

American Councils for International Education
2013-2014 Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training Program
Final Report

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Cultural Revolution in Early Soviet Kazakhstan, 1921-1941

September 3, 2013 – June 15, 2014

Almaty, Kazakhstan

Research Abstract:

This Title VIII fellowship supported nine months of foundational research for a doctoral dissertation on the subject of cultural revolution in early Soviet Kazakhstan. In the ideology of the period, “cultural revolution” necessarily followed from socialist political revolution, but was seen as a longer and more saturating process of transforming everyday lives and practices at their most basic level. Ultimately, changes ascribed to the cultural revolution outlasted many of those ascribed to the political revolution. In areas like Kazakhstan, where Sovietization was inextricably bound up with modernization (to use overly simplistic categories), cultural structures and social patterns that solidified in this period often have continued currency.

My research examines two sides of the cultural revolutionary project in the context of Kazakh communities from 1920-1940. On the one hand, it explores how the criminalization of “everyday” (*bytovye*) practices like bride price, polygamy, and underage marriage shaped the formation of Kazakh Soviet culture, and vice versa. On the other, it looks at the creation of everyday structures for cultural integration, specifically the development of a state educational system and mass literacy campaigns in rural areas. Ultimately, it seeks to understand how both these sides of the cultural revolutionary project helped to establish a framework for Kazakh Soviet citizenship, in the context of widespread devastation and upheaval. A focused

examination of this process within Kazakh communities can begin to illuminate its relationship to broader global conversations about citizenship, modernization/development, human rights and indigenous rights, during the period in question and beyond.

Research Goals:

The primary goal of my time in Kazakhstan was to establish a solid base of archival research for a dissertation on the subject described above. Archives and libraries in Almaty and other centers contain a wealth of material on the cultural revolution. My focus during the fellowship period was on reading state and party files from the 1920s and 30s to identify key institutions, people, and processes involved in the project for cultural revolution, collecting notes and copies of documents that shed light on how this project developed on the ground. Thanks to the language lessons provided by the fellowship, I was also able to focus on improving my understanding of Kazakh language and culture.

More specifically, my goals were as follows:

- 1) Locate and collect archival documents and other primary sources relating to these cultural revolutionary campaigns (especially at the local level) and the people who participated in them
- 2) Locate and read secondary sources on the subject, particularly literature from the Soviet period and dissertations that are only available in Kazakhstan
- 3) Take research trips to identify useful files in regional archives
- 4) Connect with archivists, librarians, and scholars working in similar areas

Thematically, research conducted for this fellowship was shaped by attention to the relationship between ideals of cultural transformation and the role of women and religion in

society. Both branches of the cultural revolutionary project conceptualized women as central to their project, as the emancipation of Kazakh women was used to explain both the criminalization of certain practices and the value of mass education, and research correspondingly devotes particular attention to women's symbolic and actual roles in the process. Each branch also directly affected religious life, as the majority of both the criminalized customs and pre-Soviet Kazakh education were associated with Islam. An important research goal, then, was to gather directly and tangentially relevant information on the spheres of gender relations and religion in Kazakh communities at the time, in order to go beyond official rhetoric of cultural transformation to see how newly constructed Soviet structures interacted with specific local practices. This aspect of the research was conducted partly with the broader hope that the findings would provide helpful historical context for understanding the role of women and religion in Kazakhstan today.

Research Activities:

Research during the fellowship period was conducted almost entirely in Almaty, at the Central State Archive (TsGARK), the President's Archive (APRK), and the National Library. It also included two one-week visits to the state archives in Shymkent and Semey, to which I hope to return in the spring of 2015. Apart from reading primary source material, these months spent in Kazakhstan allowed me to acquire published works and document collections that are unavailable in the United States, which will be useful resources for current and future work. Kazakh lessons provided by the fellowship also played an important role in research. In addition to helping me reach the level of language needed to read (or at least, slowly decipher) many of the sources, the language instructor's extensive knowledge of philology and history meant that lessons included discussions of words, concepts, people and events which continually brought to

light important aspects of the subject. I also learned to read the Arabic-based Kazakh script used through the 1920s, thanks in part to one of the APRK archivists who kindly gave me an orthographic conversion table.

Most of my time in Almaty was spent at the Central and President's archives, reading reports, stenograms, letters, telegrams, meeting minutes, copies of decrees, circulars, and other documents that made their way to the central institutions of the republic. Using the finding aids, I focused on files that were identified as relevant to *byt* crimes, literacy education, women, religion, and rural or nomadic Kazakh communities. Reports by the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate and reviews of local party cells often provided some of the richest information about life in local communities. The former are often grim reading, as relevant details are found in the midst of reports on famine deaths, violence, and ethnic tensions. The latter are particularly useful, as reports of review commissions focus on the shortcomings and deviations of local party members, giving snapshots (through their own lens, of course) of how Soviet cultural institutions were appropriated, misunderstood or simply ignored at the local level. Other useful files included those of the party Zhenotdel, the Narkompros, Narkomiust, branches of the Central Executive Committee (TsIK) organized around questions of women and religion, and the Komsomol. There is an abundance of such materials, and even after these months of full-time archival research there are many more to read. Time spent in these archives allowed me, however, to gather a relatively representative sample, which I hope to fill in as needed after processing my notes from the research year and reading more of the published literature identified at the National Library.

I also spent a significant amount of time at the National Library and benefited greatly from their extensive collection of published works, including many from the Soviet and pre-Soviet period that are not available elsewhere. Although here, again, there are more relevant

sources than I could adequately review in nine months, hours spent with their card catalogue left me with a much more comprehensive understanding of published literature on the subject than I could have reached in the United States. Some of these I read, others I found to be available in the US and have begun reading since my return. In addition to these monographs and document collections, the librarians in the dissertation hall kindly compiled a list of potentially relevant dissertations (recent and older), and I was able to begin reading through those as well. Most importantly, the library's rare books room includes collections of newspapers, journals, brochures, pamphlets, literacy textbooks and other publications from the 1920s and 30s. Newspapers and journals were particularly useful for information on key developments, for ways in which cultural revolutionary campaigns were presented and idealized by state institutions, for clues to the population's response, for stories to follow up on in the archives, and for a sense of the conversations taking place among Kazakh Soviet activists and intellectuals.

Short research trips to archives in Shymkent and Semey were also extremely valuable. In order to avoid missing Kazakh lessons, each visit was limited to one week. These sites were chosen for their potential as case studies to yield a more nuanced view of the cultural campaigns than could be gathered from central sources in Almaty. Both cities are historically significant regional centers marked by different networks of influence, with Shymkent's connections to Uzbekistan and southern Central Asia and Semey's (formerly Semipalatinsk) ties to Russian and Tatar communities. Though I have yet to process my notes from these archives, and though I hope to return for a better picture, looking at documents in these two regions helps to illuminate how the nature of and responses to the cultural campaigns were shaped by regional contexts. Thanks to the hospitality and helpfulness of archivists at each location, I was able to gather more material than expected in such a short time. I also identified important files to read later and

learned of other archives to visit in each place. I look forward to returning to these archives in spring 2015.

Spending this time in Kazakhstan also put me in daily contact with archivists and other researchers, who generously connected me with advice and resources and suffered my painful Kazakh with patience. The chance to be surrounded by others interested in similar issues was invaluable. Discussions helped me to understand my own research better and to see ways that it might complement what others are doing. The archives I worked at were professional and well-organized, and I am grateful to have been granted access to the sources I needed.

Important Research Findings:

At this point, I am still in the beginning stages of processing the research collected during the fellowship year, so any findings so far are tentative. Since the cultural revolution in Kazakhstan reflected attempts at achieving broader Soviet ideals, my research so far has confirmed for the local context observations of USSR-wide developments, such as those in Terry Martin's *Affirmative Action Empire*, and has echoed studies of the cultural revolution in other republics of the USSR, like Ali Igmen's *Speaking Soviet with an Accent*. The incorporation of Kazakh communities into the Soviet Union, involving as it did such fundamental change to ways of life and such a multiethnic context, served in many ways as a model of Soviet development. At the same time, there are distinctives of the Kazakh context that I hope to draw out more as I process my notes and move forward. I hope that privileging Kazakh communities over state structures will make it easier to notice influences from less conventional sources.

In the branch of this project that focuses on education and literacy campaigns, for example, incorporating pre-Soviet Kazakh history allows for more attention to the ways in which the "old elite" of the Kazakh intelligentsia participated in new Soviet structures, especially in the

sphere of education. During the fellowship period, I collected resources and writings on these early influential figures who span the revolutionary divide (Akhmet Baitursynov, Saken Seifullin, Uraz Dzhandosov, and others) in order to examine this further. In keeping with this participation of pre-Soviet activists in the formation of new structures, research so far suggests that the development of mass education in this context was a site of negotiation and pluralism (voluntary and involuntary), even as it ultimately became one of the most concentrated aspects of the drive to produce a firm and non-negotiable Soviet citizenship. Sources consistently assume basic education – “alphabetical” and “political” literacy – to be a cornerstone of membership in Soviet society. The extent to which this education was shaped by local context, which my research examines in more detail, thus has implications beyond education for Soviet and post-Soviet identities. From the desperate situation of under-resourced state schools vying for materials, to the links between dekulakization and education (as property confiscated from kulaks was allocated to schools), from discussions of how to host new state schools alongside original religious schools to attempts by urban Muslims to shape the implementation of the decree on separation of church and education, the sphere of education also serves as a microcosm for the broader types of issues and appropriations that marked this period.

In the second major branch of research, I searched for documents relating to Soviet campaigns against “crimes of custom”, consisting mainly, as mentioned above, of polygamy, underage marriage, bride-price, forced marriage, and other practices associated with religion and women. Important work has been done on related subjects – most notably for English-language scholarship, Marianne Kamp and Douglas Northrop’s monographs on the unveiling campaigns in Uzbekistan in this period and Paula Michaels’ work on early Soviet public health campaigns in Kazakhstan. Where Northrop examines the subject with attention to local resistance against

Soviet norms, Kamp looks at similar issues from the perspective of Uzbek women's own appropriation of and participation in the movement, and Michaels considers the suppression of tradition as part of a contested imposition of new norms for hygiene and "civilization", I have found my own research drawing me to focus on what the *byt* crime campaigns suggest about the nature of Soviet law itself as it was conceptualized and implemented at the time. In the course of the fellowship year, the assumptions and actions articulated in documents indicated repeatedly that legal institutions and criminal prosecution, at least those dealing with *byt* crimes, were thought of less in terms of "justice" than of "culture". That Soviet administrators and activists saw the legal code as didactic rather than simply punitive is suggested particularly strongly by the frequent calls for "show trials" (*pokazatel'nye protsessy*), but also by their sanctioning of different penalties for offenders at different cultural levels (with lessened sentences for those who were argued to be still functioning in cultural "darkness", which was often indicated by illiteracy). In this sense, law was the other side of education – meant not just for distributing justice but for shaping communities into models of proper Soviet society.

Sources gathered in the course of this year illuminate some of the ways that law was meant to shape communities into Soviet society, but they also suggest how communities' implementation, appropriation, and subversion of law shaped Soviet society. Official reports on these issues constantly complained that practices like bride price and polygamy had simply continued in "hidden" forms, even among party members. These ranged from standard concerns, like the suspicion that polygamous marriages were being disguised with official divorces, to more innovative cases, like the administrator who reportedly reinstated a wealthy man's voting rights as an (implied) bride price for marrying his daughter.¹ While official policies discouraged this sort of reinvention of tradition to suit new contexts, new Kazakh Soviet citizens were

¹ APRK F.719 d.667 l.146.

encouraged (at least nominally) to take an active part in shaping the laws themselves. In one case, newspaper articles indicate that, in 1927, the republic's administration initiated a project to add to the *byt* crimes section of the criminal code (*ugolovnyi kodeks*) and created groups (*kompanii*) at the regional level for discussion of how new laws should be framed. Women in particular were sought out for participation in these groups, and their comments were (according to the press) to be taken into account in the course of confirming the new laws.² Since it relates so directly to *byt* crimes and the creation of avenues for Kazakh Soviet citizenship, I plan to look into this codex reform project further as I continue research.

For the final section of this project, I collected information on the transition from the negotiations of the early 1920s to the repressions of the 1930s, especially in the spheres of education and customary practices. Preliminary readings of archival party files suggest that, at the republic level, the environment of accusation and suspicion associated with the purges had roots in earlier developments, as the mid-to-late 1920s saw influential Kazakh figures denounced and local Kazakh party leaders charged with forming feuding and conspiratorial “*gruppировки*” based on kinship and clan ties. I was less successful in locating accessible files on the purges of the late 1930s themselves, and plan to make use of recent document collections on the subject. Other sources – like reports mentioning the continued use of a Kazakh literacy textbook that had been officially condemned along with its author – indicate that while the purges were brutal, they were not necessarily thorough, and purged figures could remain influential, if unacknowledged. These sorts of details, examined in the context of the repressions and purges as a whole, give insights into the nature of emerging Kazakh Soviet culture and can also help to chart changes and continuity in the project of cultural revolution across this period.

² *Sovetskaia Step'* 67 (March 1928), p.2 and 56. On my last day in Almaty, I found a file of protocols from these “*kampanii*”, which I hope to read more fully next spring.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

Although the events covered by this research took place nearly one hundred years ago, they shaped a concept of culture (*kul'turnost'*) and its relationship to ethnic identity that continues to resonate in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Since my research is historical, I have not gathered any academically measurable data on the current influence of these ideas and would be hesitant to draw direct implications for policy makers. Still, a deeper understanding of this historical context can provide a firmer footing for those wishing to navigate contemporary issues with diplomacy and sensitivity.

It is useful to see, for example, that although Soviet cultural policy in Kazakhstan is often presented (not without reason) as destructive and oppressive, it was formally focused on integration and often resulted in real identification with Soviet citizenship and Soviet ways of being modern. My research so far tentatively suggests that Kazakh communities did appropriate Soviet *kul'turnost'* to a certain degree, and that this was considered a complement to rather than a denial of Kazakh “national culture” (which, of course, was itself in a process of definition). *Kul'turnost'* could have undertones of Russian cultural superiority, but it was not limited to these. In a formulation that is still alive today, rural Kazakhs who were “superstitious” or not formally educated were associated with lack of culture, as were “fanatical” Muslims further south, but so were Russians who drank or swore. As I hope to explore further in the dissertation, elements of the *kul'turnost'* ideal as it emerged from this period can be traced to cultural currents within pre-Soviet Kazakh society and to the influence of local communities at the time. Present-day expressions of or nostalgia for certain norms associated with Soviet *kul'turnost'* – such as esteem for education, sense of community with citizens of other republics, gender equality (in a certain sense), social comradery, tempered or nonexistent religious expression, literary and

aesthetic taste, cosmopolitanism expressed through fluency in Russian language, a well-defined understanding of one's place in the world – and concerns that these norms are disappearing, then, should not be interpreted as necessarily the product of a simplistic “Russification” or as nostalgia for the Soviet Union as a whole.

At the same time, attention to the 1920s and 30s shows that awareness of the potential for cultural marginalization, or even annihilation, developed alongside this identification with Soviet culture. If integration was the shiny side of the cultural revolutionary coin, its grittier side was marked by chilling violence and devastation. This devastation was of course first of all physical, with the violence and famine of the early 1930s especially uprooting Kazakh communities, leaving livelihoods destroyed and disproportionate percentage of the population lost to starvation and flight. But it also had a cultural dimension – beyond the criminalization of practices and transformation of education described above, cultural continuity at the most basic level was brought into question. A secret report from circa 1933 on the state of administrative indigenization (*korenizatsiia*) in the Atbasar region, for example, complains that non-Kazakh specialists at the state bank no longer bothered to attend Kazakh language lessons, with some of them asking outright: “Why should we learn [Kazakh] – the [Kazakhs] are going to die out soon in any case”.³ Communal appropriation of Soviet-style *kul'turnost'* was, and still is, uncomfortably tinged with this annihilatory dimension. If contemporary Kazakhs often identify with the set of “civilized modern norms” articulated in this period, they also maintain a sense of grievance and protectiveness for a national identity remembered as being nearly wiped out. While there are many more recent and increasingly influential factors at play in Kazakhstan's

³ “Zachem my budem izuchat' kirgizskii iazyk – kirgizy vsravno skoro vse podokhnut” (TsGARK F.5 op.21 d.120 l.86).

multiethnic society, this history is still an important background for outsiders to understand, even for such seemingly mundane details as deciding which language to greet someone in.⁴

Co-Curricular Activity:

During the fellowship period I spent most of my time in the archives and did not have any formal lectures or meetings relating to my research. I was thankful, however, that even without this it was possible to meet informally with scholars, archivists, librarians, students and others who are doing important work and whose advice and insights have already been helpful to my own. In May, I attended the joint Association for Slavic, East European & Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) and Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS) conference at Nazarbayev University in Astana. This conference was valuable in terms of both the subjects discussed and the opportunity to talk with scholars from a variety of disciplines and countries. I particularly appreciated meeting scholars working in Kazakhstan, at Nazarbayev University and Al-Farabi National University. In Almaty, researchers from the Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnography were also very welcoming and are doing exciting work. I hope to continue to be in touch with these institutions and people. I also enjoyed the chance to be involved with the work of the American Councils office in Almaty, providing free SAT prep lessons and helping with scholarship applications.

Conclusions:

The opportunity to spend these nine months in Kazakhstan through American Councils has been critically important, both for my current graduate studies and as a foundation for further years of scholarship. I am so thankful for the financial support provided by the Title VIII

⁴ Bhavna Dave's *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power* is a particularly insightful work on these subjects.

fellowship, and for the on-the-ground support of the American Councils offices. During my time in Almaty, I was able to access unique documentary and published sources unavailable elsewhere, to improve my Kazakh language skills considerably through immersion and regular lessons, and to make contact with scholars and others from around the world working on similar subjects. Research conducted during this time in Almaty, Semey, and Shymkent will supply the bulk of the original archival work supporting the dissertation described above, which I ultimately hope to revise into a book manuscript. Even apart from purely research-oriented goals, the chance to live in Almaty, surrounded by signs of history and a thriving cultural center, provided a richer perspective on Kazakhstan's past and present.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:

After the fellowship program, I returned to the United States, where I have begun analyzing notes and writing my dissertation. I plan to return to Kazakhstan, along with Russia, for several months in the spring and summer of 2015 to conclude research. In particular, I hope to spend more time in both Semey and Shymkent, to revisit relevant files previously glossed over due to time constraints. Thanks to the short trips to these cities made possible by the program, I have a much better idea of how to work there effectively. I plan to spend some time in Almaty as well, to follow up on leads for sources that I learned about during the fellowship period, in archives at the Academy of Sciences and the Central State Museum. I anticipate completing the dissertation by spring of 2016. As the work progresses, I plan to draw from this research for several conference papers and to submit at least one article for publication. I also hope to incorporate research from my time in Almaty into designing courses for the 2015-2016 academic year.

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Center of Documentation for Recent History (TsDNI), Semey
South Kazakhstan Regional Archive (IuKOA), Shymkent

Selected Periodicals

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Bol'shevik Kazakhstana
Ezhenedel'nik sovetskoi iustitsii
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