

The Alash Movement

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russia, throwing caution to the wind, began overt colonization of Kazakhstan. Once the legislative framework was in place, it began intensive resettlement of Russian peasants to the steppe, convinced they were the bearers of an advanced culture. According to the Tsarist ideology, and later that of the Bolsheviks, there was not, and could not be, anything particularly serious in life on the steppe, and so it should be reformed fundamentally and immediately so as to convert it to Russian ways. Kazakh youth being taught in Russian educational institutions were inculcated with this idea. Tsarist agrarian policies, mass expropriation of Kazakh lands for the newcomers, and increasing impoverishment of the masses compelled educated Kazakhs to enter politics on a professional level, nurture the idea of national liberation, and organize a political party with a concrete agenda.

The Tsarist administration engaged in double dealing with them. On one hand, representatives of the national elite (A. Bukeikhanov, A. Birimzhanov, A. Kalmenov, B. Karataev and others) were elected to the first two State Duma convocations. On the other, the issue of resettlement, which was keenly and persistently raised by them through the Muslim faction and Cadet deputies, and heated debates on the topic at sessions of the Duma led to the Kazakh people being stripped of the right to vote [1]. And while all this was going the most active members of the national elite were being subjected to persecution and deportation [2].

In response to these brutish colonial policies, Tsarism engendered a strong opposition among the Kazakh intellectual elite, which pressed for a return to independence. The formation of the Alash Orda government and the autonomy of Turkestan (Kokand) in 1917 were not just the result of intense political activity by the national elite; at the same time these events attested to the immense potential of such activity to bring about a national revival.

Thus, the Alash movement was born of the serious crisis that stemmed from the Tsarist colonial policies in Kazakhstan. Progressive forces in Kazakh society, first and foremost the emerging national intelligentsia, understood perfectly well the sinister implications of colonial dependency and saw as a way out of the situation the reinstatement of national statehood.

Here certain specific features of the Kazakh liberation movement at the start of the twentieth century are worth noting. Firstly, the liberation movement of this period was a logical continuation of the Kazakh people's struggle for independence, only under new historical conditions. It was a logical continuation, for example, of the anti-colonialist actions of the Kazakhs in the nineteenth century [3].

Secondly, however, at the start of the twentieth century the liberation movement was led by a political force new to Kazakh society: the national intelligentsia. Though modest in number, they were extremely active and politically sophisticated.

A distinctive result of the progress of the national liberation movement was the founding of the Alash party in the summer and autumn of 1917. The party's platform, which was published in the newspaper Qazaq (Kazakh) [4], essentially consisted of two objectives: liberating the Kazakh people from colonial dependency and taking them forward to surmount the nation's social and economic backwardness. As was stated quite clearly in the party's program, it intended to achieve these main goals through political and socio-economic reform rather than radical revolutionary change. Thus, in terms of the methods it advocated to achieve its objectives, the Alash movement was fundamentally different from the Bolshevik faction of social democrats. It was no accident, therefore, that the ideas and slogans of the October socialist revolution of 1917

were rejected out of hand by Alash. And during the civil war the Alash party and the Alash Orda government joined forces in rallying against the Bolsheviks and the Soviets.

Let us now take a look at the key aspects of the Alash party's program. In the section on state structure it is stated that "Russia should become a democratic, federal republic (in a democracy the power belongs to the people, a federation is a union of states with equal rights. Each state in a federal republic has its own territory, may independently determine its own agenda, and is bound by ties of friendship)." [5]. The head of state and government would be the president, elected by the State Duma for a fixed term. All citizens would have the right to vote, irrespective of their origin, faith and gender. The power to legislate would lie with the State Duma, which would monitor the activities of government agencies, hear their reports and make enquiries regarding specific areas of interest.

It is interesting to note that before the 1917 Bolshevik revolution the leaders of the Alash movement were hesitant to discuss the question of independent statehood, limiting themselves to the demands that Kazakh oblasts be given the right to a certain amount of local self-government (zemstvo) and a greater role in the judicial process and military service, with account for local customs. The Alash program states that "all Kazakh lands are united as a consolidated whole, are sovereign and join the Russian Republic on federal grounds." [6]. The political state of affairs in the former empire at the end of 1917 was such that the leaders of the national liberation movement could quite openly discuss the question of state autonomy within the framework of the federation.

The party also took a moderate line when it came to social policy. Its program contains no hint of restricting the rights of the feudal aristocracy. The movement's leaders were convinced that in Kazakh society, due to certain circumstances, class differentiation had not evolved as it had in, for example, Russian society. Moreover, for Kazakh society, which was at the stage where the liberation movement was gaining popularity, it was more important to consolidate the nation than to lead it to confrontation on the basis of class differences and interests. These interests are reflected in the program in the distinctive assertion that the Alash party is directing its efforts and energies for the good of the nation, is "leading people on the path to progress" and "championing justice."

The program also makes no mention of disqualifying any social groups or forces from a role in governing the state. The question of taxation was decided along roughly the same line: "levying of taxes shall be done fairly, depending on wealth and income, that is to say, the rich will pay more, and the poor—less." [7]. Workers rights would be protected by special legislative acts. On this question the Alash party took the same stance as the social democrats (Mensheviks).

Under the Alash party program autonomous Kazakhstan would become a secular state, i.e., there would be no state religion, and all citizens would have freedom of conscience to practice their choice of faith. The antifeudal and anticolonial character of the program was particularly palpable in the sections "Principal Rights" and "Teaching of Science and Knowledge." Here it was noted that in the Russian Republic all citizens, irrespective of faith, nationality, race or gender, would be equal. Other stipulations that were provided for included the right to assemble and to organize associations, freedom of speech and freedom of the press, the inviolability of the individual and one's residence, etc.

As follows from an analysis of the party's program, the leaders of the Alash movement advocated first and foremost implementation of steps aimed at decolonization and the achievement of general democratic objectives. Their main, pressing task was to bring about national rebirth. They were also well aware that this could be attained by creating a society receptive to

progressive experience of others. And, naturally, they had not the least intention of establishing an insular, mononational state, as Soviet historians claimed.

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References:

1. The Regulation on Elections to the State Duma of July 3, 1907. See V. I. Kovalenko et al., eds., *Politicheskaiia istoriia Rossii: Khrestomatiia* (Moscow, 1996), p. 607.
2. In 1907-1910 the leaders of the national liberation movement Alikhan Bukeikhanov, Akhmet Baitursunov and Mir-Yakub Dulatov were convicted and received sentences of various lengths, then were deported from Kazakhstan for involvement in the anti-colonial movement
3. Soviet historiographers did not acknowledge that the manifestations of Kazakh anti-colonialism of the twentieth century had its roots in the nineteenth century. For example, the Kazakh revolt under the leadership of Kenesary Kasymov in 1837-1847 was treated as a feudal-monarchist uprising, while the social and political activity of the national intelligentsia at the start of the twentieth century as a bourgeois nationalist movement. In contemporary historiographies of Kazakhstan both of these developments are treated as stages of the one and the same anti-colonial movement.
4. The decision to create the Alash political party was made at the all-Kazakh congress in July 1917. *Alash qozghalisi / Dvizhenie Alash: Sbornik dokumentov i materialov*, vol. 1 (Almaty, 2004), pp. 438-441
 5. Ibid., pp. 504-505
 6. Ibid., p. 504
 7. Ibid., p. 505