

On the Road to Insurrection: The Soviet Nationalities Problem, the Kazakhs, and Zheltoksan in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This article places the first instance of ethnic unrest in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, the 17-20 December 1986 Alma-Ata events, in historical perspective by examining the Soviet nationalities (national minorities) problem and 300 years of previous Russo-Kazakh interaction in Central Asia. Besides, utilizing both archival sources and interviews, the author specifically shows why Mikhail Gorbachev's 16 December replacement of First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (CPK), Dinmukhamed Kunaev, with the Russian Gennadi Kolbin was viewed as a political and ethnic challenge by many young Kazakhs—who showed up the next day on Brezhnev (Republic) Square in Alma-Ata (Almaty) to protest the decision. After years of Soviet repressive measures such as Stalinist collectivization and purges, Khrushchev's Virgin Lands program, and the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Polygon, and the destruction of the Aral Sea, the Kazakhs constituted a minority population in their republic. During Leonid Brezhnev's and Kunaev's rule, however, Kazakhs began to gain ground in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR) both demographically and politically—a fact which the author documents with Soviet census data and ground-breaking archival data relating to the ethnic composition of the CPK—but Brezhnev's death in 1982 and the rise of Yuri Andropov and Gorbachev marked the beginning of an attack on the Kunaev political machine, culminating in the appointment of Kolbin. When tens of thousands of young Kazakhs subsequently took to the streets of Alma-Ata, then, the author concludes that it not only marked the beginning of an independent Kazakhstan—but also the beginning of the end for of the Soviet Union five years later—as Kazakhs were first to exercise their right to have an independent say in the governing of their republic.

Keywords

Alma-Ata, Brezhnev, Gorbachev, Kazakhs, Kazakhstan, Kolbin, *Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic*, Kunaev, Nationalism / Nationalities, Perestroika, Russians, Soviet Central Asia, Zheltoksan

Introduction

When the Soviet flag was lowered for the last time in December 1991 the world not only witnessed the ignominious end of the last great European empire, but also the failure of the ideology of Soviet Communism. This momentous event was not an overnight occurrence, however, but came as the culmination of decades of Russian and Soviet injustices, Brezhnev-era cynicism and stagnation, and Gorbachev-era ethnic and

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political unrest in the Union republics—especially those located in the Soviet South and Baltic regions. Thus, the seemingly monolithic edifice of the USSR did not fall from without but imploded from within as its constituent republics, one-by-one, decided to brave the uncharted waters of national independence. Though the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR) was the last Soviet republic to officially declare independence, the 17-20 December 1986 Alma-Ata demonstrations (also known as *Zheltoksan/Jeltoqsan*, or “December”) predated Gorbachev-era outbursts in other parts of the Union. Thus, when thousands of young Kazakh students and workers demonstrated in the streets of their capital, the Gorbachev regime was shaken to its foundations as Kazakhs articulated their grievances in a public forum. The Alma-Ata demonstrations were caused by the Soviet nationalities' problem, ethnic grievances arising by a centuries-long process of Russo-Kazakh interaction which included Stalinist depredations and the Virgin Lands, and pro-Kazakh policies on the part of Leonid Brezhnev and his ally Dinmukhamed Kunaev which the Andropov and Gorbachev regimes seemed intent on reversing. Indeed, the protests also marked the inauguration of a five-year period of spiraling unrest that signaled the failure of Soviet nationalities policy and Gorbachev's attempt to revitalize the Union under *glasnost* and *perestroika*. This article will examine historical, demographic, and political factors leading up to Zheltoksan, and will situate the occurrence of the December protests within the wider expanse of Russo-Kazakh relations and the decline of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Nationalities Problem

The Soviet nationalities (national minorities) dilemma was arguably the main factor that contributed to the collapse of the USSR in December 1991.¹ The roots of the nationalities problem extend back to the years directly following the First World War. At this time, Lenin and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) reached a strategic compromise with several of the Union's larger nationality groups, bestowing a semblance of political legitimacy upon them by creating national republics in a Soviet federal system.² Though Lenin hoped to eventually replace the federal system with a French-style centralized government, he had no intentions of forcing the cultural assimilation of the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union (Rywkin 1990:142).³ Stalin, however, had different plans for dealing with the Soviet nationalities. During the 1930s and 1940s the emergence of the New Soviet Man (*sovetskiy chelovek*), who was to be politically Marxist, but culturally and linguistically Russified, was stressed. In 1938 Russian was made compulsory in Soviet schools (Duncan 1990: 152-54). To ensure the success of his political program, Stalin tapped into Russian nationalism, which, according to Hugh Seton-Watson, at the time constituted "the only effective means available to the Russian politicians of the Right to mobilize popular support" (Seton-Watson 1977: 187). Thus, the Soviet republics were bound to Russia, all ethnic claims and disputes were labeled as manifestations of “anti-Soviet feeling”, and the Soviet government attempted to draw interior borders in such a way as to divide-and-conquer subject nationalities (Duncan 1990: 158-59).⁴

Unfortunately for Moscow, however, the very structure of the Soviet federalized system had already provided a strong outlet for nationalistic expression. Besides, the “mobilizational aspect” inherent in the Soviet system, which emphasized education,

urbanization, and institution building, also helped to foster ethnic cohesion (Gleason 1990: 20). Thus, Stalin's heavy-handed attempt to Russify the non-Slavic Soviet population under the guise of socialism, while seemingly effective, created an elementary socio-political dichotomy, or contradiction, in Soviet society. Stalin's death in March 1953, the eruptions of nationalism in Eastern Europe during the mid-1950s, and Khrushchev's anti-Stalin speech at the 20th Party Congress in 1956 culturally and politically reinvigorated the Soviet non-Russian nationalities. Officially, the CPSU continued to assert that the nationalities problem had been "solved" right up until the time of Gorbachev.⁵ During the 1970s, however, Leonid Brezhnev softened the Party line and began speaking of *edinstvo* ("unity"), among the various Soviet national groups instead of using the more offensive Stalinist terminology of the cultural *sliianie* ("fusion") of nationalities (Rywkin 1990: 141).⁶

Soviet Central Asia,⁷ though lauded by the Khrushchev and Brezhnev regimes as the showplace of the success of Soviet cultural homogenization, would eventually become a painful ethnic thorn in Moscow's side. In 1924, the Soviet central government created new administrative divisions among the multilingual, multicultural peoples that inhabited the former People's Republics of Turkestan, Bukhara, and Khorezm. On Stalin's recommendation, political boundaries were drawn utilizing European-style criteria, including homogeneity of language and ethnicity. The imposed, artificial boundaries created lasting tensions between the widely dispersed peoples of the region, who had formerly been separated only by deserts, not solid borders because all the new republics were home to significant populations of non-indigenous nationalities (Jukes, Nourzhanov, and Alexandrov 1998: 249-50). In ending the former tradition of ethnic diversity, tribalism, and multilingualism, however, the new boundaries also did something the Soviets had not anticipated: They created "preconditions for the rise of homogenous nations" (Swietochowski 1990: 229).

The Russian Civil War and Stalinist depredations such as collectivization (1929-33) and the Great Purge (1934-38) had a particularly harsh impact on Soviet Central Asia—so much so that between 1920 and 1945 it is estimated that at least one-quarter of the region's population died violently (Rashid 1994: 34). The former Soviet policy of *rastsvet* ("flourishing"), or tolerance of Central Asian culture, came under attack for "encouraging local chauvinism and nationalist deviations" in the early 1930s, and was phased out. Thus, the Islamic religion was discouraged, alphabet reforms changed the script of transliteration from Latin to Cyrillic, and migration and intermarriage between natives and Slavs were officially encouraged (Swietochowski 1990: 231). The Khrushchev years witnessed a continuing erosion of Central Asian culture as 1,000,000 Slavic settlers moved into the northern part of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR) during the Virgin Lands Program (1954-60) and Moscow stepped up attacks against Islam in 1955 and 1958 (Rashid 1994: 34). Though Moscow fostered modernization in Central Asia by instituting a mass-based educational system, modern communication systems, state-run social and health care, and industrialization, educational and cultural policies were geared toward Russification and imposed by the Soviet government. (Rakowsa-Harmstone 1991: ix)

Despite decades of Russification and Sovietization, during the 1960s and 1970s the indigenous peoples of Central Asia made a cultural and demographic comeback, and, in so doing, made a mockery of Soviet nationalities policy. Due to a revival of Muslim influence and more modern healthcare, the birthrate of indigenous Central Asian populations began to outstrip that of the Russians. Thus, after 1960 the Russian nationality's share of the regional population began to decline (Rakowsa-Harmstone 1991: xi)⁸. Moreover, in 1960s several strong republican leaders were able to circumvent the parallel Russian-dominated bureaucracy that had existed in the region since the days of Stalin and build their patronage networks. These included first secretaries Sharaf Rashidov (r. 1959-83, Uzbek SSR), Turdakun Usabaliev (r. 1961-85, Kyrgyz SSR), Mukhamednazor Gapurov (r. 1969-86, Turkmen SSR), Jabbar Rassulov (r. 1956-82, Tajik SSR)—and Kunaev, who served as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (CPK) from 1964-82. Such indigenous leaders flourished during the corruption of the Brezhnev era when the CPSU finally compromised with the nationalities by tolerating the entrenchment of local satrapies so long as republican leaders remained outwardly subservient to Moscow. This de facto political independence, coupled with a great increase in the native educated population, helped to further strengthen political and cultural self-awareness and promised enhanced career opportunities for young Central Asians.

The Kazakhs in Historical Perspective

According to legend, the Kazakhs are descendants of 300 warriors (dzhigits) who left their homeland in ancient times and, as part of a rite of passage, settled on the Asian steppe. Founded by the sons of the mythical Alash (Alach) who were supposedly the first Kazakhs, these three hundred of warriors, or zhuz/juz ("hordes"), served as the basis for the modern Kazakh tribal division into Great, Small and Middle hordes. Kazakh society was, above all, nomadic. Each tribe possessed its genealogy of real or mythical ancestors and the tribes were subdivided into auls ("villages"), which were led by wealthy and/or powerful men known as bais ("chiefs"). A khan, who had been elected from the descendants of Chingis Khan, presided over each of the three hordes. An important chapter of Kazakh history was also written by the Mongols, who conquered the steppes in the 13th century and added significant linguistic, legal, and political customs to Kazakh culture. After the Mongols came to the Muslims. In contrast to their sedentary (or sart) neighbors such as the Uzbeks to the south, the Islamic religion came late to the Kazakhs. Because the hordes were not completely converted until the 18th century, the Kazakhs' practice of Islam was colored by elements from their pre-Islamic past (including pantheism), and the Kazakhs never developed their philosophical school (such as Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi sect) or built an indigenous Islamic center of learning (Olcott 2002: 209).⁹

During the 15th and 16th centuries, the Kazakhs comprised a political union or khanate which was formed from the various tribes and was geographically centered around the Chu river and Betpak-Dala desert (currently south-central Kazakhstan). According to Soviet-era historians, this was the era when the first truly Kazakh khan, Janibek, appeared (George, 2001: 6).¹⁰ The Kazakhs, however, quickly found themselves

threatened from the east by Kalmyk Mongols, who pushed into their territory during the 17th and 18th centuries. This crisis pushed the Kazakh khans into a fateful embrace of the Russians, who they viewed more favorably than the Mongols. At first, the Russians were only interested in Kazakhstan as a commercial route to the lucrative markets of Persia and India and thus were somewhat tardy in taking advantage of Kazakh appeals for assistance. In the 1630s and 1640s, Cossacks constructed the first fortifications along the Ural River. These were followed by a string of forts stretching from Orenburg to Omsk in the first half of the 18th century—to which the Kazakhs again appealed for protection in 1731 and 1740. Even after the Russians agreed to protect their Central Asian neighbors, however, the resulting arrangement was still flexible enough to ensure a fair degree of political and cultural autonomy (Olcott, 1995).

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, expansionist-minded monarchs such as Catherine II and Alexander I began pushing southward into Kazakh lands. Catherine's concern about rising Chinese influence in Central Asia translated into a more aggressive Tsarist policy vis-à-vis the Kazakhs, and Alexander I (r. 1801-1825) decided to annex the Small and Middle hordes. After putting down a seven-year rebellion led by Sultan Kenisary Qasimov in 1845, the Russians conquered the Great Horde as well, and by mid-century, the Kazakhs had been completely subjugated under Tsarist rule. The Russians viewed the Kazakhs as standing in the way of their expanding empire and believed the nomadic herdsmen were “wasting” the land by grazing their herds on it. Thus, an inevitable war of cultures between the Christian Russian peasant-farmers and the Muslim Kazakh steppe herdsmen lay in store for the future (Crowe 1998: 399-401).

With pacification came colonization: In the two decades between 1896 and 1916, 1,500,000 Slavic settlers moved into northern Kazakhstan (then known as “Turkestan”) to farm the steppes, taking control of vast tracts of Kazakh grazing lands in the process. In 1905, the Kazakh elite used the workers' uprising in St. Petersburg to press the government for demands involving the rights of Muslim clergy and Kazakh language instruction in primary schools (Olcott 1995: 411). In 1916, Kazakh bitterness exploded to the surface when a massive revolt broke out after Nicholas II attempted to conscript 390,000 Central Asians for wartime labor service (Crowe 1998: 401).¹¹ In 1918, the Alash Orda, Kazakhstan's independent government during the Russian Civil War which governed the steppes from December 1917 to the middle of 1919, sided with the Bolsheviks because of the withdrawal of White military support and Lenin's more lenient attitude towards the nationalities of the former Russian Empire (Crowe 1998: 401-02).¹² Thus, the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was formed in August 1920 and much of the former Alash leadership attended the first Constituent Congress of Soviets in the Kazakh ASSR in October (Rashid 1994: 114).¹³ Tragically, it was also during this period that the Civil War and famines caused by Bolshevik grain requisitioning resulted in the deaths of 750,000 to 1,000,000 Kazakhs (Crowe 1998: 402).¹⁴

Compared to Lenin, Stalin had very different policies in mind: During the late 1920s and early 1930s, former Alash members of the Kazakh government were purged by the CPSU because of their resistance to collectivization, and labor camps (part of the GULAG system) were set up to house political prisoners in the republics (Rashid 1994: 104). During Stalinist collectivization, the loss of livestock and human life was

proportionately greater in Kazakhstan than in any other Soviet republic: Approximately 80 percent of the Kazakh herd was decimated and 1,000,000 to 1,500,000 Kazakhs perished from either starvation or resisting Party attempts to organize them into farms.¹⁵ According to Martha Brill Olcott, the collectivization drive effectively ended Kazakh pastoral nomadism as 60 percent of the rural population previously living in auls was collectivized (Olcott 1995: 181, 185-87).¹⁶ Then came Kazakhstan's role as the Soviet Botany Bay: Ethno-national groups relocated there included tens of thousands of Germans and Poles in 1936, and Greeks, Koreans, Jews, Crimean Tatars, and other peoples in subsequent years. In 1944, nearly half a million Chechens and Ingush (the largest single group of exiles) were also forcibly exiled to the KSSR—but most of these had returned home by 1957-58—leaving the Slavic population as the main competitor for power.¹⁷ During the Second World War, Kazakh soldiers were placed on every major front. Kazakhstan also served as a haven for refugees, evacuees, and factories from embattled European Russia, and coal production in the KSSR tripled as the Soviets began tapping the vast mineral reserves in the republic for the first time (Holm-Hansen 1990: 188-89). In 1947, years of neglect of Soviet agriculture on the part of the central government caused a major famine in Ukraine. Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev proposed to solve the country's agricultural problems by plowing up millions of hectares of "under-utilized" land on the Kazakh steppes. To accomplish Khrushchev's grandiose scheme, Moscow, during the 1950s, moved almost 1,000,000 Slavic settlers into the northern territories of the KSSR. Thus, the rigors of Soviet life had cut such a swath through the Kazakh population that by the late 1950s—after the great influx of settlers during the Virgin Lands program—the Kazakhs constituted a minority population in their republic.¹⁸

Under Leonid Brezhnev, the industrialization of Kazakhstan's northern oblasts continued and more scientific methods—including fertilization, crop rotation, irrigation, and mechanization—were applied to agriculture and livestock breeding in the KSSR (Olcott 1995: 227-29, 237). Due to his service as First Secretary of the CPK from 1954-56, Brezhnev felt a special affinity for the KSSR and enjoyed a close friendship with Kunaev to the end of his life. The Kazakhs, however, paid a huge environmental price for the enhanced role of their republic in national affairs under Stalin's successors: The strip cropping of crops and fallow, long practiced in North America to help control wind erosion of sandy soils, was virtually unknown in the Kazakh Virgin Lands during the 1950s and early 1960s, as was the planting of shelterbelts of trees to stop soil erosion (Kahan 1961).¹⁹ Thus, during the early and mid-1960s, a Soviet "Dust Bowl" occurred: Wind storms destroyed 10,000,000 acres of cropland in the KSSR and damaged 29,000,000 more—approximately half of the Kazakh Virgin Lands (Feshbackand Friendly 1992 cited in Christian 1997: 366). During Brezhnev's tenure, improved methods of soil conservation were instituted and the use of herbicides increased, but dust storms persisted in northern Kazakhstan and Western Siberia into the 1980s (Craumer 1990: 185, 190).

Kazakhstan also had the dubious distinction of serving as the focal point for Soviet nuclear weapons research: In 1947, the Soviet Ministry of Defense chose the northern oblast of Semipalatinsk as a nuclear test site due to its sparse population, good transportation network, and distant location from the Soviet border. Accordingly, the

central government appropriated over 18,000 square kilometers (over 11,000 square miles) of Kazakh ancestral lands in an oblast that housed the birthplace of the famous Kazakh poet, Abai. The native population was summarily evicted from their land, and in the space of 40 years (1949-89), the Soviet government conducted 470 under and above-ground tests—including Sakharov's 600-megaton thermonuclear bomb in 1953 (George 2001: 191-92).²⁰ Only once, in 1953, was the surrounding population evacuated. Radioactive contamination soon seeped into the soil, water reserves, and pasture lands: The water, milk, meat, fruit, and vegetables of the region became contaminated and the population suffered from a variety of related illnesses, which included birth defects in children. In 1989, the Kazakh poet Olzhas Suleimenov founded the internationally acclaimed Nevada-Semipalatinsk Anti-Nuclear Movement in protest and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev permanently shut down the test site in August 1991 (George 2001: 191-92, 198, 201, 204).

Even more damaging than Semipalatinsk was the destruction of the Aral Sea, which ranks as the greatest man-made ecological disaster of all time. During the 1930s, the Soviets began diverting water that had been flowing into the Aral Sea from its two major tributaries, the Syr Amur and the Syr Darya rivers, to extend cotton production in the region through irrigation. Due to the siphoning off of the incoming water, the level of the Aral Sea began dropping steadily. Water quality was further degraded by Soviet industrial waste and the overuse of agricultural fertilizers. By the 1980s, the once rich commercial fishing and shipping industry of the Aral Sea had been decimated, and the surrounding region had been turned into a desert by the high winds that whipped up salt and pesticides from the exposed sea bed; health problems among the population included a sharp increase in infant mortality, esophageal cancers, and typhoid, outbreaks of viral hepatitis, congenital deformation among children and waterborne diseases. Moscow attempted to placate the population by promising relief in the form of Brezhnev's even more grandiose "Siberian River Diversion Project," or Sibaral, meant to save the Aral Sea and boost agricultural production. In August 1986, however, the CPSU Central Committee put the project on hold, citing its prohibitive cost. In June 1990, the Central Asian republics made their last appeal for Moscow's help to combat the disaster by signing a joint declaration requesting moral and financial support (Jukes, Nourzhanov and Alexandrov 1998: 356-59, 363, 366-67).²¹

Ironically, during the same period, the Soviet government was despoiling the environment in the KSSR, Moscow's grip on the republic began slipping. As has previously been stated, Brezhnev compromised with his Central Asian subordinates by allowing them a great deal of freedom at the republican level in exchange for their support of the policies of the central government. Thus, during the 1960s and 1970s, First Secretary of the CPK and Brezhnev confidante Kunaev was successful in reinstating a clan-based patronage system in the KSSR, and Kazakh population growth outstripped that of the Slavic population.²² Even as the provincial clout of the non-Russian indigenous elite was flourishing during Brezhnev's tenure, however, according to Michael Watson the central government in Moscow "became more of a Russian preserve" with Russians predominantly staffing the Central Committee ministries, army, and KGB (Duncan 1990: 156-57). When Yuri Andropov came to power in November 1982 seeking to fight

corruption and address economic stagnation by decentralizing the Soviet economy, his ascension, according to Olivier Roy, "translated into a serious crisis between Moscow and the Muslim republics," because Andropov's policies directly threatened the Brezhnev-era republican leadership or political status quo. In 1983, for instance, the "Uzbek mafia"—Uzbek Party higher-ups in collaboration with Brezhnev's son-in-law who was accused of cheating the government out of a fortune by falsifying the yields of cotton harvests—was very publicly broken and two Muslims were removed from the Politburo (Roy 2000: 125-26).²³ According to Ilya Zemtsov, Andropov even tried to roll back the clock by replacing the term “national republic” with “union republic”, but either was unsuccessful in his attempt or simply did not live long enough to enforce his new policies (Zemtsov 1985 cited in Gleason 1990: 16).

The Kazakh Reconquista

Despite the shift in politics in Moscow, Soviet census data relating to the ethnic composition of the population of the KSSR and Party statistical information regarding the percentage of Kazakh candidate and full members of the CPK (Tables 1 and 2) clearly illustrate how the Kazakhs were beginning to demographically and politically “recover” their republic under Kunaev. For example, in 1959, twenty years after Stalinist collectivization and during the sixth year of the Virgin Lands, the Kazakhs—who had made up over 40% of the population in 1939—constituted only 30% of the people of their republic. By 1979, however, the Kazakhs had rebounded to 36% of the population, and the Russian and Slavic (Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian) percentage of the population had been falling for some time. And, on the political front, the percentage of Kazakh candidate and full members of the CPK—both of which were dropping as Brezhnev and Kunaev came to power in 1964—also rebounded soon after, with Kazakhs constituting almost 50% of the candidate and 40% of full members of the CPK at the time of Brezhnev's death in 1982. Indeed, when the long-serving Kunaev was dismissed, this more favorable socio-political construct is likely the only one that most young Kazakhs had ever known—motivating them to take to the streets of Alma-Ata in protest. The effects of Andropov's rise to power on Kazakh political fortunes in the KSSR is also clearly visible in the data relating to the percentage of Kazakh candidate members of the CPK—which began to drop in 1983 for the first time in almost 20 years—and the increase in the percentage of Kazakh full members, which slowed appreciably in 1985-86 when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and began to directly target Kunaev.²⁴

Table 1: The KSSR by Nationality, 1939-79 (Kazakhstan v tsifrah 1987: 5)

Year of Soviet Census	KAZAKH	RUSSIAN	SLAVIC
1939 : Stalinist Purges	42.4	45	57.6
1959 : Virgin Lands, 6 th year	30	42.7	52
1970 : Kunaev in power 6 yrs.	32.6	42.4	51.1
1979 : Kunaev in power 15 yrs.	36	40.8	48.2

(Note: Boldface type indicates a decrease from the previous census.)

Table 2: Percentage of Kazakh Candidate and Full Members of the CPK (VKP(b) v tsifrah 1948: 43; KPSS v tsifrah 1954-87 in RGANI)

Year	Candidate Members	Full Members
1947: Post WWII	not available	40.2
1953: Virgin Lands begins	n/a	40.6
1954: Virgin Lands, 1st year	n/a	39.9
1958: Virgin Lands, 5th year	33.3	36.6
1964: Brezhnev/Kunaev rule	29.5	33
1965: Kunaev in power 1 yr.	32.3	32.8
1969: Kunaev in power 5 yrs.	38.7	34.3
1974: Kunaev in power 10 yrs.	41.6	36.2
1979: Kunaev in power 15 yrs.	45.6	38.3
1982: End of Brezhnev rule	46.9	39.4
1983: Andropov in power	46.2	39.7
1985: Gorbachev in power	42.9	40.3
1986: Kunaev "retired"	40.3	40.5

(Note: Boldface type indicates a decrease from the previous year.)

And so, when Kunaev was replaced with a Russian and outsider, Gennadi Kolbin, on 16 December 1986, young Kazakhs viewed it as a slap in the face and were ready to take on the Soviet establishment—and interviews conducted by the author in 2001 bear this out: Zheltoksan activist Rasul Khan Kudaibirgenov, for example, said that he responded by protesting the “*diktatura Moskvu*” (“dictatorship of Moscow”) he felt the decision represented.²⁵ Professor Kanasha Satpaeva further elucidated that Gorbachev was mainly to blame for what happened next on Brezhnev Square because he replaced Kunaev with a *stranger* from Ulyanovsk (Kolbin) who was unfamiliar with the language, history, or traditions of the Kazakhs.²⁶ In addition, Nurtai Sabil’ianov told the author that young Kazakhs met on the square because Moscow had degraded their “national dignity” and encroached upon their right to national self-determination.²⁷ Umit Basmanova, for her part, described the Alma-Ata events as a “demonstration of people demanding their rights”—maintaining that nobody talked students into protesting or organized them (as would later be alleged by the Soviet government)—and Abdrakhman Umataev described the decision to go to the square as sudden and spontaneous, with students simply saying “Let’s go there.”²⁸ Finally, Dr. Bayan Besbaeva told the author she was sitting in an English-language class on the 16th when the announcement came over the radio that Kolbin had replaced Kunaev. According to Besbaeva, the instantaneous reaction among students and scholars was utter disbelief. People asked questions such as “*Kak tax?*”, “*Pochemu Kolbin?*”, “*Pochemu ne Kazakha?*” (“How can this be?”; “Why Kolbin?”; “Why not a Kazakh?”).²⁹ Thus, in the context of centuries of Russian colonization and decades of Sovietization, when faced with the perceived threat of a policy of renewed Russification on the part of Moscow, thousands of young Kazakhs—students and workers—took to the streets of Alma-Ata and other population centers in the USSR in what would become the first (but not the last) major instance of ethnic unrest during the

Gorbachev regime.³⁰

Unfortunately for Andropov and his protégé, Gorbachev, then, Central Asians in general and Kazakhs, in particular, viewed both the anti-corruption drive and perestroika within the overall context of 300-year Russo/Soviet-native relations; or, as simply another means by which the central government was attempting to re-impose both Russian culture and political domination on their republics. Perestroika also posed a direct economic threat to the South, which had benefited from special attention on the part of Moscow during the Brezhnev years, especially following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Gorbachev's attempts to withdraw from the Third World in general—and from Afghanistan in particular—coupled with the low regard Moscow had for Muslims in general spelled trouble for the central government. In November 1986, when Gorbachev blasted Islam during a speech in Tashkent but made no mention of Christianity, Central Asians once again felt they had been singled out; what Roy terms as the "psychological break between Asiatic and Moscow *nomenklaturas*" that had begun during the Andropov years continued into the Gorbachev era, and many Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Turkmens, and Tajiks viewed both men as Russian nationalists bent on destroying the Brezhnev-era "reliance on cadres" (political arrangement) that had allowed for gains in the rights of the Soviet nationalities (Roy 2000: 126-29).³¹ And so, when Gorbachev replaced Kunaev, the Kazakhs responded as if the move constituted a direct challenge to their prerogatives within the KSSR and the stage was set for the Alma-Ata events/demonstrations/protests³² or a series of occurrences that has been described by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, in their groundbreaking study *Dynamics of Contention*, as "contentious politics"—a major ethnopolitical confrontation between the Kazakhs and Moscow that would shape the last five years of Soviet history (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001: 255).³³

Notes

1. Edward Allworth defines the Soviet nationality question as "a disequilibrium that occurs when dissatisfaction overwhelms the satisfaction of the Soviet nationalities collectively and, at certain times, individually, in their immediate as well as extended environments throughout the state." Allworth further explains: "A widespread problem stems from the tension that persists between the presence of ethnic inequality in the country on the one hand, and ideological and policy requirements for its eradication on the other (Allworth 1990: 27-29)."
2. Gregory Gleason describes the distinguishing feature of Leninist Soviet nationality policy as the "tactical manipulation of local national sentiment" by the Bolsheviks, who granted "political recognition to ethno-territorial groups...in exchange for political support(Gleason1990: 11, 14, 20)."According to Peter Duncan, the Bolsheviks granted statehood to the main nationalities of the Russian Empire to "undercut minority nationalism and encourage the nationalities to cooperate within the federal framework of the USSR." Lenin, like Marx and Engels, "favored the existence of a single unitary party for the workers or a particular state, irrespective of nationality," and "believed the right of nations to self-determination was subordinate to the class struggle (Duncan 1990: 152-54)."
3. According to Grigol Ubiria, Lenin's original korenizatsiia (or "rooting") campaign was "aimed at popularizing the Bolshevik regime among non-Russian peoples through the affirmative action programs, which was thought to give the Soviet power a 'native' character and application in every political-administrative unit in the Soviet state." "Put simply," Ubiria continues, "the goal was to make each non-Russian group within the USSR believe that the Soviet regime was not alien, imposed upon them by force, but rather an indigenous one, serving their national interests equally with those of others, including the Russians (Ubiria2018: 148)."

4. According to Olivier Roy, Moscow's game of *divida et impera* included such tactics as "manipulating political factionalism" among the respective parties of the Central Asian republics, establishing patron-client relationships between "key members of the apparatus in Moscow...and the leaders of the republics," and "encouraging identification with the nationality and individual Soviet republic [as opposed to larger, more dangerous entities such as Pan-Islam or pan-Turkism] as well as loyalty to the Soviet Union as a whole (Roy 2000: 103-04)."
5. Both Khrushchev and Brezhnev, in 1961 and 1971, respectively, declared the nationalities problem was no longer a challenge for the Soviet government (Rashid 1994: 35).
6. Rywkin examines various code words used to define Soviet policy goals with reference to nationality affairs, including *rastsvet*, or the "flourishing" of separate cultures within the confines of Soviet "political-economic integration"; *sblizhenie*, or the "rapprochement" of different cultures leading to a higher state of cohesiveness; and *sliianie*, or the total "fusion" of all Soviet cultures. The author views the proliferation of such terms that took place during the 1970s as a sign of compromise between Brezhnev and the nationalities, and notes that the "old triad of 'flourishing,' 'rapprochement' and 'fusion' collapsed completely with the advent of *glasnost* (Rywkin 1990: 139-44, 147)." According to Ubiria, *sliianie* remained a "distant" objective of the CPSU, but Brezhnev (unlike Khrushchev) chose not to focus on it (Ubiria 2018: 235).
7. Soviet Central Asia is (roughly) defined as the five republics of the Kazakh, Uzbek, Turkmen, Tajik, and Kyrgyz SSR's. The region was fully divided into these particular administrative units by 1936.
8. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Central Asian population of the USSR grew three to four times as fast as the ethnic Russian population, despite countermeasures by Moscow such as the introduction of sex education, a propaganda campaign to reduce family size, and a wider availability of contraceptives. (Lubin 1991: 36, 42-43, 58). For an in-depth analysis of Soviet attempts to get Central Asian young people to relocate outside of their republics through labor migration, see also: (Fierman 1991: 255-83).
9. See also: (George 2001: 4-5).
10. Crowe also mentions that at this time the Kazakhs fully emerged as independent people from "under the Mongol shroud (Crowe 1998: 397)."
11. Olcott adds that "virtually all sectors" of Kazakh society united against the government in the revolt: some reacted to the economic hardships brought about by wartime and others simply did not wish to help the "infidel" Russians fight their Turkish brothers in the Ottoman Empire (Olcott 1995: 123-24).
12. See also: (Olcott 1995: 129).
13. The Kazakh ASSR became the full Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936.
14. See also: (Olcott 1995: 158-59).
15. For a firsthand account of how Stalinist collectivization affected ordinary Kazakhs, see (Shayakhmetov 2007).
16. See also: (Crowe 1998: 402-03). The Kazakh population at this time was only 4-5,000,000.
17. Bjorn Holm-Hansen describes Kazakhstan's ethnic situation during the 20th century as a state of "dramatic demographic flux" brought on by conditions such as "agricultural reform, Stalinism, war, work migration and post-Soviet nation-building." (Holm-Hansen 1990: 157).
18. The budding Kazakh intelligentsia also suffered tremendously during Stalin's purges in the Party from 1934-38. (Crowe 1998: 403). See also: (Olcott 1995: Chapter Nine).
19. See also: (McCauley 1976: 86). The practice of strip cropping of crops and fallow was instituted only in the northern oblast of Pavlodar and thus was far too limited to prevent the ruinous dust storms which engulfed Kazakhstan in the early 1960s. (Craumer 1990: 183, 185-86).
20. According to Kunaev, the republican political leadership was not consulted when the decision was made to conduct nuclear tests in Semipalatinsk. The decision was made personally by Stalin and Lavrenty Beria, then the head of the KGB and the man in charge of the Soviet Union's atom bomb project, and thus could not be questioned. (Tolmachev 1997: 115).

21. See also: (Roy 2000: 127).
22. For a discussion of how Nursultan Nazarbaev's regime has affected Kazakhstan's traditional clan-based political system, see also: (Peyrouse 2016: 29-61). The author argues against the common western perception that, due to the failure of Soviet nationalities policy, clan affiliation has once again become the most important factor in Kazakh internal politics—pointing instead to the Nazarbaev familial patronage network, which bears a greater resemblance to the methodology Vladimir Putin uses to rule Russia.
23. Sharaf Rashidov, First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party during the Brezhnev era, died opportunely in 1983. Between 1984 and 1987, 90% of the Uzbek Central Committee was forced to step down. (Gleason 1990: 16). Roy even goes so far as to label the Andropov-Gorbachev anti-corruption drive as precipitating a "cultural and political split between north and south." (Roy 2000: 125-26).
24. For a thorough discussion of Kunaev's career and the process of "Kazakhization" in the KSSR during his tenure as First Secretary of the CPK, including a full range of statistical information from *KPSS v tsifrakh*, see (Stefany 2013: 49-72).
25. Interviewee Rasulkhan Kudaibirgenov, from Alma-Ata, personally participated in the December events, and at the time he spoke to the author was an active member of the citizen's group Zheltoksan—an organization lobbying the Kazakh government for greater transparency relating to the 1986 protests.
26. Interviewee Kanesha Satpaeva, from Alma-Ata, a professor at Kazakh National Technical University who witnessed the December 1986 events from his nearby apartment, added that he told Kolbin the demonstrations were not nationalistic in character, affirming "*natsionalizmazdes'net*" ("There is no nationalism here.").
27. Interviewee Nurtai Sabil'ianov, from Alma-Ata, was a 24-year-old student at the Alma-Ata Agricultural Institute in 1986 and personally participated in the December events.
28. Interviewee Umit Basmanova, of Alma-Ata, was a 34-year-old Inspector in the Ministry of Light Industry who participated in events on Brezhnev (Alma-Ata's main) Square from 17-19 December; Abdrakhman Umataev, also of Alma-Ata, was a 26-year-old student at Kazakh State University (KazGU), who spent all day on 17-18 December on the square.
29. Interviewee Dr. Bayan Besbaeva, of Alma-Ata, was a 30-year-old employee of the KSSR Academy of Sciences in 1986.
30. Additional documentation of the Alma-Ata events of 17-20 December 1986 includes: (*Conflict in the Soviet Union* 1990); (Ponomarev and Dzhukeeva, Eds. 1993). See also: (Stefany 2003: Ph.D. dissertation).
31. Roy also mentions that most Central Asians desired a non-Slavic-dominated Soviet system, which protected their cultural and political rights and did not work "only for the advantage of the Russians." (Roy 2000: 129).
32. Indeed, up to December 1986, Gorbachev had shown "remarkable insensitivity to Central Asia and continued to treat the republics as colonies, which led to public resentment." (Rashid, 1994: 36).
33. The authors define contentious politics as "collective political struggle" that is "episodic rather than continuous, occurs in public, involves interaction between makers of claims and others, is recognized by those others as bearing on their interests, and brings in government as mediator, target, or claimant." And, in a chapter entitled "Nationalism, National Disintegration and Contention," the authors directly discuss the Alma-Ata events under the heading of "Kazakh Contention" (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilley 2001: 5, 255-61).

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