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The sonic occupation of Central Asia

Sound culture and the railway in Chingiz Aitmatov's *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*

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Introduction: Listening to the railway in Central Asia

Following more than a century of prolonged conflicts and shifting alliances, in the second half of the nineteenth century the Russian Empire succeeded in conquering the last remaining areas to its south that separated it from Persia, Afghanistan and China. By bringing the khanates of Khiva and Kokand and the emirate of Bukhara under its political control, the Russian Empire was able to considerably expand its sphere of influence in Central Asia. The military campaigns during this time period also paved the way for the political reorganization of previously occupied territories, as demonstrated by the cases of the Turkestan and Steppe governor-generalships or other regions that were integrated into the empire after the subjugation of the three Kazakh *zhuz* (hordes) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The reasons for the annexation of the southern borderlands were manifold and ranged from economic considerations about the exploitation of natural resources and human labour to the Russian Empire's geopolitical and strategic ambitions of positioning itself as a major military force in the region, and the Tsarist idea of a civilizing mission in Central Asia and the quest to demonstrate Russia's status as a great imperial power.¹ Russian expansion into Central Asia had a lasting impact even after the Russian Revolution of 1917 (ending the Tsarist Empire) and the establishment of the Soviet Union, during which formerly colonized peoples were unable to gain independence from the multiethnic Soviet state (Carrère d'Encausse 1994a, 1994b; Radjapova 2005), leading to what has been referred to as the region's 'second colonial experience' (Brower 2003: 153).²

The conquest of Central Asia by the Russian Empire and, later, Soviet rule over the region was accompanied by a reconfiguration of the soundscape. Newly introduced auditory environments exemplify the effects that these imperial constructs had on the population of Central Asia and their cultures. Listening to occupation thus reveals continuities in the different oppressive political systems that shaped the history of Central Asia for over 200 years. Acts of listening to occupation can also be observed in a medium such as literary texts. Through the lens of fiction, the political significance of sounds under occupation can be amplified and made explicit. As this chapter will demonstrate, in Soviet literature, certain sounds that emerged within the soundscapes of Central Asia a century before are taken up to critically reflect not just on Russian expansion in the nineteenth century but also on how the Soviet Union continued this history of occupation and how it upheld imperialist attitudes and forms of governing. The case of Central Asia is instructive for observing the transitions between different systems of occupation that are in many ways antagonistic to each other, but still share important features in controlling and disciplining colonized peoples. Tracing the sounds of occupation shows how these periods of political rule are connected to each other. There are emblematic sounds that illustrate both the legacy of occupation and the reinstatement of imperial power constellations under new circumstances. One feature that is characteristic of the occupation of Central Asia under both Russian and Soviet rule and that decidedly influenced auditory environments and soundscapes is the railway.

Among the many changes within Central Asia that were introduced through the Russian colonial project, the introduction of the railway was one of the most incisive features of the occupation by the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Russian Empire pursued a so-called railway imperialism, not only consolidating its territories but also expanding territorially through the establishment of a railroad system (Schenk 2014: 114). In the Soviet Union, the railway continued to grow in importance in Central Asia as the example of the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad shows. Built between 1926 and 1931, and becoming one of the most important railway projects in Central Asia and the Soviet Union in general, the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad 'was to bring not only trains to the Kazakh steppe, but revolution' (Payne 2001: 10), on the basis of a massive push for industrialization (Rees 1995). In the Soviet Union as a whole, the railway became inextricably linked to the Gulag prison system, whether as a means of transporting prisoners to the camps (Applebaum 2003: 159–80) or as a building project reliant on forced labour: the Salekhard-Igarka Railroad, or 'Dead Road', Stalin's unfinished

railroad venture, and the Baikal-Amur Railroad are two notorious examples in this regard.

Closer to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in 1980, the Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov published his first novel, *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (*I dol'she veka dlitsya den'*), choosing the Soviet lingua franca Russian instead of Kyrgyz, which dominated his early literary career in the 1950s and 1960s. Aitmatov's novel is exemplary of a new aural sensitivity that is characteristic of literature in the twentieth century (Cuddy-Keane 2000: 71). The reasons for this new aurality and its manifestations in literary texts can be found in the introduction of new sound technologies and the growing industrialization that had made them possible towards the end of the nineteenth century (Cuddy-Keane 2005: 383; Morat, Tkaczyk and Ziemer 2017: 4–5; Schrage 2011: 273). In the context of colonialism, however, the same sound technologies were exported 'to discipline the bodies of natives, principally to exploit their labor but also to tattoo authority on colonized bodies via their ears' (Smith 2007: 56). In this way, sounds could reproduce and reinforce colonial structures and dichotomies, such as the opposition between 'civilization' and 'wildness' (Hendy 2013: 161–2). In *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, there is a heightened attention to the auditory regime of the Soviet Union, with particular focus on how technologization impacts aural spaces under occupation. On a general level, the novel highlights an array of topics and themes that relate to Central Asia under Soviet rule. The opposition between the Soviet political system and traditional ways of life is particularly pervasive throughout the novel. The process of Russification, for example, is one of the chief issues negotiated in the novel. The sentiments and ideas expressed in the text even became so influential that some of the novel's terms are now being used in areas beyond literature, as can be seen in the case of the *mankurt* (a figure from a legend which is told in the novel). Bhavna Dave notes that in Kazakhstan, '[m]ankurt is a widely used metaphor to convey the loss of ethnic identity and native language, and has become synonymous with being Russified' (2007: 50).³ Aitmatov's novel thus lays open political tensions which existed in twentieth-century Central Asia by contrasting native identity, Indigenous traditions and folkways with the political regime and its version of modernity. Through this opposition, the text develops nativist undertones (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007: 143–4) that are used to promote pre-colonial traditions and values and enable a critique of imperial cultural hegemony. The process of reclaiming an Indigenous culture that was deemed 'primitive' within the Soviet Union, and the Russian Empire before it, is an important aspect of the novel. This critical perspective is also established

through themes such as the conflict between languages (Caffee 2013: 30–6), a focus on folk legends and myths and the repressive measures taken against their circulation, the contrasting of urban and rural life and, not lastly, the impact of technological innovations (Mozur 1995: 120–2). The railway is one of the motifs that help to convey the central conflicts of the novel.

The following paragraph is taken from the novel and is repeated multiple times throughout the text. It is featured at the beginning of the novel, stands at the opening of many chapters, is the last closing paragraph at the very end of the novel and is used to indicate shifts between different storylines. The passage may be different in some regard each time it is repeated, but the reader always unmistakably recognizes it as a variation of the same opening paragraph:

Trains in these parts went from East to West and from West to East . . .

On either side of the railway lines lay the great wide spaces of the desert – Sary-Ozeki, the Middle lands of the yellow steppes.

In these parts any distance was measured in relation to the railway, as if from the Greenwich meridian . . .

And the trains went from East to West, and from West to East. (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 12)

The importance of the railway within the novel is foreshadowed through the frequent repetition of this passage: here, the centrality of the railroad is emphasized by ascribing it the status of a universal geographical guideline, and it is depicted as the most important point of orientation in the steppes (which is where most of the novel's story takes place). However, the railway is of significance not only in relation to (the control over) space. It also plays 'an important part making the rhythmic patterns which govern and regulate modernity' (Revill 2013: 52) and thus has to be considered in terms of sound (Marcus 2017). It is no coincidence that Aitmatov chooses to highlight the attributes of trains (and the railway in general) that relate to listening, namely by focusing on their sonic properties, the sounds they produce. As this chapter will show, the amount of references to the auditory perception is striking when the events of the novel involve trains, railroads or railway stations, and sounds often serve to emphasize the political conflicts that pervade the text.

Only recently has the railway been taken up again as an object of investigation within sound studies. Michael Bull summarizes the multidimensionality of the railway as follows: 'Trains like other technologies are subordinate clauses in the march of cultural history deriving their meanings from power, economics, cultural and perhaps more personal experiences. At various times we have

listened to and understood the locomotive through the prism of leisure, noise pollution, industrialization, imperialism, progress and so on' (2019: xxvi). In the case of Aitmatov's novel, it appears as if the sounds of the railway indeed literally echo the imperial heritage of the Soviet Union, which goes back to the occupation of Central Asia by the Russian Empire. While the railway itself is a prominent trope in postcolonial fiction which has been examined in a variety of publications (Spalding and Fraser 2012; Aguiar 2011), the sound dimension of trains has gone relatively ignored in this context. Recent research in the field of sound studies and ethnomusicology can stimulate a much-needed debate on the importance of sound in the formation of empire which could also be extended to literary studies: 'As a colonizing force in the rise of empire, . . . sound productions became a key tool in imposing other forms of discipline and order. At the outset, sound's presence was anything but orderly. Occupations were inherently noisy and chaotic. . . . In its participation in social order, however, sound production quickly assumed a role in organizing human behavior' (Radano and Olanian 2016: 2). Radano and Olanian's characterization of occupation as 'noisy' will guide my analysis of the novel as special attention will be paid to the sounds which are foregrounded in the text in connection to the railway. This analysis consists of a close reading of relevant passages from the novel and takes into account, first, sonic phenomena, places, events and other elements presented through the narrative and, second, the way they are presented, that is how the narrative is structured. The latter includes a consideration of narratological concepts (such as focalization) and rhetorical and stylistic features of the text. The close reading examines how these textual characteristics are put in relation to each other to create descriptions of sound that further highlight the political themes of the novel. In accordance with a postcolonial narratology that emphasizes a context-sensitive approach (Birk and Neumann 2002: 116), studies about the history of Central Asia will be used as additional sources to contextualize Aitmatov's novel and its references to the railway. Furthermore, critical literature from the field of sound studies complements the observations about sound in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*. My goal is to show how Aitmatov's novel reflects what I tentatively call the 'sonic occupation' of Central Asia. The basic assumption is that occupation and the aural are firmly interrelated and that one has to take into account changes in sound culture – that is, the auditory environment in its wider social and cultural context (Chignell 2009: 103) – in order to gain a fuller understanding of the extent of occupation. The sounds of occupation also influence other forms of cultural production, such as literary texts, and by examining Aitmatov's novel as an example, it can be demonstrated how

auditory regimes and changes in the auditory environment due to occupation are perceived, creatively interpreted and challenged in different media. Over the course of this chapter, it should become evident that the way in which the sounds of the railway are presented in the novel lets the reader perceive them as a disciplining force and a means of oppression in their own right.

Since '[w]hat is audible about empire is part of a larger working logic' (Radano and Olaniyan 2016: 6), it will be necessary, as a first step, to give an overview of the introduction of the railway in Central Asia under the Russian Empire. This will serve to contextualize the changes in the sound culture in relation to the social and economic effects that the railway had within the region. The main focus of the first part will be on the historical region of Turkistan (as it has come to be called since the Russian conquest) because part of it later became the Kazakh SSR, which is where most of Aitmatov's *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* is set. Besides the railway, Aitmatov addresses other issues that also reach back to the occupation by the Russian Empire: Russification, for instance, did not start with the Soviet Union⁴ and was already well under way during the period of Russian imperial rule. The second part of this chapter will consist of an analysis of the literary sounds – in the sense of what Sylvia Mieszkowski tentatively calls a 'literary sound studies' (2014: 9, 23–32) – that are related to the railway in the text.⁵ Through such an examination of examples from the novel, this chapter will demonstrate how sonic occupation becomes manifest in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* and how the effects of the railway on the sound culture of Central Asia extended well into the twentieth century and the Soviet Union.

The railway in Central Asia under the Russian Empire and in the Soviet Union

Similar to other colonial systems around the globe (cf. Das 2015; Dvořáček and Záhořík 2018; Biermann 1995; Baillargeon 2020; Gamst 2006; Ishiguro 2017: 131–3), the railway in Central Asia was an important imperial tool under Russian rule. It served economic and military purposes, and was also a major factor in the colonization of the region.

Plans to establish a railway system in Central Asia emerged in the 1870s. The construction of the Transcaspian Railway started in 1880, and it reached the city of Samarkand in 1888, connecting it to Krasnovodsk Bay. In 1899, the route was extended to Tashkent, as part of the Samarkand-Andijan Line. By 1906, the

Orenburg-Tashkent connection was completed after six years of construction work (Schenk 2014: 84–8; Poujol and Fourniau 2005: 63–8; Brower 2003: 79–80; Abdurakhimova 2005: 141). The growth of the railway system can be summarized as follows: ‘By 1880, just before the construction of the Transcaspian Railway, Russia had built 21,000 kilometres of railways, and 70,000 kilometres of railways were built in 1906’ (Poujol and Fourniau 2005: 65).

Economically, the railway was intended to facilitate colonial exploitation by the Russian Empire: ‘The introduction of the railway . . . was a direct consequence of the policy of making the colonies profitable’ (Poujol and Fourniau 2005: 65). Cotton, for example, was one of the most important commodities for the Russian Empire, and the textile industry heavily relied on shipments from Turkistan:

[T]he share of cotton from Turkistan rose from about 30 per cent to more than 60 per cent in a very short period (from 1908 to 1912). In 1915 more than 350,000 tonnes of cotton were shipped to Russia, compared to 11,000 tonnes by 1877, that is before the construction of the railway and the introduction of American species of cotton. (Poujol and Fourniau 2005: 69)

By building railroads, the Russian Empire ended the economic isolation of Central Asia and integrated the region into the global trade market for the empire’s benefit (Brower 2003: 79–80).

The military was also a deciding factor for the establishment of the railway, as the railway was an important means of moving troops faster than ever before from the imperial centre to distant regions. For instance, the Russian Empire sought military security to counter British power in Central Asia against the background of the so-called Great Game (Schenk 2014: 88). The empire also needed to maintain a military presence to put down rebellions in Turkistan and for its campaigns to subdue Turkmen nomads, for instance, in the western deserts of Central Asia (Brower 2003: 80–2).

Trains as more convenient means of transportation were also largely responsible for a large influx of Russian settlers in Turkistan. These settlers received preferential treatment from the colonial authorities in the distribution of land, further contributing to ethnic conflicts (Brower 2003: 130–40). The native population, which consisted to a great extent of pastoral nomads – approximately 80 per cent in 1897 (Tabyshalieva 2005: 87) – were forced to settle in order to keep up with the Russian colonizers and to be able to earn a living (Abdurakhimova 2005: 140). Furthermore, the nomadic way of life was considered primitive, and there were campaigns for the sedentarization of the Indigenous peoples as part of a Russian *mission civilisatrice*, which also

pushed the process of Russification (Schenk 2014: 88, 91; Brower 2003: 128). The Russian presence and the railway also made certain occupations obsolete, such as muleteers and travel guides, since the railway presented a more comfortable and much faster means of transportation compared to travelling by camel (Poujol and Fourniau 2005: 66–8).

The railway epitomized the conflict between the traditional pastoral societies and technological modernity. From an imperial perspective, there was on one side the cattle and livestock of the nomads and on the other the so-called iron horse of the empire. The railway was, thus, an incisive innovation which confronted the Indigenous population with new economic, social and cultural problems.

In the Soviet Union, the railway remained a part of the civilizing mission which was described earlier, as can be seen in the example of the massive project of the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad. Among other things, '[t]he colossal struggles involved in . . . acclimating nomads to industrial work while "Sovietizing" peasant seasonal workers . . . cast Turksib in the role of an instrument of civilization in a supposedly uncivilized outback. Turksib's builders, very aware of this civilizing role, constantly made reference to the need to uplift backward natives, reform individualistic managers, and "reforge" insufficiently proletarian workers' (Payne 2001: 5). The building of the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad also furthered ethnic conflicts as the Russian workers 'sought to exclude Kazakhs from the ranks of proletarians' based on 'prejudice, mockery, and vicious pogroms' (Payne 2001: 10). While the blatant contradictions within the Soviet ideological programme cannot be addressed within the scope of this chapter,⁶ it can be said that the railway was still an instrument of occupation under the Soviet regime and had an immense impact on the lives of the Indigenous population. The railway also prolonged the imperial history of the region, reinforcing racist mindsets in the context of the opposition between modernity and 'primitivity'.

There is another aspect to the railway in Central Asia which has been disregarded in the academic literature about the region, however – the dimension of sound and its importance in regard to these new means of transportation. Besides being a relevant factor for the subjugation and domination of different regions within Central Asia, trains and railway stations introduced Turkistan to an entirely new auditory environment in the nineteenth century. The pioneering work of scholars of sound studies such as Emily Thompson (2004), Mark M. Smith (2001) and Karin Bijsterveld (2008) has demonstrated how industrialization and technologization created a whole new spectrum of sounds and how both processes influenced the ways of hearing and listening. 'The steam whistle', Thompson

writes, 'which announced the arrival of both railroad and factory, constituted the acoustic signal of industrialization' (2004: 120), while Smith goes so far as to call the sound of trains on the railroad the 'rumble of modernity' (2001: 96). The sounds of the railway were also perceived as a nuisance at many points due to different factors: '[W]ith industrialization . . . , new kinds of noises began to offend. The sound of the railroad, for example, became a new source of complaint. The noise of its steam whistle was disturbing not only for its loudness but also for its unfamiliarity' (Thompson 2004: 117). While the idea of the noisy technological innovation of the train might represent a culturally pessimistic 'trope of industrial capitalism in the form of the railroad puncturing rural quietude' (Smith 2012: 44), the negative connotations of the railway do correspond to the perception of trains in Central Asia in the twentieth century when the railway was even at times 'held to be a creation of the Devil' (Poujol and Fourniau 2005: 66) by the Indigenous population. In Central Asia, trains and railroads produced entirely new sounds and unusual noises, at unprecedented volume levels, drastically altering the auditory environment. With the help of the railway, the Russian Empire did not just conquer space and time but also the soundscape.⁷

In Aitmatov's *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, these sounds, which are so closely associated with industrialization, become entangled with political oppression; additionally, the array of sounds is extended in correspondence with technological renewals in the field of the railway in the Soviet Union. Loudspeakers, for instance, add to the auditory environment of the railway station, and Aitmatov's novel explicitly references the public address system (as the next section of the chapter will show).

While most researchers and critics focus on the science fiction subplot and space flight when it comes to the technological themes of the novel, the railway is a pervading motif in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*. Besides the passage quoted in the beginning of this chapter, in which the centrality of the railroad is emphasized, the railway is integral to many more aspects of the novel. For example, the protagonist Yedigei works at a way station, just like his friend Kazangap, who dies at the beginning of the text and whose burial is the main driving element of the plot. Even the former and alternative title of the novel markedly points to the railway: *Burannyj polustanok*, which can be translated as *Blizzard Stop* or *Blizzard Station*. The following analysis will elaborate on two episodes in the novel in which the railway is of major importance, concentrating on the sonic dimension of the narrated events, the literary means of presenting the railway as an oppressive force and how different sites of sonic occupation become manifest in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*.

The railway station as a site of sonic occupation

As mentioned previously, the central plot element of the novel is the burial of Kazangap, an old friend of the protagonist Yedigei. Besides extensive renderings of folk myths and legends, the novel also consists of Yedigei's recollections of his own life leading up to Kazangap's death. Probably most important are his memories of his experiences with the family of Abutalip, his wife Zaripa and their two sons Ermek and Daul. In one of the memories, Yedigei travels to the city with Zaripa, whose husband Abutalip died during his imprisonment after his arrest by the secret police. When they go to the train station to claim a notice which informs them of Abutalip's death, Yedigei thinks about his deceased friend and about what is to become of Abutalip's children. While he waits for Zaripa in the square in front of the station, he notices people getting off a train and loud music coming from the public loudspeakers:

He was amazed what bored, drab faces people had, how featureless, how unconcerned they looked, how tired and cut off from one another. Added to which, the radio music on the public address sounded as if it were suffering from a throaty cold, filling the whole station square with its monotonously flowing dull noise and adding to the general misery. What sort of music was this? What a programme! (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 219–20)

In this passage, the culturally pessimistic trope of the train as the emblem of modernity and technologization can be noticed. In line with the opposition of traditional ways of life and the Soviet political system within the novel, the train is rendered in a negative light through how the effects of this mechanical means of transportation are presented: specifically, the isolation and apathy of the passengers who leave the train. At this point in the text, the reader also notices how the music coming from the loudspeakers in the square matches the alienated state of the rail passengers. Thus, the music and the technological apparatus of the loudspeaker enter into a relationship with the train, creating an assemblage of estranging forces which converge in the railway station.

Christin Hoene, in an article about the sounds of postcolonial metropolises in the works of Amit Chaudhuri, describes six different ways in which novels can evoke sound,⁸ and the literary sounds in the previous quote meet the criteria of three of these. First, there are 'descriptions of environments with predominantly auditory terms and a focus on auditory sensations' (Hoene 2016: 365) – in the above case, the station square is presented with a heavy emphasis on sound, and more specifically, the music which fills the square. Second, Hoene refers to

cases in which 'objects and technologies of auditory perception are the subject matter' (2016: 365), and the public address system in the quote clearly represents such an acoustic apparatus. Third, Hoene cites 'characters' auditory perceptions' (2016: 365) – while Hoene most likely refers to instances where the sensation of sound is made explicit in the text (through verbs such as 'listen' or 'hear'), the use of free indirect speech at the end of the quoted paragraph ('[w]hat sort of music was this? What a programme!' Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 220) indicates that the sounds are conveyed to the reader through Yedigei's listening experience.

Shortly after, Yedigei and Zaripa find out why this music is broadcast all over the station square:

The radio music played on all over the station, as if aware of Zaripa's bereavement, for it was mournful and exceedingly painful. . . . Lifting their heads, they were watching some men put up a ladder and set about hanging a large portrait of Stalin in military uniform, with a black mourning border around it, high above the door.

Now he understood why the radio music had been so mournful. . . . He did not utter a word. Moreover Zaripa was not interested in anyone or anything else.

The trains, however, were running as usual, as they had to, whatever else might be happening on earth. (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 221–2)

Although at first it seems that the sorrowful music coincides with Zaripa's grief, the two characters are confronted with the real reason why the music plays – it is mourning music played to mark the occasion of Stalin's death in 1953. The internally focalized narration – which foregrounds the experiences of the two characters – adds to the effect of surprise, leaving the reader baffled, just as Yedigei and Zaripa appear to be. By presenting the events through internal focalization, the reader is also deceived by the sad solemnity of the music.

The sound dimension establishes a connection between Abutalip's death and Stalin's. However, as it turns out, the auditory environment serves entirely to commemorate Stalin's passing. The music announcing Stalin's death also seems to drown out Zaripa's and Yedigei's grief for Abutalip, assisted by the public address system at the train station. Barry Truax emphasizes the political effect of high-volume sounds that emanate from loudspeakers: 'The control of spatial communication . . . is essential to centralized power and domination. Therefore, acoustic power, amplified through the loudspeaker, . . . is linked to the domination of space. The loudest sounds have always been associated with the most powerful forces in the world, whether they represented physical or political power' (2001: 113). By incorporating the music broadcast by the public

loudspeakers, the text marks the railway station as a site of sonic occupation. The music serves propagandistic purposes while announcing Stalin's death which, at this point in the novel, is contrasted with the death of a victim under Stalin's regime.

As Michael Denning argues, 'Empire . . . was a musical event: the conquest and colonization of territories was "accompanied" by the musical occupation of the space, and the projection of a new colonial order in sound' (Denning 2016: 35). In the case of Aitmatov's novel (which is situated in the Soviet Union), the occupation of space through sound is still in effect, and the music at the train station does, in fact, project a new colonial order – a colonial order in which the lost lives of the Indigenous population go unnoticed when they are juxtaposed with the passing of the leader of the political terror.⁹ Furthermore, in the quote from the novel, there is a discrepancy in the intensity of sounds within the auditory environment. Yedigei and Zaripa are ascribed quiet behaviour, as opposed to the loudness of the music. By presenting this contrast in volume, the text also conveys the imbalance of power which becomes manifest at the train station. The reader becomes aware of this precarious power constellation solely based on the sound dimension of the narrated world and what effect it has on the characters.

Already during the Russian Empire, railway stations were imagined to be part of the *mission civilisatrice* because they represented a 'breeding ground for civilization' (Schenk 2014: 189; my own translation). As Aitmatov's text also shows, under the Soviet regime, the space of the railway station was renewed with acoustic technologies, which further enabled the sonic occupation of Central Asia. The next section will focus more closely on the train and how its sonic attributes are presented in the novel, and will also examine Abutalip's arrest before his death later on.

The literary sounds of the train and Soviet oppression

Another episode in the novel also heavily relies on a contrast of sounds, and the difference in the acoustic modes and behaviours is even more striking than in the example from the previous section. The following recollection of Yedigei is about the actual arrest of Abutalip, after being charged with 'hostile agitation' and 'counter-revolutionary tendencies' (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 185) by the secret police. This time, sonic occupation becomes manifest in connection to the train on which the officers take Abutalip away. As will be shown, the scene

in which the train arrives at the village and leaves with Abutalip is riddled with various sounds that establish a contrast of auditory phenomena and that further highlight the menacing presence of the train. It will also be noticeable that – similar to how train noises were perceived as a nuisance when they were newly introduced – the sounds of the train are a source of distress for the characters in the novel, and the text accentuates the adverse situation between the village inhabitants and the secret police through the train noise and the reactions to it.

Prior to a closer analysis of the text, however, it is important to note that Abutalip is arrested by the secret police because he writes down folk legends and his memories of the Second World War for his children; his writings and memories are deemed ‘hostile to the State’ (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 187). While interrogating Yedigei, the officer presents his reasoning as to why Abutalip should not have written of his own accord: ‘What matters is that when we describe the past . . . , we should do so in the way that is needed now, . . . for us. Things that are of no use to us at the present time must not be mentioned’ (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 189).¹⁰ The dialogue between the officer and Yedigei is one of the most explicit historical references in the novel: the native population is denied their collective memory and, ultimately, their identity under the Soviet regime.¹¹

Before the train arrives at the village, the acoustic behaviour of the inhabitants and the auditory environment is presented to set the scene. They are aware of Abutalip’s arrest and they are portrayed to be mostly quiet. For example, ‘Zaripa was weeping quietly’ (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 195),¹² and Daul, one of Abutalip’s sons, ‘was quiet’ (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 195). Likewise, the surroundings in the scene are described as equally quiet: ‘The wind swept through the place. It chased the snowy air across the ground with a rustling sound and a scarcely audible whistle’ (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 195). In order to express utter silence in the text, some of the actions are relegated to the visual realm, even if they are commonly associated with specific sounds: ‘The heavy sighs of Ukubala were revealed in the clouds of mist which came from her mouth’ (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 195). On the other hand, and in contrast to the acoustic behaviours of the village inhabitants and the quiet surroundings, there is the train which signals the imminent parting with Abutalip and which produces very loud noises. The image of the quiet, rural village is the direct opposite of how life in the city is presented in the novel. Those who move to the city to complete their education in the Soviet system become estranged and turn into modern-day *mankurts* (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 347–8), whereas the rural village represents an environment where the traditions of the (pre-colonial) past can still be allowed to thrive and native identity is fostered. The rural village is strongly associated with nature, while the

city stands for an affinity with technology. The sounds of the train thus evoke the processes of technologization and urbanization that run counter to the ideals of rurality in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*. Consequently, the train is described as an intrusive element which disturbs the sorrowful quiet of the village in the chapter about Abutalip's arrest: 'With its headlight piercing through the thick, frosty, swirling mist, it came on, a dark, threatening, clattering mass. As it approached, the blazing headlight and the other lights seemed to rise above the ground; the snowy air above the rails became more visible in the beams, and the heavy noise of the cranks and pistons grew louder' (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 195–6). The train is pictured as an obscure, menacing object by means of its acoustic characterization in the text. What follows next is a plethora of descriptions of the intimidating sounds produced by the train, making it out to be much more than simply a transport vehicle made out of steel. The train stops 'with a long, heavy screeching' (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 196), its engine lets out 'a great hiss of steam' (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 196), and later the train leaves with 'its wheels shrieking as they turned' (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 198), to quote just a few examples. Remarkably, both in the Russian original and in the English translation, all of the words used for the sonic phenomena produced by the train have an onomatopoeic quality: 'screech' and 'скрежет' (*skrezhet*); 'hiss' and 'шипение' (*shipenie*); and 'shriek' and 'скрипучий' (*skripuchij*).¹³ Furthermore, there are other noises connected to the train, such as the recurring sound of the whistle which is alternately described as 'piercing' (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 196) and 'terrifying' (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 197). The original uses a more figurative language in the last instance, presenting the effects of the whistle sound in an even more vivid way. It is described as 'сверблящий душу' (Aitmatov [1980] 1981: 164), which can be loosely translated as 'soul-unsettling' or 'mind-troubling'.

In her readings of Western novels between 1875 and 1975, Karin Bijsterveld formulates a typology of mechanical sounds and sounds connected to technology. She suggests four different types of sound, one of which she calls 'intrusive sounds':

Intrusive sounds are usually expressed as a multitude of different sounds or a series of recurrent sounds. These sounds threaten the existence of something or someone that is vulnerable or fragile, such as nature, harmony, or one's heart, mind, body or security . . .

Intrusive sounds violently enter the protagonists' world, often all at once, and endanger something cared for. The simultaneousness of different sounds creates chaos or forms a deep rumble that affects a subject's body. (Bijsterveld 2008: 44–5)

The train in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* produces such intrusive sounds, but the presentation of their intrusiveness and noisiness is rooted in the central themes of the text. While the sounds of the train may communicate the ideas of progress and modernity from the perspective of Soviet authority, the internally focalized narrator establishes the village and its tight-knit community as such a vulnerable and fragile sphere that Bijsterveld writes about and that is threatened by the train sounds. The suppression of Indigenous memory in the chapter is accentuated through the unpredictability and chaotic simultaneity of the different sounds produced by the train, which are important criteria for their intrusiveness (Bijsterveld 2008: 45). It is their disruptive nature that makes these sounds appear as noisy, whereas silence becomes synonymous with the calm of the countryside and the harmony of the rural setting. Bijsterveld herself discusses the noise of trains in conjunction with rurality as an example for intrusive sounds in her analysed texts: 'By positioning, in the auditory topos of the intrusive sound, the chaos of train sounds against the order of the countryside – the situation to be protected – mechanical noise is the symbol of social disruption' (2008: 51). Aitmatov's novel likewise presents 'sounds of technology . . . as powers ruthlessly invading a realm to be defended' (Bijsterveld 2008: 51), enabling a critical perspective on occupation through a textual focus on sonic phenomena. The disruptive force of the train also becomes evident when considering the reactions of the village inhabitants to its loud noise: 'The boy in Yedigei's arms had shivered with fright when it had come level with them, and had jumped as the train gave out steam with a sudden hiss' (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 196). The boy's auditory perception illustrates once again the threatening nature of the train sounds.

The intrusion of the train is also illustrated through how the sounds are contrasted with the behaviour of the characters who witness the arrest of Abutalip and what kind of sounds are ascribed to them (as I have already shown in reference to their quiet demeanour). There are also occasional loud interjections by the village inhabitants which either fade away or are drowned out by the sounds of the train. For example, Abutalip's son Ermek falls silent when his father does not respond to his remark about the train: "Papika! Papika! Look, the train's coming!" Ermek was shouting – then he too became silent, surprised that his father did not answer' (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 196). Such transitions from loudness to quiet further highlight the villagers' silence in comparison to the train's overwhelming acoustic presence in the text. It is also of note that the loud sounds produced by the people in the village fundamentally differ from those of the train: with reference to a 'narrative sonography' (Vandeveld 2015: 61),

the sound types can be classified as 'human/anthropomorphic' on the one hand and 'mechanical' on the other (63, 65). This differentiation is important because it reiterates the confrontation between the village community and Soviet authority. It is presented as a sonic conflict between 'organic' human voices and the 'cold' noise of machines, where the latter threatens to overpower the former.

The arrival and departure of the train are thus narrated with excessive reference to auditory phenomena, and the political conflict at the heart of this episode is transferred to the dimension of sound in the text. The interrogation by the secret police that takes place before the quoted passages and the arrest of Abutalip culminate in this very scene where they force Abutalip into the train to take him with them, as a provision to censor his writings and suppress the memory of the Indigenous population and their traditions.

As was the case in the example within the previous section in regard to the railway station, the train is strongly associated with the Soviet regime and its repressive measures, and Aitmatov presents the train as a menacing object mainly by depicting its sonic attributes.

Conclusion: Sonic occupation and sound culture

Aitmatov's novel highlights the imperial heritage of the Soviet Union by also focusing on the railway and its status as an imperial tool even a century after the Russian annexation of Central Asia, reaching beyond 1917 and the dissolution of the empire. In *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, the railway also emblemizes the conflict between subjugated people and an oppressive political system. The text establishes the conjunction between the railway and occupation through references to the auditory environment. Whenever the political impact of the railway is foregrounded, the narrative heavily draws on phenomena which are of an acoustic nature. The two analysed examples from the text feature two different elements of the railway system – the railway station and the train – and in the context of the novel's opposition of the past and the present, both appear as objects and spaces that illustrate how the Indigenous population is oppressed by the political regime, forcing them to forget their traditions and values. When Abutalip is arrested for writing down folk legends and his memories of the Second World War, the train – with its screeching and shrieking wheels and hissing engine – provides, in a manner of speaking, the soundtrack to his imprisonment. Even after Abutalip dies, his death is overshadowed by the death of Stalin. The mournful music which is played in honour of Stalin over the

loudspeakers at the railway station drowns out the grief of Abutalip's family and friends. The railway is thus closely connected to the occupation of Central Asia in the text, and Aitmatov uses references to the auditory dimension to highlight the political significance of this means of transportation. Literary sounds and the contrasts between them evoke the fundamental conflict between Soviet authority and the Indigenous people, as well as their traditions and culture. The sounds in the text point to the oppressive circumstances under which the Indigenous population lives, how they are not allowed to preserve their traditions and how the grief for the death of those who fall victim to the state's repressive measures cannot be adequately expressed.

In both discussed examples from the novel, the literary treatment of sounds conveys to the reader the political significance of the railway, and the various noises amplify the dramatic effect of each scene – but they also show that the Soviet regime relied not just on the occupation of the mind but also on the occupation of the ear. Carla J. Meier argues in regard to sound cultures that sound is 'part of complex cultural, social, and mediatized practices' and that sounds 'constantly re-constitute the world in which we live and how we perceive it and make sense of it' (Maier 2016: 179). Aitmatov's novel clearly demonstrates the impact sound can have on one's perception of the world and how one interacts with it. While Radano and Olaniyan rightly point out that there is no such thing as a 'sociopolitical "absolute sound"' and that sound cannot be 'observed separately from other territories of the imperial' (2016: 6), sonic occupation must be understood not just as an occupation's effect on a particular sound culture but also as how occupation works through sound culture itself, how it creates new auditory environments and new ways of hearing and listening which reinforce political, economic, social and cultural constellations of power.

Notes

- 1 The scholarly literature about Central Asia and its occupation by the Russian Empire in English alone is enormous. For recent scholarship about the Russian conquest of Central Asia, see Morrison (2021) and Keller (2020). A very comprehensive inquiry into the history of Central Asia since the mid-nineteenth century is presented in Adle, Palat and Tabysheva (2005). Allworth (1994) gives a critical overview of the developments in Central Asia under Russian and Soviet rule.
- 2 In the last twenty years, the Soviet Union and Central Asia have been increasingly studied from the perspective of postcolonial studies (Moore 2001; Ram 2003;

- Etkind 2011; Adams 2008; Heathershaw 2010; Khalid 2007). For an analysis of Aitmatov's novel based on postcolonial theory, see Coombs (2011).
- 3 For an analysis of the *mankurt* within the novel, see Mozur (1995: 107–11). See also Mozur (1987: 13–24), Kolesnikoff (1999: 71–4) and Haber (2003: 137).
 - 4 For a nuanced study of the linguistic and cultural hegemony within the Soviet Union in the first half of the twentieth century, see Martin (2001).
 - 5 Mieszkowski describes 'literary sound studies' as a new research area which aims to 'build a bridge between the interdisciplinary field of Sound Studies and literary criticism' (2014: 9). Thus, literary sounds are understood here as 'silent' sounds, that is, as 'sounds and processes of hearing, which have been medialized by (written) words' (Mieszkowski 2014: 24). Philipp Schweighauser has also previously made a suggestion for a field called 'literary acoustics' (Schweighauser 2015: 483), which shares similar research interests with literary sound studies.
 - 6 Ram (2006: 832) writes: 'The Soviet Union was expressly internationalist yet zealously territorial and expansionist, denying the autonomy of its constitutive peoples while retaining a federal structure that would nonetheless permit an elaborate discourse of local specificity.'
 - 7 For a critical discussion of the term 'soundscape' and its problematic implications, see Kelman (2010).
 - 8 Hoene derives her six modes of how sound enters the domain of literature from John M. Picker's groundbreaking monograph, *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003) (Hoene 2016: 365).
 - 9 Yedigei's reaction to the monotonous music emanating from the loudspeakers is later contrasted with how deeply moved he is by Erlepes playing on his *dombra*; in this case, the long and old tradition of the music is highlighted multiple times in the text (Aitmatov [1980] 1988: 260–6).
 - 10 In the Russian original, the statement by the officer is even more drastic because it does not just prohibit mentioning the things that are not useful to the Soviet regime but even remembering them, making the forceful process of forgetting even more explicit: 'Важно вспоминать, нарисовать прошлое . . . так, как требуется сейчас, как нужно сейчас для нас. А все, что нам не на пользу, того и не следует вспоминать' (Aitmatov [1980] 1981: 157).
 - 11 The events in the novel also appear to echo the cultural policies in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, when, for example, Kyrgyz epics were criticized during a 'general campaign against epics' (Grenoble 2003: 155; Haber 2003: 53–4).
 - 12 The English translation does not exactly reflect the level of quietness which is present in the original: 'Зарипа неслышно плакала' (Aitmatov [1980] 1981: 162). A more literal translation of the quote would read 'Zaripa wept unhearably'.
 - 13 'Поезд остановился с долгим, тяжким скрежетом' (Aitmatov [1980] 1981: 164); 'паровоз . . . с шипением спустил пар' (Aitmatov [1980] 1981: 164); '[о]н пошел, скрипуче раскручивая колеса' (Aitmatov [1980] 1981: 165).

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