting on this, he wrote: “At a time when battles were raging in the streets of Tashkent over who would rule the destiny of Turkestan, the Turkestanis themselves remained mere spectators, indifferent observers.” [4. B. 91]. Through this statement, Chokay poignantly expressed his sorrow over the political passivity of his people, highlighting the tragedy of a nation whose fate was being decided by others while its own sons stood by as onlookers.

Conclusion

In summary, M. Chokay devoted his life to the struggle for an independent and sovereign Turkestan Autonomy. His fight was not confined to his writings or ideological beliefs it was also evident in his practical political and military activities. Standing firmly against the Soviet regime, he even engaged in armed resistance. As a result, the Soviet authorities sentenced him to death, but M. Chokay and his companions escaped abroad, preserving their lives and continuing their mission for the liberation of Turkestan from exile.

As the leader of Turkestani emigres abroad, M. Chokay wrote more than 700 political and journalistic articles and books. His lifelong dedication and service to the freedom and independence of his nation will forever remain in the memory of all Turkic peoples, especially among the people of Turkestan.

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