

Report On Central Asia

I spent my last semester abroad at the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP). In this report I'm going to go into the way Central Asia, and Kazakhstan in particular, has been treated before and during the soviet period, and what the situation is like there today.

Early Central Asia

Early Central Asia has a long history going back to the Mongol Empire, the Golden Horde and the various Khanates which succeeded it. I didn't study much of this history so I can't explain it in much detail. I do know that for most of this period the peoples of Central Asia were largely nomadic. The exception are the ancient cities which lie along the silk road: Bukhara, Samarkand, the holy city of Turkestan, and Almaty. These are clustered around what is currently eastern Uzbekistan/southern Kazakhstan, and aside from Almaty they show the remains of remarkably advanced and sophisticated societies. Their position on the silk road allowed them to grow out from simple trading posts to proper towns and their strategic position made them good areas to fortify.

This split between sedentary and nomadic life probably contributed to the ongoing rivalry between Uzbeks and Kazakhs. That and the fact that Uzbeks at one point invaded and controlled large swathes of Kazakh territory. It seems much of the history around this is slightly distorted by the google national image of each country. The Uzbeks see their conquest of the Kazakh territories as benevolent while the Kazakhs proudly celebrate the anti-colonial warlord Eset Batyr. I'm not sure if he deserves to be called a warlord, but then again I'm not sure if he can justifiably be called anti-colonial either.

Asiatic mode of production

In any case the most important perspective on this period comes from Marx and Engels. Their conception of the Asiatic mode of production¹ was more or less directly based on the history of Central Asia. I can point to a few basic features which define the mode of production of the time in the nomadic areas

- Common non-ownership of the land².
- Hunter-gatherer economy, almost no industrial development.
- Tribal state based around khanates and warlords. Not quite feudal because the Khan did not own the land and the dominant form of property was ownership of horses. There was also some democratic control of local waqfs³.

The urban development in settlements and cities along the Silk Road should be treated separately from nomadic life. These settlements came into contact with mercantile capitalism and benefited from goods brought to them from Africa, Arabia, Europe, India and South East Asia. One important point for soviet history is that the urban centres were the centres of the first soviets established in Central Asia, before the arrival of the red army to attack the tribes in the countryside. The Khorezm People's Soviet Republic arose out of the uprising in the city of Khiva, and the Bukharan PSR was likewise established around the city of Bukhara.

The Russian Empire sponsored a railway-building programme in Central Asia prior to the 1917 revolution. The goal of the railways were to entrench Russian military and economic dominance in the area, but it has the side-effect of contributing to the creation of a grand industrial working class. The railway construction workers were a solid base of soviet support in the region at the time; the first Central Asian soviet, established in Tashkent in 1917, consisted entirely of railway workers. This support in turn led to the central soviet government pushing for the completion of the Turksib railway in the late 1920s. At its peak the railway employed almost 50,000 people.

The soviet government knew that the rural population was held back by their nomadic life and this shaped much of their policy towards the region. The prime example is the Tajik SSR, which did not take part in the drive for mass industrialisation in the 1930s. Instead it set up light industry around canning fruit and fish and underwent moderate agrarian reform. This reform was nothing on the scale

of the agricultural collectivisation which took place in the Kazakh SSR. Education of the people was identified as the main priority and was spearheaded by a massive literacy campaign in 1925. By all accounts this was hugely successful, literacy rates went from 3.8% for men and 0.1% for women at the time of the 1926 census to 87.4% of men and 77.5% of women in 1939. This took place despite the outspoken and sometimes violent opposition of Muslim clerics.

Both Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were part of the Southern Consumer Region in the Soviet Union, where on the whole they consumed more than they produced and acted as a drain on the soviet economy. Estimated figures from 1991 show how much these republics depended on funds from the central union body⁴:

soviet republic	budget transfer from the union as % of total republic revenue
Tajik	46.6
Uzbek	42.9
Kyrgyz	35.6
Kazakh	23.1
Turkmen ⁵	21.6

Table 1: funds received by the Central Asian republics from the Soviet Union

The Soviet Union dealt with these underdeveloped republics by massively subsidising their economies. In 1972 central union government first tried its hand at industrialising the Tajik SSR with a Territorial Production Complex for the purposes of processing aluminium. No matter that Tajikistan has almost no native aluminium reserves, the raw metal ore was imported from elsewhere. Its legacy has endured; in 2007 the Tajik Aluminium Company made up 40% of the industrial output of Tajikistan⁶. Another explanation for the eventual industrialisation of the republic was the need to sustain its booming population.

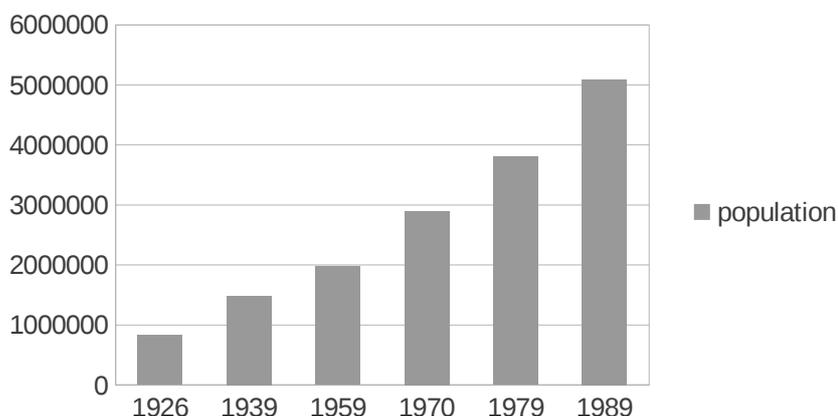


Table 2: population of the Tajik SSR, 1926 to 1989

The Soviet Union's approach of friendship and assistance to the Central Asian republics also helps dispel the claim that it acted as a continuation of the Russian empire in the region. Since its collapse the Soviet Union has been repeatedly accused of imperialism in the socialist republics of Central Asia and eastern Europe. It's true that much of the Soviet Union's economic activity in Central Asia was centred around basic resource extraction, but this was accompanied by a whole raft of measures to develop more advanced industry and bring the Central Asian republics up to the same standard as the rest of the union.

I can also point to Mongolia and Afghanistan as areas where the alternative methods of development were tried and promoted. One point worth noting is that the present-day governments of Kazakhstan and Kirgizstan revere the nomadic heritage of their people. They lament the loss of traditional values in the collectivisation programmes and the asiatic mode of production is elevated by mythical nostalgia. At the same time these governments refuse to resurrect the nomadic way of life, the only element which is actively being re-established from the pre-soviet era is the clan system. I can write more about this later.

Combating pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism

The emergence of soviet power in the early 1920s was matched by the modern project to unify Central Asia into a single geopolitical bloc. The first and most powerful movement in this direction was pan-Turkism, the promotion of a community of Turkic-speaking peoples. Great divisions between clans and tribes were eventually overcome in the face of two enemies: Russian imperialism and soviet power. Anti-communist sentiment was stimulated by the mullahs and rural elites, while anti-Russian sentiment was stimulated by the new intellectuals and Jadidist scholars. These are not common causes and there comes a time where the insurgency splits in two with secular jadids on the one hand and devout islamists on the other. In 1917 the basmachi insurgency formed an uneasy alliance with the White Russian army, and in 1920 insurgents under the leadership of Madamin Bek joined the red army⁷.

Those which joined the communists had a deep impact on the policy of the central soviet government towards Central Asia, for example the creation of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Encouraged by this concession the pan-Turkic nationalists went further and proposed a 'Greater Turan Republic' as an independent country operating outside the Soviet Union. Realising their mistake the soviet government firmly rejected the proposal and later on many of the pan-Turkic nationalists were executed in Stalin's purges. The Turkestan ASSR was also broken up in 1924.

It's important to note here that the demand for self-determination embodied by the pan-Turkic movement was secular and sometimes took a leftist form, this naturally aligned it with the soviets. Meanwhile the Islamist call for a unity of religious forces failed to resonate with the population and its natural allies were the kulaks and the leftovers of the Russian empire. There is a strange blip of history where the red and the white armies come together to suppress the islamic uprisings against the pro-russian government in Xinjiang in 1931 and 1937. The Chinese Kuomintang supported the islamists and Uyghur seperatists, despite their anti-Chinese position. All the main actors here (including the soviets) are ruthlessly pragmatic and have little concern for their respective ideological positions.

Central Asia as the industrial front of the great patriotic war

Now we come to the role of Central Asia in the great patriotic war. All the way through the war almost no territory of soviet Central Asia was taken by the fascist forces. The region was comfortably surrounded by allied territories, British to the south, Chinese to the east and Soviets to the north and west. The caspian sea and the 'land-ocean' of the steppe provide a long defence against any invader from Europe. The Altai, Tien-Shan and Pamir mountain ranges were a wall against invasion from Japan through China. It's for this reason that south-eastern Kazakhstan was chosen as the safe haven for the soviet war economy.

In the face of the fascist advance whole factories were disassembled and hauled by rail down to Kazakhstan. See how useful the Turksib railway turned out to be! Along with the factories came the most skilled scientists and engineers of the Soviet Union. The result was that Kazakh SSR, and Almaty in particular, found itself at the centre of the 'war of production'. The republic rose to the challenge, and its industrial boom was a huge benefit to the war effort. Quoting from the Great Soviet Encyclopedia⁸:

More than 140 enterprises evacuated from western regions of the USSR and more than 1 million evacuated Soviet citizens were accommodated in the republic.

Speaking of the evacuated citizens, there has been a lot of criticism of the soviet government for its forced migrations, and the resettlement of innocent citizens in labour camps. One of the Kazakhstani

lecturers addressed these concerns, and I'll regurgitate some of their arguments here. To begin with there was some basis to Stalin's accusation that certain ethnic groups such as Tartars or Volga Germans were untrustworthy. There are examples of Tartars opening the gates to the fascist invaders⁹, there was certainly a residual anti-Russian and anti-communist sentiment among those groups. The soviet government couldn't take the risk of allowing them to sabotage the war effort. However, I do think the blanket policy of considering all members of a certain ethnic group as class enemies to be unhelpful and at worst outright xenophobic.

The conditions in the labour camps were terrible, my lecturer cited a 10% death rate. A large proportion of those who died should include the old and the sick who could not survive the conditions in the camps. The bad camp conditions can be attributed to disastrous weather, low food rations and a very high physical workload. Nevertheless, there's some defence even for this, the deportees had a far better chance of survival in the camps than they did on the front. The soviet authorities also acted with good faith, they did their best to keep the deportees alive and did not deliberately harm them. If it really was a genocide, as some people have claimed, the death rate would have been far higher than 10%. The specific targeting of Jews for deportation was not intended to replicate the Nazi holocaust, it was really designed to save these Jews from the holocaust.

In the immediate postwar period Kazakhstan saw a large influx of Japanese prisoners of war, which were organised into construction brigades. Indeed a significant part of KIMEP was built by these prisoners, though the university doesn't like to publicise it. Many refugees from the Korean war were also resettled in Kazakhstan.

The last point to make about the war is the Turkestan Legion, this was a section of the Nazi Wehrmacht formed of Turkic people and many former basmachis. The worrying thing is that some fighters in the Legion are today considered national heroes, notably Mustafa Shokai. The Kazakhstani embassy in France asked for a bust of him to be made in the town where he was exiled¹⁰, and there was a biopic made of his life in 2008¹¹. Shokai was a fascist sympathiser, and the current Kazakhstani government reveres him at the risk of losing its history in the struggle against fascism.

There are some heroic icons left over from the period of the war, such as Aliya Moldagulova, Manshuk Mametova and Ivan Panfilov. Aliya was an 18-year old who joined the 54th shooting brigade as a sniper and killed 91 fascists before being killed in action. Manshuk Mametova was a machine gunner who refused to leave her post when her division all fell back, she showed courage and bravery in battle. Ivan Panfilov was a general who led a small rifle division in the defence of Moscow, this division destroyed 18 fascist tanks using only grenades, tank traps and other tricks, they held the line of defence and did not retreat¹². All these soviet fighters from Central Asia were posthumously awarded the rank of Hero of the Soviet Union and the Order of Lenin, there are statues and streets named after them in Almaty which date back to the soviet era.

Virgin Lands program

In 1953 Kazakhstan gained a new-found prominence as the bread-basket of the Soviet Union. The union was quickly heading towards a food crisis and was heading to a position where it would have to import wheat from the USA. In order to reverse this situation it was proposed to cultivate the vast steppes of Northern Kazakhstan and Siberia. This program had a lot of promise as the area of the virgin lands was more than double the agricultural area of California¹³.

The program had a bumper harvest in 1956 and decent harvests in 1958 and 1959. It was considered as abandoned after poor harvests in the 1960s, but the new land was still farmed and it provided a stable source of crops for years afterwards. The food crisis was averted and had the bonus effect of settling the inhospitable areas of Northern Kazakhstan. The best example is the current capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, which was built during the 1950s to act as a hub for workers coming to farm the virgin lands.

The second wave of interest in the Kazakh SSR came with the soviet space program. There was an atomic weapons testing site at Semipalatinsk which had attracted specialists in rocketry.

These specialists were relocated to the town of Tyuratam where the Soviet Union constructed the

Baikonur spaceport¹⁴. The interest in the space program in turn led to the promotion of institutions such as the Fessenkov Astrophysics Institute in Almaty or the Tien Shan observatory complex¹⁵. Much of the activity of the space program took place in secrecy, but it was nevertheless a source of great pride for the citizens of the Kazakh SSR. The legacy of the space program can be seen in 'Gagarina' the street named after Yuri Gagarin in Almaty¹⁶, or a mural in Shymkent showing Lenin and two workers holding an atom.

Kunayev era

From 1960 to 1986 the Kazakh SSR was led in various roles by Dinmukhamed Konayev. Under his leadership living standards rose steadily and the republic prospered, this was a trend in the 1960s and 1970s despite the overall economic stagnation in the union economy. Kunayev was also popular for his promotion of ethnic Kazakhs in prominent positions, and as a Kazakh himself he was liked much better than the Russian leadership. He was also popular for his humble lifestyle, he lived in a small apartment in Almaty, drove a Lada to work, and he kept his occupation on his party card as 'mining engineer'.

As a skilled diplomat he elevated the status of the Kazakh SSR within the Soviet Union and became a major player in relations with Afghanistan, Mongolia, North Korea and Syria. He was close friends with Leonid Brezhnev, in part due to their shared history as First Secretaries of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan.

Anyway, towards the end of his career he retired from his position as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan after Gorbachev accused him of corruption and nepotism. To some extent this followed a trend, in 1983 a scandal emerged surrounding embezzlement and the false reporting of cotton outputs in the Uzbek SSR¹⁷. Two years later in 1985, Rahmon Nabyiev the first secretary of the Tajik SSR was removed from office. In that same year the first secretary of the Communist Party of Kirghizia, Turdakun Usubaliyev, was also removed from office. The old leadership of the Central Asian republics was flushed out to be replaced by new people loyal to Gorbachev. The only exception to this is Turkmenistan which seems to have simply rotated their leadership with more hardline communists filling top positions.

The easy conclusion is that Gorbachev did not trust Kunayev as he was a 'Brezhnevite'. Gorbachev needed a loyal surrounding of followers to ensure that his reforms were put in practice, so he got rid of Kunayev. The second theory is that Kunayev deliberately asked to retire because he could not contain the reformists in his party; he wanted to leave the way open for a Russian hardliner like Gennady Kolbin to regain control¹⁸.

Alternatively, we could accept that Kunayev really was corrupt and that Gorbachev was acting completely correctly by replacing him with Kolbin. A report from the Guardian on the 19th December 1986 names a party official in Shymkent who built his own hunting lodge and diverted electricity from the main grid to power it.

The events of Jeltoqsan

Kunayev's removal from office sets the scene for the Jeltoqsan (December) riots of 1986. To give them some context, Kunayev's replacement was Gennady Kolbin, who was Russian. Not only was he Russian but he was also accused of having never even lived in Kazakhstan before being appointed to his position. This led to some peaceful demonstrations in Almaty calling for Kunayev to be reinstated. The demonstrations carried on into the following day when they turned into riots and took on a new character which was both strongly nationalist and bourgeois-democratic.

Unfortunately there's precious little information available, the museum in Shymkent has a small archive of material, containing the few photos taken of the events. They show a large crowd gathered on one of the streets, and some underground newspapers which were published at the time. The Komsomolskaya Pravda reported that students joining the riots had been '*roused from their dormitories... and urged to march on the city's central square*'¹⁹. One of my lecturers was studying in Almaty at the time and they confirmed that the agitators distributed crates of vodka to the students.

I can only guess at who was provoking the students, the obvious suspects are Islamic or nationalist elements, perhaps working on behalf of the secret services of a foreign country. I've also heard that it might have been provoked by anti-communist elements working within the Komsomol. Either way I think it'll be difficult to know for sure as much of the evidence has disappeared.



Illustration 1: Jeltoqsan rioters on what I guess is the top of Furmanov street

The second major protest movement in Kazakhstan in the lead up to independence was the anti-nuclear protests against the Semipalatinsk testing ground in 1989. What I find fascinating about these is that the environmentalist demand was first rendered apolitical²⁰, and then reconstructed as a form of anti-Russian nationalism. The result of these protests was that the testing ground was closed in 1991, shortly before Kazakhstan declared its independence.

In the months following independence the new president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was somewhat reluctant to give up the nuclear material stored at Semipalatinsk. He required absolute guarantees that as a non-nuclear state Kazakhstan would not be targeted by any other nuclear state. This condition is implied in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty which Russia had signed²¹, and it helped that China became party to the treaty in 1992. However, there were early tensions with Russia, in 1993 Yeltsin ordered troops to be sent to the border with Kazakhstan to bolster their position in border negotiations. There was also the issue of former soviet troops which were stationed in Kazakhstan and remained loyal to Russia. This soured Russia-Kazakhstan relations in the early 1990s and did not give Kazakhstan much incentive to hand over its nuclear weapons to Russia. Eventually Kazakhstan capitulated and gave up its nuclear arsenal in 1995²², and this was extended to a region-wide Central Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone which came into force in 2009²³.

The last point to be made about independence is that Kazakhstan was the last republic to leave the Soviet Union. It declared its independence only 9 days before the union was formally dissolved. Although Nazarbayev was a reformist and came to power on the back of moderate nationalist sentiments he wanted the Soviet Union to remain intact. This is because, as shown in Table 1, the Central Asian republics were all very reliant on the Soviet Union. In the March 1991 referendum on whether or not to keep the Soviet Union was overwhelmingly approved by Central Asian states²⁴.

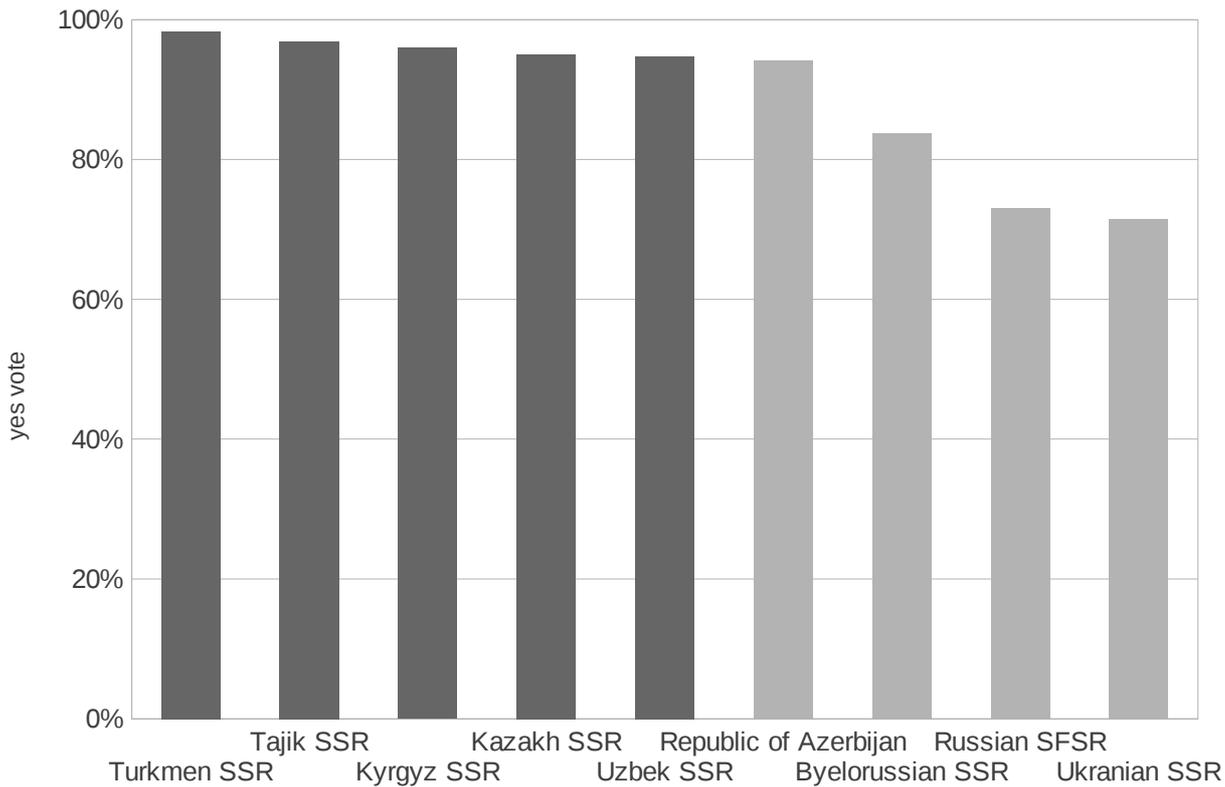


Table 3: results of the referendum on whether to keep the Soviet Union, the Central Asian Republics are highlighted in dark grey.

The scale of the support makes me very skeptical about the accuracy of the referendum. For example in Turkmenistan 98.26% of those asked supported the Soviet Union. I don't believe that can be correct and so the results are suspicious. Overlooking this slightly we still see a strong support for maintaining the Soviet Union from Central Asia when compared with a result of only 73% in Russia. Another explanation is Narzarbayev's pursuit of initiatives towards Eurasian integration such as the Customs Union of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan, the Eurasian Economic Union²⁵, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and, the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The important point to make here is that the current regime of Kazakhstan is to some extent traditionalist, it does not miss the loss of the Soviet Union for its socialist programme. It misses the Soviet Union because of the military and economic growth it brought to Kazakhstan.

Modern Kazakhstan

The early 1990s in Kazakhstan were marked by a shock-privatisation programme. This can be contrasted with Uzbekistan which took a gradual approach. Kazakhstan's economy was severely damaged by the privatisation, while Uzbekistan grew steadily in part thanks to consistently high cotton prices (cotton is one of Uzbekistan's main exports). Towards the 2000s the situation reversed, oil and mineral exports from Kazakhstan brought in huge revenues, and Uzbekistan's economy slowed down to a near crawl.

The specific nature of privatisation in Kazakhstan was very messy. In many cases large enterprises were sold off to old elites, or to people already set in managerial positions. Some people have called it 'crony capitalism'²⁶, a distorted form of capitalism where business is only at arms length from the corporate state. I agree that it's a form of capitalism, but I disagree that it's a distortion, or that it's a break from the 'normal' anglo-american form. Even if the major banks are owned by members of the president's clan, the bankers still act and behave like any other capitalist bank. Corruption in their case is just a natural feature of the system. The industries which have remained under state

ownership are oil and mineral companies, and anything to do with defence.

I don't have any statistics on the social impact of the privatisation, but I do have the personal testimony of having visited the poorer areas of Kazakhstan. The people in the rural areas starved when the collective farms were privatised, and since the soviet collapse the micro-districts surrounding Almaty have turned into slums. A school we visited had no gym equipment, and the textbooks dated back to the 1980s²⁷. The homeless come to bathe in the public fountains at night. There are hundreds of these examples which show that Kazakhstan is still dealing with the long term ramifications of capitalist restoration.

President Nazarbayev has a small cult of personality, which is being fostered slowly. Last year I witnessed the first 'President's Day' – a day dedicated to celebrating Nazarbayev. His portrait is conspicuously present on billboards and around public buildings. Nazarbayev does enjoy some popular support, but his repeated elections as president were almost certainly rigged. There were 14 reported cases of torture last year²⁸, which is shocking, but to put it in some context it's still not so much when compared to Uzbekistan or even Turkmenistan. The informal structures of soviet democracy have been either abolished completely or have been reformed such that they no longer represent popular interests.

Zhanozhen and the future for socialism in Kazakhstan

On the 15th December 2011, a brief scuffle broke out in the town of Zhanozhen. It was the culmination of a 7-month strike by oil workers over 'unpaid danger money'. In all those 7 months the oil workers were peaceful and worked with the official trade unions to resolve the issue, they occupied the town square in protest. The ironic twist is the violence occurred when the police tried to clear the square to prepare for a celebration of independence day/the Jeltoqsan riots which took place 25 years earlier²⁹. It's not clear exactly what happened, but the outcome was that 14 people were shot by the police. This underlines failure on several counts, the failure of the trade unions negotiate on behalf of their members, the failure of the government to intervene until it was too late, and the failure of the police to resolve the conflict without resorting to violence.

The government's response was to declare a state of emergency, isolating the town until they knew the police had regained control. They did also punish some managers of Ozenmunaigas who were responsible for the workers. Overall the Zhanozhen case shows the re-emergence of the working class with the agency to seriously challenge the bourgeois state.

In another example the prime minister, Karim Massymov, resigned unexpectedly in September, on the same day there was a power cut throughout Almaty, and some people set off fireworks next to the mayor's office. I remember that it was a tense atmosphere all through that day and nobody knew quite what was going on. A few hours later the power came back on and it was revealed that Massymov had been appointed the head of the presidential administration³⁰. The tension disappeared quickly, but it left behind an uneasy sense that some sort of coup had happened high up in the administration. Despite its strong bureaucratic authority the state is not as stable as it looks.

Lastly I have to come to how socialist politics plays out in Kazakhstan. There are two communist parties: the Communist Party of Kazakhstan and the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan³¹. The people's party was formed out of a split in the communist party in 2004. The people's party is a pro-government party which was probably formed as a way of neutralising support the communist party. In 2011 the government suspended the party, and this suspension was extended until the 12th December 2012. When I tried to visit the communist party it was a spent force, most of the major figures in the party were in hiding and they claimed they were under surveillance. The office of the communist party in Almaty is located in a building which also houses trade unions, along with some minor pressure groups³². I don't know what the relationship is between the communist party and the independent/government-affiliated trade unions, I didn't get a chance to ask them.

I did get to speak to someone called Alexander Kholodkov from the people's party and it is a growing party³³. I think they benefit greatly from their affiliation with the state, their komsomol took part in the official constitution day celebrations. Despite it's status as a semi-front group the people's party remains a socialist organisation, it just believes that socialism can be won through reform within the

current government. Kholodkov was particularly keen on the Nazarbayev's concept of the 'society of universal labour'³⁴ and while it includes some specific promises to improve the the standard of living it stops short of advocating a socialist solution.

There is not much friendship between the two parties, an attempt to unite them was unsuccessful and the people's party did not speak up to support the communist party when it was suspended. I personally side with the communist party and believe that the government of Kazakhstan in its present form is anticommunist and outright hostile to socialism. It is admittedly difficult to define the stance of the government because it is full of internal contradictions. The leadership is a soviet-educated group of bourgeois reformists which privatises the commanding heights of the economy during one crisis, then nationalise them during the next. The secular government promotes the islamic heritage of the country while fending off a minor islamic insurgency. It celebrates its role in the fight against fascism while simultaneously celebrating so-called nationalists who fought on the wrong side. As an oil rich state it builds truly monstrous road networks and then claims environmentalist credentials. It idolises the nomadic lifestyle and then imposes a relationship with the land which makes that life impossible. Not to mention its multilateral position which sees it swing between allegiance to Russia, China, then Europe, Turkey and the USA, all while insisting on its independence and selling planes to North Korea³⁵.

It is unlikely the communist party will become influential enough to pose any threat to the bourgeois state any time soon. For the moment it is pursuing a broad strategy of uniting progressive and democratic forces around it. It walks a tightrope between western-funded groups who want to provoke a colour revolution and islamists who would take advantage of any revolution to bring about an even more reactionary regime. There is a future for socialism in Kazakhstan, there is certainly labour unrest and class struggle, but the communist party is not in any position to capture state power at the moment.

The rest of Central Asia

Now I'm going to talk a little bit about the places I visited and learned about when abroad.

Xinjiang

This is a province in northwestern China which borders with Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan and Russia. It's surprisingly well developed, even in the rural areas, especially in the rural areas, when compared with the post-soviet states of Central Asia. A lot of Chinese policy towards Russia and Central Asia relies on promoting trade with Xinjiang. The China-Eurasia Expo, a minor regional trade fair, was attended last year by Wen Jiaobao³⁶, so China clearly places great importance on trade in the region.

I can't make too many theoretical judgements on the path of socialist development taken by China. What I can say is that there are no real slums in Urumqi, basic commodities such as rice or noodles are exceptionally cheap, and the people live pretty comfortably. The city has a thriving bazaar and several mosques, it's still very turkic in character³⁷.

I have a few concerns about the way the China Communist Youth League operates, namely that the young communists I spoke to all joined because it was a good career move. None of them spoke of any firm committment to socialism as their primary motive for joining, and I find that slightly worrying. I was however impressed when one of the young communists whose parents were farmers said that her brother is a surgeon³⁸. That's a big leap in social mobility from farmer to surgeon in one generation. She said that there was a huge amount of support available for farmers in the form of low-interest loans from rural credit co-operatives or from regional development schemes. Strangely enough there are actually some semi-nomadic farmers who graze their sheep on the steppe. I saw their yurts on the bus on the way into Urumqi. Alongside these there are huge agricultural complexes which farm crops in neat rows stretching out to the horizon.



Illustration 2: a display commemorating the Chinese People's Consultative Conference in the People's Square, Urumqi.

Kirgizstan

I visited Bishkek, formerly known as Fruze after the famous red army commander. It's a small city with few things to do for tourists, despite going through two colour revolutions the physical city has remained similar to how it was in the soviet era. The state museum is the best place to visit, it's full of monuments and paintings showing the history of the Soviet Union, and behind it there's a tall statue of Lenin. I understand that Kirgizstan suffers from the twin problem of being resource-poor and politically unstable.

Only a week or two before I visited some miners staged a protest in which they scaled the fence around the white house³⁹, demanding the nationalisation of a gold mine^{40 41}. There was a 'Tulip revolution' in 2005 which broadly removed the generally pro-Russian government and replaced it with a generally pro-USA one. Then in 2010 there was another revolution which reversed the process and replaced the pro-USA government with a pro-Russian one. Every time this happens Russia and Kazakhstan have sent observers, but they've never directly interfered with the country, at least as far as I know. Along with the old soviet monuments some streets are adorned with the spray-painted hammer and sickle, and other communist graffiti. I get the feeling the citizens of Kirgizstan are much more politically active than those in Kazakhstan.

There is a US transit centre in Manas which is a constant source of controversy amongst the population. On the international level China is very concerned by the base, as it's dangerously close to their border. The US maintains that the 'military base' is only a 'transit centre' and it's only there as a refuelling point for planes on their way to Afghanistan. Kazakhstan has cordial neighbourly relations with Kirgizstan, however Kirgizstan's porous borders means militants from Tajikistan/Afghanistan use the country to get into China/Kazakhstan. It's for this reason that there's very strict border controls on the Chinese side and well-fortified military outposts on the Kazakh-Kirgiz mountain border. China has a lot of economic influence in Kirgizstan thanks to its tendency to flood the country with investment.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan went through two periods of civil war in the 1990s. It relies heavily on Russia, it was the last country to stop using the soviet ruble and its economy was kept afloat by military aid from Russia. Today it's still one of the poorest countries in the former Soviet Union and it struggle to contain the conflict in Afghanistan from spilling over into its territory. It also has to deal with simmering unrest in the Pamir mountains which flares up every once in a while.

Uzbekistan

I've already gone through a comparison of Uzbekistan's 'gradualist' economy when compared to Kazakhstan's privatised market economy. Most of Uzbekistan's economy is still under state control, but this doesn't stop it from being a major US ally. It spent some time as part of the anti-Russian GUAM bloc and is very reticent when it comes to Russian-led integration initiatives. Its relationship with the US suffered a little after the Andijan incident, it kicked the US out of the air base at Karshi-Khanabad and recalled military officers receiving military training in the USA. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is a constant threat and the Uzbekistani government sometimes uses it to justify funding from the USA under the need to combat terrorism. I'm not sure how great a danger the Islamic Movement really poses.

Uzbekistan is a very authoritarian state, having previously been accused of boiling dissidents alive. It's also very good at telecommunications and it provides around 90% of the internet access for Afghanistan⁴², I don't know why.

Turkmenistan

It holds an official policy of neutrality, though it's always implicitly pro-Russian and pro-Iranian. On the Soviet collapse the Communist Party of Turkmenistan superficially changed its name to the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan and made almost no privatisations whatsoever. Apart from a brief experiment with an Agrarian Party the Democratic Party remains the sole legal party. The state is the most extensive and authoritarian in the region and second only to North Korea in the world. The former leader Saparmurat Niyazov maintained a cult of personality and developed an official semi-ideological line of march for the country in a book called the Ruhnama. Published in two volumes the Ruhnama is a mix of religious codes and moral teachings from Niyazov. It can be compared to Gaddafi's Green Book as a fusion of Islam and social justice, not quite as strong as Islamic socialism. I have not yet found a printed english translation but I do know they exist somewhere, I was advised to ask at the embassy of Turkmenistan in London.

Turkmenistan is very rich in gas and it uses revenues from this to fund continuation of the soviet welfare state. Citizens in Turkmenistan get a range of services free at the point of use, such as electricity, heating or water. This helps to pacify the population and from what I heard from the Turkmen students living in Kazakhstan it's nice place to live. It does of course have a terrible human rights problem and it's difficult to tell what's really going on in the country because it's so secretive and enclosed.

Conclusion

Overall the USA tries to drag attention down to Afghanistan and away from China and Russia, it balances democracy promotion with its own strategic interests. China tries to maintain stability in the region and hopes to use it as a market for Xinjiang. Russia sees Central Asia as its own backyard and insists on military dominance, but its economy is too weak to subsidise and sustain the region on its own, so it relies on China to provide infrastructure and investment.

The actual interests of Central Asia are often forgotten in the narrative of international relations. This is partly because the region has so many internal completing influences aligned one way or another to external actors. The process of capitalist restoration in most of the region has been messy and in some cases it's still going on or halted mid-way. As to whether the process can be reversed and whether socialism can return; of course I think it can. However, we have to note that there are already agents of imperialism and religious fundamentalism firmly entrenched in the region and the future could get much worse before it gets better.

In order to inspire the people the new progressive and socialist forces deserve to use their soviet past as an example while making their own way into the future.

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+ another generally useful resource is the 'Soviet Booklets' series on the soviet republics. English translations of these can be found on Archive.org at <http://archive.org/search.php?query=publisher%3A%22London%3B+Soviet+Booklets%22>