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### The Other Side of the Coin: Russification Practices and Perestroika Policies (1985-1991)

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The Other Side of the Coin: Russification practices and Perestroika Policies (1985-1991)

An honors thesis presented by

Lev Pushel

To the Department of History

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Honors

Connecticut College

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### **Introduction.**

The period of perestroika (1985-1991) and the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union (1985-1991) in the predominant narrative remains an era of the defeat of Russian nationalism and imperialism, the very idea of Russianness; when in fact, it was the period of the revival of these ideologies and ideas. Putin's narrative declares the dissolution of the USSR "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the Twentieth century" and keeps victimizing Russians in that context, calling them "the largest divided nation in the World."<sup>1</sup> Historiography of the post-Soviet countries focuses on the anti-colonial striving of the ethnic minorities during perestroika. With some concessions, historians from post-Soviet states name the collapse of the Soviet Union the victory in the struggle for independence for their peoples. Western historiography stays in that narrative, focusing on the predilections of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Finally, the anti-Putinist Russian narrative also speaks of perestroika as the period of freedom and Gorbachev as a freedom-giver, even though such a narrative under Putin's oppression is not popular and printing it is difficult.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to show that perestroika (1985-1991) was, in contrast to most of the historiography, a period of the revival of Russian nationalism and imperialism in the Soviet Union. Examining the history of two Soviet Central Asian republics – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – during perestroika led me to this conclusion. The revival of Russian nationalism occurred even earlier than the collapse of the Soviet Union. The narrative of "Russian greatness"

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<sup>1</sup> Putin, Vladimir. "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on the Security Policy" February 10, 2007. <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

<sup>2</sup> "Vlasti Moskvy ne Soglasovali Vystavku k Stoletiu Sakharova [The Government of Moscow did not Allow the Exhibit on the Hundredth Date of Sakharov's Birth]" *Current Time*, May 17, 2021. [currenttime.tv/a/sorvana-vystavka-k-stoletiyu-sakharova/31259508.html](http://currenttime.tv/a/sorvana-vystavka-k-stoletiyu-sakharova/31259508.html)

and Russians being responsible for the proliferation of the national republics became mainstream during perestroika.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the very division between the Russian and non-Russian populations of these regions happened during the 1980s. In order to support that claim, I built two case studies, which analyze how the positive reforms of perestroika in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were used to nurture the tensions between the Russian and non-Russian groups. The primary sources cited in this thesis show how the policies of perestroika gave a chance not only for the non-Russian, but also for Russian nationalism to thrive. Moreover, they show how the state, which still controlled most of the media and all the political sphere, was fostering nationalist sentiments in Russians.

The politics of perestroika opened the window of opportunities for people who opposed the Soviet regime. One of the most prominent policies of that era was *glasnost*, the freedom of speech, proclaimed in 1985, limited but allowing vehement criticism of the government for the mistakes and miscalculations. A great instance of such critique was the reaction of the Soviet to the disaster in Chernobyl.<sup>4</sup> If not for democratization, the leader of the Soviet dissidents, academic Alexander Sakharov, would never be able to participate in the political life of the country. The generation of the “young democrats,” such as Gaidar, Yeltsin, Khodorkovsky, Yavlinsky, and Sobchak, who carried out the market and democratic reforms of the 1990s in all post-Soviet countries, started their careers during perestroika.<sup>5</sup> For many (not all) national republics of the Soviet Union, that was the first opportunity for reckoning with the local

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<sup>3</sup> Spence, T.M. “The Development of Russian Nationalism Under Gorbachev (1985-91)”. Dissertation. University of London, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Plokhyy, Serhii. *Chernobyl: History of a Tragedy*. London: Penguin Books, 2019, 7

<sup>5</sup> Boris Yeltsin - the first president of the Russian Federation, Anatoly Sobchak - the first governor of the post-Soviet Saint-Petersburg, Grigory Yavlinsky - the developer of one of the plans of the economic reforms in the Soviet Union and founder of the Liberal-Democratic party *Yabloko*. Mikhail Khodorkovsky - one of the first bank-owners of the post-Soviet Russia. Yegor Gaidar - the author of the “shock therapy”, capitalist reforms of 1992 in the Russian Federation

historical traumas and election of the advocates for local autonomy into the administrative bodies.

On the other hand, the Soviet government also used these policies in order to keep its power. In the common academic narrative, there exists a contradiction: on the one hand, scholars generally agree that Gorbachev strived to keep the USSR together; however, his reforms facilitated the rise of the separatist movements. *Glasnost* and democratization became the best tools for nationalists to gain support in their countries. Nevertheless, not only the nationalists in non-Russian republics gained that platform. The Russian nationalists and imperialists also had a chance to express their ideas. The Soviet government supported them through the state-owned press. Russian nationalists became one of the forces on which the leadership of the Soviet Union relied in its aspiration to preserve the country.

Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian nationalists kept discussing its recreation and protesting against the independence of the former Soviet republics. This strive led to the alliance of the communists with nationalists, creating a unique Russian political phenomenon called the “Red-Brown alliance.” or *krasnokorichnevye*.<sup>6</sup> Numerous parties in post-Soviet Russia tried to combine in their rhetoric the nationalist and communist sentiments with the premise of recreating the Soviet Union. In 1996, such an alliance of communists and nationalists in the Russian State Duma successfully denounced the Belavezha agreements of 1991, which dissolved the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> That action had no legal or international consequences but was a major declaration of the effort to gather the Soviet republics back into one state. Putin later successfully incorporated some of the notions of Red-Brown discourse into his politics, as

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<sup>6</sup> The example of such political platform is the National-Bolshevik Party of Eduard Limonov. See Fenghi, Fabrizio. “Making post-Soviet Counterpublics: The Aesthetics of Limonka and the National-Bolshevik Party.” *Nationalities papers* 45.2 (2017): 182–205. Web.

<sup>7</sup> Russian State Duma Act no 157-II SD “On the Legal Power of the Results of the Referendum of the USSR of March 17, 1991, for the Russian Federation-Russia” March 15, 1996.

one Russian journalist, Konstantin Semin, stated, “bringing together Ilyich [Vladimir Lenin] and Ilyin [the Russian philosopher, one of the founders of Russian Fascism].”<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, does such an alliance – between the Russian nationalists and the communists – show that Russian imperialism was the essence of the Soviet regime? The scholarly and popular narrative in the post-Soviet non-Russian states argue that the USSR was indeed a reincarnation of the Russian Empire. Taras Kuzio, a Ukrainian historian, argues that the Soviet Union adopted “Pro-Russian anti-Ukrainian policies.”<sup>9</sup> Historians from the Baltic States also tend to present the Soviet occupation of their countries as “Soviet Russian occupation.”<sup>10</sup> Even Kazakhstan, a loyal friend of contemporary Russia, keeps describing the Soviet period as a period of colonization by Russians.<sup>11</sup> The equalization of the Soviet and Russian elements keeps playing an important role in the nation-building process of those states.

However, while post-Soviet historians describe the Soviet period as an era of Russian domination, they always make an exception for perestroika. Russians and their political aspirations remain largely forgotten in those narratives. Ukrainian historians focus on the striving for Ukrainian nationhood and language.<sup>12</sup> Baltic historiographers scrutinize the history of the heroic struggle of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia for independence. Because of equivalence in the narrative of Russians and the Soviet Union, anti-Soviet actions are often perceived to be also anti-Russian.

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<sup>8</sup> Cited from Rudoy, Andrey “Stas i Marxism na Soloviev.Live. Ai Kak Prosto Stat’ Propagandistom.[Stas and Marxism on Soloviev.Live. How Easy it is to Become a Propagandist]” Vestnik Buri, April 6, 2023, video, 11:11

<sup>9</sup> Kuzio, Taras. “Soviet and Russian Anti-(Ukrainian) Nationalism and Re-Stalinization.” *Communist and post-communist studies*, no.49 (1), (2016): 87–99. Web.

<sup>10</sup> Krievina, Rita Laima. *Skylarks & Rebels : a Memoir About the Soviet Russian Occupation of Latvia, Life in a Totalitarian State, and Freedom*. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Amanzholuly, Abil Erkin. “History of Kazakhstan and Problems of Mythmaking.” *Omskiy Nauchnyi Vestnik*, no 4 (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Plokhyy, Sherhii. *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2021.



Meanwhile, many Russian and non-Russian scholars keep distinguishing the imperialism of the USSR from the imperialism of Putin's Russian Federation. According to Russian philosopher Grigory Yudin, contemporary Russian imperialism as an ideology rests on the aim of bringing the past back. Soviet imperialism rested on the idea of forced modernization of the neighboring countries.<sup>13</sup> Putin exploits Soviet nostalgia; however, his actions on the occupied territories differ significantly from the Soviet ones. While the Soviet Union, after occupying the Baltic States, totally changed the economic and political system within them, Putin's Russia reinstated the symbols of power and the past, such as statues of Lenin or Red Flags. Still, it did not offer any image of the future for the occupied regions.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the description of the Soviet Union as a Russian nationalist state also does not adequately represent the intricacies of the Soviet nationalities policies. Terry Martin, in *The Affirmative Action Empire*, describes rather anti-Russian national politics during the first stages of the existence of the USSR, such as the preferable employment of non-Russian ethnicities and attempts to introduce Ukrainian as one of the state languages. In the later stages of the Soviet existence, Russians indeed started playing a more significant role. Stalin introduced "Holy Rus" into the anthem, and Brezhnev stated that "Russians were the state-forming nation" in the Soviet Union. Russification practices, which Kuzio, Plochy, and many other post-Soviet historians note, indeed existed. However, no Soviet official or media could declare the supremacy of Russians or the inferiority of non-Russian nations. The notion of "historically Russian lands" or "Economic dependence of non-Russian republics on Russia" widespread in contemporary Russian media was never mentioned in the Soviet print or video press. The scholar of Russian Nationalism,

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<sup>13</sup> Malia, Martin E. *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991*. New York: Free Press, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> "Moscow Reinstates Statue of Lenin in Ukraine's Mariupol Years after Kyiv Took it Down" *Times of Israel*, November 5, 2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/moscow-reinstates-lenin-statue-in-ukraines-melitopol-years-after-kyiv-took-it-down/>

Yitzhak Brudny, in *Russian Nationalism from 1953 to 1991*, states that in the Soviet Union, Russian nationalism was rather a cultural than a political phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, Russian historiography, in line with the state propaganda, keeps describing perestroika as a “national defeat.” The language of many of those works is interesting: the authors keep using the terms “Russia” and USSR interchangeably (especially, that is applicable to the terms “Russians” or “our” and the term “Soviet”).<sup>16</sup> A great instance of that is an article by Boris Ershov and Vera Zimenkova “The Consequences of the Dissolution of the USSR.” In it, the authors mention that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the “territory of the country decreased by more than four times.”<sup>17</sup> Such statement equates Russia to the Soviet Union, stating that the country which dissolved and the country which rose on its ruins were the same countries.

This way, the Soviet Union fits into the narrative of the thousand-year-old Russian statehood. This approach to history suggests that from 862 until the present, there has been a Russian State which was peacefully or not incorporating neighboring peoples into itself. Russian Tsardom in it is a direct heir of the Medieval Princedoms with the capital in Kyiv, the Russian Empire comes out of the Russian Tsardom, the Soviet Union is a resurrected Russian Empire, and the Russian Federation is an heir of the Soviet Union, stripped of its historical land and power.<sup>18</sup> Putin invested time and money into the promotion of that narrative. In 2022, he even

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<sup>15</sup> Brudny, Yitzhak M. *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998. Print, 3

<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, such practice is also present in the Western Historiography. The Russian popular and historiographical approach is well-examined in the work of Andrew Linchenko “Dissolution of the USSR: Stages and Strategies of the Construction of the Historical Trauma in the Media Discourse of Contemporary Russia” *Socioeconomics*, no. 1,(2019)

<sup>17</sup> Ershov, Boris, Zimenkova Vera “The Consequences of the Dissolution of the Soviet Union” *International Journal of Humanitarian and Natural Sciences*, (2016).

<sup>18</sup> “The New Concept of Teaching Russian History to the Non-history Majors”. Passed by the Russian Ministry of Education, February 4, 2023.

<https://minobrnauki.gov.ru/%D0%9A%D0%BE%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F1.pdf>

gave a speech in Novgorod, dedicated to the thousands of years of Russian statehood.<sup>19</sup> In this framework, the dissolution of the Soviet Union becomes not a process of recreation of Russia as a state, but a national disaster, the collapse of Russia, and Russian ideas. The Soviet “nation of nations” and the Russian nation in those narratives are the same thing. Here, the historiography of the oppressor – Russia – aligns with the historiography of the oppressed.

Both Russian and non-Russian historians from the post-Soviet space, therefore, perceive perestroika as the gap in the coherent history of Russian oppression in non-Russian discourse or victorious Russian statehood in the Putinist one. However, such perception leads to a paradox. According to most of the historical scholarship, Mikhail Gorbachev never wanted the Soviet Union to dissolve and fought for its existence up until the Belavezha agreements of 1991.<sup>20</sup> However, he, for some reason, implemented the policies which led to its dissolution and were treacherous to the idea of Russianness.

Stephen Kotkin proposed a resolution to this paradox, which became quite widespread. According to him, the Soviet leader of 1985-1991 was unaware of the separatist intentions and nationalist tensions in the national republics.<sup>21</sup> Gorbachev himself proposed this hypothesis in his memoirs. He kept stating that he genuinely believed that interethnic conflicts were not possible in the Soviet Union and that the Soviet “nation of nations” qualified any possible tensions in that sphere.<sup>22</sup> Gorbachev presents himself as a person who bought into the narrative of Brezhnev,

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McGlynn, Jade “Imposing the Past: Putin’s War for History.” *War on the Rocks, Texas National Security Review*, March 15, 2023. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/imposing-the-past-putins-war-for-history/>

<sup>19</sup> Putin, Vladimir, “Speech on the Celebration of the Thousand-Year Anniversary of Russian Statehood.” Novgorodskoye Oblastnoye Televidenie. September 21, 2021.

<https://rutube.ru/video/2759d72b2ce17f413f62c4df4faebf8e/>

<sup>20</sup> Plokhy, Serhii. *The Last Empire : the Final Days of the Soviet Union*. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Kotkin, Stephen. *Armageddon Averted : the Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print, 72

<sup>22</sup>Gorbachev, Mikhail, Zdenek, Mylnar, and George Shriver. “Can the Use of Force ‘Save Socialism’?” In *Conversations with Gorbachev: On Perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the Crossroads of Socialism*, 127–34. Columbia University Press, 2003. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/gorb11864.14>.

which declared that the Soviet nations are no longer nations in its essence, but rather parts of one large Soviet nation, united by the memory of the victory in World War II.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that Gorbachev was well aware of the interethnic tensions in the Soviet Union. The nationalist dissidents such as Valery Stus' in Ukraine were tortured and received long prison terms.<sup>24</sup> However, their voices were loud enough, and it is hard to imagine that the Soviet leadership was not knowledgeable of their political platform. Furthermore, the problem of over-centralization of the USSR remained a prominent one in the vestiges of the political discussions which were happening in the 1980s. Anatoly Sobchak referred to these discussions in his electoral campaign in 1988.<sup>25</sup> A prominent scholar of the Soviet approach to the national question, Jeremy Smith, described the vehement debates about the status of the Russian language in the Soviet Press during the rule of Brezhnev.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, even he, for some reason, in the chapter "From Reform to Dissolution. 1982 - 1991," keeps referring to all actions of Gorbachev in the national sphere as mistakes, which his unawareness of the problem of the interethnic tensions sponsored.<sup>27</sup>

The Russian liberal, anti-Putinist discourse approached this paradox in a different way. Many prominent Russian liberal thinkers, such as Nobel Prize laureate, Dmitry Muratov, continually refer to Gorbachev as a freedom-giver to the nations of the Soviet Bloc.<sup>28</sup> The civil

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<sup>23</sup> Brezhnev, Leonid "Report to the XXIV Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union." Stenogramm of the XXIV Congress of the CPSU, vol. 2, GosPolitizdat March 30, 1971, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Stus, Dmytro, and Ludmila Bachurina. *Vasyl Stus: Life in Creativity*. Translated by Ludmila Bachurina. Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Sobchak, Anatoly, *Khozdenije vo Vlast' - Rasskaz o Rozhdenii Parlamenta* [How We Went into the Government - the Story of the Birth of Parliament], Moscow: Novosti, 1991, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, Jeremy. *Red Nations: the Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Print, 217-232

<sup>27</sup> Smith, 256-282

<sup>28</sup> Muratov, Dmitry "A Conversation with Dmitry Muratov, 2021 Nobel Peace Prize Winner" (public talk, Southern Connecticut State University, New Hampshire, Connecticut, September, 9, 2022)

funeral of Gorbachev in the summer of 2022 turned into a peaceful liberal demonstration.<sup>29</sup> The eulogies to Gorbachev were also extremely complimentary: Boris Vishnevsky, a liberal representative in the council of Saint-Petersburg, stated that Gorbachev gave “all us a chance for a free life.”<sup>30</sup> And yet, the actions of Gorbachev contradict this narrative. Alongside the aforementioned struggle of Gorbachev to keep the Soviet Union together in 1991, there was the bloody suppression of protests in Belarus (1988), and Tbilisi (1989); violent attempts to defeat separatist movements in Vilnius and Riga (1991), and the military coup in Baku in 1990. Even though Gorbachev tried to explain these events as the mistakes of his colleagues (chapter “Vilnius, Baku, Tbilisi” in “On My Country and the World”), he acknowledged that in the case of Baku, it was his decision to let the army enter the city.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, this approach does not resolve the paradox of the “Pro-Soviet - Anti-Soviet” actions of the Soviet Leadership in 1985-1991.

This thesis offers a different resolution to this paradox: it presents the period of perestroika as a period of a shift from the international to a national approach in Soviet politics. The power of the Soviet leadership no longer rested since the start of perestroika reforms on the CPSU – an omnipresent organization, the branches of which were the only administrative bodies existent across all fifteen Soviet republics. De-jure, the Soviet Union was a confederation of fifteen independent states, each of which had its own constitution, parliament (Supreme Soviet), and government (Soviet of Ministers). However, these were members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union who filled these positions, which effectively turned a union of fifteen loosely connected states into a monolithic partocracy. Since 1977, the CPSU had even official power:

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<sup>29</sup> Pleitgen, Frederick, John, Tara “Russians Say ‘Farewell’ to USSR’s Last Leader Mikhail Gorbachev in a Funeral Snubbed by Putin” *CNN Online*, September 3, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/03/europe/mikhail-gorbachev-funeral-russia-intl/index.html>

<sup>30</sup> Vishnevsky, Boris. *Vishnevskoye Vremya*, *Telegram*, September 3, 2022. <https://t.me/visboris/9483>

<sup>31</sup> Gorbachev, Mikhail, William Taubman. *On My Country and the World*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019, 94-104

according to the sixth article of the Brezhnev's Constitution of the USSR, the CPSU had a "leading and directing role."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, while the Soviet Union was divided into fifteen national republics, the ruling power of its was an interethnic organization. Such configuration facilitated the suppression of the interethnic tensions and kept the country centralized.

Nevertheless, the corruption and bureaucracy of the CPSU impeded the development of the USSR. Therefore, the Soviet leadership had to weaken CPSU somehow, but it still needed some political entity to keep the Union together. The only omnipresent entity other than CPSU, the USSR, were ethnic Russians, which inhabited in different proportions all fifteen Soviet republics; somewhere (not only in RSFSR, the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic), comprising a majority or the largest minority.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, using perestroika policies of *glasnost*, anti-corruption struggle, and democratization, the same way as the dissidents were raising national consciousness among non-Russian nationals, the Soviet media, officials, and leadership started promoting Russians as a political force on the one hand and juxtaposing them with their neighbors on the other hand.

The very policies of perestroika scrutinized in this thesis, *glasnost*, democratization, and anti-corruption purges had no national element in them initially. Nevertheless, they enabled bringing both Russian and non-Russian nationalism into the Soviet discourse on a larger scale than during previous periods of Soviet history. While dissidents in non-Russian national republics were bringing up issues of national autonomy, language, and greater federalization of the USSR, the Soviet government, through the press, was describing all these aspirations as threats to Russians and building narratives about strong anti-Russian national sentiments. The

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<sup>32</sup> *Constitution of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics*. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1982. 7

<sup>33</sup>"Census of 1989 " *Institute of Demography of A Vishnevskiy of the Higher School of Economics*  
<http://www.webgeo.ru/index.php?r=33&id=433>

purges of the corrupt elites became a legal pretext for the first time since Stalin's rule promotion of Russians to the local leadership in non-Russian republics.

The first chapter looks at how the Soviet government used the freedom of speech, declared in the late 1980s, to promote pro-Russian narratives. The example of such promotion is the media coverage of Jeltoqsan – the rebellion of people living in Kazakhstan against the appointment of the leader with no background in Kazakhstan to the local party branch in 1986. Even though the protesters were coming from various ethnic backgrounds, the Soviet media presented them as a riot of Kazakh nationalists, willing to kill all Russians who lived in Kazakhstan. The Soviet Press used the practices of *glasnost*, such as lifting the taboos from previously silenced issues, in order to denigrate the Kazakhs. Furthermore, the same press put a great emphasis on the positive qualities of the Russian people and even whitewashed Russian imperialism. Before perestroika, the very discussion of the protests such as Jeltoqsan, was not possible. During perestroika, discussion became one of the tools of propaganda.

The Kazakh historiography on Jeltoqsan focuses primarily on its impact on the Kazakh striving for independence. The protests of 1986 and their suppression remain an important part of the ideology of Nazarbayev's and Tokaev's Kazakhstan, a part of the national story.<sup>34</sup> The very narratives and the central audience of those, which, according to this thesis, was predominantly Russian, remain understudied. The Russian historians also present the protests as a national affair of Kazakhs and Kazakhstan and either do not focus much on the narratives about the Russians or aiming at Russians in that context. Myakshev, in the article "Protests of 1986, the First Ultimatum of the National Elites to the Center," mentions that after the protests, many Russians

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<sup>34</sup> Momysuly, Aslakhhan, "Jeltoqsan was Silenced, Denigrated and now is Acclaimed" *RusAzzaryk*, December 15, 2011.

left Kazakhstan; however, he does not connect it to the narratives spread by the Soviet press.<sup>35</sup> Finally, in Western historiography, Jeltoqsan does not receive attention at all. Neither Jeremy Smith in “Red Nations” nor Cathleen Collins in “Clan System and Regime Transition in Central Asia” examine the national aspect of that event.<sup>36</sup>

The second chapter focuses on the usage of the anti-corruption struggle in the 1980s in order to elevate ethnic Russians as a separate political force. An example of such a policy is Uzbekistan, where during the anti-corruption purge most of the local leadership went to prison or lost its positions. The Soviet government substituted the accused and imprisoned with the Russian newcomers. Furthermore, in the print media, it one more time promoted the idea of Russian supremacy: calling all Uzbek thieves and nationalists and presenting Russians as fighting against that threat to Soviet Statehood. Eventually, newcoming Russians left Uzbekistan after the process of a radical democratization of the USSR started in 1989, and the local political atmosphere became more stable.

The Uzbek historiography, as well as Kazakh, focused on anti-Uzbek rather than pro-Russian parts of the narrative, which the Soviet government built around the corruption in Uzbekistan and focuses on the impact which those narratives and affairs and purges had on the Uzbek identity. Maria Junusova in the article “From the Cotton Affair to the Uzbek Affair” blames the Soviet Press for the representation of all the Uzbeks as thieves.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, she does not describe the Russification of the Uzbek leadership, which took place in the 1980s. Russian historiography usually stays in line with propaganda in the description of Uzbek

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<sup>35</sup> Myakshev, Anatoly, “The Events in Almaty in December of 1986: the First Ultimatum of the National Elites to the Center” *Izvestiya Saratovskogo Universiteta*. Series: History and International Relations. vol. 18, no. 4, (2018): 428-445, 432

<sup>36</sup> Collins, Kathleen. *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Web.

<sup>37</sup> Junusova, Khurshida “The Cotton Case.” *Problemy Nauki*. No 4 (124). 2018



corruption and depicts it as a “national trait of Soviet Uzbekistan.” The discussion of the Russification of Uzbekistan in the 1980s is not happening at all, presumably, because it would dismantle the narrative about the equivalence of the Soviet State and the Russian state.<sup>38</sup> In Western Academia, Cathleen Collins remains the most prominent scholar of that affair; however, in the “Clans and Regime Transition in Central Asia” she primarily scrutinizes the impact of the Russification of the clan system of Central Asia, but not the patterns and premises of that Russification.

The history of the relationship between the Russian nationalism and the state remains a field, attention to which is wanting. In 1996, aforementioned Yitzhak Brudny published *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism from 1953 to 1991*. He also marks the rise of Russian nationalism in the end of the 1980s; nevertheless, he focuses primarily on the nationalists and their political actions; rather than on nationalism as an ideology and the way it did fit into the broader Soviet policies examined. Therefore, according to Brudny the alliance of the Russian nationalists and the Soviet government started in 1989, with the first elections to the People’s Congress of Deputies. Meanwhile, this thesis shows how the Soviet State employed the Russian nationalist notions several years earlier.

The topic of contemporary Russian nationalism and its origins remains extremely important in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As a Russian, I am deeply interested in the search for the reasons for popular support for the invasion in Russia. According to the State Russian Sociological Agency, VTSiOM, by February of 2023, 68 percent of the respondents support the war against Ukraine.<sup>39</sup> Even though this data is not reliable, because

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<sup>38</sup> Burkov, V. G., “Republic of Uzbekistan in the Foreign Politics of Russia: is Strategic Partnership Possible?” *Prioritetnye Napravleniya; Ot Teorii k Praktike*, no. 25 (2016): 51-56, 52

<sup>39</sup> “Special Military Operation: A Year Later.” VCIOM, February 23, 2023.  
<https://wciom.com/press-release/special-military-operation-a-year-later>

VTSiOM remains a state-owned agency, it is important to acknowledge that there is a large proportion of the Russian population which indeed supports the aggressive invasion of the neighboring country. Independent researchers describe that number as around 20-50 percent of the Russian population.<sup>40</sup> The reinvention of Russian supremacy on the state level contributes to this trend.

Another important part of such scrutiny is dismantling Putin's narrative about "one thousand years of Russian statehood." Through such a narrative, the Russian dictator justifies the annexation of the Ukrainian territories and attempts to annex the lands of Moldova and Georgia.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, it is important to distinguish between the Soviet and the Russian states. The Russification practices of the Soviet Union up until the 1980s usually (with the exception of Ukraine in some cases) went without the apparent juxtaposition of "Russians" with "non-Russians." Meanwhile, for the nation-state or for the national Empire, the state-supported distinction between the dominant (in the Soviet case, Russian) and the oppressed (all other) groups is an incisive trait.

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<sup>40</sup> "Conflict With Ukraine: Assessments for February, 2023" *Levada-Center* <https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/03/13/conflict-with-ukraine-assessments-for-february-2023/>, March 13, 2023

<sup>41</sup> Putin, Vladimir "On the Beginning of the Special Military Operation in Donbass." *TVC*, February 24, 2022. <https://theprint.in/world/full-text-of-vladimir-putins-speech-announcing-special-military-operation-in-ukraine/845714/>

For the history of Russian invasions to Moldova and Georgia see Dareg A. Zabarah. "Pridnestrovie." In *Nation- and Statehood in Moldova*, 139–. 1st ed. Harrassowitz, O, 2014.

Toal, Gerard. *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

## Chapter One.

### Media Coverage of the Rebellion in Almaty in 1986

“Freedom of speech led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.” This is a pervasive argument in both academic and public spheres. From the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, up until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the communist government controlled the media. The heaviest pressure was put on the nationalist and separatist movements in the non-Russian Union republics. Calls for more autonomy for non-Russian parts of the Union were punishable crimes.<sup>42</sup>

However, in 1985, this situation changed. That year the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev declared the policy of *glasnost*, lifting censorship in the USSR. Scholars, such as Stephen Kotkin and Jeremy Smith have argued that freedom of speech gave a platform to the local nationalists to make their voices heard.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in Ukraine, local advocates for national statehood successfully used newspapers and television to spread their ideas.<sup>44</sup> But why did the Soviet Union even enact such a policy? Did Mikhail Gorbachev and his team indeed underestimate nationalism, as scholars such as Cathleen Collins suggest?<sup>45</sup>

This paper aims to show that the central Soviet state actually benefitted by allowing expressions of nationalism back into public discourse. This change allowed the Soviet state to use propaganda to encourage a new wave of Russian nationalism, chauvinism, and imperialism

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<sup>42</sup> Brezhnev, Leonid “Report to the XXIV Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.” In *Stenogramm of the XXIV Congress of the CPSU*, vol. 2, GosPolitizdat March 30, 1971, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Smith, Jeremy. “From Reform to Dissolution, 1982–1991.” Chapter. In *Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR*, 256–81. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139047746.012., 277,

Kotkin, Stephen. *Armageddon Averted: the Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print, 72

<sup>44</sup> Plokhy, Serhii. *The Gates of Europe: a History of Ukraine*. Revised edition. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2021. Print. 313-314.

<sup>45</sup> Collins, Kathleen. *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Web. 101.

to maintain control over the country. This paper looks at how the Soviet media and officials used *glasnost* to reprimand and denigrate their political opponents.

A great example of the prevalence of Russian nationalism in media coverage is the example of Jeltoqsan, an unprecedented protest that took place in Almaty in December 1986. Gennady Kolbin, an ethnic Russian, former KGB agent, and the head of Soviet Georgia, had just received a new appointment. He was appointed the head of both the Supreme Soviet and the Communist Party of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan, which put him at the head of the Republican hierarchy. Kolbin had never been to any of the Central Asian republics before. He flew to the Kazakh capital, Almaty, for the first time, while already holding the highest office in the local hierarchy.<sup>46</sup> Right after Kolbin's arrival, people in Almaty and many other cities launched a protest that was unprecedented in Soviet Kazakhstan, called the Jeltoqsan. The appointment of a person, who had no connection to the republic, provoked anticolonial and anti-Moscow sentiments in the local population: they did not see any reason why any politician, born in Kazakhstan, could be in charge instead of the outsider Kolbin.<sup>47</sup>

However, the state did not adhere to their arguments. Soon, the Soviet military forces entered Almaty and violently suppressed the protest. According to the investigation, which started three years later, the soldiers killed around 200 protesters and injured even more.<sup>48</sup> This uprising became one of the core events in the collective memory of Kazakhstanis. When the country became independent in 1991, the government started erecting monuments and naming

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<sup>46</sup> Committee on the events of December of 1986. "The Course of Events" Chapter. In the *Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. 1989. National Archive of Kazakhstan, Astana

<sup>47</sup> Umirbekov, Darkhan, "Alma-Ata, 1986: The First Test Of Gorbachev's Glasnost." *The Journalist as Historian*. May 22, 2019. [journalist-historian.com/?p=495](http://journalist-historian.com/?p=495) .

<sup>48</sup> Myakshev, Anatoly, "The Events in Almaty in December of 1986: the First Ultimatum of the National Elites to the Center". *Izvestiya Saratovskogo Universiteta. Series: History and International Relations*. Volume 18 (2018): 430-445, 435.

the streets after Jeltoqsan (In Kazakh, Jeltoqsan means “A December Uprising”).<sup>49</sup> The Soviet press unexpectedly gave this riot a lot of attention; however, the description of the protesters was extremely jaundiced, while the Soviet state and Russian imperialism received support from the media.

Jeltoqsan was not the first uprising in the Soviet Union. There were rebellions in Novochoerkassk (1962), Krasnodar (1961), and Tashkent (1967), with economic, political, and nationalist demands. However, the suppression of those included the informational blockade. The Soviet state did everything possible to classify the facts and the reasons for the rebellions.<sup>50</sup> There were only two ways for a Soviet person to know about these anti-Soviet uprisings: through rumors or underground dissident journals. However, not everyone got access to the anti-Soviet self-printed press, and keeping those could lead to imprisonment.<sup>51</sup> The rumors were merely not reliable enough sources of information.

What distinguished those rebellions from Jeltoqsan was that they had occurred before the introduction of *glasnost*. Jeltoqsan, on the contrary, received extensive media coverage during and after the rebellion itself. The newspapers were replete with articles denigrating the protesters, and Soviet officials were addressing the people of Kazakhstan via radio and television.<sup>52</sup> However, the state controlled all the press, not letting any piece on Jeltoqsan go into public without being checked first.<sup>53</sup> The government required factories and state institutions to

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<sup>49</sup> “Lists of the streets in Almaty and Astana”. Accessed October 17 2022, <https://geodzen.com/kz/astana/streets?type=st>.

<sup>50</sup> Baron, Samuel H. *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union : Novochoerkassk, 1962*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001. Print.

Polynov, Mikhail “The Problems and Contradictions in the Development of International Relations in the USSR in the 1970s - the first half of the 1980s”, *Obschestvo*. (2008): 1-22., 21.

<sup>51</sup> Vaissie, Cecile. “Who Read, Typed, and Distributed Samizdat in the Soviet Union?” *Kritika* 23, no. 4 (2022): 941–946.

<sup>52</sup> Examples can be found later in the paper

<sup>53</sup> Committee on the events of December of 1986. “The Public Opinion.” Chapter in the *Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. 1989. National Archive of Kazakhstan.

organize talks about the event. Before the period of liberal reforms, known as perestroika (1985-1991), the press and officials had been propelling the narrative about the “non-existence” of inter-ethnic tensions in the USSR evaporated. However, under new Perestroika policies of limited freedom of speech, the media started discussing the “atrocities” of the protesters and portraying ethnic Russians as victims. The Soviet state was the only institution that could protect the victims from aggression in this situation. Thus, the Russian population of Soviet Kazakhstan got the motivation to support local officials.

Russian nationalism never entirely left the public discourse in the post-Stalin Soviet Union (1953-1991). The anthem of the USSR stated that it was “Holy Rus” that gathered the Union.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the constitution of the country, written in 1977, perpetuated that ideology by stating that the Russian nation was central to the formation of the Soviet Union.<sup>55</sup> The Russian people occupied most high-ranking positions in the late Soviet Union. Even if an official came from a non-Russian republic, he had to speak perfect Russian in order to succeed within the Soviet system.<sup>56</sup> And local languages received almost no support from the Soviet State. Even in non-Russian republics, the government did everything to make Russian the exclusive language of education.<sup>57</sup> The opening of the first Kazakh-language kindergarten in Almaty happened only in 1987 and attracted much media attention.

However, an essential portion of contemporary Russian nationalism was not present in Soviet public ideology before *glasnost*: the idea of the oppression of Russian people by local ethnic minorities. The so-called “oppression” of non-Russian Soviet ethnicities never entered the

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<sup>54</sup> Mikhalkov, Sergey “The Soviet National Anthem”. Accessed November 1, 2022 <https://hymnus.ru/gimn-sssr/>.

<sup>55</sup> *Constitution of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics*. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1982. 8

<sup>56</sup> Kuzio, Taras. “Soviet and Russian Anti-(Ukrainian) Nationalism and Re-Stalinization.” *Communist and post-communist studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 87–99.

<sup>57</sup> Fishman, Joshua A. “The Changing Status of Russian in the Soviet Union.” *International journal of the sociology of language* 33 (1982): 7–39. Print. 1982

narrative before perestroika. Neither media nor officials tended to describe Russians as victims of those or address any anti-Russian tensions in the national republics. The official propaganda focused on the Soviet “nation of nations” rather than on the Russians at its core. The media and the officials justified the Russification politics by calling them “internationalization.” There was a lack of media and education in non-Russian languages, even in national republics. However, the propaganda did not explicitly state the supremacy of Russian culture and language. The media justified teaching Russian and the suppression of the local languages by Russian being a *lingua franca* of the Soviet Union.<sup>58</sup> Cultural discourse within the RSFSR, Ukraine, and Belarus remained the only space in which Russian supremacists dominated.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, *glasnost* made bringing back to life the idea of Russian supremacy possible: the media started discussing the greatness of Russian imperialism and culture. Even more, the press started constructing the narrative of Russian victimhood in the national republics.

Bringing the media coverage of Jeltoqsan into the discussion of the *glasnost* policies adds a new perspective on the reason for implementing *glasnost*. Most scholars tended to describe the rise of nationalism in the media as the unwanted side effect of *glasnost*. However, the media and the official response to Jeltoqsan show how the Soviet government navigated the patterns of the *glasnost* era, such as the discussion of previously taboo issues, such as alcoholism, drugs, and nationalism. One example was that the Soviet media started paying a lot of attention to the political tensions between the nations. Before *glasnost*, the mainstream narrative had been that no nations existed in the USSR. Consequently, not only nationalists got an opportunity to start a

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<sup>58</sup> Kuzio, Taras. “Soviet and Russian Anti-(Ukrainian) Nationalism and Re-Stalinization.” *Communist and post-communist studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 87–99., 95

<sup>59</sup> Brudny, Yitzhak M. *Reinventing Russia : Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998. Print., 23

discussion of the Russification practices and over-centralization of the Soviet Union, but the Soviet government itself got a chance to defend those practices.

Soviet newspapers from 1986-1987 discussed Jelotqsan extensively. They provide us with numerous examples of how the state denigrated its political opponents through the *glasnost* patterns. These newspapers represented the state's position, as the communist party and the government still owned them. Nevertheless, they were still working in the paradigm of *glasnost*, which allowed them to bring into the discussion notions unimaginable for the pre-perestroika period, with Russian nationalism and Russian victimhood as the most prominent ideologies.

The Soviet state needed to bring Russian nationalism back to the public discourse during Perestroika to keep the country together. Indeed, the USSR started falling apart in the late 1980s, after Gorbachev's anti-party reforms, which weakened the strong hierarchy of the Communist party. Meanwhile, before the reforms, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was the only institution uniting the country, consisting of 15 states, each with its own parliament and constitution.<sup>60</sup> It had a strong hierarchy and great prevalence across the country, which enabled such unification. Meanwhile, in the beginning of the 1980s, the USSR entered an economic crisis, which it could not handle. The dictate of the party, infected with corruption and nepotism, was impeding the country's development.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, Gorbachev undermined the power of the party through the introduction of *glasnost* and democratization. The party officials started receiving unprecedented critique and for the first time in many years faced political competition. However, because of the weakening of the CPSU, the government needed a new prevalent group or institution to control the dissolving country. Ethnic Russians were living in all parts of the

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<sup>60</sup> Kotkin, 79

<sup>61</sup> Gorbachev, Mikhail Sergeevich. *On My Country and the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. Print, 85



Soviet Union. Consequently, the Soviet system made them into a new power to preserve the country.

Jeltoqsan was one of the first instances of *glasnost* policies resulting in the creation of explicitly pro-Russian narratives and denigration of non-Russian ethnic minorities. Both supreme officials of Soviet Kazakhstan and the media described the protesters as violent and aggressive towards Russians. According to the state narrative, they aspired to cleanse the Russian ethnos from the lands of Kazakhstan. This paper will further explore this notion in the “Evil Nazis” subsection. The Soviet state, however, according to the media, was the only institution that could preserve Russians from genocide. The “Caring State” subsection examines this narrative. Meanwhile, ethnic Russians received much acclaim in the media: the press stated that the Russian Empire and its people were integral elements in the very existence of Kazakhstan and the Kazakh nation. The subsection “Good Russians” scrutinizes that issue. Propaganda led to the mobilization of the Russian population of Kazakhstan: they started moving from Kazakhstan to RSFSR in large numbers.<sup>62</sup> The migration and its impact on the current narratives about post-Soviet republics in the Russian Federation is the focus of the last subsection: “Outcomes and Conclusions.”

Kazakh and Russian historians have dedicated much study to Jeltoqsan and its appearance in the media. Russian historian Myakshev examined the way Jeltoqsan impacted the elites of Kazakhstan.<sup>63</sup> Kazakh scholars, Serdali, Saydykov, Tayubykaev, Ashirbekova, and Zhaxylykbaeva, described the influence of media response to Jeltoqsan on Kazakh identity.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Kaziev, Shattar. “Traditsii Natsional’noy Politiki i Mezhetnicheskiye Otnosheniya v Sovremennom Kazakhstane.” *Nauchnye Vedomosti Belgorodskogo Universiteta* 13, no. 13 (2011): 70-85, page 83.

<sup>63</sup> Myakshev, Anatoly, “The Events in Almaty in December of 1986: the First Ultimatum of the National Elites to the Center” *Izvestiya Saratovskogo Universiteta*. Series: History and International Relations. vol. 18, no. 4, (2018): 428-445, 429-431

<sup>64</sup>Serdali BK. “National Identity in the Print Media of Kazakhstan in the Late Soviet Period.” *Global Media Journal*. 2017.

Meanwhile, this paper focuses on its impact on the development of the Russian identity and colonial narratives at the end of the Soviet Union's existence. The main issue addressed in this work is the origin of the absurd notion that Russians were victims of evil nationalists in the post-Soviet space. Scholars studying Russian imperialism, such as Taras Kuzio or Yitzhak Brudny, did not address this issue.<sup>65</sup>

Arguments against the idea of the Jeltoqsan rebellion as an outbreak of anti-Russian nationalism developed already in the 1980s. To carry out a fair investigation of the events of December 1986, Kazakh intelligentsia and party officials put together a 1989 special committee, which started collecting information about these events. Most of the research sources are from the materials that this committee collected, including interviews with party officials, the description of the radio and TV addresses, and some newspapers. The committee attempted to remain impartial by including people with different political views and positions on Jeltoqsan. Other sources come from other document collections and archives located in Kazakhstan. The Kazakh society completed an enormous feat by dismantling the colonial narrative about one of the most important events for developing their identity. Nevertheless, the impact of the Jeltoqsan rebellion and the media coverage of it on the Russian community remains understudied.

These narratives about anti-Russian Kazakh nationalism survived within the Russian Federation and still play a key role in public opinion and official statements. In 2022, Russian propagandist Tigran Keosayan mentioned in his evening show that the Russian Federation should invade Kazakhstan, because the Kazakh government canceled the May 9th (Day of Victory) Parade, which, according to Keosayan is a hostile act towards Russia.<sup>66</sup> The secretary of

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<sup>65</sup> Kuzio, Taras. "Soviet and Russian Anti-(Ukrainian) Nationalism and Re-Stalinization." *Communist and post-communist studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 87–99.,  
Brudny, Yitzhak M. *Reinventing Russia : Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998.

<sup>66</sup> Keosayan, Tigran, "Roskomnadzor". April, 24th, 2022. Tigran Keosayan Youtube Channel was deleted from Youtube.

the Defense Council, ex-president Dmitry Medvedev agreed with the assumption that Kazakhstan is a Nazist state and claimed that the very creation of this country was artificial.<sup>67</sup> This narrative closely corresponds to the portrayal of Ukraine; so, scrutiny of media depictions of Jeltoqsan might serve as an example of how the Russian and the Soviet Empires construct such narratives across several contexts and countries.

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<sup>67</sup> Medvedev later deleted his post. Medvedev, Dmitry, "On Kazakhstan," August, 2nd, 2022. *Vkontakte*.

## Evil Nationalists

If one tried to create the portrait of an average participant in the Almaty protests of 1986 by relying only on the Soviet newspapers of the time, the resulting image would be fascinating. That would be a young, drunk, and high hooligan, a firm supporter of Kazakh Nazism, dreaming of genocide of the Russian population of Kazakhstan. Each of these traits galvanized fear in a person living in the Soviet Union. Due to propaganda and historical traumas, drug addicts, alcoholics, hooligans, and nationalists were the principal evils in the mainstream narrative. However, it was *glasnost* which allowed such issues to become public. The state officials were endorsing the panic by claiming that Jeltoqsan was a well-thought conspiracy and not an autonomous protest. These were Russians, such as Kolbin, who told these stories to a Russian audience. Such statements contributed significantly to an enduring notion of Russian victimhood: the idea that non-Russian nations in non-Russian post-Soviet republics oppress the Russian population. The late 1980s marked when the discussion of such “oppression” started occurring in public, while the Soviet Union was still extant. Soviet media used the policies of *glasnost*, introduced at that time, to deepen that fear in the Russian community.

The development of the conspiracy theories about Jeltoqsan had already started when the protests were happening. When the army had just suppressed the uprising, TASS - the leading Soviet Information Agency - already claimed that some “nationalistic elements incited students to go to the streets. The mob presented itself as a mass, insane from using drugs and drinking alcohol”.<sup>68</sup> Alcohol played a massive part in that theory. Kolbin himself mentioned that there was a “machine distributing vodka” on Brezhnev Square in Almaty during the uprising.<sup>69</sup> In

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<sup>68</sup> Editorial Board. “Riot Reported on Ouster of the Soviet Official : Tass Press Agency Gives Unprecedented Account of Violence.” *Los Angeles Times* December 18th, 1986

<sup>69</sup> Committee on the events of December of 1986. “The Course of Events.” Chapter. In *Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. 1989. National Archive of Kazakhstan.

Kolbin's mind, the latter fact indicated that someone behind the curtains bought this machine and bought vodka to support the protesters. Somehow, the Western press, which had extremely limited access to Kazakhstan at that point, acquired this information. Thus, New York Times, LA Times, and many other major newspapers stated that there was a plot behind the Jeltoqsan protests.<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile, Soviet officials arrived at a problem: they could not find one instigator of the protests. As general Knyazev, the commander of the military that suppressed the demonstrations, mentioned in the interview with the Polish newspaper “Tribuna Lyudu”: they could not catch any organizer of the riot because there had been no organizer or organization behind them.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the investigators blamed the random participants of the protests. For instance, the evidence in one case of “organizing a mass riot” was a “happy smile on the protester’s face.”<sup>72</sup> Because finding single organizer turned out to be impossible, the Soviet law enforcement employed an old tactic of mass repressions. The activities of the Soviet repressive institutions ultimately led to the purges of the Kazakh universities - thousands of students faced expulsion. Also, the government fired deans and professors.<sup>73</sup> The repressed people were predominantly of Kazakh origin, which reinforced the idea of Kazakh anti-Russian plot.<sup>74</sup>

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The account does not mention the number of participants of the meeting; however, states that every head of *obcom* participated in it. At that moment there were 22 *obcoms* in Kazakhstan. See, Chiesa, Julio *The Democratic Experiment*. For the number of oblasts in Kazakhstan.

<sup>70</sup> Keller, Bill “Origins for Kazakh rioting are described”. *New York Times*. January 11th, 1987; KazGU Bulletin (1999) Series of journalism 7: 12-13.

<sup>71</sup> “The riots were suppressed - Interview of general Knyazev.” *Tribuna Lyudu*, February, 27th, 1987. Thanks to my friend Antonina Kaminskaya for scanning this from the Georgian Archive and translation from Polish;

Cited in Committee on the events of December of 1986. “The Public Opinion.” Chapter. In *the Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. Mistakenly calls the newspaper Bulgarian.

<sup>72</sup> Committee on the events of December of 1986. “The Accounts of People Arrested and Beaten .” Chapter. In *the Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*.

<sup>73</sup> Kaziev, Shattar. “Traditsii Natsionalnoy Politiki i Mezhetnicheskiye Otnosheniya v Sovremennom Kazakhstane. [Traditions of the National Politics and Interethnic Relations in the Modern Kazakhstan]”, *Russia and Muslim World*, no.6 (2012): 70-85, 78

<sup>74</sup> Myakshev, 432

Despite the lack of evidence, the seed of fear of “the plot behind the Jeltoqsan” conspiracy theory survived because it fell on the welcoming soil of Soviet Society. The Cold War and repressions led to a constant state of alarm among the Soviet citizens. From preschool, the Soviet educational system nurtured the eagerness to look for the anti-communist spies.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, the constant shortage of information left vast room for rumors, which often exacerbated the official statements.<sup>76</sup> Several witnesses, who agreed to interview for this paper, mentioned that they believe that some organization plotted the Jeltoqsan. They noted that some buses brought people to Almaty - an absurd statement because buses belonged strictly to the state.<sup>77</sup> The Soviet state efficiently debunked the notion of the protesters in Almaty coming from other cities by arresting hundreds of Almaty citizens and not arresting anyone from the other cities in the period of protests.

The alcohol, which served as the evidence for the conspiracy theory, was itself a denigrating circumstance in the eyes of the inhabitants of the Soviet Union. In 1986, free access to alcohol could spur both moral and class tension towards the protesters. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev imposed restrictions on the consumption and selling of alcoholic beverages. A Soviet citizen, henceforth, could not buy a bottle of vodka or beer after two PM. The price of spirits rose significantly, and access to it became a sign of a privileged person.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, the statement that the organizers of the protest had so much vodka that they could spread it implied that someone extremely powerful and rich was behind the protests. On one hand, such

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<sup>75</sup> Even childish songs propelled the search for spies. See Kim, Yuly, *Song about Alesha*.

<sup>76</sup> Apple, Nicholay. *Neudobnoye Proshloye: Pamiat' o Gosudarstvennykh Prestupleniyakh v Rossii i Drugikh Stranakh*. Moscow: Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 2021, 20

<sup>77</sup> Interview with the witness, Leila Madurova, lives in Almaty. She was 20 at the time of the protest.

<sup>78</sup> Bhattacharya, Jay, Gathmann, Christina, Miller, Grant. . “The Gorbachev Anti-Alcohol Campaign and Russia's Mortality Crisis.” *American economic journal. Applied economics* no.2 (2013): 232-260.240.

accusations invoked class and anti-elite tensions in Soviet society.<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, they invoked fear of powerful leaders behind the “nationalists.”<sup>80</sup>

However, the fear of alcoholics and merely drunk people overshadowed the class controversy. The anti-alcohol campaign of Gorbachev included vehement propaganda of sobriety. The Academy of Science was publishing a federal journal, “*Trezvost' i Zhizn*” - “*Sobriety and Life*” which preached abstention from drinking alcohol. The same editorial brought back to life the same-named All-Union society. All of these organizations described the mysterious nature of alcohol and the consequences of drinking, most notably the threat an alcoholic posed to the community. Many posters described alcoholics as violent and aggressive.<sup>81</sup> Given the consumption rates in the Soviet Union, presumably, many readers of the Soviet newspapers encountered these problems in their personal experience.<sup>82</sup> Thus, the description of the mob as one replete with drunk people would only perpetuate the narrative about its aggressiveness and boost the feeling of unsafety in the Soviet reader in 1986-1987.

The Soviet newspapers put a lot of stress on the drunkenness of the mob. “How dare those drunk hooligans to speak from the name of the Kazakh nation?”- asked a group of workers, whose address appeared on the pages of the most popular newspaper of the capital of Soviet Kazakhstan - *Vechernyaya Alma-Ata*.<sup>83</sup> Such addresses were a widespread genre of the Soviet Press, usually used to denounce or acclaim a specific person or measure. The government

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<sup>79</sup> Kolsto, Pal. “Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Job Competition: Non-Russian Collective Action in the USSR Under Perestroika.” *Nations and nationalism* 14, no. 1 (2008): 151–162

<sup>80</sup> Interview with a witness, Victoria Ogorodnikova, who was 9 during the Protests and remember the dialogues of the adults. Named Victoria Ogorodnikova.

<sup>81</sup> White, Stephen. *Russia Goes Dry: Alcohol, State and Society*. Cambridge ;: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 127.

<sup>82</sup> Tarschys, Daniel. “The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev’s Alcohol Policy, 1985-88.” *Europe-Asia Studies*, no 45.1 (1993): 7–25. Web. 18

<sup>83</sup> “Nam Gor’ko, [We Are Sad]” *Vechernyya Alma-Ata*, December, 21th, 1986. Alma-ata city archive, 1

presented itself as a mere tool of the people's will by publishing such addresses. In this case, the press perpetuated the notion of the protesters being drunk.

Another prominent newspaper of Almaty, *Ogni Alatau*, took a different approach to connect Jeltoqsan and alcoholism. It incorporated elements of nascent traditions of *glasnost* into its account. While discussing a biography of Rakhmetov, who received a prison term for participating in protests, the author mentioned that Rakhmetov was renowned for extensive consumption of alcohol - *pianstvo*. What makes the accusation striking is the fact that Rakhmetov was a head of the Komsomol branch, occupying an important position in the Soviet hierarchy.<sup>84</sup> Public accusation of the official was impossible for the pre-*glasnost* USSR. Meanwhile, *glasnost* opened the opportunity to reprimand the important figures in party and state institutions. Furthermore, Mikhail Gorbachev encouraged the Soviet party leadership to serve as an example in the anti-alcohol campaign.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the account of *Ogni Alatau* used the *glasnost* policy to perpetuate the narrative, which was beneficial for the state: even respected members of the society went to the protests drunk.

Another previously taboo issue that the media successfully connected with the events of Jeltoqsan was drugs. The laws of the USSR prohibited the use of drugs other than alcohol and tobacco.<sup>86</sup> The media and the government presented this issue as non-existent within the USSR. Even medical professionals could not access or collect data on drug abuse.<sup>87</sup> The journals scarcely published that data. There were only two large centers that were examining this

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<sup>84</sup> "Podstrekatel Osuzhden [The Instigator is Sentenced]" *Ogni Alatau*. January 11th, 1987, 13

<sup>85</sup> Tarschys, 20

<sup>86</sup> The Penal Code of RSFSR, 1926. The separate penal code of Kazakh SSR was not passed until 1960.

<sup>87</sup> Conroy, Mary Schaeffer. "Abuse of Drugs Other than Alcohol and Tobacco in the Soviet Union." *Soviet Studies* 42, no. 3 (1990): 447–80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/152045>. 450



problem.<sup>88</sup> The general public, therefore, encountered the discussion of drug abuse even more rarely.

*Glasnost* shed light on the issue of drug abuse. Newspapers and media started discussing the rise of addiction cases across the country. Public opinion connected that rise to the war in Afghanistan. The prevailing assumption was that the retired military was selling drugs to the civilians. Meanwhile, the perception of users themselves was (and in some parts of the post-Soviet space remains) strongly negative. The TV portrayed them as hooligans and deviant elements of society.<sup>89</sup> There was a prevalent idea that because of drug addicts, the number of Soviet citizens sick with Hepatitis skyrocketed.<sup>90</sup> The connection to Afghan veterans did not serve them well either - in public opinion, those were broken and aggressive people.<sup>91</sup>

The drug and the Afghan problems had a deep connection with the state and mass perception of the nationalist tensions in Central Asia. In the 1920s-1930s, the Soviet state repressed Kazakh rural intelligentsia under the banner of war “on drug dealers”. *Tabibs* - the medicine men of Kazakh communities - were indeed distributing the opiates; however, they were doing it to ease the feeling of hunger: in that period, the awful famine struck Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, the Soviet governmental machine kept a prejudice towards non-Russian inhabitants of Central Asia. sometimes, *militia* - the Soviet police - could come without a call or reasons to the factories in large cities of Central Asia to investigate if there were any drug users.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Latypov, Alisher. “Soviet Psychiatry and Drug Addiction in Central Asia: The Construction of ‘Narcomania.’” *Psychiatry in Communist Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2020. 73–92. Web. 75

<sup>89</sup> Conroy, 475,

<sup>90</sup> Central Intelligence Agency *The USSR Domestic fallout during the Afghan War*. February 1, 1988. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp89t01451r000100090001-5>

<sup>91</sup> Alexievich, Svetlana, *Zinky Boys*, Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1989, 177.

<sup>92</sup> Latypov, 60

The war in Afghanistan deepened the notion of the people from Central Asia being drug dealers. Many people from Muslim and Central Asian communities participated in that war.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, large cities in that Region, such as Almaty, Tashkent, or Dushanbe, were the hubs for people going to that war and from it.<sup>94</sup> These logistics made those important cities hubs of narcotraffic.

The media and officials that discussed Jeltoqsan were bringing drugs into the discourse under the *glasnost* policies. The head of the propaganda division of the Kazakh Communist Party, Kamaldienov, seems to be one of the first officials who discussed the drug problem. Nevertheless, he did that in a way beneficial for the state: he several times stated that the mob of protesters was high on drugs. He did not go into any specifics; however, that narrative survived. The western media successfully perpetuated it: the prominent newspapers, such as New York Times and Los Angeles Times, in the middle of January stated that the mob was extensively using drugs.<sup>95</sup>

The newspapers did not discuss that topic as much as they did with alcohol. The newspaper “Socialistic Kazakhstan” accused the protesters of being “*anashists*”.<sup>96</sup> *Anasha* was a Central Asian version of hashish. The choice of a drug, which the protesters used, should have also played on the established associations. *Anasha*, unlike cocaine or heroin, was a drug that young workers used.<sup>97</sup> Unbelievably, a factory employee became a despised position in the “State of the Workers” after World War Two. Unlike soldiers and cosmonauts, they were no longer

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<sup>93</sup> Yakupova Darya, Yakupov Roman, “The Soviet Society, and the Afghan War in the Reports of CIA” *Izvestiya Vysshikh Uchebnykh Zavedenij* no.2, (2019): 84-100. 91

<sup>94</sup> Alexievich, 2

<sup>95</sup> Keller, Bill “Origins for Kazakh rioting are described”, Editorial Board. “Riot Reported on Ouster of the Soviet Official : Tass Press Agency Gives Unprecedented Account of Violence.” *Los Angeles Times* Decembr 18, 1986

<sup>96</sup>Committee on the events of December of 1986. “The Public Opinion.” Chapter in the *Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. 1989. National Archive of Kazakhstan.

<sup>97</sup> Miller, Brandon Gray. “The New Soviet ‘Narkoman’: Drugs and Youth in Post-Stalinist Russia.” *Region* 4, no. 1 (2015): 45–69. 53-55

heroes but rather the lowest social stratum.<sup>98</sup> By bringing drugs into the depiction of the protests, the Soviet official propaganda was lowering the status of the protesters, most of whom were students of Almaty Universities, going to get a white-collar job after graduation.<sup>99</sup> Such denigration also could ignite fear in Soviet society: the working class presented more danger of criminal activities than students.

However, in the case of the drug narrative, it was impossible to pick specific cases and present them as a trend. As mentioned above, unlike consuming alcohol, taking drugs was a crime in the USSR. Nevertheless, none of the arrested protesters got their sentence for being a user.<sup>100</sup> Even the Soviet repressive system could not find one drug addict among the participants of Jeltoqsan. However, the fear of the protesters being drug addicts survived without vehement reinstating because it was playing on already extant stereotypes.

To deepen the feeling of fear, the propaganda dedicated a lot of time and space to discuss the notion of the protesters acting violently. The aforementioned public address “*Nam Gor’ko*” in *Vechernya Alma-ata* called a riot to be a pogrom. The representatives of the “offended community” – “*oskorblennaya obshchestvennost*”-- were claiming that the protesters were burning cars and beating people.<sup>101</sup> In a week, the other popular newspaper, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, reinforced that narrative by once again quoting the “*oskorblennaya obshchestvennost*” which, according to its editors, was outraged by the “hooligans and parasitic elements,

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<sup>98</sup> Fraser, "Masculinities in the Motherland: Gender and Authority in the Soviet Union During the Cold War, 1945-1968," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2019. 145-162

<sup>99</sup>Committee on the events of December of 1986. “The Course of Events.” Chapter. In *Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. 1989. National Archive of Kazakhstan.

Kolsto, Pal. “Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Job Competition: Non-Russian Collective Action in the USSR Under Perestroika.” *Nations and nationalism* 14, no. 1 (2008): 151–162

<sup>100</sup> Committee on the events of December of 1986. “The Reaction of the Government.” Chapter . In *Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. 1989. National archive of Kazakhstan

<sup>101</sup> “Nam Gor’ko [We are Sad]” *Vechernyaya Alma-Ata*.

protesting.”<sup>102</sup> However, this media did not go into details or say anything specific about the violence in which the protesters engaged.

Other newspapers took a similar strategy as to alcohol-related narratives. They were picking one protester and, through the description of his aggressiveness, were perpetuating the narrative about aggressive participants of Jeltoqsan. *Ogni Alatau*, half a year after the riot, described a trial against five students who had participated in it. The newspaper depicted how the “nationalist instigators” galvanized “the pogroms, ignitions of the cars, and beatings of the *militia*.” The persecution accused the students of beating several representatives of the *militia* themselves and killing one *druzhinnik* - a volunteer force member helping the Soviet law enforcement organizations. According to the newspaper, the most dangerous was one of the students, Tajimubaev, who was “knowledgeable about sambo tricks.” However, he received only 14 years of jail. The judge sentenced his comrade, Ryskulbaev, to the death penalty for the murder of the representative of the Soviet law.<sup>103</sup>

Such detailed coverage of hooliganism and murder cases had not been a tradition of the Soviet media. During all the communist rule, the newspapers tried to hide from society the news of the criminal world. In Stalin’s era (1924 - 1953), the only trials the media covered were the ones against his political opponents.<sup>104</sup> During Khrushchev’s (1953 - 1964) and Brezhnev's rule (1964 -1982), the media did not describe any violent crimes and concentrated on the political or as they called it “anti-Soviet” nature of the issues. Through such coverage the Soviet government

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<sup>102</sup> “V politburo TsK KPSS [In Politburo of TsK CPSU]”. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*. December 2, 1986. Archive of Georgian Parliament.

<sup>103</sup> “Iz Zala Suda: Rasplata za Beschinstva [From the Courtroom: the Punishment for the Atrocities]” *Ogni Alatau*, June 17, 1987. National Archive of Kazakhstan

<sup>104</sup> The most renowned cases are processes of Zinoviev. See Kotkin, Stephen, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941*. New York: Penguin Press, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2017.

aspired to nurture the communal responsibility for the fight against rise of crime<sup>105</sup> Throughout the short reigns of Andropov (1982 - 1984) and Chernenko (1984 - 1985), the media focused on the corruption cases but did everything to make the actual cases of hooliganism stay in the shadows.<sup>106</sup>

It was *glasnost* that gave *Ogni Alatau* a chance to go into such details of the case of five students who participated in Jeltoqsan. In November of 1986, the Central Committee of CPSU passed a statement called “On Further Strengthening of the Socialist Rule and Law, Guard of the Rights and Lawful Interests of Citizens.” According to that statement, *militsiya* should be as transparent as possible and give journalists access to its activities.<sup>107</sup> On December Fifth - only two weeks before Jeltoqsan - the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union stated that all courts should be transparent.<sup>108</sup> The briefings with journalists became part of the routine of the Soviet law enforcement.<sup>109</sup> *Glasnost* demolished the wall between the society and the criminal news.

The tone of the depiction of the violence during Jeltoqsan was also unique for the Soviet media, and served the purpose of galvanizing fear towards the protesters. Up until Perestroika, journalists described the rare cases of hooliganism that reached the press with pity towards the “anti-social elements.” Only political “anti-Soviet” criminals deserved denouncement. Nevertheless, during *glasnost*, the benevolence of the Soviet media evaporated. The journalists and editors were severely reprimanding the criminals, trying to break out from the previous

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<sup>105</sup> Zubkova, Elena “Normy i Praktiki Controlya nad Ugolovnoy Prestupnostiyu v SSSR: Tendencii Ottepeli [Norms and Practices of the Control over the Crime in the Soviet Union: the Tendencies of the Thaw]” *Vestnik Permskogo Universiteta*, no. 3 (2020): 128-139, 139

<sup>106</sup> Collins, 86

<sup>107</sup> “V TSK KPSS”, *Pravda*. November 26, 1986

<sup>108</sup> Bulletin of the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union, December, 5, 1986. Thanks to my girlfriend Kristina Vashpanova who scanned several pages of this document for me.

<sup>109</sup> Yakovets, E., Zhuravlenko, N., Ozhiganoca, M. “Pravopremitelnaya Deyatelnost’ Sovetskikh Structur v Poslednije Gody Suschestvovania SSSR [The Legal Actions of the Soviet Structures in the Last Years of the Existence of the USSR]”, *Uchenye Zapiski Krymskogo Federal’nogo Universiteta*, volume 8 no.1, (2022): 46 - 54, page 47

tradition.<sup>110</sup> The article of *Ogni Alatau* about Ryskulbekov is representative of that trend. The newspaper described Ryskulbekov as “furious,” “aggressive,” “not in control of his actions.” It named students “pogrommers and instigators of the riots.” The newspaper showed almost no mercy to Ryskulbekov and other participants in the protest, no lament of the fact that five students “took a road of wrong deeds” - a common collocation for the Soviet newspapers of pre-*glasnost* time.<sup>111</sup>

Nevertheless, the very facts of violence are questionable. The investigators violated all the norms of the conduct when questioning the witnesses. For instance, the main evidence in the aforementioned Ryskulbekov case was the fact that he was a Kazakh and wore a coat, which a witness recognized.<sup>112</sup> In 1989-1990, the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan rehabilitated many protesters. The basis for rehabilitation in most cases was “lack of crime” which meant that not only the people accused had not committed it, but also that the crime itself had never occurred.<sup>113</sup>

Meanwhile, politics played a huge role in that accusation. Most of the arrested people were facing charges either for hooliganism either for “advocating for the violation of equality of the nations.” That was the final and the most severe accusation - the accusation of Kazakh nationalism. Unlike others, this notion was ubiquitous - in all newspapers, radio addresses, and official statements up until 1989. That was a great example of the implementation of the *glasnost* policies. Before the first declarations of the *glasnost*, the Soviet Union for a long time refused to acknowledge any interethnic tensions within itself.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, even after the Jeltoqsan broke

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<sup>110</sup> Ivanov, Valery, “Vzaimodejstvie Organov Vnutrennikh Del Mariiskoi ASSR i Sredstv Massovoy Informacii vo Vtoroy Polovine 1980-h godov [Interactions of the Branches of the Domestic Affairs of Mariiskaya ASSR with the Media in the Second Half of the 1980s].” *Mariiskiy Gosudarstvennyy Universitet*, (2021): 18-32, 25

<sup>111</sup> “Rasplata za Beschinstva,” *Ogni Alatau*, June, 19 1987. National Archive of Kazakhstan

<sup>112</sup> Daniyarov, T. “Sud Pyaterykh [The Trial of the Five].” Chapter in *Alma-ata. 1986. December. Kniga Khronika*, Translated by Kengegulova, N.164-183. Alma-Ata: Kollegia Audarma, 1992.

<sup>113</sup> Committee on the events of December of 1986. “The Reaction of the Government.” Chapter . In *Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. 1989. National archive of Kazakhstan

<sup>114</sup> Plochy, *Gates of Europe*, 473

out, Kolbin claimed to the Western press that it has nothing to do with anti-Russian attitudes, in Kazakhstan.<sup>115</sup> However, after several days and a communique of TASS, which put the blame for the riot on the, “outbreak of Kazakh nationalism,” the situation changed.

The newspapers started describing the nationalist aspirations of the protesters. Already nine days after Jeltoqsan, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* mentioned in its permanent rubric “In Politburo” that, “working people collectively denounced the outbreaks of nationalism, which took place in Almaty and pledged to punish the instigators.”<sup>116</sup> *Ogni Alatau* published a series of interviews and collective addresses, which stated that Kazakh nationalists were violating the “unique atmosphere of Peoples’ friendship - *druzhiba narodov* - developed in Kazakhstan.”<sup>117</sup> Ironically, various journalists and even authors of the “letters to the editorial” used the same collocations and notions in their writings.

The accusation of nationalism was so important for the creation of the narrative about Jeltoqsan that even Union-level newspapers engaged in that discussion. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Leninskaya Smena*, even the main newspaper of the Soviet Union -*Pravda* and the main cultural periodical *Literaturnaya Gazeta* were discussing that issue. That media campaign lasted for a year, throughout which any interethnic debate of Kazakhstan was attracting the attention of the Soviet media.<sup>118</sup> *Pravda*, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, *Leninskaya Smena*, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* had Union-wide audiences. Thus, the narrative about the Kazakh nationalists was spreading across the Union.

Such extensive attention to the issue of “Kazakh Nationalism” was to ignite fear in Soviet society and Russian ethnic community on both linguistic and content levels. On the

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<sup>115</sup> Keller, Bill “Origins for Kazakh rioting are described”.

<sup>116</sup> “V Politburo TsK KPSS” *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 27.12.1986

<sup>117</sup> Gaipov, Escendir, “Tuchej Nebosklon ne zakryt [You can’t Cover the Sky with a Cloud]” *Ogni Alatau*, December, 26, 1986

<sup>118</sup> Serdali BK. “National Identity in the Print Media of Kazakhstan in the Late Soviet Period.” *Global Media Journal*. 2017.

linguistic level, the word nationalism sounds too close to the word nazism in Russian - both words have the [ɯ] sound in the middle. In the Soviet Union, the government did not elucidate the difference between those ideologies.<sup>119</sup> Even now, people in the Russian Federation mostly do not distinguish them - the evidence is numerous questions on the Mail.Ru, the Russian analog of Quora, a commonly used “questions and answers” website, “Are nationalism and Nazism the same thing?”<sup>120</sup> The trauma of World War Two was too deep at that point for the associations with Nazism not to cause pain and fear.<sup>121</sup>

On the level of content, the media and officials described protesters as Kazakh supremacists. The official statement of TsK CPSU stated that the protests resulted from a lack of fight against “strife for the national isolation”.<sup>122</sup> That statement was public and many people were waiting for it - *glasnost* played its role once again.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, the very formula of the reasons for the protests - “the appointment of Russian to be a head of Kazakhstan,” which appeared in official statements and hence in the foreign press was perpetuating that narrative.<sup>124</sup> Meanwhile, people were protesting not against the appointment of a Russian, but against the appointment of an outsider to Kazakhstan. They had alternate candidates, several of whom were ethnic Russian, but residing in Kazakhstan.<sup>125</sup> While the officials and media accused them of the violation of ideas of Lenin, what they did was actually putting those ideas to action. One of the

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<sup>119</sup> Smith, Jeremy. “Stability and National Development: the Brezhnev Years, 1964–1982.” Chapter. In *Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR*, 216–55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139047746.011., page 242

<sup>120</sup> Mail.Ru: 14 questions in the past ten years.

<sup>121</sup> Apple, Nicholas. *Difficult Past*. Page 602

<sup>122</sup> The Official Statement of Tsk CPSU *O Rabote Kazakhstanskoy Partiinoi organizatsii po internatsionalnomu i patrioticheskomu vospitaniyu trudyaschikhsya*, Cited in Jeltoqsan Documentary Collection, 2021, pages 25-27

<sup>123</sup> Committee on the events of December of 1986. “The Public Opinion.” Chapter in the *Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. 1989. National Archive of Kazakhstan.

<sup>124</sup> Keller, Bill “Origins for Kazakh rioting are described”,

<sup>125</sup> The Investigative Committee on the Events of December 1986, “Interview with a witness, Abdybayev Zarpın, for the investigative committee.” *Materials of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. National Archive of Kazakhstan.



first declarations passed by the Bolsheviks stated that all nations under their rule are becoming equal.<sup>126</sup> Lenin himself declared war against Great-Russian chauvinism.<sup>127</sup> Under his and early Stalin's rules, the Soviet government did everything possible to create social elevators for the representatives of the titular nations of the national republics, such as Kazakhstan.<sup>128</sup>

However, that did not qualify the assaults of the media on the protesters. The main tool of them was a juxtaposition of "a good, friendly Kazakh" and "Kazakh nationalists who went on the streets." A great example of such juxtaposition is an interview, published in *Ogni Alatau* at the end of 1986. The speaker for the interview, a student, Escender Gayipov, stated that he had many friends of different nationalities and thus he was not participating in the protest.<sup>129</sup> Such a phrase implied that people who participated in the demonstration had no friends of nationalities other than Kazakh. His colleague, Gulnur Nurmambetova, stated that in her childhood she had a friendly family of Russians who lived across the street and was helping her. According to her account in December of 1986, she went to the square "out of curiosity"; however, she was outraged by what the mob was screaming and soon she left.<sup>130</sup> If only Nurmambetova had stayed on the square for a little bit longer, she would have heard that people are speaking perfect Russian. Many placards, according to the testimony of the witnesses, were in Russian, and many ethnic Russians were engaged in the protests.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> The Council of People's Commissars. *The Declaration of Rights of the Nations of Russia*. November 2, 1917

[https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%94%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F\\_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2\\_%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2\\_%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B8](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%94%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2_%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2_%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B8)

<sup>127</sup> Lenin, Vladimir, "On National Pride of Velikorossy", *Socialist-Democrat*, no. 35. (December 12, 1914)

<sup>128</sup> See Martin, Terry, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

<sup>129</sup> Gaipov, Escendir, "Tuchej Nebosklon ne zakryt." *Ogni Alatau*

<sup>130</sup> Nurmambetova Gulnur. "Stydno i Gor'ko [Sorry and Sad]", *Ogni Alatau*. December 28, 1986. National Archive of Kazakhstan

<sup>131</sup> Committee on the events of December of 1986 "Interview with a Witness, Schmidt, for the investigative committee." *Materials of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. National Archive of Kazakhstan

Let's return to the image of a drunk, high, Kazakh Nazist and hooligan from the beginning of this subsection. The greatest paradox of that image is that none of these traits were, according to the official narratives, extant in the Soviet Union; however, there were strictly negative associations with all of them, especially in the community of the ethnic Russians. *Glasnost* brought these notions from the shadow of the rumors to the light of the public discussion. This way, the Soviet propaganda ignited fear within the Russian people: the image of the violent local nationalists aiming to massacre them or at least cut all ties with them was extremely powerful. Creation of such an image through official media was impossible before *glasnost*; however, under its policies, it became not only possible but required of newspapers to talk about such issues.

### **Good Russians.**

The positive image of the victims of violence is critical for galvanizing empathy toward them. Therefore, the Soviet media did a lot to develop a set of ideas about how good Russians were, consciously abstaining from describing any harm Russian Imperialism caused to Kazakhstan. Moreover, the ideas about “Russian kindness” and “Russian greatness” did not exist in a vacuum. According to the Soviet narrative, Russians were kind to Kazakhs, the Russian state was essential for the development and existence of the Kazakh state, and even cultures of Russian and Kazakh ethnicities were intertwined. In developing those notions, Soviet journalists and officials efficiently navigated the *glasnost* policies and used them to propel the ideas, which never openly entered the public Soviet discourse. *Glasnost* enabled open discussion of the superiority of Russian culture, the greatness of the Russian Empire, and the kindness of the Russian nation to the Kazakh people and state.

An important fact to acknowledge is that in Brezhnev’s times, there was a discussion of the importance of the Russian language. Meanwhile, there were party officials disagreeing with the party line for Russification and saying that Russian is no better than any other “*lingua franca*,” such as French or English.<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, these discussions were limited to the field of language: the media described Russian as a tool of national fusion but not as a trait of the supremacy of the Russian nation. The Soviet State before Gorbachev had been interested in creating a “supranational Soviet identity” but not in making Russian nationalism its dominant ideology. The state prosecuted Russian nationalists, who discussed the superiority of their nation, the same way as separatists from the national republics. The media did not overtly praise Russian

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<sup>132</sup> Smith, Jeremy. *Red Nations : the Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 221.

people.<sup>133</sup> Thus, the discussion of the supremacy of the Russian language did not imply the superior traits of the Russian nation.<sup>134</sup>

The Soviet Union had its own hierarchy of “advancement”: the government, since Stalin’s rule, believed that “nations” are superior to “tribes” and tribes are superior to “clans”. The Soviet ethnographers developed sophisticated definitions of each term; however, the “general public” was unaware of those discussions.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, the government strictly prohibited comparing nations between themselves, which could have reminded the citizens of Nazism. While the Germans compared the nations by “genes”; the Soviet Union compared their “social organization”. Given that, it was complicated to choose a more advanced nation.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, perestroika and *glasnost* changed it. The discussion of the inter-ethnic tensions led to Russian nationalism and supremacy ideologies being brought to the public attention.

However, while covering Jeltoqsan, the press extensively focused on the kindness of the Russian nation. For instance, in the aforementioned series of interviews for *Ogni Alatau*, Gulnar Nurmambetova recollected how in the childhood of her mother, Russian and Kazakh families was so close that they even did not build a wall between each others’ houses. Furthermore, this friendship lasted even in the 1980s: some Russian, whom she named “Uncle Vitya Suvorov,” was still coming to the family holidays.<sup>137</sup> In the same series of letters, the factory worker, Bakhyt Nasynbekova, described how Russian women had taught her in school and had been extremely kind to her. According to Nasynbekova, not only did they teach her literacy, but also

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<sup>133</sup> Brudny, Yitzhak M. *Reinventing Russia : Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991*. 78

<sup>134</sup> Fishman, Joshua A. “The Changing Status of Russian in the Soviet Union.” *International journal of the sociology of language* 33 (1982): 7–39. Print 36

<sup>135</sup> Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, 1st ed., Cornell University Press, 2005, 146

<sup>136</sup> Hirsch, 180

<sup>137</sup> Nurmambetova Gulnur. “Stydno i Gor’ko [Sorry and Sad]”, *Ogni Alatau*. December 28, 1986. National Archive of Kazakhstan

they preached “love to the motherland and humans.” “Such love for human beings” - she extrapolates - “is a unique trait of the Russian people.”<sup>138</sup> An apparent discussion of “national traits or mentality” was almost improbable in the public media of the Soviet Union before *glasnost*, as described above. Nevertheless, *Ogni Alatau* started breaking the taboo. The description of “kind Russians”, therefore, created an apparent juxtaposition between them and “evil Kazakhs”. The ingratitude of Kazakhs towards Russians leveraged the “victimhood” of the Russians: all of their kind gestures seemed to have no reciprocity from Kazakhs.

Not only the Russian nation but also the Russian state and its expansionism received acclaim in the Soviet newspapers. Instead of examining the atrocities of impacts of the Russian colonialism, the press created the positive image of the activities of the Russian Empire in Kazakhstan. An important instance of that is an article by the academic Karataev. In late December 1986, he, a prominent literary critic, published “V Sem’e Edinoj” - in “The United Family.” Ironically, the name of the article was the same as that of one of the most famous Karataev works - a book of fiction published ten years before the Jeltoqsan. In the article, however, apart from perpetuating the aforementioned ideas of “evil Kazakh nationalists,” Karataev emphasized the role of the Russian state in Kazakh history. According to him, at the end of the eighteenth century, the people of Kazakhstan were facing the threat of dying out or being enslaved. Karataev never got into the details: “enslaved by whom, why die out?” Instead, he offered a messianic portrait of the Russian nation and described the Russian state as a “great Northern neighbor of Kazakhstan”.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Nasanbekova, Bakhyt. “Borot’sya za kazhdogo cheloveka [To Fight for Every Person]”, *Ogni Alatau*, December 27, 1986 City Archive of Almaty

<sup>139</sup> Karataev, Mukhamedzhan. “V Sem’je Edinoj [In the United Family]” *Ogni Alatau*, January, 5th, 1987. City Archive of Almaty

Such a narrative deepened the idea of Russians being victims of Kazakhs. Adding the history of Russian colonization and oppression would complicate the narrative about “Kazakh nationalism.” The appointment of an ethnic Russian, Kolbin, would look as perpetuation of Russian colonial practices. However, not introducing Russian imperialism into the picture of Jeltoqsan, contributes significantly to the image of the protests as unprovoked. Therefore, as long as the media depicted the uprising as anti-Russian, Russians became “innocent victims” of the “*pogroms*”.

It is important to acknowledge that such an approach towards Russian colonialism was a vestige of the historiography of the Stagnation period. In that, the scholars described the annexation of the Kazakh lands as a consequence of the “mutual closeness” of the Russian and Kazakh nations. The field of history would remain predominantly “Russified” in its narratives up until the end of the 1980s.<sup>140</sup> The school curricula of the “Soviet History” focused on Russia, not on other republics, which led to the implication that the Russification. Despite that, beliefs such as “overall kindness of the Russian nation” pervasive across the Soviet media in the *glasnost* era, were not present even in the historiography of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, *glasnost* enabled creation of the contrast between “good Kazakhs” and “kind Russians.” The newspapers covertly assigned the specific traits to the nationalities. Such an approach was a common one during the era of *glasnost*. Before that the Soviet press had not gone into the discussion of the nationalities of the “criminals” and the “good guys.” However, during *glasnost* that pattern changed. An example of that is the corruption case in Uzbekistan in 1983, when the Soviet Press put all the blame on Uzbeks. Furthermore, in the media they described Russians as the “good nation”, which would help in purification of Uzbekistan from

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<sup>140</sup> A.A. Alinov , M.A. Demin. “Reasons and Nature of the Accession of Kazakhstan to the Russian Empire (Historiography of the Problem).” *Izvestiya of Altai State University*, (2021): pp. 39-45, 40

the “corruption.” The mainstream narrative was of Uzbeks as thieves and Russians as honest. In case of Jeltoqsan, the depiction of Kazakhs as violent and Russians as kind played a significant role.

Therefore, there were numerous apologetic publications and letters published. “Many of the signatures implied Kazakh ethnicity based on their name.”<sup>141</sup> Meanwhile, only two out of five people living in Kazakhstan were Kazakh by origin.<sup>142</sup> However, no ethnic Russians wrote a letter apologizing for the “terrible behavior of the protesters” or at least lamenting it. Before *glasnost*, the editorial board would put some Russian name into the list of signatures. The content of the letters described above was dedicated to the “shame for people who tore apart the threads of friendship between two nations.” The shame and the notion of “ingratitude towards our neighbors together with whom we built the best moments in Kazakh history” was predominant in the public media.<sup>143</sup>

This way, the media produced not only a scare of aggression which never happened but also compassion towards “victims” who had no experience of oppression. The “Kind and essential for Kazakhstan” Russians became an important part of the narrative about Jeltoqsan. Furthermore, such an accent on their “good traits” made Russians perfect victims. This victimization remains an important part of the Russian nationalist narrative: according to it, the “evil Nazis” are persecuting them in the post-Soviet Space for the very fact of being Russian.

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<sup>141</sup> “Nam Gor’ko [We are Sad] and other letters in both *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Ogni Alatau*

<sup>142</sup> “Census of 1979” *Institute of Demography of A Vishnevskiy of the Higher School of Economics*  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20121127044753/>

“Census of 1989” *Institute of Demography of A Vishnevskiy of the Higher School of Economics*  
<http://www.webgeo.ru/index.php?r=33&id=433>

<sup>143</sup> Karataev, Mukhamedzhan. V Sem’je Edinoj. *Ogni Alatau*

In the same vein, Putin whitewashes his invasion of Ukraine and Georgia, and justifies the continuation of the Pridnestrovie occupation.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> See, Toal, Gerard. *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. Print. and Dareg A. Zabarah. "Pridnestrovie." *Nation- and Statehood in Moldova*. 1st ed. Harrassowitz, O, 2014. 139–. Prin. for more detail



## **Caring State.**

In the binary of “aggressive Kazakhs” and “Russian victims,” the Soviet Government positioned itself as an arbiter and defendant of the “weakest” in this narrative: the ethnic Russians. The actions of the Soviet law enforcement or military during Jeltoqsan received no critique while being the reason for the violence occurring. Furthermore, the state officials, who were having a meeting in the “Republican Palace” on Brezhnev’s square - the main site of the protests - and did nothing to preclude the massacre, remained in their positions.<sup>145</sup> Such lack of punishment and action seemed to be the perpetuation of the practices of Stagnation (1964 - 1985) - the preceding period of Soviet history, when any officials, despite their mistakes, remained in power for a long time. However, *glasnost* - the main feature of the early Perestroika - still played its role in describing the reaction of people in power to Jeltoqsan. The new “freedom of speech” pressure fell on the party structures and officials.

The Soviet Union before Gorbachev’s rule (1985 -1991) had been a single-party autocratic state. By the constitution, there was a Parliament, named “Supreme Soviet,” and the government, named “The Council of Ministries.” Furthermore, there was the unique system of Soviets - the small electoral parliaments, which were present in any village, city, factory, and other large institutions.<sup>146</sup> Nevertheless, since the times of Stalin, it was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that accumulated all the power.<sup>147</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, for example, counted as a ruler of the Soviet Union while being the head of the CPSU. During a period of Khrushchev’s rule, it was a different person, Bulganin, who was the head of the Soviet Government.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Committee on the events of December of 1986. “The Course of Events.” Chapter. In *Report of the Committee on the events of December of 1986*. 1989. National Archive of Kazakhstan.

<sup>146</sup> See more in Martin, Terry, *Affirmative Action Empire*. 23

<sup>147</sup> See more in Kotkin, Stephen, *Stalin : Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941*. New York: Penguin Press, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2017.

<sup>148</sup> Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeevich, Khrushchev, Sergeĭ. Chapter “After the Twentieth Congress of the Party” Chapter. In *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University, 2004. Print.

Furthermore, it was CPSU that set the direction and framed the Soviet policies in its congresses.<sup>149</sup> Finally, in a new constitution of 1977, the ill-renowned sixth article officially assigned a “navigation of the State” to CPSU.<sup>150</sup> Meanwhile, even officially, CPSU remained a party, not a state institution; thus, there was no law regulating its activities and it had even no formal responsibilities in front of the electorate.

Gorbachev’s will to reclaim the power of the governmental and legal institutions was one of the reasons for the start of perestroika. Partial democratization through the creation of the first elected parliament since the very first years of the Soviet Union stripped CPSU from its monopoly on power. This parliament - a Congress of People’s Deputies - went further and canceled the sixth article mentioned above.<sup>151</sup> Finally, already on the verge of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the single-party system perished: Liberal-Democratic Party of the Soviet Union became an official institution.<sup>152</sup>

These reforms were impossible without media support. The media coverage of Jeltoqsan was covertly buttressing the anti-party struggle by attacking the party structures on the one hand but preaching the Soviet ideology on the other. This balance was highly beneficial to Gorbachev’s course: reforming the country's structure without its dissolution.<sup>153</sup> While this approach did not eventually work out, its vestiges are still ubiquitous in the Post-Soviet Space.

The depiction of Jeltoqsan events was a strong and orchestrated attack on the *Komsomol* networks. *Komsomol* - or a Communist Union of the Youth - was a party, not a state

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<sup>149</sup> Kotkin, Stephen. *Armageddon Averted : the Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. 2nd ed. New York ;: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print. 78

<sup>150</sup> *Constitution of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics*. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1982, 7

<sup>151</sup> Sobchak, Anatoly, *Khozdenije vo Vlast' - Rasskaz o Rozhdenii Parlamenta* [How We Went into the Government - the Story of the Birth of Parliament], Moscow: Novosti, 67

<sup>152</sup> See more in Kartsev, Vladimir., and Todd. Bludeau. *!Zhirinovsky!* New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. Print. To be fair, this party was never democratic or liberal and was registered with huge violations of the Soviet “party law”

<sup>153</sup> Kotkin, Stephen, 85

organization. All Soviet high school and university students had to join it in order to advance in their careers. Thus, by 1984, more than 42 million Soviet citizens were members of *Komsomol*. The main responsibility of *Komsomol* was ideological work and propaganda among the Soviet youth.<sup>154</sup> It was *Komsomol* that had to nurture patriotic and communist feelings in young people. The propaganda in the young social stratum remained an essential element of Soviet totalitarianism.

Blaming the *Komsomol* for the events of Jeltoqsan started almost immediately. A week after the riot, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Ogni Alatau*, and other newspapers accused *Komsomol* of “passiveness in nurturing of interethnic connections.”<sup>155</sup> Unlike the aforementioned case of Rakhmetov, that was not a denigration of specific *Komsomol* officials but an attack on the organization as a whole. The dean of the education-engineering department of Almaty State University, Inkarbaev, on the pages of *Ogni Alatau*: “The *Komsomol* organizations showed a lack of principles and activeness.” He acknowledged that many events dedicated to the “nurturing of the interethnic connection” were rather formal, and *Komsomol* did not put a lot of effort into them being carried out properly.<sup>156</sup>

A renowned official, Mikhail Solomentsev, the head of the “Party Control” committee, supported the statements of Inkarbaev. According to him, the *Komsomol* was responsible for the riot. “How could you, the Youth?” - asked he of the *Komsomol*. - “allow that to happen?”<sup>157</sup> Interestingly enough, Solomentsev was not the representative of the State, but of the CPSU

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<sup>154</sup> “Dosie: Komsomol: Istorija, Tsifry, i Fakty.” October, 13, 2013. <https://tass.ru/arhiv/712002>

<sup>155</sup> Nam Gor’ko, *Ogni Alatau*

“Rasplata za Beschinstva”, *Ogni Alatau*

“Gor’ky Urok”, *Ogni Alatau*

Karataev, Mukhamedzhan. “V Semje Edinoy”, *Ogni Alatau*.

“V Politburo TsK KPSS”, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravada*

<sup>156</sup> “Rasplata za Beschinstva”, *Ogni Alatau*

<sup>157</sup> Nasanbekova, Bakhyt. “Borot’sya za Kazhdogo Cheloveka” *Ogni Alatau*

itself.<sup>158</sup> That shows how the new binary of state and the party was nascent and was merely developing in 1986. Nevertheless, *Komsomol* was a party organization and the party was responsible for the *Komsomol* activities.

Later, when Jeltoqsan left the headlines and Kazakhstan tried to proceed to normal life, the attacks on *Komsomol* continued. The newspapers, as mentioned above, documented that some arrested protesters were members of *Komsomol*. Furthermore, the procedure of expulsion from *Komsomol* became a public one. The newspapers were replete with the depictions of how the group of Komsomolian activists gathered together and denounced their comrades for participating in Jeltoqsan.<sup>159</sup> Given the number of students purged from the universities and *Komsomol* after Jeltoqsan, gathering such material was one of the easiest tasks for the journalists.<sup>160</sup>

Such an attack on some Union-level organization had never occurred before perestroika and *glasnost*. The media and officials were extremely cautious about the public image of *Komsomol*. However, *glasnost* enabled the reprimand of what was unchastisable before.<sup>161</sup> Thus, the media could finally criticize *Komsomol* for formal and lackluster events on the “friendship of peoples.” In the years after Jeltoqsan, not only *Komsomol* but also CPSU itself would face unprecedented criticism.

On the other hand, the Soviets and the governmental structures did not receive critique for Jeltoqsan. That is justifiable by the fact that these were CPSU structures responsible for the propaganda. However, the violence broke out because of the actions of the Ministry of Domestic Affairs; moreover, the Ministry of Domestic Affairs failed to contain the protests in the first

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<sup>158</sup>“V Politburo Tsk KPSS” *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*

<sup>159</sup> See chapter “Evil Nationalists” for the examples

<sup>160</sup> Kaziev, Shattar. “Traditsii Natsional'noy Politiki i Mezhnatsionalnye Otnosheniya v Sovremennom Kazakhstane.” *Nauchnye Vedomosti Belgorodskogo Universiteta* 13, no. 13 (2011): 70-85, 82

<sup>161</sup> Kotkin, Stephen. *Steeltown, USSR: Soviet Society in the Gorbachev Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. 77

place.<sup>162</sup> The media also did not question the decision of Gorbachev to appoint Kolbin which led to the protests.

The Soviet ideology and the essence of the Soviet State as guarantors of the containment of “Kazakh nationalism” and preservation of “Russian Greatness” were the key parts of the propaganda. The media ubiquitously mentioned that Kazakhstan is a “laboratory of the friendship of peoples.” Friendship of peoples was an important element of the Soviet ideology - the declaration of the “official equality of nations.” In practice, that meant extensive Russification of education and politics while allowing the existence of national cultures and historiography.<sup>163</sup> Through its main media, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, the Soviet State promised to maintain this status quo. For example, Gennady Kolbin, an ethnic Russian and an outsider to Kazakhstan promised to give an annual report in Kazakh.<sup>164</sup> He never kept his word, however. In practice, he russified all the party elites of Kazakhstan and never learned one Kazakh word.

The idea of “friendship of peoples” was never intended to win the hearts of ethnic Kazakhs for Kolbin. An experienced *apparatchik* and former KGB agent, he clearly understood that after labeling Kazakhs as nationalists, he would never be popular among them. The promise of maintenance of “friendship of peoples” was aimed at Russians, the only beneficiaries of it.

The final promise of protection was coming from Lenin himself. All the newspapers were referring to Lenin’s ideas of the equality of nations when accusing Kazakhs of nationalism. According to them, the protesters during Jeltoqsan were violating the “testament of Lenin,” which promised interethnic collaboration. Meanwhile, the protesters were referring to Lenin’s

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<sup>162</sup> Ministry of the Domestic Affairs of the Kazakhstan Soviet Republics *Plans and Undertakings Developed by the Ministry of Domestic Affairs in case of Repeat of the Events of December of 1986*, National Archives of Kazakhstan

<sup>163</sup> Smith, Jeremy, *Red Nations*, 246

<sup>164</sup> “Prishol na Krovi, no, Slava Bodu, Ushol bez Krovi”. January 31, 2019. <https://e-history.kz/ru/news/show/4435/>

ideas, such as the struggle against Great-Russian chauvinism. Nevertheless, the media were continuing to describe the Soviet ideology as - eventually - pro-Russian.

The media, which scared the ethnic Russians with “evil Kazakh nationalists,” promised protection from the state. Furthermore, the same media described Russians as kind and their culture as great - in the same issues, if not on the same pages or texts. Thus, they nurtured a clear empathy in the Russian people for the Soviet Union. The government at first scared people, then praised them, and finally - offered them safety.

### **Outcomes and Conclusions.**

Many scholars addressed the issue of the rising of Kazakh ethnic consciousness after Jeltoqsan. Description of ethnic Kazakhs as nationalists which was happening on the Union-level indeed spurred local anti-Soviet tensions. The Kazakh society asked for a proper investigation of the events of December 1986. The Soviet Supreme Soviet started such an investigation and put together a special committee for it. The Kazakhs were pressing the Soviet government so much

that they even had to include in the committee Mukhtar Shakhanov, a representative of the Kazakh opposition. However, media coverage of Jeltoqsan had an impact on the Russian community as well. It resulted in an increase in emigration levels from Soviet Kazakhstan to RSFSR - the Russian republic of the Soviet Union and the survival of some of the narratives, created in Kazakhstan in 1986 -1987.

The description of “evil Kazakh nationalism” in the media resulted in mass migration of Russians from Soviet Central Asia and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in particular. In 1987, more than one hundred thousand Russians left Kazakhstan. The main reason for that, according to Myakshev, was the fear of Russophobia. Myakshev, however, states that there was the migration of the Russian population to RSFSR long before Jeltoqsan.<sup>165</sup> On the other hand, the drastic increase of numbers - as many as a quarter of the people who left Kazakhstan during 1975-1988 left it after the suppression of the protest - shows us the level of fear. The geography of emigration is also striking: most Russian people emigrated from Jambul and Karagandinskaya *oblasts*.<sup>166</sup> Meanwhile, the Jeltoqsan events occurred primarily in Alma-atinskaya oblast; however, the fear of “nationalists” due to propaganda spread across the republic.<sup>167</sup> In Karaganda, for instance, the Russian people had nothing to be afraid of: they comprised 46 percent of the *oblast* population and there were twice as many of them as Kazakhs.<sup>168</sup> However, 46000 of them moved to Russia in 1987. <sup>169</sup>

The narratives about Jeltoqsan that migrants brought to Russia survived. As mentioned above, the ideas of conspiracy and alcohol are even now extremely popular among Russians,

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<sup>165</sup> Myakshev,432

<sup>166</sup> Myakshev, 433

<sup>167</sup> About the scope of the riot see “Red Nations”

<sup>168</sup> “Census of 1989” *Institute of Demography of A Vishnevskiy of the Higher School of Economics*  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20121127044753/>

<sup>169</sup>Myakshev, 433

who lived in Kazakhstan at that point. Furthermore, in the oral interviews, gathered for this paper, many witnesses stated that they believed in the idea of “Kazakh nationalists”, who came to the streets during Jeltoqsan. One of the witnesses stated that these nationalists were eager to kill her and her mother because they were Russians. Meanwhile, as it turned out during the protest, she and her mom were out of Alma-Ata, in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, one of the witnesses told that Russian people were the ones who built the Kazakh state in its essence and that Kazakhs are ungrateful, and how Jeltoqsan was a great instance of that. While responding to the question about what she was reading in 1986, she stated that she was getting news from *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Ogni Alatau*.

The Jeltoqsan media coverage offers a change to our perspective on the reforms of Perestroika. While *glasnost* lifted many taboos, the media and officials still used them to achieve certain political results. While the undermining of the power of CPSU made the reforms and eventual dissolution of the USSR possible, the tight grip of the state was still present. Finally, while the Soviet media of the time invoked great ideas of liberalism and national self-consciousness, they also constructed new patterns of Russian xenophobia. Phobia in Ancient Greek means “fear”. So, fear played a great role in this ideology- one which it continues to play.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Making Russians into a separate political force: the Case of Uzbekistan.**

#### **Introduction**

One of the main achievements of Gorbachev’s rule and the program of Perestroika, which allowed economic and political liberalization, was the weakening of the Communist party of the



Soviet Union (CPSU). Before 1985, the CPSU was the main source of political power in the USSR.<sup>170</sup> The Soviet Union was a single-party state; furthermore, official decrees from the beginning of the 1920s prohibited factions within the party itself.<sup>171</sup> The Party, of course, was never monolite and had its internal debates; however, its decisions were not subject for the discussion. Neither did the Communist party have any official responsibility before the Soviet citizens; unlike the Soviet government its members did not even formally participate in the electoral process; the members of the party were appointed to their positions.<sup>172</sup> On the other hand, the Soviet law affirmed the position of the party as the main political force of the USSR. The sixth article of the Soviet Constitution of 1977 stated that the CPSU is “forming and navigating the politics of the USSR.”<sup>173</sup>

The democratization of the Soviet Union undermined the monopoly of the CPSU on political power: The first competitive elections of 1989 led to the formation of the parliament where the CPSU did not hold all the seats.<sup>174</sup> However, such a quick shift led to the creation of a vacuum of power in the Soviet State. This vacuum was one of the reasons for the dissolution of the Soviet Union: there was no force to keep the republics together anymore.<sup>175</sup> Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that Mikhail Gorbachev gave up and did nothing to preclude the collapse of his country.<sup>176</sup> What were the measures which the Soviet government undertook in

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<sup>170</sup> Kotkin, Stephen. *Armageddon Averted : the Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print. 78

<sup>171</sup> Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) *Resolution of the “On the Party Unity.”* 1921.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/10thcong/ch04.htm>

<sup>172</sup> Kotkin, 78

<sup>173</sup> *Constitution of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics*. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1982.

<sup>174</sup> Brudny, Yitzhak M. *Reinventing Russia : Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998.226

<sup>175</sup> Kotkin, 76

<sup>176</sup> See more in Plokyh, Serhii. *The Last Empire : the Final Days of the Soviet Union*. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2014. Print.

order to preserve the Union while weakening the Communist Party? How did that align with the strategy of the federalization of the country, which Gorbachev officially proclaimed?

This chapter offers a new interpretation of the Gorbachev's "anti-CPSU" measures. The Soviet government was nurturing a new political entity: Russians, which should have held the Union together. The Soviet State was integrating Russians as separate political power into the structures of the Soviet national republics in order to qualify the willingness of the republics to exit the Union. In that work, the Soviet government used already extant networks of power of the national republics and instead of dismantling them, integrated loyal Russian civilian officers into it. In Uzbekistan, that led to the appointment of numerous Russian cadres at the expense of the Uzbek ones: more than 2000 Russians, from Moscow and other Central Asian regions, received key positions in the government of Uzbekistan. That story shows how much attention the government of the Soviet Union paid to the national question since the early stages of Perestroika and debunks the narrative of Gorbachev, underestimating the problem of nationalism in the Soviet Union.

One of the main political discussions of Perestroika (1985-1991) was about the federalization of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Constitution of 1977 proclaimed the USSR to be the federation, consisting of fifteen separate republics.<sup>177</sup> Each of those had their own constitution, parliament, called Supreme Soviet, and government, called the Soviet of Ministers.<sup>178</sup> Nevertheless, since Stalin's rule, the USSR was heading to deeper and deeper centralization.<sup>179</sup> Main decision-making institutions, such as the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Politburo TsK KPSS) or Council of the

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<sup>177</sup> Constitution of 1977, 77

<sup>178</sup> Kotkin, 76

<sup>179</sup> Martin, Terry. *The Affirmative Action Empire : Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017. Web. Part Three "Revising the Affirmative Action Empire"

Soviet Ministers - the government of the Soviet Union, gathered in Moscow. Their decisions, however, had an impact on the whole country: these institutions were the ones which framed all aspects of the politics of the USSR. For instance, they redistributed the goods and materials produced in one republic, across the Soviet Union, assigning prices to those.<sup>180</sup>

Many representatives of the intelligentsia, both in national republics and RSFSR, which remained a center of the Soviet Empire, found such a centralized system to be unjust. The question of federalization played an important role in the electoral debates of 1988, which preceded the first competitive elections in Soviet history.<sup>181</sup> Moreover, in the late Perestroika the organizations fighting for federalization, increased autonomy of the national republics, and even independence of those were thriving across the Soviet Union. The *Birlik* movement in Uzbekistan gained more than a third of the seats in the local parliament.<sup>182</sup> *Saludis* in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia organized immense protests against the Soviet occupation.<sup>183</sup> The National *Rukh* (Movement) of Ukraine was buttressing the strikes of the miners in Donbas.<sup>184</sup> These organizations became important political forces which pressured the Soviet government into allowing more and more autonomy for their republics up until their ultimate separation from the Soviet Union.

The initial breakthrough of those organizations within the Soviet political sphere was that they undermined the monopoly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on power. Before

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<sup>180</sup> Lukashевич, Dmitry, "Legal Aspects of the Reorganization of the Central Economic Bodies in the USSR during Perestroika." *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta MVD Rossii*, no. 8, (2020): 32-35, 32.

<sup>181</sup> Sobchak, Anatoly, *Khozdenije vo Vlast' - Rasskaz o Rozhdenii Parlamenta* [How We Went into the Government - the Story of the Birth of Parliament], Moscow: Novosti, 11

<sup>182</sup> Dieter Nohlen, Grotz, Florian, Hartmann Christof *Elections in Asia and a Pacific, A Data handbook*, Oxford:Oxford Academic, Online Edition, November 1, 2003 <https://doi.org/10.1093/019924958X.001.0001> page 490.

<sup>183</sup> Dobbs, Michael. "Baltic States Link in Protest 'So Our Children Can Be Free'; 'Chain' Participants Decry Soviet Takeover: FINAL Edition." *The Washington Post*. Washington, D.C: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post, 1989.

<sup>184</sup> Plokhyy, Serhii. *The Gates of Europe : a History of Ukraine*. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015. Print. 653

Perestroika, this organization was the one that de facto ruled the country.<sup>185</sup> Its omnipresence and power were impeding the development of the Soviet Union. Its corruption and nepotism were damaging the Soviet economy and politics. Therefore, on the verge of the economic collapse, which the Soviet Union faced in the 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev was interested in undermining the power of CPSU. Therefore, his government carried out the democratization of the USSR: it put together the first de facto electoral parliament in Soviet history, where even non-members of CPSU could be elected.

Many historians agree that the aim of the political reforms of Gorbachev was to weaken the CPSU.<sup>186</sup> Nevertheless, not so many of them engage with the question of what was the alternative which Gorbachev saw for the CPSU as the most powerful institution of the country. The nationalist organizations occupied the vacuum of power which formed after the collapse of CPSU. However, Gorbachev never pursued the increase of autonomy of the national republics and tried to preserve the Soviet Union even on the verge of its dissolution in 1991.<sup>187</sup> Therefore, the rise of those movements could not be the ultimate goal.

The Soviet government offered another force that could have held the country together: the Russian people. Much as the CPSU, they were present ubiquitously across the country. Before Perestroika, however, they were never a separate political force in any national republic or even in RSFSR. Perestroika changed that for Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Adding those republics to the narrative about Perestroika in the Soviet Union helps to understand how the Soviet government tried to mitigate the centrifugal tendencies of the rise of nationalism through Russification practices. This chapter focuses on the making of Russians into a specific political

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<sup>185</sup> Kotkin, 78

<sup>186</sup> Kotkin, 78

<sup>187</sup> Plokhy, Serhii. *The Last Empire: the Final Days of the Soviet Union*. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2014. Print. 7.

power in Uzbekistan. The first part of it, “Uzbekistan as a polygon for the Russification experiment,” examines the social and political conditions for the Russification practices in Uzbekistan. The second one, “Powerless Russians,” elucidates the place of the Russian nation in Soviet politics before Perestroika. The third part, “Russians as a clan,” scrutinizes the way Russians integrated into the Uzbek political system.

The notion of Russian-speaking people being one political entity, which has its own specific political interests and passions, became a prominent one in Russian propaganda after Ukrainian revolutions in 2004 and 2014 respectively. Putin justified interventions into Ukrainian domestic affairs in 2004, annexation of Crimea and proxy-war in Donbass in 2014, and full-scale invasion of 2022 by “defense of the interests of Russian-speaking population of Ukraine”<sup>188</sup> According to him and Russian propaganda, this community has specific political views, for instance, all of them voted for specific candidates in the Ukrainian elections. By 2022, the propaganda extrapolated this idea of “Russian-Speaking political groups” to all former Soviet republics. It became an important part of the ideology of hostility towards those states. For instance, when Kazakhs beat a Russian-speaking person in Kazakhstan, propaganda presents it not as an incident but as an excess of controversies between those groups.<sup>189</sup> Therefore, tracing the origins of the notion of the existence of Russians as a separate political force in the Post-Soviet and Soviet space is extremely important for the dismantling of that narrative. Uzbekistan, where the development and elevation of that group were more apparent than in any part of the Soviet Union, is a perfect ground for such research.

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<sup>188</sup> Putin, Vladimir, “Speech on the Acknowledgement of Luhansk and Donetsk Popular Republics”, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, February 21, 2022. <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27366/4549244/>  
“Speech on the Reunion of Russia with Crimea,” *RT in Russian*, March, 18th, 2022. <https://russian.rt.com/article/24532>

<sup>189</sup> Simonyan, Margarita, *Maragrita Simonyan*, *Telegram*, August 17th, 2022. <https://t.me/margaritasimonyan/11908>



## **Uzbekistan as a Polygon for the Russification Practices.**

In 1984, the Soviet State system shook due to the scandal. It turned out that the Uzbek and other Central Asian party officials engaged in a large network of corruption. In the reports, they added several millions tons of cotton to the ones actually produced and gathered. The Central budget sent them several billions of roubles for the material, which never existed.<sup>190</sup> The corruption which was pervasive across the Soviet Union, was even more of an issue in the Central Asian republics. The deep-rooted clan networks and lack of control over local party officials created an environment of bribery, nepotism, and forging the statistics, sent to the center.<sup>191</sup> Furthermore, Sharaf Rashidov, a leader of Uzbekistan, respectively, was accused of building personality cult by his fellow party members.<sup>192</sup> Finally, Rashidov supported the upbringing of Uzbek culture and appointed many Uzbek officials, which for the multiethnic Soviet Union counted as support towards nationalism.<sup>193</sup> The Soviet system seemed to start losing control over the region: the local leaders were able to rule as feudal lords.<sup>194</sup>

Corruption was a defining feature of the post-Stalinist Soviet Union (1953 - 1991). *Blat* - access to the deficit goods - was a ubiquitous privilege of the Soviet party nomenclature. However, on the verge of economic crisis, the Soviet government started fighting corruption and *blat* among the civilian officers. Not only overarching reforms, such as weakening of CPSU, but

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<sup>190</sup> Cucciolla, Mario Riccardo (2017) "The Crisis of Soviet Power in Central Asia: The 'Uzbek cotton affair' (1975-1991)" Dissertation, Lucca University, 12

<sup>191</sup> See Collins, Kathleen. *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>192</sup> See the memoirs of Kazakh writer Shakhonov, report of Nazarbaev on the last speech of Kunaev, and Remnic, David. "Corrupt Soviet Uzbekistan Learns About `Our Rotten History: FINAL Edition." *The Washington Post*. Washington, D.C: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post, 1988.

<sup>193</sup> Blackmon, Pamela, ed. *In the Shadow of Russia : Reform in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan*. Michigan State University Press, 2010. page 15

<sup>194</sup> David Remnick. "Corrupt Soviet Uzbekistan Learns About `Our Rotten History: FINAL Edition." *The Washington Post*. Washington, D.C: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post, 1988. Cucciolla states it lighter: in Brezhnev's times, the Central Asian party leaders enjoyed some freedom in the internal politics. "

Cucciolla, Riccardo Mario. "Sharaf Rashidov and the International Dimensions of Soviet Uzbekistan." *Central Asian survey* 39, no. 2 (2020): 185–201, 187

also fight against specific corruptioners, such as Rashidov, was one of the means of the dismantling of that system. Nevertheless, in the context of Uzbekistan, the repressions quite soon shifted from the individual arrests to the mass purges.<sup>195</sup> The Soviet government fired and arrested many high-ranked Uzbek public officials.

However, instead of appointing new officials from the local people and creating the local committee to investigate the affair, the Soviet government sent into Uzbekistan several thousands of Russian civilian officers and investigators, which provoked outrage in Uzbeks. However, the political environment and history of Soviet Uzbekistan made this republic the best place for the Russification attempt. Uzbekistan was a multi-ethnic region with a fiercely competing political elite, divided into clans, with an overall benevolent attitude towards Russians. However, despite those factors, the economic factors - lack of white-collar jobs despite high levels of education - led to the failure of the Russification undertaking.

Throughout Soviet history, the Soviet leaders had to deal with the power dynamics within Central Asia, which were extremely different from those in other parts of the country. This region almost lacked the working class. People identified themselves with clans more than with their nations, which made the clans a strong political power.<sup>196</sup> The Muslim majority of the region distinguished it culturally from most of the parts of the Soviet Union. Finally, the attempts of the Russian Empire to carry out Russification of Central Asia, galvanized the separatist attitudes in the region.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> For more on the difference between personal and mass repressions see Schulmann, Ekaterina, *Practical Politology, A Book on the Contact with Reality*, Moscow: AST, 2022

<sup>196</sup> Collins, Kathleen. "The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia." *Comparative Politics* 35, no. 2, (2003): 171–90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150150>, page 180. Even now, the inhabitants of Uzbekistan, for instance, express low ethnonational consciousness. See Abashin "Nationalism in the Central Asia."

<sup>197</sup> Olcott, Marta Brill, "Central Asia." In. *Critical Dictionary of Russian Revolution*, Saint-Petersburg: Nestor-Istoria, 2014.



While through various measures, the Soviet system has solved - or at least qualified- all other problems, the clan network outlived the Bolsheviks in Central Asia. According to the data, more than ninety percent of inhabitants of the Central Asian countries still rely on the clan network more than on the state one.<sup>198</sup> That is one trait of the clans. Another one - which grew up out of the Soviet policies, discussed below - is a significant attachment to the territory. By the time of Perestroika, most of the clans had a specific territory, where they were more powerful than others.<sup>199</sup> Clan members were tied through a kind of kinship; however, as the time was going these ties were no longer restricted to the family.<sup>200</sup> Genealogy is a starting point of self-identification; however, people often use it to justify the relatedness to their clan.<sup>201</sup> Furthermore, clans are dependent on the interpersonal connection chains: the elite of a clan tries to bring up the non-elite clan members through nepotism and *blat*.<sup>202</sup> This system survived the Soviet one; despite the willingness of the latter to destroy it.

At first, as elsewhere, the Soviet state tried to bring up local cultures and nurture the “equality of nations within the Soviet Union”. The doctrine “nationalist in form, socialist in content, implemented by Lenin, required that.” The governing of “national outskirts ” by Russians was seemingly a trait of “Great-Russian chauvinism”, which Lenin called “a rotten tooth.”<sup>203</sup> Moreover, in late 1920s, in the Central Asia, cultural indigenization was not possible without a political one. That resulted in promoting local party officials through various systems. There were established quotas for representatives of five titular nations of the Central Asia:

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<sup>198</sup> Collins, 183

<sup>199</sup> Collins, 110

<sup>200</sup> Jacquesson, Svetlana. “From Clan Narratives to Clan Politics.” *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 3 (2012): 277–92. 286

<sup>201</sup> Gullette, David. *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State and “Tribalism”*. Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2010, 3

<sup>202</sup> Collins, 175

<sup>203</sup> Lenin, Vladimir “On the National Pride of the Great Russians” *Sotsial-Demokrat* No. 35, December 12, 1914.

Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmens. Other nations also gained political representation through the system of national Soviets (councils) and districts. Furthermore, even unqualified candidates received opportunities through the systems of *Praktikantstvo* and other ones.<sup>204</sup>

The promotion of locals resulted in the establishment of the clan networks already within the CPSU and government of the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union. Soviet Central Asia enjoyed some degree of self-governance throughout its history; thus, got an opportunity to preserve the local social institutions, such as clans and Islam. While the Christian churches across the country were shut down or demolished, some mosques across the Central Asia were allowed to keep working.<sup>205</sup> The same way, the Soviet government tried to institutionalize the clans and its elites became members of local committees.<sup>206</sup> Even more, during the collectivization, the *kolkhozy* in, for instance, Tajikistan were organized on the basis of local kinship.<sup>207</sup> The early Soviet state tried to incorporate local elements instead of suppressing them. Through *raionirovanie* it gave the clans the specific territorial boundaries and made those even more apparent by restricting the movement across the country.<sup>208</sup>

However, the Soviet government thought of the clans as a rudiment of the underdeveloped society. The Stalinist government aspired to merge them into larger nations - which would show the evolution of the social structure under Soviet rule. By the census of 1937, Soviet propagandists aspired to show the “enlargement of the nations”.<sup>209</sup> The clan system suffered an assault: the times of reckless promotion of the local officials was over for Central

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<sup>204</sup> Martin, Terry. “Affirmative Action in the Soviet East, 1923–1932.” In *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, 125–81. Cornell University Press, 2001, 134.

<sup>205</sup> Soucek, Sevatopluk. *A History of Inner Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000

<sup>206</sup> Collins, 178

<sup>207</sup> Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, 1st ed., Cornell University Press, 2005, 142

<sup>208</sup> Collins, 189

<sup>209</sup> Hirsch, 145

Asia. In the new reality, the orphans or people lacking long clan-connection were making a career.<sup>210</sup> Furthermore, Central Asian elites suffered greatly from famine in the beginning of the thirties and from the terror in the end of those.<sup>211</sup>

Nevertheless, the clan system outlived the repressions of Stalin's times. Furthermore, it successfully integrated into the Post-Stalinist environment of the Soviet political elite. The unspoken treaty that representatives of the Soviet ruling class do not execute each other was a benign soil for clan competition in Uzbekistan.<sup>212</sup> The confrontation between clans in Soviet Central Asia usually remained in the political frame and did not lead to executions or murders of the participants or of the leaders. Furthermore, after Stalin's death, the clan system became a defining feature of the Soviet political system, not limited to Central Asia. Different groups were engaged in mutual confrontation for the attention of the Secretary-General of CPSU - de-facto ruler of the Soviet State - the resources, and power. Clan competition was never happening publicly; however, it was a clandestine political life of the single-party state.

Therefore, neither Khrushchev nor Brezhnev did not fight the clan system in Soviet Uzbekistan. Unlike Kazakhstan, whose virgin lands presented interest for the Soviet government and became a part of the large project of increasing the accessibility of the consumption goods for Soviet Citizens, Uzbekistan developed with little interference from the center. Local clans were finally free from pressure from Moscow.<sup>213</sup> Nevertheless, the constant struggle between these political powers made it more difficult for the Soviet government to control Uzbekistan,

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<sup>210</sup> Alexopoulos, Golfo. "Stalin and the Politics of Kinship: Practices of Collective Punishment, 1920s–1940s." *Comparative studies in society and history*, no. 1 (2008): 91–117, 102

<sup>211</sup> For instance, two ex-heads of Tajik branch of communist party were arrested and executed.

<sup>212</sup> For more see Schulmann, *Practical Politology* and Collins, *Clan Networks and Regime Transition in Central Asia*

<sup>213</sup> Collins, 120

Therefore, while acknowledging the power and persistence of the clans, both Khrushchev and Brezhnev chose to support one of them in the struggle in the exchange of loyalty.

The rule of Brezhnev became a golden era for the clans-centered politics in Soviet Uzbekistan. The only leader of the Soviet Union who had worked in Central Asia - in 1955-1956, Brezhnev was a head of the Kazakshtanian Communist Party, de facto, a governor of Soviet Kazakhstan - he definitely understood the invincibility of the clan networks.<sup>214</sup> Instead of fighting them, he brought five clans across Central Asia to power, and almost did not interfere in the local affairs of those republics.

For Uzbekistan that meant the rise of the Sharaf Rashidov and clan of Jizzak villages. Quickly, Rashidov started building the system, in which his clan and he himself had almost absolute power. He put members of his clan into the key positions: especially, he was interested in the control over the cotton production. Furthermore, he even gave his clan the fief - he created the Jizzak *oblast*, As mentioned earlier, the levels of corruption under Rashidov's rule were unprecedented even for the Soviet Union. By the start of the investigation, they had received more than 4 billion rubles for the non-existent cotton.<sup>215</sup>

Nevertheless, the Soviet government turned a blind eye to those crimes: Rashidov was never arrested and was fired up only in 1983. Furthermore, even when the government of Uzbekistan made significant political mistakes, the government in Moscow did not anyhow weaken the positions of Rashidov. The instance of that is the lack of reaction to the nationalist outbreak in Tashkent. In 1969, a group of Uzbek fans of the Pakhtakor team ignited mass violence against all "white-looking" people in Tashkent. The Soviet Union had almost

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<sup>214</sup> Collins, 129

<sup>215</sup>. Clark, William A *Crime and Punishment in Soviet Officialdom: Combating Corruption in the Political Elite, 1965-1990* Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993, 187;  
Leslie Holmes, *The End of Communist Power: Anti-Corruption Campaigns and Legitimation Crisis* Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 101.

zero-tolerance policy towards outbreaks of nationalism or ethnic “chauvinism”; however, Rashidov, who let it happen, remained in power for 14 more years.

Despite 24 years of rule, the Jizzak clan did not obliterate or incorporate other clans into themselves. The future dictator of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov (1990 - 2016) was not directly related to the clan or kin of Rashidov.<sup>216</sup> Inamzhon Usmankhodzhaev - the successor of Rashidov on the position of the secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan - was from Ferghana, not from Jizzak *oblast* - and his father, Buzrukhodzhi Usmankhodzhaev was a politician either.<sup>217</sup> Such succession shows their belonging to the clan of Ferghana. A diversity of clans persisted in Uzbekistan; therefore this environment was benign for the integration of the new political element.

Uzbek society had ambivalent views on the integration of the Russians as a separate element into the local political scene. On one hand, Russians had a generally positive image in Uzbekistan: local people thought of them as professional and kind people. On the other hand, its industrialization and modernization due to proliferation of the natural resources happened much faster than that of its neighbors. Therefore, by the time of Perestroika, the demand for white-collar jobs grew, in light of the rising population and the upheaval of education.<sup>218</sup> The appointment of several thousand party workers from Moscow in these conditions could produce nothing but hatred. The Party and high-ranking state workers earned from 300 up to 1000 rubles

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<sup>216</sup> Sidorchik, Andrew “Svoi Put’ Islama Karimova: Kak Chlen Politburo Stroil Novy Uzbekistan? [The Own Way of Islam Karimov: How the PolitBuro Member ]” *Argumenty i Fakty* 29.08.2016

<sup>217</sup> “Skonchalsya Byvshiy Rukovoditel’ Uzbekistana [Ex-Head of Uzbekistan Died]” *Radio Ozodi*, March 17, 2017. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170320075357/http://rus.ozodi.org/a/28375695.html>

<sup>218</sup> Kolsto, Pal. “Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Job Competition: Non-Russian Collective Action in the USSR Under Perestroika.” *Nations and nationalism*, no. 1 (2008): 151–169.

per month.<sup>219</sup> In the spirit of shortages, even more important was the access to the products that they had: the party officials had even foreign items in their houses.

Therefore, Uzbekistan made good but not perfect ground for Russification. Its covert political life was much more intense than in other parts of the Soviet Union. The attack on the local political elite had its own justifications, given the overall anti-corruption struggle. Nevertheless, the competition for white-collar jobs with the Russians provoked massive outrage towards the Russification practices.

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<sup>219</sup> Kuznetsova, P. "Zarplata Rabotnikov Apparata KPSS i Krisis Sovetskogo Obschestva, [Salary of the Workers of CPSU and Crisis of the Soviet Society in the end of the 1980s-1990s]". *Center of Political Science in Perm*, Elis-Center, National Research Polytechnic University in Perm, Archive of the Conference. [http://elis.pstu.ru/index.php?a=9&pod\\_id=30&pod3\\_id=97](http://elis.pstu.ru/index.php?a=9&pod_id=30&pod3_id=97)

### **Powerless Russians.**

Massive Russification of the governments and party apparatus of the Central Asian republics was indeed unprecedented for Soviet Central Asia. As mentioned earlier, this region was the most rebellious one: its states and cities had a very long history of independence, compared to other colonized parts of the Russian Empire, such as Belorussia or Siberia. Even the Imperial government acknowledged the unique status of this region: a large part of it, the Bukharan Emirate, remained de-jure independent and merely admitted the status of vassal of the Russian Empire. Therefore, no Russian civilian officer was in charge of it, and the only Russians who arrived there right after the conquest were members of the Imperial military personnel. The local political elite remained in power and kept most of its privileges.

Therefore, the political integration of Central Asia into the Russian Empire went slowly. Its inhabitants were stripped of the right to vote in the elections to the Imperial Parliament - *Gosudarstvennaya Duma* - in 1907.<sup>220</sup> Understanding that, in the 1910s, the Imperial government started encouraging settler colonialism in that region. Then, the lands of Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Turkmens, local clans, and tribes faced the mass arrival of Russian peasants and cossacks - military peasants - into that region. That action was a mistake: the Russian Imperial government obliterated the peculiar balance between the semi-autonomy of the Central Asian political elites and Imperial control. That resulted in the massive anti-Russian and anti-Imperial rebellion of 1916.<sup>221</sup> The Russian military suppressed it, but already in 1917, immediately after the Revolution, Bukharan Emirate declared independence. The Bolsheviks had to acknowledge

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<sup>220</sup> Allworth, Edward A., ed. *Central Asia : One Hundred Thirty Years of Russian Dominance, a Historical Overview*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, 185-188

<sup>221</sup> Campbell, Ian W. "Nationalizing Violence in a Collapsing Empire: A View from the Steppe." *Ab imperio* 2020, no. 3 (2020): 98–113. 99

and make a temporary alliance with the local nationalists. Nevertheless, in 1920 they invaded the Emirate and sacked Bukhara.<sup>222</sup>

Nevertheless, the idea of independence remained popular in the region. Until the end of the 1930s, Bolsheviks had to fight against the *Basmachi* - local pan-Turkic and pan-islamic movement that performed acts of terrorism on the Central Asian railways or raided the villages.<sup>223</sup> What made controlling Central Asia for Bolsheviks even more difficult was the absence of the proletariat - the social stratum which comprised the biggest portion of their support base.<sup>224</sup> Finally, the absence of strong national sentiment - people in Central Asia did not identify with nations - was making it more difficult, because Bolsheviks could not employ their standard national policies.<sup>225</sup> The pervasive anti-Russian sentiment precluded appointment of many native Russians to important positions in Central Asia.

To resolve at least some of these problems, the Soviet government employed the Affirmative Action practice, discussed earlier, that enabled appointment of numerous representatives of the indigenous peoples of Central Asia. Such appointments happened at the expense of Russian workers, who were often even more qualified than the ones that the Soviet government hired. Some of the new employees were even illiterate; however, the Bolsheviks developed a new internship program, through which they still had better chances of getting positions in the ruling apparatus of the Central Asian republics than Russians.<sup>226</sup> In some

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<sup>222</sup>Allworth, Edward A., ed. *Central Asia : One Hundred Thirty Years of Russian Dominance, a Historical Overview*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. 235

<sup>223</sup>Tursun, Haziretali, and Dana Moldabaeva. "Enver Pasha, the support he gave to the National Struggle in Central Asia in Moscow Documentation Archive." *Bilig* (Ankara), no. 68 (2014): 231–242. 233

<sup>224</sup>

Malia, Martin E. (Martin Edward). *The Soviet Tragedy : a History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991*. New York: Free Press, 1994. 134

<sup>225</sup> Allworth, 187

<sup>226</sup> Martin, Terry. *The Affirmative Action Empire : Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017, 235



republics, that led to a decrease in the number of Russians in the 1920s; nevertheless, in Uzbekistan, where anti-Russian sentiment was not pervasive, most of them stayed.

Nevertheless, there was no vestige of Russian preeminence in the region in Uzbekistan. Russians even had no national soviets - the territorial power institutions, which were to defend the interests of the national minorities in the republics with other titular nations. They experienced lack of jobs, and therefore, even in underfinanced Uzbekistan, were impoverished. The Russian language lost its dominant position: by 1927, more than 90 percent of the schools were giving education in Uzbek.<sup>227</sup>

Stalin brought change to the system of international relations: Russians rose to prominence in non-Russian republics, and the Russian language regained its dominant position. The Stalinist times were the only ones before Gorbachev when people of Russian descent were appointed to be the heads of the Communist party branches in Soviet Central Asia. The head of the Turkmen branch - Phonin- lived in Moscow and had never been to Turkmenistan before the appointment.<sup>228</sup> In Uzbekistan, with a higher proportion of Russians living there, there was a Russian-born leader, Ivanov.<sup>229</sup> Kyrgyzstan received a leader from Rostov-on-Don.<sup>230</sup> The leader of Kazakhsan was from Moscow itself.<sup>231</sup> However, by the end of the forties, the process of Russification stopped. The important notion is that during the war the size of the

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<sup>227</sup> Smith, Jeremy. *Red Nations : the Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 92

<sup>228</sup> *Velikaya Otechestvennaya Voyna: Bolshaya Biographicheskaya Encyclopedia*, ed. Konstantin Zalesskiy, (Moscow:AST, 2013), s.v. "Phonin Mikhail Makarovich"

<sup>229</sup> *Gosudarstvennaya Vlast SSSR Vysshye Organy Vlasti, ikh Dolzhnosti i Rukovoditely, 1923 -1991 [The State Power of the USSR: the Supreme Administrative Bodies and their Heads, 1923-1991]* V. Ivkin, (Moscow: ROSSPAN, 1990)

<sup>230</sup> *Gosudarstvennaya Vlast SSSR Vysshye Organy Vlasti, ikh Dolzhnosti i Rukovoditely, 1923 -1991 [The State Power of the USSR: the Supreme Administrative Bodies and their Heads, 1923-1991]* V. Ivkin, (Moscow: ROSSPAN, 1990)

<sup>231</sup> *Gosudarstvennaya Vlast SSSR Vysshye Organy Vlasti, ikh Dolzhnosti i Rukovoditely, 1923 -1991 [The State Power of the USSR: the Supreme Administrative Bodies and their Heads, 1923-1991]* V. Ivkin, (Moscow: ROSSPAN, 1990)

Russian-speaking population of Central Asia increased significantly: many people evacuated from the occupied territories to this region, which was not under attack.<sup>232</sup> The short rule of Beria in 1953 ended this revival of Russian leadership on the territory of the USSR.<sup>233</sup>

The rules of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, as mentioned above, were marked by the rise of the clan networks; therefore, officials were coming from the Uzbek, not Russian, background. Nevertheless, the Russian language played an important role in both official documentation and school education.<sup>234</sup> The population of Russians increased steadily: in 1966, many young Russians moved to Uzbekistan because they were working on building new houses in Tashkent which lost them to the largest earthquake in local history. By 1989, there were 1,6 million of Russians living there.<sup>235</sup> Nevertheless, they were not part of the clan tensions, which comprised most of the local politics, as discussed above.

Up until the Perestroika Russians were never a separate part of the political life of Uzbekistan. Despite the privileged position of the Russian language and culture, the Soviet government both for the domestic and foreign image needed to maintain the semblance of the equality of nations.<sup>236</sup> Furthermore, Russians historically never played a significant role in the cities or the rural area of Uzbekistan. Consequently, the decision of Gorbachev to put Russians in charge of the purge of the local elites and Russify the local political elites was an unprecedented one and led to the establishment of the Russians as a new political force in Central Asia. The central Soviet government in Moscow benefitted from this process: Russian people were not

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<sup>232</sup> Shaw, Charles David. "Making Ivan-Uzbek: War, Friendship of the Peoples, and the Creation of Soviet Uzbekistan, 1941-1945." *eScholarship*, University of California, 2015. Print.3

<sup>233</sup> Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, Sergeï. Chapter "After the Twentieth Congress of the Party" Chapter. In *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University, 2004. Print. .

<sup>234</sup> Smith, 221

<sup>235</sup> Census of 1989 " *Institute of Demography of A Vishnevskiy of the Higher School of Economics* <http://www.webgeo.ru/index.php?r=33&id=433>

<sup>236</sup> Cucciolla, Riccardo Mario. "Sharaf Rashidov and the International Dimensions of Soviet Uzbekistan." *Central Asian Survey* 39.2 (2020): 185–201. Web, 187

interested in tearing up connections between Uzbekistan and Moscow. Their presence in the political arena impeded the centrifugal tendencies which were going to demolish the construction of the Soviet Union.

### **The Uzbek Affair and its Consequences: Russians as a Clan.**

The second half of the 1980s in Uzbekistan was marked by a wave of Russian cadres coming and fighting with the locals for political power. The Soviet government was behind this wave. Therefore, soon, Russian party workers occupied all the key positions in the republic. Primarily they were appointed to play the most significant role in the local political process; with no need for public appearances, so that they wouldn't have to learn Uzbek. The Uzbeks received the appointment of so many people, foreign to the republic, with apprehension. Even when the appointment of thousands of Russians was merely a rumor, a new secretary of the Uzbek Communist party, Usmankhodzhaev, who despite his local roots agreed to work with the newcomers, received the nickname "slave of Moscow."<sup>237</sup>

Other Russians constituted the committee which investigated the Cotton Affair - the case of Rashidov and Jizzak clan's mass corruption discussed earlier. Contemporary Uzbek historiography negatively marks the work of the Committee accusing it of using torture and other lawless means of pressure. Even in Soviet time, there were numerous complaints about its work. Nevertheless, they successfully carried out a purge in Uzbekistan, and its leaders: Gdlian and Ivanov - earned Union-wide fame.<sup>238</sup>

Kathleen Collins in *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* argues that such purges and appointees, which were extremely provocative and could have led to the massive anti-Russian sentiment, were part of the anti-corruption and larger anti-clan struggle of Gorbachev.<sup>239</sup> However, the argument of this thesis is that the efforts of Gorbachev led to the

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<sup>237</sup> Collins, Kathleen. *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 115

<sup>238</sup> Junusova, Khurshida "XX Century Uzbekistan: Several Questions on studying "The Cotton Case." *Problemy Nauki*, no 4, (2018):

<sup>239</sup> Collins, 115

establishment of Russians as a separate clan and only turmoil of the Perestroika and the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to its disappearance from the political scene of Uzbekistan. The “Clan of Russians” competed with other clans, had a territory with which it was associated, and worked on the promotion of each other at the expense of the representatives of other clans.

The competition between Russians and other clans - primarily Jizzak one - happened in two dimensions: the administrative and repressive. The committee of Gdlian and Ivanov which had to investigate the Cotton Affair in the fastest way turned their mission into the repressive purge of the cadres loyal to Rashidov and Jiizzak Clan. All cases, which Telman Gdlian investigated, ended in court with the suspect on the branch. 20 members of the highest political leadership of Uzbekistan - all coming from Jizzak or Samarkand - faced charges; the minister of the extraction of cotton was even executed.<sup>240</sup> This way, the committee of Gdlian violated the old rule of the Soviet regime not to kill the representatives in power. For the first time since the Stalin’s rule, the repressive machine employed the tactics of the arrest on not only the suspect, but on all the family members.<sup>241</sup> That is explainable by the fact that clans were usually connected by blood; therefore, such arrests were part of the inter-clan struggle.

The Russian newcomers, belonging to the so-called Red Landing group, occupied the vacant positions in 1987-1988. More than 2000 of them came into the positions of the civilian officers of the middle and high class.<sup>242</sup> A new minister of the domestic affairs, Eduard Didorenko, put a lot of pressure on local nationalist and clan organizations.<sup>243</sup> Most of the new

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<sup>240</sup> Junusova, Khurshida “ XX Century Uzbekistan: Several Questions on studying “The Cotton Case.”

<sup>241</sup> Junusova, Khurshida “ XX Century Uzbekistan: Several Questions on studying “The Cotton Case.”

<sup>242</sup> Interview of Kathleen Collins with Ambassador of Uzbekistan in the United States, Sodyq Safaev, and other experts on the politics of Uzbekistan. See in Collins, Kathleen. *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 115

<sup>243</sup> Didorenko, Eduard. “Pismo [A Letter]” *Tashkentskaya Pravda*, February 1989. Found in Sidorchik, Andrey “Ad v Solnechnom Uzbekistane [Hell in the Sunny Uzbekistan]” *Argumenty i Fakty*, June, 3d, 2019. This article is mentioned in the article “Zatmenije [Eclipse]” by Golovkov, published in *Ogonyok* in July, 1989.

appointees on the contrary received the positions that lacked publicity. None of them was appointed to the position of the head of the oblast branch of the communist party of Uzbekistan.<sup>244</sup> Ironically, their position was in the center of the decision-making process in the authoritarian state of the Soviet Union. The substitutes of the public party workers had to put the decisions of their superiors, or of the superiors of their superiors in action. Meanwhile, the highest Soviet officials - which is usual for autocracy - were not so well aware of the “situation on the ground.” Therefore, these were the lower-ranking Soviet state employees who had to adjust the decisions to reality.<sup>245</sup> However, they never had to speak publicly or at least formally report to the citizens about the results of their work.

The administrative methods of fighting against Jizzak clan included the classic for the inter-clan struggle attack on the fief. In 1988, the homeland of Rashidov, his kin, family and clientele, Jizzak oblast was disbanded.<sup>246</sup> That was a classic turn of the interclan struggle in the Central Asia: two years later, the same way, the new clan of Kirgiz leaders formed a new *oblast* from several districts of the Osh *oblast* - the fief of the powerful Osh Clan.<sup>247</sup> Such administrative measure led to the weakening of the power base of the competing clan: it lost the controlled obcom, through which the cadres, loyal to the ruling clan were able to make it to the Congresses of the CPSU - the main political event of the USSR, where the CPSU officially declared the pathway through which they wanted the country to go - or to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.<sup>248</sup> Two first secretaries of Jizzak obcoms, Tukhtamysh Baymirov (1978-1983) and

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<sup>244</sup> *Gosudarstvennaya Vlast SSSR Vysshye Organy Vlasti, ikh Dolzhnosti i Rukovoditely, 1923 -1991* [The State Power of the USSR: the Supreme Administrative Bodies and their Heads, 1923-1991] V. Ivkin, (Moscow: ROSSPAN, 1990)

<sup>245</sup> See Schulmann, *Practical Politology*

<sup>246</sup> “Jizzakh,” *Travellers.Ru*, <http://www.travellers.ru/city-dzhizak>

<sup>247</sup> “Jalal-Abad Oblast,” *National Statistic Committee of Kyrgyzstan*, <https://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/ruwiki/76430>

<sup>248</sup> Kotkin, Stephen. *Armageddon Averted : the Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print., 78

Habibula Shagzatov (1983-1985), before the *oblast* was disbanded, were present at those fateful meetings.<sup>249</sup> Through them, Rashidov and his clan could increase the lobbying power of Uzbekistan in the all-Union arena.

Not only did Rashidov and his clan suffered from the new player in the interclan struggle. A weaker Bukhara clan also lost key positions in the agricultural sector of the Bukhara *oblast*. The Bukhara *oblast* where the local Bukharan clan was in power got almost all heads of kolkhozy replaced: they were accused of connection with Rashidov.<sup>250</sup> Furthermore, when loyal Usmankodzhoev tried to fill their positions with the members of his own Ferghana clan, he got arrested himself. Their positions were filled with Red Landing participants.<sup>251</sup>

Russians never established any fief for themselves. Unlike in neighboring Kazakhstan, there was even no attempt to create a special autonomy for Russians in Uzbekistan; neither did they fully Russify the government of any already extant *oblast*.<sup>252</sup> However, that did not preclude them from having a “motherland” combined with the common ancestor. What made “Russian clan” unique was the fact that their “fief” or “clan-land” was located far from Uzbekistan and that its common ancestor was not a “mythical hero” but an existent institution.

Moscow had all the traits of the “land of the clan origin” for coming Russians, and the Soviet government played the role of the “common ancestor” in that paradigm. Such a perception was extremely common among Uzbeks; however, the Russian appointees did nothing to debunk it. There was no evidence of them learning Uzbek or promising, like Kolbin, also a Russian, a secretary general of the Kazakh branch of the Communist party, to give a report in

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<sup>249</sup> *Gosudarstvennaya Vlast SSSR Vysshye Organy Vlasti, ikh Dolzhnosti i Rukovoditely, 1923 -1991* [*The State Power of the USSR: the Supreme Administrative Bodies and their Heads, 1923-1991*] V. Ivkin, (Moscow: ROSSPAN, 1990)

<sup>250</sup> Ilyukhin, Vladimir, *Oborotni: Kak bylo nadumano “Uzbekskoe” delo* Tashkent: Uzbekistan, 1993. I would say that the reliability of this source needs to be checked. The author is tendentious and describes all accusations of the cotton case as unproven. Collins, nevertheless, cites this book.

<sup>251</sup> Collins, Kathleen, 114

<sup>252</sup> See the next chapter for the description of such projects.

Uzbek.<sup>253</sup> Furthermore, as mentioned above, their positions did not require any spoken or written Uzbek. Another trait of lack of integration into the local life of Uzbekistan is that most of the newcomers successfully returned home or were replaced in the power structures with Uzbeks during the late stages of Perestroika. Yuri Didorenko, for instance, left for his home in Ukraine.<sup>254</sup> Gdlian and Ivanov, after their work was over, tried to become the deputies in Moscow and Leningrad.<sup>255</sup> Therefore, the common narrative in Uzbekistan is that representatives of both repressive and administrative machines were coming from Russia. Despite their various origins, the fact that all of them were Russian-speaking led to such a perception. The fact that Usmankhodzhaev was called a “slave of Moscow” not of CPSU or any other Soviet Institution, says that the newcomers were perceived to have come from “Moscow.”<sup>256</sup> The naming of the clans after the “homeland” worked the same way.

The local perception of the newcomers as coming from Moscow led to interesting patterns in the legal resistance to the purges and Russification. In autocratic regimes, expressing open discontent might lead to the arrest of the person who showed it. The only legal way to protest in the Soviet Union was to send complaints about the situation, which one did not appreciate, to the superior institutions. Meanwhile, there was not so much to appreciate about the work of the Cotton Affair investigative committee. While working, it violated both laws and procedures: many suspects were tortured, many - threatened.<sup>257</sup> Some property that was confiscated were not put into the list of confiscated items.<sup>258</sup> While complaining about the first

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<sup>253</sup> “Prishol na Krovi no Khot’ Ushel bez Krovi.” <https://e-history.kz/ru/news/show/4435/>

<sup>254</sup> “Life should be lived like this!” *Twenty-First Century Newspaper*, Another piece of evidence is that Didorenko became a citizen of Ukraine, which meant that by 1991 he was living on the territory of Ukraine. There, in 1991, he founded a University of internal affairs in Luhansk.

“History” *Luhansk University of Internal Affairs*, <https://lduvs.edu.ua/history/>

<sup>255</sup> Sobchak, Anatoly, *Khodzhenije vo Vlast’ - Rasskaz o Rozhdenii Parlamenta* [How We Went into the Government - the Story of the Birth of Parliament], Moscow: Novosti, 67

<sup>256</sup> Collins, 115

<sup>257</sup> Sobchak 68

<sup>258</sup> Junusova, Khurshida “XX Century Uzbekistan: Several Questions on studying “The Cotton Case.”



one to somewhere lower than the Soviet ministry was indeed senseless - Gdlian had his power from the very center, the complaints about the latter one could be sent to the local offices of *militia*. However, the Uzbek people sent more than 1000 complaints about the overall work of the committee to different all-Union institutions.<sup>259</sup> That shows the apparent linkage of the activities of the committee and its power to Moscow - while Gdlian and Ivanov had been under severe pressure from the center to limit the investigation to Uzbekistan and not go into the connections of the local corruption to Moscow.<sup>260</sup>

The newcomers and their allies kept swearing allegiance to Moscow. Didorenko called the fight against Islamism and separatism - two main threats to the power of the Kremlin in Uzbekistan - his most important task in the position of the minister of the domestic affairs of the republic.<sup>261</sup> Furthermore, Rafiq Nishanov, a de-jure head of the republic of 1986-1988, who agreed to work with the Red Landing, for his allegiance to Gorbachev, earned the nickname “A personal RAFik of Gorbachev.”<sup>262</sup> In the middle of the growing popularity of the movements for the larger autonomy of Uzbekistan, such allegiance underscored the separation of the newcomers from Russia and other republics from the Uzbek political context.

Such integration of the Russians into the local clan system had its limits. There is no evidence that Russians tended to rely more on the participants of the Red Landing, than on the governmental structures. Meanwhile, transitional clans usually efficiently substituted the state networks. Even now, in Uzbekistan, people tend to rely more on clan networks than on the official institutions. Therefore, the Soviet government and propaganda started engaging in not

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<sup>259</sup> Junusova, Khurshida “ XX Century Uzbekistan: Several Questions on studying “The Cotton Case.”

<sup>260</sup> Sobchak, 68

<sup>261</sup> Didorenko, Eduard. “Pismo [A Letter]” *Tashkentskaya Pravda*, February 1989.

<sup>262</sup> “Died Last Adviser of Gorbachev Rafiq Nishanov,” *RBC*,  
<https://www.rbc.ru/society/12/01/2023/63bfee499a7947feb1aad77e>

only integration of the Russians into the Uzbek political environment, but also separating them from the traditionally multi-ethnic society of Uzbekistan.

The two lines by which the separation went were the Cotton Affair and the Ferghana Massacre. Russian historiography, even now, despite benign relations with Uzbekistan, keeps naming the Cotton Affair an Uzbek one. An example Such a naming pattern is widespread in the discussion of the Soviet purges (consider Leningrad Affair or multiple Moscow Affairs). Nevertheless, given the fact that Cotton Affair was a proven case of corruption, naming it after the place where such corruption took place, implied not the victimhood, but the collective guilt of people living there.

The press used a Cotton Affair to draw a contrast between the corrupt Uzbeks and honorable Russians. In *Ogonyok*, two articles came out consecutively in 1989, describing how corrupt the atmosphere in Soviet Uzbekistan had been before the Red Landing. The second one ended with the apparent condemnation of Uzbeks for not cooperating with the participants, especially with Didorenko.<sup>263</sup> On the contrary, participants of the Red Landing were presented as the most honest people in the USSR. According to the first article of 1989, one of them, after interrogating the suspect, who hinted that Perestroika had worsened everything, because after it started, the sausages disappeared from Moscow, pathetically responded: “While you were in power, the truth was disappearing.” The journal *Ogonyok*, which published this article was extremely popular in the Soviet Union. It had a reputation as the “locomotive of *glasnost*” ad a tirage of more than 4,5 million papers per issue.<sup>264</sup> However, despite the image, the journal - as well as other news media - belonged to the Central Soviet government.

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<sup>263</sup> Golovkov, Anatoly “Mne Gor’ko [I am Sad]” *Ogonyok*, June, 1989.

<sup>264</sup> Karataev, Denis “The legend about *Ogonyok*: History of the Publicistics in Perestroika” *Vestnik RGGU*, no. 4, (2014): pages 58-64.

In 1989, the Uzbeks themselves gave a chance for Soviet propaganda to denigrate them. After a conflict (which as rumored started after a provocation by the KGB agent; in Uzbek historiography, this narrative is commonly accepted) in the market, the Uzbeks started pogromming the villages of one of the multiple ethnic minorities of the republic - Meskhetian Turks. Soon, the whole densely inhabited region of Ferghana Valley became a scene for the ethnic cleansing of Turks.<sup>265</sup> The Soviet government even had to evacuate them.

The press did not give wide coverage of the violence in Ferghana; however, already mentioned “megaphone of Perestroika” *Ogonyok* published an article in which Anatoly Golovkov created the narrative about Uzbek nationalism being dangerous not only for Meskhetian Turks but also for Russians. He put several incidents of Anti-Russian nationalism in Uzbekistan in line with the terrible ethnic cleansing which occurred in Ferghana. Nevertheless, while in Ferghana, the apparent aim of the protesters was to exterminate all the population of the Meskhetian Turks, the events, which Golovkov used as evidence of the anti-Russian sentiment of the Uzbeks, were acts of individual attacks or mere statements or “hate speech”.<sup>266</sup> The local newspaper, *Pravda of Ferghana*, went even further: they described some calls that the Russian population of the Valley received, in which the Uzbek nationalists were threatening them with ethnic cleansing.<sup>267</sup> These articles remain the only source of such information; nevertheless, Russian propaganda keeps describing violence at Ferghana as aimed at Russians.

The same as in Kazakhstan, tactics of creation of the notion of Russians being victims of the titular nation did not work in Uzbekistan. Because of the larger proportion of the titular nation, more loose connections to the center, and a higher density of populations, Uzbekistan had

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<sup>265</sup> Mirkhanova, Malika. “People in Exile: The Oral History of Meskhetian Turks (Akhyskha Turkleri) 1.” *Journal of Muslim minority affairs* 26, no. 1 (2006): 33–44.

<sup>266</sup> Golovkov, “Zatmenije [Eclipse]” *Ogonyok*, no. 29, (1989): 28-31, 29

<sup>267</sup> *Pravda of Ferghana*, August 12, 1989, cited from Gosipov, A “Ferganskije Sobytiya: Construirovanie Novogo Etnicheskogo Conflicta [Events in Ferghana: Construction of the Ethnic Conflict]” *Nauka*, (2004):164-223.

a strong national movement, and Uzbeks had a strong national identity. However, Uzbek nationalism meant loyalty to the state of Uzbekistan, not to the nation of Uzbek.<sup>268</sup> Therefore, the relationship between the Russians and Uzbeks remained positive, and the Russian population did not preclude local nationalists from gaining power and later -declaring sovereignty and independence.

The economic reasons for the apprehension of Russian newcomers were also common for the local Russians and Uzbeks. Overall lack of white-collar jobs, despite high levels of education and urbanization, affected them all, no matter their nationality. Consequently, the experiment of turning Russians in Uzbekistan into a separate political power failed. In 1989, Islam Karimov, who had strong connections to local clans and separatist movements, came to power in the republic. Soon, participants of the Red Landing and investigative committees fled Uzbekistan.

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<sup>268</sup> Abashin, Nikolay *The Birth and Current State of the Central Asian Nationalisms*, Moscow: Nauka, 2007, 356.

## **Conclusion**

The practices of Russification had a profound impact on Kazakhstanian, Uzbekistanian, and Russian politics. In Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev's regime built an enormous portion of its legitimacy and national ideology of independent Kazakhstan on the commemoration of the events of Jeltoqsan, incorporating some of the Soviet narratives about the protests of 1986. In Uzbekistan, the regime of Karimov (1991-2016) put a lot of legal and ideological effort into the presentation of the anti-corruption purge as a national attack on Uzbeks. Finally, in Russia, the narratives about Russian victimhood and oppression that Russians faced from the nationalists in the Soviet and post-Soviet republics became one of the justifications for the war in Ukraine.

As mentioned in both the first and second chapters, the period of late Perestroika was marked by the mass migration of ethnic Russians from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to Russia. Even people who were born in Soviet Central Asia and had never been to Russia before Perestroika decided to move. Such migration shows that the Soviet practice of creating a gap between the native inhabitants of Central Asia, such as Uzbeks and Kazakhs, and Russians ultimately succeeded. Ethnic Russians started looking for new self-identification because the Soviet media and officials kept underscoring that remaining in their current place, both physically and ideologically, would be dangerous. In the case of Kazakhstan, such a danger was explained through a threat coming from the local nationalists. In the case of Uzbekistan, such a danger was explained through the threat to the power of the Russians and a threat of ubiquitous corruption, which was described as a national trait of the Uzbeks.

Such mass migrations were one of the reasons for the spread of negative narratives about Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan - which was extrapolated to all the post-Soviet republics. As shown in the first chapter, the idea of Kazakh nationalism remains a prominent one in the pro-Putinist

framework. The narrative about the national character of Uzbekistan corruption also remains important in the Russian context: Russian historiography keeps using the label of the “Uzbek Case” in its description of the Cotton Affair.

For the regime of Nazarbayev, the events of Jeltoqsan remain a crucial part of its identity and ideology. Throughout his rule, the first president of Kazakhstan tried to reclaim the legacy of the protests and rewrite the history of Jeltoqsan. As mentioned in the second chapter, many streets in Kazakhstan were renamed after Jeltoqsan during Nazarbayev’s rule.<sup>269</sup> In the former Brezhnev square, which was the main site of the protests in 1986, there now is a first stone of a future monument dedicated to the “heroism of the participants of Jeltoqsan.” During the opening ceremony in 2021, Nazarbayev, at that point holding the titular of *ebasy*, a leader of the nation, declared that “now, Kazakhstan had achieved what youth of that point was dreaming of -independence.”<sup>270</sup> That clearly follows the Soviet narrative of “Jeltoqsan being the protests of the Kazakh Nationalists,” described in the second chapter of this thesis. However, in the ideology of Nazarbayev, the very perception of “Kazakh Nationalism” changed. For contemporary Kazakhstan, nationalists, and national heroes remain positive figures.

Nevertheless, the perception of Jeltoqsan varies in Kazakhstan. Two-thirds of Kazakhs keep thinking of Jeltoqsan as a positive event in the history of Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that not all those people believe in Nazarbayev’s nationalist narratives. The protesters of 2022, who revolted against the personalist regime of Nazarbayev, also built part of their identity on the events of December 1986. They fit the legacy of Jeltoqsan into the overall narrative of the confrontations between the people of Kazakhstan and the state. “We seek

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<sup>269</sup> Tokarev, Alexey, “Kazakhstan” *Kommersant* April 25, 2016. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2968021>

<sup>270</sup> Denisova, Ksenia, “Jeltoqsan is Independence” *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*. December 16, 2021. <https://kazpravda.kz/n/zheltoksan-eto-nezavisimost/>

revenge for Jeltoqsan and Janaozen,” - said one of the protesters to a BBC journalist.<sup>271</sup> Janaozen was the ill-renowned suppression of the protests in the city of Janaozen in 2011, during which police forces and the army killed more than a hundred people.<sup>272</sup> An essential part of the narrative of Jeltoqsan as a confrontation between the state and the people is the controversial role of Nazarbayev himself in the suppression of Jeltoqsanian protests.

The perception of the Jeltoqsan in Kazakhstan varies significantly among the ethnicities. While most Kazakhs tend to think of Jeltoqsan as a positive event - despite numerous casualties, the protests seemed to be the point of the birth of national consciousness - most of the Russian population perceive Jeltoqsan negatively.<sup>273</sup> That is a clear indication of the impact of the Soviet narratives about the outbreak of anti-Russian Kazakh nationalism. The Soviet propaganda succeeded in dividing the two largest nations of Kazakhstan. Perception of Jeltoqsan is one of the watermarks of how Kazakhs and Russians are now two different political forces and entities of one state and perceive its history very differently.

Such juxtaposition of two parts of the society of Kazakhstan led to apparent political consequences. In the 1990s, the Russians of Kazakhstan (and of all of Central Asia) migrated in large numbers to Northern Kazakhstan, which became the Russian enclave of independent Kazakhstan.<sup>274</sup> There are numerous political parties declaring “defense of the Russian population” as their aim. The Russian Party of Kazakhstan fights for the ubiquitous teaching of

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<sup>271</sup> Abdurasalov, Abujalil, “Kazakhstan Unrest: BBC witnesses Apocalyptic scenes in the Main Clty.” *BBC*, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59912794>

<sup>272</sup> Satpayev, Dossym, and Tolganay Umbetaliyeva. “The Protests in Zhanaozen and the Kazakh Oil Sector: Conflicting Interests in a Rentier State.” *Journal of Eurasian studies* 6, no. 2 (2015): 122–129, 122

<sup>273</sup> Eurasian Monitor “EM-11. The Perception of the History of Soviet and post-Soviet Periods by the Population and the Youth of the New Independent Countries. Album of Diagrams,” *Eurasian Monitor*, August 22, 2009. <https://eurasianmonitor.org/issliedovaniia>

Cited in Tokarev, Alexey, “Kazakhstan” *Kommersant*, April 25, 2016. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/29680216>.

<sup>274</sup> Shestakov Igor, “Ugrozhaet li Kazakhstanu Regionalnyi Separatism [Does Regional Separatism Threaten Kazakhstan?]” *IAC Eurasia*, <https://www.neweurasia.info/archive/articles/DIV.htm>

the Russian language in Kazakhstan.<sup>275</sup> Cossack movements in Northern and Eastern Kazakhstan kept calling for the national autonomy of Russians within Kazakhstan. Some of them even demand the transfer of those territories to Russia.<sup>276</sup>

Such movements and demands are common for oppressed minorities: some African American movements in the United States call for ethno-territorial autonomy within the country. Nevertheless, the origins of the idea of Russians being an ostracized group within Kazakhstan seems to lie within the Soviet narratives about Jeltoqsan. A year-long lasting discussion of the Kazakh anti-Russian nationalism, which happened in both pan-Soviet and local Kazakhstani media, had a clear impact on the interethnic relations within Kazakhstan. The narrative about “ungrateful Kazakhs” and “good Russians” also contributed to that tension. Russians started perceiving themselves as victims of Kazakh oppression who needed protection on the political scene. Meanwhile, even now, 32 years after Kazakhstan gained its independence, Russian remains one of the important languages for Kazakhstani statehood. Even the banknotes of the Kazakh national currency use the Kazakh and Russian languages equally.<sup>277</sup> In 2023, first-year school students in Almaty will be able to go to Russian-speaking classrooms.<sup>278</sup>

One of the possible counterarguments is that Russian-Kazakh tensions were existent in Kazakhstan even since pre-Revolutionary times. In 1916, Kazakhstan revolted against Russian

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<sup>275</sup> “Russkaya Partia v Kazakhstane,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 14, 2022.

<https://www.dw.com/ru/%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%8F-%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B2-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%85%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5/a-498605>

<sup>276</sup> Karabek Erzhan “Uralskiye Sobytiya 1991 goda: Tayny i Legendy [Events in Ukalsk in 1991, Secrets and Legends]” *Radio Azzatyk*. March, 5, 2016

[https://web.archive.org/web/20160305185242/http://rus.azattyq.org/content/uralskie\\_sobytiya\\_1991\\_oral\\_o\\_kigasy\\_uralsk\\_events\\_kazakhstan\\_kazak\\_eskaliev\\_makashov/24322127.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20160305185242/http://rus.azattyq.org/content/uralskie_sobytiya_1991_oral_o_kigasy_uralsk_events_kazakhstan_kazak_eskaliev_makashov/24322127.html)

<sup>277</sup> Prezident of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Ukaz no. 804*, December 12, 2018

<https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/U1800000804>

<sup>278</sup> Wyskopf, Anatoly “Izuchenie Russkogo Yazyka v Kazakhstane: Chto pomenyal MinPros [Studying Russian Language in Kazakhstan: What did MinPros change]?” *Deutsche Welle*, September, 1, 2022.

<https://www.dw.com/ru/izuchenie-russkogo-jazyka-v-shkolah-kazahstana-chto-pomenjal-minpros/a-62985781>



settler colonialism.<sup>279</sup> Furthermore, in the 1920s, Kazakh nationalists who became allies of the local communists were advocating for the expulsion of Russians from Kazakhstan.<sup>280</sup> That trauma might have influenced the perception of the Jeltoqsan and helped the Soviet propaganda in the development of its narrative about the protests and “evil Kazakh Nationalists.” However, it is important to acknowledge that the process of Russification in a not-so-densely populated Kazakhstan was tremendously successful. Nikita Khrushchev even thought of incorporating Kazakhstan into other Soviet republics.<sup>281</sup> By the middle of the 1980s, Russians comprised the majority in Kazakhstan. Finally, as mentioned in the second chapter, Russians played a very important role in the protests of Jeltoqsan, which shows how living in Kazakhstan comprised a more significant part of their identity than being Russian. The process of transition between the tensions of early indigenization to the peaceful co-existence and even common protest is an opportunity for further research.<sup>282</sup>

Another space for further scrutiny is the impact of the Russification practices on the politics of Uzbekistan in the 1980s. Shortly after the *Red Landing* discussed in the third chapter, the dominance of the Uzbek leaders in Uzbekistan resumed. Furthermore, the leader of the independent Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, built a personalist autocracy with his figure at the center of it. That virtually eliminated any domestic political life within the country.

In his politics of memory, Karimov tried to dismantle the negative narratives about the Cotton Affair. The streets across independent Uzbekistan are named after Rashidov.

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<sup>279</sup> Uyama, Tomohiko. “Why in Central Asia, Why in 1916? The Revolt as an Interface of the Russian Colonial Crisis and the World War.” In *The Central Asian Revolt Of 1916*. United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2019.

<sup>280</sup> Martin, Terry, *The Affirmative Action Empire : Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. 59

<sup>281</sup> Kaziev Shattar, “The National Policy and Interethnic Relations in Kazakhstan in the Post-Stalin Period (1953-1964)” *Vestnik Kalmytskogo Instituta Gumanitarnukh Issledovaniy RAN*, no.4, (2014): 56-62, 57.

<sup>282</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the political history of Kazakhstan in the 1990s remains extremely understudied.

Commemoration of that extremely corrupted leader of the local party branch also happened through the local print media. For instance, *Kommersant.Uz* called him “a national teacher of Uzbekistan.”<sup>283</sup> On the contrary, Gdlian and Ivanov receive harsh treatment from both Uzbek media and Uzbek historiography. The media and historians keep describing their activities not as anti-clan but as anti-Uzbek. The narrative focuses primarily on repressions, not on the Russification practices.<sup>284</sup>

The lack of political pluralism in Uzbekistan leads to the lack of separate political forces. Therefore, unlike Kazakh, the Uzbek political scene does not feature Russian separatist or even social movements.<sup>285</sup> Furthermore, unlike Kazakhstan, there is no specific Russian region within Uzbekistan. Most of the Russian population is concentrated in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan.<sup>286</sup> Because there is no apparently “Russian” region within Uzbekistan, the domestic and foreign policies of the country are much more flexible than those of Kazakhstan. In Uzbekistan, the Russian language does not have the status of the state one; however, all the officials can translate documents into Russian by request.<sup>287</sup> The relationship between Karimov’s Uzbekistan and Russia remained tense up until 2005. During that period, Karimov remained an ally of the United States.<sup>288</sup> Meanwhile, the threat of Russian separatism and proximity to Russia

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<sup>283</sup> “Sharaf Rashidov: Ot Uchitelya do Natsionalnogo Lidera Uzbekistana [Sharaf Rashidov: From the Teacher to the National Leader of Uzbekistan.]”

<https://kommersant.uz/sharaf-rashidov-ot-uchitelya-do-natsionalnogo-lidera-uzbekistana/>

<sup>284</sup> See for Example, Maria Junusova’s “Cotton Affair” article, cited in the second chapter.

<sup>285</sup> Rabimov, Kamoliddin. “Political Parties of Uzbekistan: Between the Government and the Society” *Central Asia and Caucasus*, no.1, (2007): 62-76, 64-66.

<sup>286</sup> “Chislennost’ Naseleniya Goroda Tashkenta Prevsila 2.7 Milliona Chelovek [The Population of Tashkent is now more than 2.7 million of People]” *Kun.Uz*, April, 30, 2021  
<https://kun.uz/ru/news/2021/04/30/chislennost-naseleniya-goroda-tashkenta-prevysila-27-mln-chelovek-a-tri-mesyatsa-umerli-pochti-4-tysyachi-chelovek>

<sup>287</sup> “Uzbekskim ZagSam Razreshili Isplozovat’ Russkiy Yazyk.[The Courthouses of Uzbekistan are now allowed to use Russian Language],” *Lenta.Ru* November 1, 2012.

<https://lenta.ru/news/2012/11/01/language/>

<sup>288</sup> Schenckan, Nate, “Islam Karimov and the Dictator’s Playbook,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 30, 2016,  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/30/islam-karimov-and-the-dictators-playbook-uzbekistan/>

left Nazarbayev and Tokaev with no other option than to become allies of Russia on the international scene.<sup>289</sup>

Nevertheless, one thing in local-Russian relations is common for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan: the attitude towards Russians is rather positive in both countries. Uzbeks and Kazakhs would prefer bringing their children to the Russians than to a local doctor. Russian professionals are perceived as more competent than local ones.<sup>290</sup>

Another commonality in the impact of the Perestroika practices on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is the lack of radicalism of the local leaders and political movements during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both Nazarbayev and Karimov actively participated in the “Novo-Ogarevo process” - the negotiations about reframing the Soviet Union. Unlike political elites of the Baltic States or Caucasian republics, none of them ever advocated for leaving the Union. Nazarbayev even thought of himself as the future prime minister of a new Union.<sup>291</sup> Karimov adamantly opposed the nationalist organization, *Birlik*, and the leader of *Birlik*, Mukhamed Salikh, was his only opponent in the presidential elections of 1991.<sup>292</sup> Opponents of Nazarbayev, on contrary to the opponents of Karimov, had even less interest in the independence of Kazakhstan, focusing primarily on ecological and economic issues.<sup>293</sup>

Nevertheless, Russification practices had an even larger impact on Russia than on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. A large anti-corruption campaign against Uzbeks and a large anti-nationalist campaign against Kazakhs led to the perception of local Russians as a separate

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<sup>289</sup> Askar, Aliya, “The Complexity of Russia-Kazakhstan Relations on Display,” *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2022

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/the-complexity-of-kazakhstan-russia-relations-on-display/>

<sup>290</sup> Collins, 136

<sup>291</sup> Lukashin, A. V. “Drafting the Union Treaty in September-December 1991: from Dismantling the Statehood to the USSR’s Collapse” *Upravlenie*, no.3, (2018): 72-79, 73

<sup>292</sup> Yarmoschuk, Tatiana, “Intelligentsia Moves to Opposition, National Movements in the Republics during the Collapse of the Soviet Union” *The Current Times*, January 11, 2023

<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/ussr-uzbekistan/32217736.html>

<sup>293</sup> See strikes in Karaganda as example.

group. As mentioned in both chapters, the media were spreading the information about those issues across the Union, perpetuating the same narratives about the supremacy of Russians and oppression of them by the local nationalists. That led to the perception of Russians, usually well-integrated into local networks of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or any other post-Soviet States, as a separate political power and, even more importantly, as an oppressed ethnic minority within those states.

The narrative about oppressed Russians remains a prominent one in the Russian state media and official statements. The protection of the “interests of Russians” is the official justification for the Russian foreign policy on the post-Soviet space. For example, the laws about the Russian language, which parliaments and presidents of the former Soviet Union states pass, are always at the center of attention of the Russian news media. In 2015, the government of Latvia accepted the bill, which asked (not required, but asked) the workers of stores, kindergartens, and schools to talk to each other in Latvian in the presence of clients. Russian media officially claimed that the Latvian government prohibited talking in Russian. Furthermore, even the Ministry of Russian Foreign Affairs officially stated that the passage of such laws is an act of discrimination towards the “Russian-speaking population.” Meanwhile, no one was prohibiting speaking Russian even in public; Latvia was merely striving to protect the state language, which almost died in the Soviet era. However, such laws as described above contribute to the worsening of relations between Latvia and Russia.<sup>294</sup> Clearly, the Russian state keeps perceiving Russian-Speaking Latvians as primarily Russians, not citizens of Latvia. Such perception is a heritage of the Perestroika narratives discussed above.

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<sup>294</sup> “Can You Speak Russian in Latvia?” *Meduza*. January 27, 2015. <https://meduza.io/cards/mozhno-li-v-latvii-govorit-po-russki>

The general Russian public, Russian state media, and officials keep describing interethnic relations within the post-Soviet States from the lens of “local anti-Russian nationalism” For instance, in 2021, some Kazakh citizen beat a Russian-speaking child. According to Russian media, Readovka, which is affiliated with the Russian State, the crime was sponsored by “interethnic hate.” They claimed that there was a video that proved that the crime was motivated by the irritation with the Russianness of a kid. The media did not even provide the readers with any other motivation for the crime.<sup>295</sup> This way, the media are perpetuating the narrative about aggressive anti-Russian nationalism within Kazakhstan, which the Soviet press and radio used to describe the December Protests of 1986.

The idea that Russians need protection from the state manifested itself even in Russian domestic policies. Since the early Soviet era of indigenization, the territory of the Russian Empire was divided according to the ethnic principle. Many nations, previously minoritized within the Russian Empire, gained republics, where they became titular nations whose representatives comprised a large portion of the local leadership, and their language became one of the languages of the official documentation. Not only the Soviet Union remained federalized, but also the Russian republic within it (RSFSR) consisted of numerous national republics.<sup>296</sup> Therefore, in 1991, Russia could dissolve into numerous nation-states as the Soviet Union did. Under this threat, national republics gained many privileges from the federal center. One of them was the obligatory teaching of the national languages in the national republics. Nevertheless, under the regime of Putin, the federal center gradually curtailed that privilege. The pretext for these actions was “the protection of the Russian language” - the only state language of the

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<sup>295</sup> Proshina, Elena “V Kazakhstane Vnov’ Zhestoko Izbili Russkogo Rebenka [A Child Got Beaten in Kazakhstan],” *Rambler*, October 27, 2021  
<https://news.rambler.ru/incidents/47467644-v-kazahstane-vnov-zhestoko-izbili-russkogo-rebenka/>

<sup>296</sup> See Martin, Terry *Affirmative Action Empire*.

Russian Federation and the language of instruction in all the universities.<sup>297</sup> The tensions around the language question also rises from the Perestroika narratives, when the struggle of the national dissidents to preserve their languages was described as an assault on the Russian language.<sup>298</sup> However, the description of the local activism as an assault on the Russian population started even earlier than those “language movements,” during Jeltoqsan and its aftermath.

The culmination of the rhetoric of “protection of the Russians” occurred during Russian aggression against Ukraine (2014 - now). The propaganda presented laws, which the parliament of Ukraine was passing since the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 in order to protect the Ukrainian language, as assaults on the status of the Russian language. For instance, in the Russian mainstream narrative, the law which required all Ukrainian web-sites to post in Ukrainian, but allowed keeping Russian, turned into the law which forbade usage of Russian in the Ukrainian segment of the internet.<sup>299</sup> Some people henceforth believe that there is a law in Ukraine under provisions of which one might get in prison for speaking Russian in public.<sup>300</sup>

Furthermore, in the discussion of Ukrainian politics, the highest Russian officials kept calling the Ukrainian regime a Neo-Nazi one, aiming to “exterminate all Russians.”<sup>301</sup> Putin himself kept calling all Ukrainian politicians Nazis since 2014 and used this narrative to justify Russian attacks on Ukraine, such as the annexation of Crimea or the full-scale invasion, that began on February 24, 2022.<sup>302</sup> However, Nazism in this discourse is not the same ideology as Hitler’s one, which rested on antisemitism and the supremacy of the “Aryan” German race. The

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<sup>297</sup> Ivanov, Gleb, “Rodnoy ili ne Rodnoy? [Native or Not Native?]” *Argumenty i Fakty*, July 27, 2018 [https://aif.ru/politics/russia/rodnoy\\_ili\\_ne\\_rodnoy\\_kak\\_teper\\_v\\_shkolah\\_budut\\_uchit\\_nacionalnye\\_yazyki](https://aif.ru/politics/russia/rodnoy_ili_ne_rodnoy_kak_teper_v_shkolah_budut_uchit_nacionalnye_yazyki)

<sup>298</sup> See for example the case of Pridnestrovie.

<sup>299</sup> An instance of that is an article in *Kommersant* about the law on the indigenous languages.

<sup>300</sup> Rudoy, Andrew “Lyudi Zhestko o Spezoperazii: ZlobodneeVnyi Vopros.” Youtube-Channel *Vestnik Buri*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnasWqZ1xjU&t=1024s>

<sup>301</sup> Putin, Vladimir, *Speech on the acknowledgement of Donetsk and Luhansk Popular Republics* February, 21st, 2022. Kremlin.ru

<sup>302</sup> Putin, Vladimir *Speech on the Return of Crimea*, March 18th, 2014.

description of President Zelensky, who never tried to hide his Jewish ancestry, as a “classical” Nazi, was too controversial even for Russian propaganda.<sup>303</sup> Nevertheless, Ukrainian Neo-Nazism is said to rest on “Russophobia” and the “Supremacy of the Ukrainian nation.”<sup>304</sup> These narratives reflect the ones which the Soviet propaganda perpetuated after Jeltoqsan about Kazakhs. By fighting, alongside Russians, for the autonomy of Kazakhstan that was guaranteed by the Soviet constitution, Kazakhs were assaulting the Russian population of their republic, according to the Soviet media.

Another heritage of Perestroika is a perception of the Russian-speaking people living outside of Russia as a separate political force in the state where they currently live. In terms of Ukraine, this is the narrative about unanimous apprehension towards the revolution of dignity by the “Russian-Speaking East of Ukraine.”<sup>305</sup> Meanwhile, even in the currently occupied Luhansk and Donetsk, which, according to Russian propaganda, were the centers of the resistance to the revolution, there were numerous protests in support of the new rule in Kiev.<sup>306</sup> Furthermore, even the narrative that most of the Russian-speaking East and South supported Yanukovich - a president of Ukraine, whom the Revolution of 2014 ruled out, is also misleading. This misleading narrative significantly contributes to the perception of Russian-Speaking Ukrainians as a homogenous political group.<sup>307</sup> For instance, the city of Kherson gave to Timoshenko, the main opponent of Yanukovich, 33 percent of the vote.<sup>308</sup> The narrative about Russians as a

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<sup>303</sup> Zelensky, Volodimir *Speech about the Potential Russian Full-Scale Invasion*. February, 22th, 2022.

<sup>304</sup> Gordeeva, Katerina, “This is Called a Preventive Attack. An Interview with Elena Drapeko.” March, 5th, 2022 Youtube Channel *Skazhi Gordeevoy*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snLa5oyjwPM>

<sup>305</sup> Krasovsky, Anton. “We don’t want It like this” Deleted Youtube Channel *Antonimy*

<sup>306</sup> Shtefanov Alexander “Obyknovennaya Denazificatzia [A Usual Denazification]” Youtube Channel *Alexander Shtefanov*. February, 24, 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uicsdZDw-Y>

<sup>307</sup> Vasiliev, Stas, “The Diary of Donbass” Deleted Youtube Channel *Stas-Ai-Kak-Prosto*.

<sup>308</sup> “Rezultati Golosovannya po Ukraini [Results of the vote in Ukraine]” *TSIK (Central Electoral Committee) of Ukraine*, January 17, 2010. <https://cvk.gov.ua/pls/vp2010/wp300f0d8.html?PT001F01=700>

separate political power is also coming from Perestroika, from the appointments of Russians to “fix” Uzbekistan, and from the attempts to make them into a new ruling clan of the republic.

These narratives clearly informed the practices of Russian politics towards Ukraine. In 2016, Victor Medvedchuk, a relative of Putin, created a political party, which, according to Ukrainian police, had the goal of spreading Pro-Russian narratives.<sup>309</sup> In the mission statement, the party declared, however, that its aim is to defend the right “to speak, use and learn Russian.”<sup>310</sup> However, since the ill-renowned attempt to cancel the status of the Russian language as a state one in 2014, the Ukrainian government never attacked Russian in public or personal use.. Furthermore, as described in the previous paragraph, Russian-speaking people were never established as an identity within Ukraine.<sup>311</sup> That underestimation of how people identify themselves with the Ukrainian state and society, even if they speak Russian, led to the numerous mistakes of the Russian high military and political officials in the preparation of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine.

In the description of the reasons for the invasion of 2022, many scholars stated that general Putin’s aim is to recreate the Soviet Union and reverse the results of Perestroika. While as we see now, this is true in terms of territories, it is quite controversial in terms of the nature of Putin’s rule. Putin does not want to have 15 republics within his state; he thinks that all of them

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<sup>309</sup> Venkina Yekaterina, “Genprokuror Ukrainy Raskryla Sut Obvinanii Medvedchuku [Genprokuror of Ukraine] Revealed the Essence of the Accusations to Medvedchuk.” *Deutsche Welle*, May 11, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/ru/genprokuror-ukrainy-raskryla-sut-obvinenij-medvedchuku/a-57500483>

“Ukrainian Court Finally Prohibited the Opposition Party for Life,” *BBC*, June, 20, 2022 [bbc.com/russian/news-61865366](https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-61865366)

<sup>310</sup> OPZZH, “Predvybornaya Programma na Vyborakh v Radu v 2019 [Electoral Program for 2019 Parliament Elections].” *LB.UA*, July 19, 2019. [https://lb.ua/news/2019/06/12/429384\\_predvibornaya\\_programma\\_partii.html](https://lb.ua/news/2019/06/12/429384_predvibornaya_programma_partii.html)

<sup>311</sup> Stoliarenko, Alexey, “Vse pro Status Russkogo Yazyka [Everything about Status of Russian Language]” *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, March, 13, 2014. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/columns/2014/03/13/7018654/>  
[pravda.com.ua/rus/columns/2014/03/13/7018654/](https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/columns/2014/03/13/7018654/)



are part of one large Russian nation.<sup>312</sup> This is not the narrative of Brezhnev's, Khrushchev's, or Stalin's USSR. This is the policy and narrative of Perestroika, brought to the extreme. Putin does not pursue any ideology but aggressive Russian nationalism. Therefore, Russianness is the only thing that might unite the territories he wants to conquer. In the same way, the only thing that the Soviet government could offer to the state on the verge of collapse was the fear of Russophobia. The history of Jeltoqsan and Red Landing is among the most prominent examples of that policy.

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<sup>312</sup> Putin, Vladimir "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." *Kremlin.Ru*, July 21, 2021. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

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