

Akhmed Abadullovich Kitaev

(1925 - 1996) b. Tatar Yunki, Mordovia, USSR

Just Graduated, 'We Are Going Into a New Life' 1953

oil on canvas

Young women in cheerful summer dresses stride forward into the sunlight, arms linked, radiating hope and possibility. Their hands hold rolled-up diplomas, symbols of their accomplishment. Behind them, mothers and loved ones embrace, celebrating their success. Behind these bright tones and confident figures, lies the story of a man who survived exile, repression, and war.



Born in 1925 in the village of Tatar Yunki, in Mordovia, Kitaev came from a religious Tatar family. His grandfather was a mullah, a Muslim leader trained in sacred law and theology. By 1930, Stalin had begun mass campaigns of repression against so-called "enemies of the state." Ethnic minorities, religious leaders, intellectuals, and supposed dissidents were swept up in waves of forced deportation. As both ethnic and religious minorities, the Kitaev family was targeted. Consequently, when Akhmed Kitaev was just five years old, the government exiled him and his family to Siberia.

Kitaev's childhood experience was not uncommon in the early years of Stalin's rule. Special settlements and camps were established in remote, often frozen regions, where exiles endured starvation-level rations, grueling labor, inadequate shelter, and near-total isolation. The system laid the groundwork for what became known as the Gulag, a vast network of forced labor camps.

The repression reached its most violent peak between 1936 and 1938, during a period known as the Great Terror. A culture of intense fear and paranoia prevailed. Show trials and mass executions became routine. And by this point, no one was above suspicion: Communist Party officials, military leaders, members of Stalin's Secret Police, and everyday citizens alike were arrested, executed, or imprisoned based on fabricated charges. Historians estimate that between 700,000 and 1.2 million people died during the Great Terror, either executed outright or dying as a result of the brutal conditions of the Gulag labor camps.

For the young Akhmed Kitaev, exile was the landscape of his formative years, but it wasn't to last forever. At the age of ten, Kitaev won an All-Union art competition. In an audacious act, he wrote directly to Stalin, expressing his desire to study art. Incredibly, a military official arrived a short few weeks later and escorted him from the frozen settlement to the big city of Leningrad. Kitaev went on to study at prestigious Soviet art institutes. His artistic career flourished, and by the 1950s, he was exhibiting his work in major Soviet exhibitions and teaching the next generation of artists.

By the time Kitaev reached adulthood, the Soviet Union was undergoing another profound transformation. Stalin's death in 1953 marked the beginning of a new era. His successor, Nikita Khrushchev, ushered in a period of political and cultural liberalization known as the Thaw. In a dramatic break from Stalin's legacy, Khrushchev publicly denounced the terror, purges, and personality cult in a secret speech to the Communist Party in 1956. Under his leadership, many political prisoners were released, the Gulag camps were closed, and artistic censorship was loosened. International cultural exchanges, foreign films, and uncensored literature began to circulate. Soviet society began to cautiously open to the world.

Kitaev's journey from exile to national recognition encapsulates the contradictions of Soviet history: how repression and resilience coexisted, how identity was both erased and reasserted, and how Soviet artists navigated a complex emotional landscape, balancing state ideals with their own histories of suffering and endurance.

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