



## Fifteen Deaths at Seven Kilometers

by Casey Michel - 29.09.2012

It was late April 2011. The air in Belbulak, the Almaty satellite city we temporarily called home, was coarse with burning garbage. Dust hung along the unpaved roads. The refuse of the winter's toss-in-the-snow disposal system was emerging rotted and unclaimed. The smell through town was enough enough to turn our eyes watery and to curl the tail of the donkeys rummaging the new-dug leftovers. We needed respite.

We headed to the hills, the low billows of the Tien Shan Mountains, hiking deeper through the rivulets and low-hang birch. The stench thinned, and we grew warm. We thrashed a few startled pheasants, jumped the mud-clomp horse trails, pulled nettles and scoured for any bark-colored ticks that may have clung for travel and blood. The air grew sweet with spring bloom. The hills' height pushed the rotted smells behind.

We made it to a flatgrass garret, hitch in our breath and sweat in our boots. We scanned southward. The hills rolled higher, rising eventually into the granite-flecked tops of the Tien Shan, which created a sawtooth skyline southward as peaks piled behind one another like shark's teeth. And just beyond, with air hopefully a bit more rarefied than the allergen clouds we'd just left, lay the border with Kyrgyzstan.

We knew, by most metrics, that the border divvying those peaks has remained markedly placid since the fall of the Soviet Union. There are none of the ethnic pockets dug out, none of the enclaves Stalin used so effectively in Ferghana or Nakhchivan. Over the last two decades, the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan has been one of the pacific areas of an otherwise overstressed area.

We turned eastward, knowing that while the nearest peaks blocked any lengthy scan, some borderland tranquility could, impressively, be noted where Kazakhstan meets China. That border has seen none of the sell-off and none of the acrimony that besets Beijing's dealings with Dushanbe or Bishkek. And while Beijing has made passes at Astana's land, the two nations have maintained notably secure lines for the past two decades.

Indeed, Kazakhstan's southeastern corner has remained a stronghold of safety in a country that markets itself as an island of stability. The borders in this corner were neither porous nor contentious; they represented,

rather, some of the elusive successes in Central Asia politics.

But this summer, something changed. Something has happened along Kazakhstan's border -- or, rather, something is happening -- that tosses the locked stability of the entire area into doubt. Much like the massacre in Zhanaozen served to upset Kazakhstan's international image, a pair of mass murders have served to cast both borderland safety and governmental legitimacy into doubt. And while the search continues for murderer(s), it is increasingly clear that, despite profusions otherwise, the country's shock has given way to more questions than anyone in Astana is willing to answer.

### The Man Responsible

As Joanna Lillis correctly notes, mass murders in Kazakhstan are exceedingly rare. Certainly, between the Stakhanovite camps and the Zheltoksan events on 1986 (and especially after Zhanaozen last December) the country has seen its share of violent surges. However, in its modern incarnation massed violence is as unique and remarkable as clean-hand government officials.

And yet three months ago, 14 border guards and a park ranger were slaughtered on the country's southeastern slopes. A lone compatriot was off and missing: Vladislav Chelakh, a stupefied 19 year old — a teenager — who said he had only wanted to protect his nation's borders. Per the formula, Chelakh was soon found, confessed his crime, and, seemingly remiss of any remaining regret or concern, set under lock and key while trial proceedings began.

In videos of his confession, Chelakh seemed to carry the face of a man aware of his guilt, calm in the knowledge that the chase had ended and that his future was predestined before he'd reached the age of 20. He was ... calm. As Solzhenitsyn points out in *The Gulag Archipelago*, "sometimes the principal emotion of the person arrested is relief." And so it seemed here: you see the facts, and you see his face, and you use your belief in circumstance to state the obvious. The man was caught. The man was guilty. The case had ended.

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### Reconsidering the Truth

Like Raskolnikov, I said. The boy was like Raskolnikov: He snapped, broken by the hazing, pushed beyond a limit you or I will likely never approach. It was a fine theory, with literature and circumstance as backing. In a horrific, maleficent way, it was only natural.

And then, it wasn't. A few weeks later, Chelakh claimed he was coerced into the confession, beaten and threatened with rape by his interrogators. He said he was pushed by a rung of officers facing concurrent pressure from the higher-ups: the pressure to find an answer, to find the kind of scapegoat that Chelakh fit so neatly. It didn't matter that this green recruit's ability to somehow murder 15 of his fellow colleagues — 15 of his fellow armed colleagues — should cause a few extra rounds of questioning. We needed Chelakh. We needed guilt, unassailing and unencumbered.

And why not this boy? After all, people get driven, lucky. His victims were probably drunk, or distracted, or in disbelief that Chelakh would follow through. They put themselves in no positions to defend themselves.

If no one at Tucson or Oak Creek or Blacksburg had defended themselves, is it such a stretch to believe someone would in Argkangerken?

### Until Proven Guilty

Well, yeah. Maybe it is. Because in early August, as Almaty's caramel smog obscured the Tien Shan and as the city's pedestrians trawled the streets in search of cheap drinks and cheaper watermelons, the country's second mass murder of the summer occurred.

Twelve bodies this time, found stabbed and hacked and strewn in the Ile-Alatau national park. Charred, some of them. Just like the ones in Argkangerken. No money was taken, no signs of robbery evident. Twelve thousand tenge remained in the safe, lying locked in the same house as a handful of the bodies. All the guns in the house had remained on their racks, too — this killer apparently preferred knives. He'd opted, unlike those in Argkangerken, for hand-to-hand murder.

The only name of the victims yet leaked belongs, perhaps interestingly, to another park ranger. Panayota Zakharopulo, a barrel-chested 76-year-old, was found splayed next to his common-law wife, dead in the park to which he'd devoted himself for decades. Zakharopulo was purportedly known for his anti-poaching beliefs, protecting the native shrubs and black storks and wild deer living within. He protected one of the few untouched ecologies remaining in Kazakhstan.

As Zakharopulo well knew — and as he helped publicize — Ile-Alatau was known as much for its natural resplendency as much as it was for its ability to attract vagrants and poachers from the surrounding mountain-side. Depressed economies, especially during that first post-Soviet decade, forced residents to draw incomes where they could, dropping all pretense of ecological balance and environmental awareness.

Whereas the saiga's sawed-off antlers have attracted the most anti-poaching attention in Kazakhstan, furs — say, among the russet sables burrowing throughout Ile-Alatau — carry a healthy price in the Russophone world. Clobber a few sables and evade Zakharopulo, and you could sate your family until you found steady work.

Martens, however, rarely lead to murder — certainly, the pro-poaching camp wouldn't have needed twelve bodies on its hands, and in such grisly fashion, to make its point. As such, authorities have said they are pursuing some line of "internal struggle" as motive for the murders. Police say that they have found a pair of blood-stained cars recovered at the scene. One, they announced, belongs to Igor Zakharopulo, the park ranger's 51-year-old son, who remains unaccounted for and missing these weeks on.

### The Drug Run

And so, here we are once more: one man, fingered and missing. But that's what we heard last time: a single attacker, maintaining no history of violent outbreak or family grudge, now snapped and fled. Another scapegoat for authorities to find, remand, remove and bury. Another case, like Chelakh, of the temporarily insane.

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But now, two months in and with Chelakh still asserting his innocence, we have a second round of mass murder in a not-too-distant locale. Now both cases, even if only coupled through coincidence, carry a bit more weight.

Coincidences, however, depend largely on a matter of scale. One-offs, writ small in action and consequence, make for fine coincidence. But this? Mass murder in Kazakhstan? Mass killing where almost none existed prior? This is but pure coincidence, without any need to scour for potential link?

Before finding myself losing you to conspiracy, consider: Like Argkangerken, Ile-Alatau lies near the nation's southern border — the first slaughter took place at a border outpost, after all. And as has been brought to renewed light recently in Tajikistan, border guards, and those settled into border areas, present capital and conduits for the region's swelling drug trade.

These narcomen, saddled largely along the borders, help heroin and opiates surge northward from Afghanistan, flourishing the greatest drug route on the continent. And just as in Bangkok, just as in Juarez, these men have no qualms with using violence as a means of maintaining business. Should anyone get in their way — say, upstanding border police, or meddlesome park rangers — murder would seem a natural response.

(Of course, as Igor Zakharopulo remains missing, it's only normal for Astana to pick up another long ranger, Aleksei Shkilev. The man had worked with Panayota, so, naturally, he'd want to hack those twelve and roast their remains. And yet, he was arrested for possession of illegal firearms, right? And weren't those twelve stabbed? Does cognitive dissonance cross all borders?)

Like tuberculosis spread or political repression before it, Kazakhstan is loathe to shine light on anything that may dampen its image, on anything larger that may lie behind these purportedly isolated murders. And so that obvious line of investigation — that these killings may be related to drug transit — remains untouched. After all, we have a bloody steering wheel, a missing son, and a nation whose only issues consist of treasonous editors and those who haven't yet purchased the Leader of the Nation's latest biography. There's no room for anything else, so why bother searching?

## Rotten Air

Twenty-seven people have died, a number that should resonate regardless of nationality or citizenship. And yet, it may yet come that these murders were more than the one-offs authorities want them to remain. It may yet show, and should be inquired whether, there's something more than mere broken loners roiling the nation's southern hills.

But that will likely never to pass. Such is the nature of superficial legalism in Kazakhstan: opting for the easiest route, placating the blinkered populace, regardless of what truth may yet exist. Look at Zhanaozen. Look at Kozlov. There's no precedent, despite Tony Blair's po-faced assurances, for large-level legal recourse in Kazakhstan. There's no reason to think the investigation will take place. And so, the questions and the rumors about these main murders will remain.

Whether or not we're missing the forest through Ile-Alatau and Argkangerken's trees remains to be seen. But there's smoke, now. And until the answers come — especially if there is a forest; especially if there is a fire — we will be left wondering how such a previously peaceable land could host such horrors, and remembering how the authorities have, once more, failed to push their duties to their fullest extent.

After Zhanaozen, Kozlov, Argkangerken, and Ile-Alatau, it is increasingly clear Kazakhstan could use a respite from the government's malodor. But it won't get one. And so long as the patrician and patronage networks entwine the bureaucracy in Astana, Kazakhstan will not climb from this muddled refuse anytime soon. Until any answers come, the coarse, rank stench, growing by the week, will hang. ❀