

The *Semetey* of Kenje Kara
A Kirghiz Epic Performance on Phonograph
with a Musical Score and a Compact Disc of the Phonogram

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Prologue

History seems indifferent to recollecting the miscellaneous achievements of that endearing and frustrating character, the mere enthusiast. These pages are, indirectly, a commemoration of the enthusiasm of an ambitious, enigmatic, and over-inflated adventurer, Aleksandr Grigor'evich Belinskii,¹ and his one-time associate, the artist Boris Vasil'evich Smirnov. In 1903 Belinskii hatched an idea to conduct a comprehensive scientific expedition on horseback from Vladikavkaz in Ossetia (named Ordzhonikidze between 1932 and 1990) to Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan. Not only the geographical scale but the names of the starting and ending points as well symbolized the imperial-patriotic designs of Belinskii's idea. Openly admitting that he was no scientist, but obviously infected by the exotic winds blowing over Russia from her Asiatic territories, Belinskii appealed to the Imperial Geographical Society to participate financially and to send specialists. The Society was cool to the idea, but Belinskii succeeded in obtaining some equipment for geology, meteorology, and other natural sciences, and arranged for the expedition's collections to be deposited in the Imperial Academy of Sciences. Belinskii later wrote:

Knowing that here in Russia nothing is ever done without a recommendation, I decided to try to recommend myself in deed: hoping that when I got on the road, covered an enormous distance, and collected as many various data and objects as possible—in a word, worked, as I was able—that then, perhaps, they would understand me and come to my aid. Having gathered a few young men, far from suitable for the purpose, but merely so as to have the right to say that I *had* people, I set out from Vladikavkaz on 3 May, 1903, with seven men and 10 horses.²

The expedition traveled through the Karakum Desert by horse and camel, and reached the Khivan oasis on 23 July. There, Belinskii said, the expedition fell apart. Later he claimed this was because the members became ill. But in truth, Belinskii had tried and failed to deceive his men. An independent newspaper report gives the other men's side of the story. Belinskii had claimed that he was a doctor. But the group observed that their

- 1 The information in this section was obtained primarily from two sources: Archives of the Russian Geographical Society, "Belinskii scientific expeditions. On his petition for a grant for his journey" (hereafter: ARGO, no. 8, 1903); and Central State Archive of the Uzbek Republic, "On the scientific expedition of A.G. Belinskii and other matters" (hereafter: TsGAUz, fond 1, opis' 28, no. 625). I am grateful to V. Ia. Galitskii for sharing essential information from his detailed notes on the latter source.
- 2 ARGO, no. 8, 1903, in a letter to the Russian Geographical Society dated 7 December 1903 (after the expedition had commenced); a document in TsGAUz, fond 1, opis' 28, no. 625 says 11 men and 11 horses. All dates are Old Style.

leader “Dr. Belinskii” had very limited knowledge, and they soon discovered that he was only a retired physician’s assistant (*fel’dšer*) from the Saratov state hospital. The men immediately abandoned Belinskii and left for home. One of them, Anosov, reportedly lost 30,000 rubles of his own money in getting the “expedition” thus far.³

Undeterred, Belinskii set out across the Kyzylkum desert with only two men and an interpreter. Making their way up the Syr Darya River from Perovsk (present-day Kzyl-Orda in Kazakhstan), the little group traversed overland to the course of the west-flowing Chu River and followed it upstream, reaching Pishpek, an uyezd (district) center on the northern approaches of the Tian Shan mountains in Semirech’e, on 3 October, 1903.⁴ (Today this is the city of Bishkek, capital of Kirghizstan). One member of the company was Ivan Aleksandrovich Beliaev, a student from St. Petersburg University who had been living near Khiva among the Karakalpaks and learning their language. In Belinskii’s words he was the group’s linguist. Beliaev became a known figure in Central Asian studies and published a paper on Turkic epic poetry,⁵ but unfortunately no mention by him of his involvement with the Belinskii “expedition” has been found, and his knowledge shed no light on the one product of the Belinskii expedition that concerns us here.⁶

Another member of the Pishpek contingent was Boris Vasil’evich Smirnov, a 22-year-old art student who had joined the group on the recommendation of the artist L. E. Dmitriev-Kavkazskii.⁷ Belinskii styled Smirnov “artist/ethnographer,” evidently in recognition of the young man’s talents of observation, but his qualifications as an ethnographer were purely intuitive. Smirnov had with him a personal interpreter, a Kazakh boy named Atey-bek. The party’s ranks were augmented by a geologist, a botanist, and a reporter from the newspaper *Peterburgskiiia vedomosti*.

The district of Pishpek was not so far-flung that Zatinščikov, the chief of the local Russian administration, could not recognize the marks of an unprofessional undertaking. He described the Belinskii group’s scientific equipment as a miscellany fit for students. The eastern regions of the Russian Empire were already being intensively studied by specialists. By the time Belinskii arrived in Pishpek with his plans for exploration, the place had been visited by the explorers Sven Hedin, Nikolai Prževal’skii, Pëtr Semenov-Tian-Šanskii, Nikolai Severtsov, and others. The orientalist Vasilii Barthold had made his epochal research tour of Turkestan in 1902. F. V. Poiarkov, who resided at Pishpek, published articles on the ethnography and archaeology of the area and was the center of a circle of *kraevedy* or cognoscenti of local area studies. These facts were no doubt part of the reason why neither the Imperial Russian Geographical Society nor the Academy of Sciences spent any money on Belinskii’s vague endeavor, despite his recurrent pleas.

3 Vnutrenniia izviestiiia 1903.

4 ARGO, no. 8, 1903; TsGAUz, fond 1, opis’ 28, no. 625.

5 I. Beliaev 1917.

6 I have not been able to obtain *Otčet* 1904.

7 Smirnov was listed among the expedition members as of 20 October, 1903 (TsGAUz, fond 1, opis’ 28, no. 625; Galitskii 1960).

The expedition members bestirred themselves in the mountains and countryside around Pishpek. Smirnov made sketches and studies,⁸ and noted the appearance in the group's quarters of zoological and botanical specimens.⁹ Beliaev set about learning Kirghiz. But the momentum was gone. There is a distinct sense that the men never found their *esprit de corps*. In his papers Belinskii only rarely mentions expedition members by name. Smirnov's memoir of the Pishpek sojourn never names Belinskii or anyone else in the group except his own interpreter, Atey-bek.

In October, 1903, Belinskii left his men in Pishpek and traveled to Saratov and St. Petersburg to obtain more supplies. He also lodged another vain petition for support from the Imperial Geographical Society. He returned to Pishpek on 4 February, 1904, amid a badly deteriorating international situation with Japan. Within a week, Russia and Japan were at war. The expedition went on a year's hiatus, which turned out to be permanent. Around 15 March, Belinskii, Smirnov, the interpreter Atey-bek, and the newspaper reporter left Pishpek by post-chaise for Vernyi (present-day Almaty, Kazakhstan). The young artist Smirnov records in his memoir that he headed to Irkutsk "on business," and strangely makes no mention of the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War.

Belinskii, whose patriotism was obvious even in his choice of starting and ending points for his expedition, was bound at last for Vladivostok and, apparently, the adventurous life he desired. An article about him—and obviously engineered by him—in an October 1906 issue of a St. Petersburg newspaper reported that he had organized a volunteer cavalry unit and successfully defended the shores of the Tatar Strait against the Japanese.¹⁰ The reason he was stopping in St. Petersburg, still in his glory and surrounded by Cossacks from his detachment, was to drum up support and manpower for continuing his expedition from Pishpek to the Far East! This time the enterprise had "commercial" and "military" (topographical) components as added draws for backers. Yet again he was rebuffed by the Geographical Society. With a few tart words for that body (from the mouth of the reporter) and an open call for "all interested persons" to join him, Aleksandr Belinskii slipped back into the obscure realms of the frustrated enthusiast.

Ten years after the expedition fizzled, in 1914, Boris Smirnov published his little volume of travel memoirs, *On the Steppes of Turkestan*, illustrated with his drawings. In this book we learn about a curious meeting between the expedition members and a Kirghiz man of Pishpek, Kenje Kara, who gave the group a little demonstration of singing

8 An album of these images was presented by the artist to the historical museum in Frunze in 1949 (Galitskii 1960, p. 164, n. 3). For sources on the artistic career of B. Smirnov (1881-1954), see *ibid.*, p. 163.

9 Smirnov 1914, p. 39. Galitskii 1980, p. 96, names other expedition members: the students V. A. Abramov, A. G. Begak, and V. K. Kovaleva. Cf. Begak, A. T. [!] and Kovaleva, V. K. "Maršrut poezdki po Turkestanu v 1904 g.," in: *Ežegodnik Zoologičeskago muzeia Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk*, vol. 11, 1906, *mielkie izviestii*, pp. xiv-xviii; Abramov, V. A. "Maršrut putešestvii v Turkestanu 1905 goda," in: *Izviestii Imperatorskago sanktpeterburgskago botaničeskago sada*, vol. 6/3, 1906, pp. 113-116 (works registered in Bregel, *Bibliography*; not seen by the present writer).

10 Borei 1906.

and playing on his native fiddle. The music program consisted of epic poetry. Someone had a phonograph machine, and Kenje Kara sang into it. A portrait that Smirnov drew of Kenje Kara appears in the book, along with a callous anecdote: some of those present got a laugh from Kenje Kara's terror-stricken reaction at hearing his voice played back off the phonograph cylinders.

This set of six wax cylinders, which were forgotten for many years, are undoubtedly the most significant fruit of Aleksandr Belinskii's unwieldy, haphazard enthusiasm for collecting knowledge.

Compact Disc Contents

<u>Track No.</u>	<u>Cylinder No.</u>	<u>Source Tape*</u>	<u>Lines</u>	<u>Time</u>
1	I	<i>SMKK C2a</i>	1-43	3:00
2	II	<i>SMKK C2a</i>	44-93 (50)	3:00
3	III	<i>SMKK C2a</i>	94-147 (54)	3:06
4	IV	<i>SMKK C3</i>	148-181 (34)	2:55
5	V	<i>SMKK C3</i>	182-216 (35)	2:59
6	VI	<i>SMKK C2a</i>	217-240 (24)	2:24

* See Appendix 1.