

Kazakhstan in the early twentieth century

In 1900, Kazakhstan was a territory that was set in its ways on the outside and still patriarchal in nature. On the great steppe expanses, just as hundreds and thousands of years before, the nomads grazed their livestock, moving in a century-long rhythm that remained unchanged from season to season, from north to south and from south to north. Yet this system, in existence for at least two thousand years was experiencing intense internal changes. Major rail routes were being built through the steppe, towns grew and developed, coupled with an infrastructure, social institutions, education and healthcare and most importantly, trade was developing at a fast rate.

At the start of the century, Kazakhstan was controlled from three centers – Tashkent, Orenburg and Omsk. A decree was issued in 1900 which obligated and encouraged the settlement of the Kazakhs from the Syr Darya region. However, the European colonization of the steppe regions progressed at a much faster rate. The Slavic population in these regions grew in the pre-Revolutionary period from 15% to 42%. The traditional nomadic economy of the Kazakhs, built upon the extensive pasture-based livestock rearing was eroded away and their way of life was destroyed. In the northern regions Kazakhs quickly turned to agriculture. In the southern regions, where there were considerably fewer Russian settlers, there were also fewer settled Kazakhs. In the north-eastern regions Kazakh farms that dealt with agriculture accounted for about one half. However, the Kazakhs who could not or had no wish to change their way of life had only one thing they could do, and that was to move south. In this way, a potential for conflict accumulated in the southern regions of Kazakhstan and it was here where the most acute struggle unfolded for the possession of the irrigated lands, which were equally suitable for grazing livestock and agriculture.

In general, the ratio of settlers to local population, as a result of the grand program of colonization, which was implemented in three phases, from the 1860s

to 1912 was 3 million Slavs to 5 million Kazakhs. The numbers of urban population also grew.

Some 40,000 people dealt in steppe trade with a network of markets scattered all over northern Kazakhstan and southern Siberia. Thanks to British finance, Kazakhstan's mineral resources were developed and by 1916 over 18,000 Kazakhs were employed in the mining industry. And yet 90% of Kazakhs continued to remain nomads, combining to a certain extent, livestock breeding and agriculture. The livestock numbers in the steppe grew from 17 million to 30 million. At the same time there were structural changes afoot in livestock farming: there was a rise in the relative number of cattle, which required less pasture land and which were more lucrative to maintain. Changes in the Kazakhstan economy progressed in parallel with the transformation of political and social structures.

Literature in Kazakh language, written in Arab script and as a rule, on religious themes, became more widespread. Throughout the entire nineteenth century about 70-80,000 such books were published but, in the early twentieth century the Kazakhs saw a real explosion in publishing. The first Kazakh-language newspaper appeared in 1888; much more came after 1905 but for political reasons, none lasted very long.

The main focus of this period was the Kazakhs' switch from a tribal conscience to a national one. The world view of the Kazakhs, which previously often ended with the family group or at the perimeter of a mountain village, now reached a generally national level. By the beginning of the century four political trends had emerged in Kazakh society. The first of such trends was that of the so-called "enlighteners". These were the first generation of intellectuals who had encountered Russian education. They viewed the union with Russia as a positive step and they sincerely believed that the Kazakhs needed to learn Russian and adopt the European style of education. They had a critical view of Islam and they spoke out against the activity of the Tatar mullahs, while at the same time marveling at the "pure" and unclouded Kazakh traditions.

Much less is known of another trend, which could be called the conservatives. This group of poets could be characterized by the term *Zar Zaman*, meaning “time of lament”. These poets were fierce antagonists of everything Russian and they idealized orthodox Islam and traditional social and moral values. Their works tell of the era of the Khans’ power as being a golden age, free of corruption and the exploitation of the colonial period.

The third group is classed as nationalists. This movement arose after contact had been made with Russian culture and education, when, in the early twentieth century, young Kazakh doctors, teachers, engineers, writers and poets no longer wished to strive towards copying European culture but concerned themselves instead with the search for their own national identity, albeit Empire. The second trend was an interest in the Turkic heritage. In political terms the result of this was growing liking for Turkey. Many young Kazakh intellectuals travelled to the cities of the Turkic world, as far as Istanbul, thus forming a fabric of a unified intellectual Turkic community. The representatives of this generation shared the view of the Russian liberals; they formed the Alash party, condemned or took a neutral stance on the uprising of 1916 and in 1917 formed two governments, in Orenburg and in Kokand.

The fourth movement was a rudimentary socialist group. Although in composition it was predominantly Russian, it had an influence upon the Kazakh workers in the major cities, in the mines and on the railways. From this group came a number of leaders for the future revolution that was to have such a massive impact on the entire former empire. The failed harvest of 1912 and the mass impoverishment and epidemic that followed as result promoted significant growth in the socialist movement.

The involvement of the Kazakhs in the political struggle on the Russian political stage between two revolutions led to an ever more active demand for Kazakhstan autonomy within the empire. The moderate wing of the intelligentsia and the elite both pursued this objective, but a large part of the Kazakh population believed that the solution to the problem was to be totally rid of the Russians and

to reclaim their lands. The moment of truth came in 1916, when the government in Petrograd through its naïve decree on the mobilization of those of different faiths into the Russian Army, which was fighting a war against the Turkish Sultan – the leader of all Muslims, gave rise to a mass uprising in central and southern Kazakhstan as well as in a large part of Turkestan. The uprising shook the very foundations of Russian rule in Central Asia and it would only be a matter of time until the region was to join the Russian Revolution of 1917. In the course of the uprising, which was accompanied by terrible violence from both sides, a split occurred within the Kazakh opposition. This was due to the fact that some of the intellectuals condemned the extreme nature of the armed battle, while others saw the armed battle as the only way to get rid of the hated tsarist regime. The latter were later to join the Bolsheviks, whose ultraradical ideology for a time appealed to the Kazakh nationalists, while the former were to make up the skeletal structure of the future Alash Horde.

From early 1918, the Alash Horde competed for power with isolated and poorly supported Marxists. These were still just isolated groups, united around charismatic leaders in the Syr Darya region, where the main battles of 1916 had unfolded.

With its moderate and collaborationist policy, the government of the Alash Horde was doomed. Its flirting with Kolchak and dithering between reds and whites led to a situation where the remnants of its power and authority were lost. In 1919, the revolutionary-minded Kazakhs took center stage in Kazakh politics; they were resolute in their support of the Socialist Revolution and the Bolshevik regime and they supported the reds in their battle with the Basmachi movement in Central Asia. A greater political intimacy became possible between the Bolsheviks and the radical Kazakh nationalists thanks to the opportunities that the new regime opened up for them: the dispossession of the Kulaks and the secularization of society as a whole. The Muslim National Communists directed their foreign policy ambitions, to use the term of the great French orientalist Alexandre Bennigsen, against

Bukhara, Khiva, Iran, Afghanistan and British India, to where they dreamt of spreading the great proletarian revolution.

Used material:

Chokan and Murat Laumulin, "The Kazakhs. Children of the steppes"