



The Fall of Otrar

Director: Ardak Amirkulov

Production Company: Kazakhfilm

Producer: Aleksei German

Screenplay: Aleksei German, Svetlana Karmalita

Cinematographers: Sapar Koichumanov,

Aubakir Suleyev

Editor: Aiman Kistauowa

Music: Kuat Shildebayev

Cast:

Dokhdurbek Kydyraliyev (*Undzhu*)

Tungyshbai Dzhamankulov (*Inalchuq*)

Bolot Beyshenaliyev (*Genghis Khan*)

Abdurashid Makhmudov

(*Muhammad II of Khwarazm*)

Kazakhstan 1991

156 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

Restored by The Film Foundation's World Cinema Project and Cineteca di Bologna at L'Immagine Ritrovata laboratory, in collaboration with Ardak Amirkulov. Funding provided by the Hobson/Lucas Family Foundation. Special thanks to Daniel Bird.

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Restored

The Fall of Otrar

+ intro by writer Daniel Bird

The origins of *The Fall of Otrar* can be traced back to the Kazakh screenwriter Zauresh Yergaliyeva. According to Yergaliyeva, in the sixth grade she came across Ermukhan Bekmakhanov's book *The History of the Kazakh SSR*, which featured a description of Inalchuq's last stand against the Mongol invasion. Years later, during the early 1980s, when Yergaliyeva was deputy editor at Kazakhfilm, she proposed the subject for a feature – an idea supported by the studio's editor in chief, Murat Auezov.

The year 1984 saw the release of Sergei Bodrov's directorial debut (alongside Amanbek Alpiyev), *Sweet Juice Inside the Grass*, based on a screenplay written with Yergaliyeva. The production was supervised by Aleksei German. In 1983, German had directed *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*, adapted by himself and his wife, Svetlana Karmalita, from a book by his father, Yuri German.

Controversially set during the 1930s, on the eve of Joseph Stalin's Great Terror, the film was shelved until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, bringing with him the policies of glasnost and perestroika, which sought to uncover Soviet works and themes that had previously been forbidden. At the suggestion of Bodrov and Yergaliyeva, Auezov approached German and Karmalita to write a screenplay for Kazakhfilm concerning the siege of Otrar. Bodrov would go on to direct his own Genghis Khan drama, *Mongol* (2007).

For their Stalin-era historical films – especially *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* and *Khrustalyov, My Car!* (1998), which depict the thirties and fifties, respectively – German and Karmalita drew on a variety of archival materials, such as newsreels, photographs, and oral testimonies. The process of writing a feature set in the early 13th century, however, meant accepting the factual limitations of archaeology. When their screenplay for *The Fall of Otrar* was published, German and Karmalita added a disclaimer explaining that 'the era was silent' and that its scant sources were contradictory. The husband-and-wife team attempted to address these gaps in the historical record by devising the character of Undzhu, a Mongol Muslim khan, who warns both the shah and Inalchuq of the threat Genghis Khan poses to the East.

Perestroika sparked a drive to find new voices, including in cinema. Auezov – together with the Kazakh Russian-language poet Olzhas Suleimenov, who was the chairman of USSR Goskino, the State Committee of Cinematography – proposed a short-film competition that would award each winner a place to study in Sergei Solovyov's directing workshop at VGIK, the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography. The pair's goal was nothing less than to nurture a new generation of Kazakh filmmakers. One of those awarded students was Amirkulov, a philology major who had graduated from Kazakh State University in 1980. During his fourth year at VGIK, Yergaliyeva recommended Amirkulov to direct *The Fall of Otrar* and brought him to Saint Petersburg (then Leningrad) to meet German and Karmalita, who approved of his take on their script.

Production began in 1987; shooting took place exclusively on location in Kazakhstan. The set for the city of Otrar, destroyed twice by the elements, had to be built and rebuilt three times. In the end, principal photography was prolonged over a four-year period. To create the medieval world of Otrar, Amirkulov turned to Umirzak Shmanov, who had been associated with the

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Uzbek filmmaker Ali Khamraev and the Ukrainian filmmaker Kira Muratova. Like Muratova, Amirkulov hired Shmanov as both art director and actor, casting him as the executioner who pours molten silver on Inalchuq's face during *The Fall of Otrar's* climax. Amirkulov also cast the Kyrgyz actor Dokhdurbek Kydyraliyev – who had starred in Tolomush Okeev's *Descendant of the Snow Leopard* (1985) – in the lead role of Undzhu. Bolot Beyshenaliyev, the Kyrgyz actor who plays a Turkic khan in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966), here portrays Genghis Khan. Amirkulov would work with both Kydyraliyev and Beyshenaliyev again in his next film, *Abai* (1995), with the former also appearing in 2008's *Farewell, Gulsary!*

As in all the Soviet republics, the Kazakh film industry was nationalised. During the Gorbachev era, when a stagnant economy was restructured in vain, there were scant resources to mount a lavish historical epic. Salaries for the cast and crew were regularly halted as the production of *The Fall of Otrar* was put on hold for long stretches. Short of funds, the film was at one point removed from the official schedule of Kazakhfilm, whose accounting department redirected disgruntled staff to Amirkulov. When the Soviet Union began to disintegrate, the budget dried up completely. No bank would invest in a production that belonged to a state institution. Boldly, Amirkulov obtained a loan to purchase the film from the government. But this meant that everything he earned from distribution went toward recouping his investment.

The Fall of Otrar was the first film from the newly independent Kazakhstan to be submitted for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. In 2002, North American audiences were granted a limited release, thanks to Martin Scorsese's production office and the efforts of Kent Jones, then director of the New York Film Festival.

But the film's impact does not end there. Interestingly, *The Fall of Otrar* pre-empted German and Karmalita's final work. During the eighties, as shooting began on *The Fall of Otrar*, German was in pre-production for his second attempt at adapting Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's novel *Hard to Be a God* (his initial attempt, almost 20 years before, had been scuppered in the wake of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Prague). Producer Peter Fleischmann replaced German as director on that film, which was released in 1989. Another 13 years would pass before German and Karmalita were able to realise their own version, which began filming at the turn of the new millennium. In 2013, German died, but later that year, his *Hard to Be a God* finally premiered, having been completed by his son, Aleksei German Jr., following a decade-plus post-production process. It was the culmination of a career dedicated to depicting how tyranny recurs through the ages – and a fitting continuation of the themes present in *The Fall of Otrar*.

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