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ARTICLE

New Narratives and Old Myths: History Textbooks in Kazakhstan

Aziz Burkhanov and Dina Sharipova

Nazarbayev University, Graduate School of Public Policy, Astana, Kazakhstan
Corresponding author: Aziz Burkhanov, Email: aziz.burkhanov@nu.edu.kz

Abstract

This article focuses on the role of textbooks in the construction of national identity by analyzing state-approved versions of national identity and history in Kazakhstan. By doing so, this project seeks to highlight what understanding of identity prevails in the history textbooks of Kazakhstan, what narratives regarding the key historic events are promoted, particularly with respect to the Dzhungar wars, annexation of Kazakh Khanate by the Russian Empire, and the Soviet era. Finally, this article compares the main narratives in the textbooks published in Kazakh and Russian languages to illustrate differences and various understandings of identity in the two linguistic realms of Kazakhstan. The article argues that Kazakhstan's textbooks combine new, independence-focused narratives with the old approaches and partial reproduction of the Soviet symbolic discourse.

Keywords: historical narrative; national identity; nation-building; colonialism

Introduction

This project examines contemporary historical narratives and trajectories of their postindependence revisions in Kazakhstan through the analysis of school history textbooks. Both classic scholarship on national identity (Gellner 1983; Smith 1991) and latest works in the field consider schools and national education systems as a cornerstone element for developing and cultivating national identity sentiments via integrating youth into the national and patriotic discourse. This article focuses on the role of textbooks in the construction of national identity via offering and state-approved versions of national identity and history in Kazakhstan. By doing so, this project seeks to highlight what understanding of identity prevails in the history textbooks of Kazakhstan and what narratives regarding the key historic events are promoted.

Furthermore, this article also seeks to contribute to the discussion around postcolonialism in Central Asia by exploring whether the postindependence history narrative in Kazakhstan has tried to critically reassess and reflect on the Soviet legacy. We explore whether the narrative in Kazakhstan's history textbooks has departed from the Soviet framing and approaches, and we seek to explain why a thorough reassessment of history is limited in Kazakhstan. Specifically, we use the postcolonial theory to explain why there are limitations in overcoming the Soviet legacy in Kazakhstan's state-approved historical narratives and why certain myths and symbols from the Soviet past are still promoted in textbooks. There may be some validity in the argument that Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries are still maintaining close political and economic ties with Russia, whose leadership continues to view the former Soviet space as Russia's exclusive sphere

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of influence. At the same time, there may also be other reasons explaining why a complete revision of the Soviet legacy may take some time to occur.

The main findings point to a huge challenge for the official historiography of Kazakhstan: on one hand, Kazakhstan still has (relatively) close diplomatic ties with Russia and many personalities from the late Soviet era are still prominent members of the country's political establishment, yet building a new national narrative on the past inevitably raises questions about the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and their legacy, including some of the darker pages.

Studying school history textbooks permits us to understand what kind of narratives they are offering to the school youth, which periods or events they are emphasizing or overlooking, and what answers they offer to their audiences regarding questions about nation's past. History textbooks often demonstrate the use of the past in the nation-building by narrating about myths of origin and sense of belonging and thus represent the notion of identity and nationhood that a state seeks to develop. This is particularly important in case of multiethnic and postcolonial societies, where the history narrative may also reflect complexity of identity debates and discourses in the society. In case of Kazakhstan, where nation-building policy was not always consistent and coherent and promoted different narratives and messages (Burkhanov 2017), studying historical textbooks helps to contextualize complexities in the process of nation-building in this Central Asian nation.

We will begin with a review of existing research on the topic of the role of textbooks in shaping national identity. Then we will give a brief overview of the Kazakhstani educational and national identity context. Finally, we will present our findings and interpretation of the data, followed by a discussion of the implications of the research.

Literature Review

Classic works in the national identity field consider school education as a cornerstone in constructing a sense of belonging to a nationhood through the socialization and transmission of fundamental nationhood values and practices to young citizens (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Anderson 1991; Smith 1991). Further studies explored the mechanics of history education and revealed that knowledge transmitted through the school history curricula may not always be neutral and instead are "the simultaneous results of political, economic, and cultural activities, battles, and compromises" (Apple 1992, 4; Zajda 2009). The theme of neutrality and objectivity (or lack thereof) of the state-supported history narratives are extensively discussed by Apple (1992), who claims that the historical narrative may be a result of complex power relations and struggles among different forces in a society and thus the narratives may often reflect the views of a dominant group.

Many governments around the world have relied extensively on education systems and particularly history textbooks to shape national identity of their citizens (Nasser 2004; Vural and Özuyanik 2008; Carney and Madsen 2009; Çayir 2009; Lee 2010; Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012; Williams 2014; Zhao 2014). This cohort of scholars asserts that governments create a particular vision for history by selectively emphasizing or downplaying certain facts and events (vom Hau 2009) or to respond to threats to their legitimacy (Carney and Madsen 2009). De Cillia (1999) highlights that a common strategy in building a sense of identity is focusing on the notions of sameness and difference, while Çayir (2009) and Lall (2008) emphasized the vision for "Other."

Regarding portrayal of national identity, in the last two decades various studies looked into history textbooks and national identity in different country contexts and unearthed many similarities in the way state-approved narrative covered identity issues. For instance, in his study of national identity and "Otherness" in Turkish textbooks, Çayir (2009) asserts that Turkish textbooks "are still characterized by an exclusive and narrow definition of nationalism and citizenship, backed by the myth of origin, ethnocentrism and an essentialism" (Çayir 2009, 53). Similarly, Lall (2008) in her study of national identity-building efforts in India and Pakistan, observes that the education narratives in both countries are fueled by increasingly nationalistic views of "Self" and antagonistic views of the Other that led to further radicalization of both societies. This discussion of antagonistic

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portrayal of the Other is further continued by Lee (2010) and his study of portrayal of non-North Koreans in the DPRK textbooks, where they are portrayed predominantly “as enemies” (Lee 2010, 365). The role of schooling in the identity construction is also discussed by Nasser (2004) in the context of Jordanian school system. Similarly, vom Hau (2009) compares history textbooks in Argentina, Mexico, and Peru and expands the discussion to include teachers as agents because “teachers’ worldviews and their use of textbooks provide a window for understanding how those official ideas are received, translated, and reworked at the interface between state and society” (vom Hau 2009, 128). Salem-Metro and Gervais (2012) in their analysis of the Burmese school textbooks’ discourse take the discussion to the “continuity-and-break” framework and argue that despite changes in the political regimes, various governments tend to use the same approaches in the history narratives, such as emphasizing national heroes and glorious ancestors.

Over the last few years, studies of historical narratives and curricula in Central Asian and former Soviet contexts have substantially expanded the scholarly discussion of historical narratives looking at both the curriculum changes and portrayal of Other (Ismailova 2004; Kissane 2005; Asanova 2007; Blakkisrud and Nozimova 2010; Nourzhanov 2015; Umetbaeva 2015; Fimyar and Kurakbayev 2016) For instance, Blakkisrud and Nozimova (2010) examine Tajik history textbooks currently and compare them with Soviet textbooks, exploring continuities and changes in the narrative on the identity issues. They highlight changes in the perception of the national Self and the new Other, the Uzbeks, and introduce two intermediary categories: the Soviet/Russian heritage as an “External Self” and Islam as an “Internal Other.” Similarly, Ismailova (2004) explores relationship between curriculum and ideology and focuses on indigenization of curriculum, which happens as a response to a long-term domination, neglect, and denigration of the culture, languages, and traditions of the indigenous people by the previously existing colonial regimes. This narrative builds on the discussion of various manifestations of postcolonialism in the governmentality and mass celebrations (Adams and Rustemova 2009), literature (Sharipova 2019), or broader debates on applicability (and limitations) of postcoloniality in Central Asia (Adams and Rustemova 2009; Heathershaw 2010). Gorshenina (2021) argues that in the Russian scholarship (which may have some legacy influence on the Central Asian historiography) the entrenched view is that Russian and Soviet history “is essentially non-colonial,” as only certain classical colonies are acknowledged as such (Gorshenina 2021, 190). Furthermore, she adds an important foreign-policy-related nuance claiming that “the degree to which the Tsarist and Soviet regimes are deemed to have colonized is dependent on the [country’s] current relations with Russia” (Gorshenina 2021, 202).

The issue about decolonization of the curriculum is has also been explored by Kissane (2005) in her study of the postsocialist transition in the secondary education history curriculum program in Kazakhstan from 1990 to the present. The article examines how the deployment of a new national narrative is being used to construct a “de-Sovietized” and “re-Kazakhified” national identity by depoliticizing and deideologizing the school curriculum. Similarly, portrayal of the Soviet past in the postindependence history textbooks is discussed by Umetbaeva (2015) in the context of Kyrgyzstan. This study highlights existing ambivalence and contradiction between two conflicting narratives about the Soviet Union: as a colonial oppressor versus an agent of modernization. Nourzhanov (2015) notes similar changes in the historical narratives in Tajikistan, where the Basmatchi movement started to be portrayed as a nationalist movement against the Turkic oppression instead of the class-based resistance. Asanova (2007) finds similar patterns in the literature curriculum in Kazakhstan by comparing the literature textbooks of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The article discusses Soviet institutional and cultural legacies that continue to exist in Kazakhstan’s literature curriculum while also noting the prevalent ethnocentric discourse in literature and literature education. Changes in the history and literature curriculum content, however, have not always brought changes in pedagogical approaches. As Fimyar and Kurakbayev (2016) argue, although Kazakhstan embarked on ambitious education reforms, the Soviet system of education is still often referred to as being “successful, fundamental and the best in the world” in the teaching community of Kazakhstan (86).

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Kazakhstan, together with other countries of post-Soviet Central Asia, is a good case to examine the public debates on national identity being a multiethnic post-Soviet state in the process of nation-building with significant ethnic minorities present in the country as well as two languages that are widely used in the media and everyday life. Through analyzing the public debate on national identity policies in the textbooks, we seek to highlight different views and narratives that exist in the country with respect to the nature of identity policy that should be implemented in Kazakhstan.

Methodology

An important feature of Kazakhstan's and some other former Soviet countries' (albeit with some variations) education systems is that the entire curriculum is centrally approved by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry considers the school history education as the most important means of presenting the new state-approved history narrative because the curriculum includes two compulsory courses (with some overlap): History of Kazakhstan and World History. These are two distinct subjects, each with separate class sessions, grades, and textbooks—one for the History of Kazakhstan and one for the World History. Instruction in History of Kazakhstan commences in the 5th grade with an overview of various episodes from the country's history (Artykbayev, Sabdanbekova, and Abil 2010), followed by a more in-depth review from ancient times up to contemporary history up to 9th grade; grades 10 and 11 repeat the coverage but offer more in-depth review, coordinated with preparation for the graduation exams and the standardized university entrance test called the Unified National Test. The World History course begins in the 6th grade and follows a similar track, with more general coverage in grades 6 to 9 and more detailed coverage in grades 10 and 11, albeit with two tracks or variations: (1) the science-oriented track and (2) the humanities-oriented track, which depend on the type and specialization of a particular school.

The content of curriculum is overseen by the Altynsaryn National Academy of Education, which is also responsible for setting the overall standards and principles in school education in Kazakhstan. The State Standard released in 2018 mentions that the subject History of Kazakhstan should enable students to know (1) "stages of formation of the Central Asian and Eurasian steppe civilization," and "ethnic history of Kazakh people," and history of polyethnic society of Kazakhstan" (State Educational Standard 2018, 98); (2) historical processes that have unfolded in Central Asia and "significance of achievements of peoples of Central Asia for the global culture-historical process" and "specifics of ethno-social organization of traditional Kazakh society" (98); (3) how "to apply skills of historical thought when defining Central Asian pillars of culture in the time and space" (99); (4) how to analyze "historical development of Kazakhstan in the context of global history" (99); (5) how to synthesize "works of research and creative character by using methods of historical analysis" (99); and (6) how to assess influence of various factors (geographic, demographic, political, cultural, etc.) on the development of Kazakhstan in various historical eras (99). The standard sets a fairly comprehensive skill set for students, yet it is not entirely certain if there are any specific tools to test these benchmarks aside from the standardized university entrance test.

History textbooks are designed in line with those standards and guidelines set up by the Altynsarin Academy. Despite the latest discussions of redesigning the textbooks, the existing choice of textbooks remains relatively small and basically limited to the duopoly of the two major Almaty-based publishing houses, *Atamura* and *Mektep*. The textbooks are written by independent authors, oftentimes professors or researchers at public universities or institutes and then approved by the Ministry of Education and Science, which annually issues a downloadable list of all textbooks in Kazakhstan (https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/edu/documents/details/253262?lang=ru). It is worth noting that Kazakhstan's postindependence textbooks have been criticized for being unfit for school children because they were prepared by academic researchers rather than school educators or teachers. Indeed, some of the textbooks reviewed in this article are lengthy scholarly works

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featuring little to no illustrations; instead, they overwhelm their readers with a multitude of facts, dates, and names that are supposed to be memorized by heart.

Since history curriculum is centrally approved, we look at the set of history textbooks from the 5th to 11th grade in both Kazakh- and Russian-language schools of Kazakhstan. Specifically, we look at the coverage of the two most contested and debated periods in the history of Kazakhstan—incorporation of the Kazakh Khanate into the Russian Empire and the Soviet rule in Kazakhstan. The choice of these two crucial time periods allows us to highlight the state narrative vis-à-vis the historic state tradition, the modernizing role (or lack thereof) of Russia and the Soviet legacy—to understand better the history side of the national identity project in Kazakhstan. This set includes a comprehensive set of textbooks from 5th to 11th grades for public schools.

Using a qualitative content analysis, we examine history textbooks used in schools of Kazakhstan. These methods include close reading, analysis, and comparison of narratives on specific pivotal events in the history of Kazakhstan. Specifically, we looked at the Kazakh-Zhungar wars, Soviet times, and portrayal of multiethnicity of Kazakhstan in the textbooks. The data for this study included history school textbooks used in the 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th grade that are textbooks that were in use in Kazakhstan during 2010–2020 printed by both *Atamura* and *Mektep* publishers.

In particular, we focus on the key pivotal events in the history of Kazakhstan that made the discussion on Kazakhstan's independence and survival more visible. These include the Kazakh-Dzhungar wars of the 18th century, which in the narrative have often been portrayed as the most important existential fight for survival that Kazakhs have ever conducted. Furthermore, we focus on the portrayal of incorporation of the Kazakh Khanate into the Russian Empire during the 18th and 19th centuries. For the Soviet era, we look at the portrayal of the famine in Kazakhstan of the early 1930s. Admittedly, there are other important events in Kazakhstan's history that would also enrich this study, such as the 1916 uprising. We specifically focus on these events, however, because these were the most debated focal points of the postindependence historical narrative. Moreover, these events were often in the focus of political messages and statements coming from the authorities. For instance, the Kazakh-Dzhungar wars and heroism of Kazakhs defending the homeland have been featured in a number of state-funded movie productions (Isaacs 2015). Similarly, in 2020 President Tokayev created a special governmental commission in charge of rehabilitation of the victims of political repressions.

Analysis

Pedagogical and Factual Features

As discussed above, the pedagogic approach used in the Kazakhstan's history textbooks carries heavy focus on the fact-based narrative instead of developing critical thinking and analytical skills when dealing with historical facts. The narrative about many events in the textbooks is offered as a simple sequence or chronology of facts with little to no attempts to contextualize these events in a broader regional and global context. With a few minor exceptions (more on that below), Kazakhstan's history narrative is being presented in an isolated fashion being disconnected from the history of the adjacent regions. The assignments included in the analyzed textbooks also clearly demonstrate the same focus on memorizing the facts or ask a simple copying to the notebook (Artykbayev, Sabdanbekova, and Abil 2010, 7, 14). Students are offered assignments that include a simple rewriting of the text into a notebook without any analysis, such as "fill in the table" or "write this in your notebook and memorize" (Zholdasbayev 2012, 43)

The textbooks analyzed also contain statements of debatable validity. For example, the History of Kazakhstan textbook for 5th grade narrates about commonalities between the Shumer and ancient Turkic writing systems. This idea was earlier promoted by a prominent Kazakh poet and intellectual Olzhas Suleimenov (Artykbayev, Sabdanbekova, and Abil 2010, 11, 92) Similarly, the 7th-grade

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textbook includes other questionable statements on periodization of the ancient Turkic writing system saying that Turkic writing system is "much older" than the scholarship says (Zholdasbayev 2012, 44).

Interestingly, despite being printed more than two decades after independence, several analyzed textbooks use what appear to be Soviet-era academic terms and ideological clichés. For instance, the term "anthropology" is explained in a traditional Soviet understanding primarily referring to physical anthropology (Toleubayev, Zhanuzak, and Koigeldiyev 2010, 69; Sadykov and Toleubayev 2011, 155). Similarly, in terms of identity and discourse about nationalism, terms such as "ethnos" and "nation" are still interpreted in the traditional Soviet, Stalinist understanding. Furthermore, some textbooks contain terms and words from a Soviet-Bolshevik ideological and political parlance such as "capitalist countries," "counter-revolutionary forces," "reactionary bourgeois historiography," and "bourgeois literature" (Kozybayev, Nurpeis, and Zhukeshev 2013, 45). Such terms demonstrate that although new narratives have been added, some of the old ideological approaches have not been reassessed, such as, for instance, incorporation into the Russian Empire.

Kazakh Khanate and Wars with Dzhungars

The Kazakh Khanate and its wars against the Dzhungar Khanate in 17th and 18th centuries remain a crucial focal point of Kazakhstan's history narrative. The Kazakh Khanate—the Kazakh statehood —appeared in 1465 when two local tribal rulers Janibek and Kerei separated from the bigger tribal conglomerate and established their own statehood in what today is Southern Kazakhstan. The Khanate shortly expanded its territories to include most of today's Kazakhstan and portions of modern-day Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. The establishment of the Kazakh Khanate marked the beginning of Kazakh statehood, whose 550th anniversary was massively celebrated in Kazakhstan throughout 2015, likely in response to the earlier statements made by Russia's President Putin denying Kazakhs any statehood tradition. The Kazakh Khanate later engaged in a series of wars with Dzhungar Khanate, an Oirat Mongol state controlling much of modern-day Xinjiang, later destroyed by the Qing China. These wars significantly weakened the Kazakh Khanate and resulted in its decline and further disintegration into three tribal alliances or Juzes, which gradually lost their sovereignty and were incorporated to the expanding Russian Empire in the 18th–19th centuries.

The periodization of the school curriculum of Kazakhstan's history is structured by grades. As mentioned above, the History of Kazakhstan course starts in grade 5 with a very general overview summarized in the textbook called *Stories about Kazakhstan's History*. In grade 6, the course covers ancient history of Kazakhstan, whereas grade 7 focuses on the medieval history of Kazakhstan (circa 6th–18th centuries). The history of the Kazakh Khanate and its incorporation into the Russian Empire are covered in detail in the grade 8 (18th century–1914). In grades 10 and 11, the narrative starts over but with a more detailed and in-depth coverage: grade 10 covers the history of Kazakhstan from ancient times until the 18th century, and Grade 11 covers period from the 18th century until postindependence.

The history of Kazakhstan in the 18th century and its relations with Russia are first introduced in the 5th-grade textbook *Stories about Kazakhstan's History* in a relatively short section called "Kazakhstan and Russia." The narrative introduces a complex geopolitical situation in the region and serious external threats to the Kazakh Khanate from its neighbors while also mentioning intraelite disputes and lack of unity among Kazakhs:

> Kazakh people lost its unity, from the east Dzhungar khanate was threating, from the other side Russia started its advance to Kazakh lands […] Difficult situation of the Kazakh society forced Abulkhair-khan to seek alliance with Russia. On the other side, Russia for a long time was trying to establish its control over the Kazakh steppe in order to get access to riches of Central Asia. (Artykbayev, Sabdanbekova, and Abil 2010, 122)

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This narrative about existential threats to the Kazakh Khanate remains a cornerstone of the narrative on the Dzhungar wars and annexation by the Russian Empire. It is further developed in the Russian-language 8th-grade *History of Kazakhstan* textbooks printed by both publishers, as they narrate about difficult situation in which Kazakh Khanate found itself, where dangers were coming from all neighbors:

> The situation was difficult not only because of the Dzhungar aggression. From north-west the Bashkirs were attacking, the Siberian Cossacks from the north, Uzbek khanates were attacking from the south as they wanted to annex part of the territory of the Senior Zhuz. Yet, the most imminent danger was the Dzhungar khanate. (Kassymbayev 2012b, 11)

Similarly, in the 8th-grade textbook published by Atamura major focus was given to the all-national character of the war against the Dzhungars, including up to calling it the Patriotic War, the title rarely used in the history discourse and typically reserved for the World War II. At the same time, domestic political disputes and lack of unity are considered as primary reasons for the eventual annexation by Russia:

> In the second quarter of 18th century, the entire Kazakh people was rising to the liberating Patriotic War (Otechestvennaia voina). During this war, the war brotherhood was created with the Karakalpaks and Kyrgyz [peoples]. At the same time, struggle for power led to domestic splits and further to the loss of independence. (Kabuldinov and Kayipbayeva 2012, 22)

Kazakh-language versions of the same textbooks, however, do not contain many of the passages about threats from the neighboring countries. Instead, they offer more details on praising the Kazakh military and its battle "spirit."

> This victory was of great importance in raising the spirits of the Kazakh people. Encouraged by the victory, the Kazakh tribes became more confident in the possibility of overcoming the Dzhungar threat, but only if the three Zhuzes were united. The goal was to clear the Kazakh land from the enemy and to fully restore the country's independence. (Kasymbayev 2012a, 10)

Similarly, unlike the Russian-language versions of these textbooks, the Kazakh-language textbooks contain lyrics of the "Elim-Ai" popular song, which has an important symbolic significance in the Kazakh culture as a song of mourning, typically reserved for very disastrous events (Kasymbayev 2012a, 9). It is worth noting a fairly consistent victimization framing of the Kazakh Khanate—as it was portrayed only as a victim of aggressive campaigns by the Dzhungars but its own attacks and counterattacks against the neighbors were not mentioned, aside from a short passage about Tauke-khan's "preventive attacks."

The narrative about the military spirit and bravery of Kazakhs primarily concentrates on the brave fight of the Kazakhs against the Dzhungars. These campaigns are commonly known in the Kazakhstan's historiography as the "Years of the Great Disaster" (*Gody velikogo bedstviia / Aqtaban shūbyryndy*) and are presented as the existential fight for the very survival of Kazakh people:

> Aggression of the Dzhungar Khanate […] brought multiple suffering, starvation, destruction of material values […] thousands of men, women and children were taken into captivity. […] Years of the Great Disaster by their consequences are comparable only with Mongol invasion in the 13th century. (Kasymbayev 2012b, 12)

Concurring narrative with the existential fight for survival is the focus on internal struggles inside the Kazakh ruling elites, primarily between the various tribal leaders, khans and sultans. The narrative consistently talks about "political instability in the Kazakh zhuzes" and the high price that

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the people paid for "carelessness of its khans and sultans" as well as "lack of political unity in the Kazakh society even in this most difficult period in the history of Kazakhstan" (Kasymbayev 2012b, 10–12). In these conditions, the narrative continues, it is the ordinary people who "took the decisive role in protecting the country" by putting forward prominent military commanders of the troops, including Qabanbay Batyr, Nauryzbay Batyr, and Bogenbay Batyr, among others. These heroes became the leaders of the national defensive wars and, unlike the corrupt and self-centered khans and sultans, were able to lead the fight against the enemy.

These military heroes and commanders became important figures in the Pantheon of Kazakh glorious past. This glorification of the ancestors, batyrs and khans, has been noticeable across Central Asia and Kazakhstan's toponymics and carried important symbolic significance for the post-Soviet Kazakhstan's nation-building project (Fauve 2015; Burkhanov 2017). However, in the Soviet Union towns, mountains, and other geographical localities were usually named in Russian manners, which included either Russianized modification of the previously existing Kazakh name of a place (for example, Russianized *Borovoe* instead of Kazakh *Burabay*) or just naming objects with an ideologically charged name (for example, *Leninsk*, *Tselinograd*, *Il'ich*, etc.). Sometimes, the ideologically charged name was Kazakh (for example, *Qyzyltu*, Kazakh for "red flag"). After the independence, things went in diametrically opposite directions and resulted in numerous renamings. The changes followed the same, although inverse, logic: the imposition of a historical Kazakh names or assigning places a new ideologically charged name, referring either to the new, post-1991 Kazakhstan (for example, *Azattyq*, Kazakh for "freedom" or *Täuelsizdik*, Kazakh for "independence") and very often to the names of prominent historical Kazakh figures of the past, including Abylai Khan, a Kazakh legist, considered one of the authors of the Kazakh traditional legal system Tole Bi, and Rayimbek Batyr, Qabanbay Batyr, and Bogenbay Batyr, Kazakh warriors and military commanders who played a major role in liberating the Kazakhs from the Dzhungar invasion.

The narrative on the Dzhungar wars further gradually develops to discuss the incorporation by the Russian Empire, as the two events were largely interconnected—out of necessity and difficulties experienced by the Kazakh Khanate, its rulers started to seek an alliance with Russia. The narrative clearly mentions that (1) the alliance was expected to be temporary, not permanent and (2) there was no unilateral support for the alliance with Russia among Kazakh nobility and many prominent elite members were actively opposing it. The Russian-language 8th-grade textbook mentions a split between Abulkhair-Khan, the main advocate of the alliance with Russia, and the rest of the Kazakh aristocracy due to the betrayal of the former—Abulkhair-Khan was tasked to conclude a military union with Russia but instead was soliciting the Russian patronage to strengthen his own personal powers in the Steppe against the rest of the Kazakh aristocracy, which did not foresee the imminent loss of independence:

> During the meeting [with Russian envoys] it became clear that Abulkhair-Khan lied to the people […] Abulkhair's petition was motivated by the declining prestige of the Khan's powers due to the losses against the Dzhungars […] Abulkhair wanted to strengthen the Khan's power with Russia's help. (Kasymbayev 2012b, 18)

This narrative mostly follows the Soviet interpretation, which also focused on the agreement between some members of the Kazakh aristocracy and Russian government:

> Admission of Kazakhs to Russia was the result of an agreement pact between part of the Kazakh nobility and the tsar government. Then the foundations of that political union between the Kazakh nobility and the Russian monarchy, which later played a major role in transforming Kazakhstan into a colony of the empire. [Russian] citizenship was taken against the will of the masses. Kazakh people fought against it. However, this struggle did not turn into a national uprising. (Istoriia Kazahskoii SSR [1943] 2011, 234)

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Furthermore, the narrative evolves around discussion of the Russian expansion to the Kazakh steppe and Russian colonial administration of the region, although highlighting the intraelite disaccord among the Kazakh steppe aristocracy remains consistent throughout the curriculum. Another noticeable aspect is a fairly consistent use of terms “colonial” and “colonizer” being applied to Russia’s administration in Kazakhstan. Some observers noted that in this sense the narrative seems to reflect the Soviet historiography’s portrayal of the Russian imperial administration in the peripheries, including Central Asia, Caucasus, and Siberia. Also, following the Soviet tradition of the focus on the people’s fight against the colonizers, the narrative offers detailed, though slightly more independence-focused discourse on the uprisings against the Russian administration in the late 18th and 19th century:

> The main goal of the uprising of Kenesary Kasymov was to preserve independence of Kazakhstan’s lands not yet incorporated by the tsarist Russia and to stop their colonization by the Empire through building fortresses and creating district administrations. (Kasymbayev 2012b, 101)

Overall, the Russian colonization is assessed as involuntary and forced because of the difficult political and economic situation of the Kazakh Khanate, intraelite disputes, and Dzhungar aggression. At the same time, the narrative tries to balance the negative portrayal by adding some lines on the positive outcomes, which, however, do not justify brutal colonial rule by Russia:

> Although Kazakhstan’s accession to Russia was considered as voluntary, it was based on a unilateral policy. […] The growing number of protests of Kazakhs is a proof of groundlessness of the theory about voluntary incorporation. Accession to Russia was a forced consequence of the crisis of the foreign and domestic policies by Kazakh rulers […] Despite the colonizing yoke, one cannot ignore positive sides of the incorporation. However, none of these achievements can justify the fact that as a result of a political treaty, the Kazakh state lost its independence. (Kasymbayev 2012b, 134)

It is worth noting that Kasymbayev’s discussion of the Russian colonial rule in Kazakhstan mostly follows the Soviet narrative about Russian Empire’s policy in Central Asia and concentrates on the depersonalized “tsarism” or “tsarist regime.” For instance, a classic Soviet volume on the history of Kazakh SSR published in 1943 narrates,

> [u]sing its economic, political and military advantages, tsarist Russia in the 1860-70s conquered the entire territory of Kazakhstan. This period of military colonization lasted over 100 years. The Kazakh steppe was surrounded by a ring of cities-fortresses, which became strongholds of the tsarism in its advance inside Kazakhstan. (Istoriia Kazahskoii SSR [1943] 2011, 424)

In the same vein, Russia’s colonial expansion is not contextualized in the broader discourse about colonial campaigns of other European countries of the 18th–19th centuries. Therefore, reasons for Russia’s expansion to Central Asia in the 1860s are not discussed and the entire campaign is presented as “reinforcement of the colonial policy of the tsar’s government in Central Asia” without any particular reasons or factors behind (Kasymbayev 2012b, 130). Similar narratives are found in the Kabuldinov and Kayipbayeva (2012) textbook, which briefly mentions that “from India, Britain had expressed considerable interest to the south of Kazakhstan and Central Asia” (130). In general terms, however, the narrative about Russian Empire’s colonial rule in Central Asia in the grade-8 textbooks remains detached from broader discourses about colonialism.

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Some of these issues are reconsidered and discussed further in the 10th-grade *History of Kazakhstan* textbook. For instance, Toleubayev, Zhanuzak, and Koigeldiyev (2010) briefly narrate about the Soviet approach to the Russian expansion to Central Asia, which argued that despite its colonial character, this also pushed "Kazakh people from the feudal backwardness on" to the progress. Challenging this approach, the textbook argues,

> Soviet ideologists were trying to give Russian expansion to Central Asia an educationalist character. However, historical reality suggests that in 18-19th centuries the Russian government conducted the same colonial policies in Kazakhstan as other Western states were in other parts of the Earth. (Toleubayev, Zhanuzak, and Koigeldiyev 2010, 194)

Furthermore, the Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev's 11th-grade *History of Kazakhstan* textbook gives a more detailed overview of the Russian colonial rule in Kazakhstan and frames Kazakh insurrections of the 18th–19th centuries as the "National-liberating fight against colonial policy of Russia" (2011, 16) and "Fight of the Kazakh people against colonizing policy of tsarist Russia" (37). Besides this, however, the textbook also does not attempt to contextualize or compare Russian colonial rule in Central Asia with colonial expansions of Britain or France.

Soviet Period: Famine, Repressions and Modernization

The narrative about 20th-century experience is the primary focus of the 9th- and 11th-grade textbooks. As is the case with textbooks for the earlier periods, the textbooks were written by academics mostly affiliated with Al-Farabi National University and Abai National University. Portrayal of the Soviet period in Central Asia is more divisive and complex. On one hand, the narrative cannot avoid talking about the famines of 1920s and especially 1930s forced sedentarization and Stalin's repressions; on the other hand, for recent generations, the Soviet legacy may not be associated with these events but rather with relatively stable and prosperous 1970s and 1980s (Shahrani 1993). That is why de-Sovietizing historical narrative has been a challenge that has been clearly observable in the history textbooks.

The 11th-grade textbook mentions that a "monopoly of the state-party power over economy" is characteristic of a "totalitarian regime" (Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev 2011, 108) and that the totalitarian system controlled all spheres of the social, economic and political life of people. Furthermore, the narrative continues to discuss the coloniality of the Soviet regime and its policy of stimulating migration of outsiders to Kazakhstan and frames it as a continuation of the tsarist Russia's colonial attitudes toward the region:

> Lands owned by Kazakhs were taken away in order to be given to the non-stopping stream of migrants. This is how colonization of the Kazakh land by the Soviet power started. All the decisions taken after this [1928] regarding Kazakh land, remind colonizing policy of the tsarist Russia. (Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev 2011, 95)

The 11th-grade textbooks do not cover in detail the emergence of the Soviet regime in Central Asia in 1918. Instead, more focus is given to the Alash Orda government and its relations with the newly nascent Soviet administration. In the chapter entitled "Political Parties and Movements in Kazakhstan in the Beginning of 20th Century" (Koigeldiev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev 2011, 73), the authors highlight different expectations and hopes of the Russian and Kazakh societies during 1917–1918:

> For the Russian society, the most important task was to reach a democratic path, while for the Kazakh society the main political goal was the state sovereignty and national independence. (74)

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The narrative further portrays the Alash Orda government as a fully functioning administration, with clear goals and aspirations of "supporting ideas of justice, standing against violence and guiding people to the path of development" (Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev 2011, 83), whose "legitimate claims were not recognized by the Soviet government" (88).

The famine of 1930s and the Stalin's repressions remain the most problematic issues of the Soviet rule in Kazakhstan and, thus, receive a much more detailed coverage in the textbooks' narrative. In the chapter entitled "Goloshchiokin's Genocide and the Tragedy of the Kazakh Aul" (Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev 2011, 97) the narrative unwraps broader policy failures such as poor planning and design and lack of strategic vision by the Soviet policy makers unfamiliar with local social and economic conditions. The main reason was the poorly designed agricultural policy of the Soviet government, which "collected grain tax from those who did not grow crops and meat tax was collected from those who did not own livestock" (99). Although the authors mentioned the Soviet leaders in Moscow, it is the First Secretary of the Kazakhstan's Communist Party Central Committee, Filipp Goloshchiokin, who was portrayed as the main person responsible for the famine. According to the textbook, he was fully aware of the ongoing famine and multiple deaths among Kazakhs and yet did not do anything to stop the collectivization policy:

> The policy of genocide led to the famine among Kazakh people in the first place [...] having killed a third of the people. Famine of the early 1930s entered the history of the country as a great tragedy of the Kazakh people. Mistakes of the Soviet Power and Goloshchiokin's genocide led to the mass migration of Kazakhs from their homelands as they were seeking shelter in other countries. This migration was going into three directions: Russia, China and Central Asia [...[Kazakhs, who defended their homeland for centuries, thanks to "fatherly love" of the Soviet Power, were forced to leave their Fatherland. (Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev 2011, 101)

This personification of the Soviet power and attribution of the genocide to Goloshchiokin's personality is remarkable because the presented narrative largely implies one individual's responsibility and only vaguely mentions actions of Stalin and other Soviet leaders. The role and agency of other members of the Kazakhstan's Communist Party and other levels of the state administration are not discussed (Cameron 2018).

Another important narrative is about World War II. The legacy of the Soviet Union's "Great Patriotic War" has become highly politicized by Russia to the point of having an extremely important symbolic meaning in the Russian internal political discourse. Broader Kazakhstan's discourse around the World War II made some attempts to reassess the contribution of Kazakhstan into the overall victory, yet it also continues to employ the Soviet symbols and pantheon of heroes, including the 28 Panfilov heroes, Aliya Moldagulova, Manshuk Mametova, and others (Rees 2020). Furthermore, in line with the Soviet historiographic approach, the textbook focuses only on the Greater Patriotic War (1941–1945) rather than World War II (1939–1945) and does not mention the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Winter war against Finland, and the Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939.

Instead, the 11th–grade textbook continues to feature the story about 28 Panfilov Guardsmen who were mobilized to the war from Kazakhstan, took part in the Battle of Moscow, and allegedly destroyed 18 German tanks in November 1941. This story was a cornerstone of the Soviet Kazakhstan's narrative about the World War II, and it has been enshrined in the Almaty Park and Monument to the 28 Panfilov Guardsmen. This episode, however, has been studied by the Soviet General Prosecutor's office in 1947, which established that this specific story was made up by the Soviet military journalist (though the general fact of the broader battle episode remains unquestionable). Despite this, Kazakhstan continues to promote the heroism of the 28 Panfilov Guardsmen (Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev 2011, 178–179). Furthermore, the

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Russian-language 10th-grade *World History* textbook adds a few passages critically assessing the "revengeful discourse" about World War II in some of the Western countries:

> In some of the Western and Eastern European countries, in the US, reflections on the past go on the basis of only using facts "comfortable" for them in order to declare the USSR a criminal state equal to the Hitler's Germany, to diminish the role of the USSR in the victory over the fascist Germany. […] European youth, having watched Hollywood movies about World War II, considers the US and not the USSR as the main victor of Germany. […] Reactionary bourgeois historiography of Western countries puts a lot of efforts to qualify the military-political alliance of anti-fascist states (USSR, USA, UK, France) as "strange" and "sinister". […] Contemporary youth of the CIS countries must keep the heroic events of the Great Patriotic War in their memories […] based on trustworthy and objective facts in their true, undistorted state. (Chupekov et al. 2010, 112)

Multiethnic Kazakhstan in the Textbooks

An important aspect of the postindependence history of Kazakhstan is its multiethnic composition. Therefore, the government of Kazakhstan had faced a challenge of building a national identity policy in the multiethnic environment. On one hand, the government had to acknowledge the multiethnic composition of Kazakhstan; on the other hand, it had to develop a Kazakh-centric narrative to legitimize Kazakh-dominant discourse of the new state.

The narrative about ethnicities and identity appears in the 11th-grade textbooks. Prior to that, the 7th-grade textbook contains a short section called "Formation of the Kazakh Ethnicity" and the 8th-grade textbook includes a chapter called "Beginning of the Formation of Ethnic Groups in Kazakhstan." The 10th-grade textbook has two sections, called "Formation of the Kazakh People" and "Ethnic Composition of the Kazakh people."

The general narrative is the focus on the ethnic formation of Kazakhs during the 14–15th centuries around an alliance between Kypchak tribes of the Central and Northern Kazakhstan with Uisuns in the South:

> Ethnopolitical commonness in Kazakhstan was consolidated around sultans Zhanibek and Kerey. This paved the way to the creation of the Kazakh khanate created conditions for strengthening the ethnic composition of the Kazakh ethnicity. (Zholdasbayev 2012, 134)

This narrative is further replicated in the 10th-grade textbook, which also expands the coverage by adding some further elaborations. It is noticeable that the textbook authors decided to include statements on similarities between Turkic and Sumerian languages developed by a prominent Kazakh poet and civil activist Olzhas Suleimenov, even though most evidence is against it:

> Ancient roots of the Turkic language correlate to the Sumerian language who lived in the Southeast (sic) Asia in 4-3rd centuries BC. According to linguists, writings on the early Sumerian monuments have similar characteristics with Turkic languages […] This can be explained by the long contacts and mutual influence of Turkic and Sumerian languages. (Toleubayev, Zhanuzak, and Koigeldiyev 2010, 74)

Later, some details are added about other ethnic groups in Kazakhstan during Russian colonization including Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Poles, and Germans. The textbook points out that according to the 1897 population census data, Russians made 12.8% of the population of Kazakhstan, whereas Ukrainians made almost 2% and Tatars were about 1.3% (Kabuldinov and Kayipbayeva 2012, 236). The textbook also adds a passage on ethnic Kazakhs living in the neighboring

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countries by stating that "some of them lived there for a long time and some had to move due to the socioeconomic and political circumstances" (Kabuldinov and Kayipbayeva 2012, 244).

This narrative continues in the 11th-grade textbook, which further focuses on the Soviet government's migration policy. The textbook covers in detail various stages of Stalin's deportations to Kazakhstan of Poles, Germans, Koreans, Iranians, Kurds, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingushs, and others and then mentions "planned migrations of the Soviet time," related to the Virgin Lands campaigns, and industrialization:

> The Soviet state […] did not take into consideration the past and present of peoples, their specifics, did not pay attention to their cultural and socio-economic development. […] Soviet nationality policy was against true interests of the Kazakh people and was imposed upon Kazakhs. (Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev 2011, 155)

Finally, the Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev (2011) textbook also includes passages on the postindependence Kazakhstan multiethnic composition in the chapter "National Question in Kazakhstan." The main argument is that the Soviet nationality policy failed to unite the people in the USSR, as "the Soviet people" turned out to be united only by the totalitarian system (156) and that national consciousness was rising in the end of the Soviet era. Independent Kazakhstan, the textbook claims, sees "national accord, high level of culture in interethnic relations as one of the main development directions of Kazakhstan" (157). The textbook also justifies certain privileges that were given to ethnic Kazakhs at the first stage of independence (1991–1995), including declaring Kazakhs as "state-forming" nation:

> During this period, it was necessary to declare the state as [Kazakh] national state. First, all countries which became independent during this period, called their countries as statehoods of the nations forming that state. Second, it was necessary to support the people, which during centuries was gradually losing its independence and became a minority in their own country. Third, such policy was needed to revive and develop culture, traditions and language, to strengthen national pride. (161)

This narrative is consistent with the general discourse of the government of Kazakhstan on the national identity, focusing on the Kazakh nature of the state.

Another interesting nuance is a fairly consistent narrative on the National Liberation Movement in Kazakhstan, which is given substantial coverage in the history textbooks throughout the entire school curriculum, with sizeable segments dedicated to this in the grades 9 and 11. The main focus is the continuity of the National Liberation Movement in Kazakhstan throughout its history, starting from the Dzhungar wars in the 18th century and going to the 20th century and anti-Soviet sentiments in Kazakhstan that culminated with its independence. The introduction chapter distinguishes three stages of the National Liberation Movement in Kazakhstan: (1) 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, which had a clear goal—to stop the expansion of Russia; (2) early 20th century—movement under the leadership of the Kazakh intelligentsia as "the new political elite which was able to formulate and declare nation-wide goals and consolidate best forces of the society around them" (Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev 2011, 9); and (3) movements against the Soviet regime:

> During the Soviet period, population of the republic demonstrated its dissatisfaction with the policies of the central government. In 1929-1931 there were uprisings against the forced collectivization, events of 1979 were consequences of mistakes of the nationality policy of the USSR. The December uprising of 1986 in Almaty concluded long period of the national-liberating fight of the Kazakh people for independence. (Koigeldiyev, Toleubayev, and Kasymbayev 2011, 10)

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Conclusion

This article has examined the narratives on history and their role in the construction of nationhood in Kazakhstan. An analysis of school textbooks has provided a window on state-sponsored ideas about national identity and history. The main findings point to a huge challenge for the official historiography of Kazakhstan: on one hand, Kazakhstan still has (relatively) close diplomatic ties with Russia and many personalities from the late Soviet era are still prominent members of the country's political establishment, yet building a new national narrative on the past inevitably raises questions about the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and their legacy, including some of the darker pages.

The article has demonstrated that Kazakhstan opted for a very careful approach when dealing with the tragic events under the Soviet rule. The famine of 1930s is framed as a personal "genocide" decision of the local communist party ruler, whereas the overall responsibility of the Soviet rulers in Moscow as well as local Kazakh apparatchiks remain untouched. Furthermore, the World War II narrative tends to repeat and strengthen the Soviet discourse. In contrast, the wars with Dzhungar state in the 18th century are portrayed as an existential fight for survival of the Kazakh people. Another importance nuance here is the victimization focus—Kazakh state is portrayed as a victim of aggressive wars while its own military expeditions (including to other countries) remain untouched.

As discussed above, the question of whether the de-Sovietized historical narrative in Kazakhstan has ever emerged is ultimately connected with political developments and foreign-policy considerations. Some of the critical reassessment of the Soviet past in Kazakhstan certainly occurred, though it follows an inverse Soviet argument focusing on the depersonalized Russian "Tsarism" colonial rule, or, in case of the famine of 1930s, a very personalistic dimension of the Goloschiokin, without discussing the core of the Soviet regime.

Furthermore, there may also be a generational aspect when assessing peculiarities of the Soviet rule in Central Asia. As Kalinovsky (2013) argues, unlike the early Soviet era, the 1960s–1980s in the Soviet Central Asia were marked by a relative economic prosperity, urbanization, and stability. Thus, none of the Central Asian states would go too far in devaluating or completely denying the Soviet past. The more possible trajectory of the historical narrative in Central Asia is likely that of acknowledging certain achievements of the Soviet modernization but also critically reflecting on the most obvious and tragic pages, such as Stalin's repressions and the famine of 1930s. All this supports arguments about a general trend of the slower process of reassessing the historical past in Kazakhstan and Central Asia (Dave 2007). With the generational changes and geopolitical turmoils of 2022, one could expect further interest of the state to reassess the previously untouched Soviet interpretations, which may be subject for further studies.

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