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ELUSIVE REBELS: RESEARCHING THE UPRISINGS ON THE EVE OF THE GREAT FAMINE IN KAZAKHSTAN (1929-1931)

The article provides an outline of the most recent scholarly literature on the wave of anti-state insurgencies against collectivization and procurements of livestock and grain in the period between 1929 and 1931 in Kazakhstan. After briefly assessing the primary sources limitation for the study of the topic, the article provides a periodization and typology of the different uprisings and an overview of their development and causes. The authors then summarize the results of the most recent and complete monograph on the topic, written by Talas Omarbekov. Omarbekov's book provides the most articulate exposition so far of the "national interpretation" of the wave of uprisings on the eve of the great famine, strongly connecting them with the 1916 revolt in the Kazakh steppe. Furthermore, the authors discuss other recent historiographical contributions to the topic, especially those from European historians, thus providing an up-to-date overview of the scholarly debate on this important page of Kazakh and Soviet history. The most important issues tackled by the scholarly literature about the uprisings are the continuity or discontinuity between the insurgency during collectivization and anti-colonial rebellions in the nineteenth and early twentieth century; the role of Kazakh elites in the insurgencies and the sources of their authority; the extent to which Tsarist domination had reshaped Kazakh society and influenced its ability to resist the Soviet state's onslaught; and the question of whether the category of "civil war" is useful for understanding the widespread violence that engulfed Kazakhstan during collectivization and the great famine. The article concludes by underscoring the irreducibility of the diverse dynamics of uprisings in different provinces of Kazakhstan on the eve of the famine to a unitary political project and language. It also stresses the need for microhistories of single insurgency episodes, based on political police materials and local archives.

Key words: famine, rebellion, local elite, collectivization, Kazakh steppe, continuity.

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Ұстатпайтын көтерілісшілер: Қазақстандағы ашаршылық қарсаңындағы көтерілістер туралы зерттеу (1929-1931)

Мақалада Қазақстанда 1929-1931 жылдардағы ұжымдастыру және мал мен астық дайындау науқанына байланысты мемлекетке қарсы көтерілістер толқыны туралы соңғы ғылыми әдебиеттерге шолу берілген. Тақырыпты зерттеуде бастапқы дереккөздерінің шектеулеріне қысқаша баға бергеннен кейін, мақалада әртүрлі көтерілістердің кезеңдестірілуі мен типологиясы, олардың дамуы мен себептері туралы ақпарат берілген. Содан кейін авторлар Талас Омарбеков жазған осы тақырыптағы ең соңғы және толық монографиясының нәтижелеріне қорытындылау шығарады. Омарбековтің кітабында ұлы ашаршылық қарсаңындағы көтерілістердің «ұлттық интерпретациясы» туралы нақты деректер келтірілген, оларды Қазақ даласындағы 1916 жылғы көтерілістермен тығыз байланыстырады. Сонымен қатар, авторлар аталған тақырыпта, әсіресе еуропалық тарихшылардың соңғы жаңа тарихнамалық үлестерін талқылайды, осылайша қазақ және кеңес тарихының маңызды тұсындағы ғылыми пікірталастарға өзекті шолуды ұсынады. Көтеріліс туралы ғылыми әдебиеттердегі ең маңызды мәселелер: XIX және XX ғасырлардағы отаршылдыққа және ұжымдастыруға қарсы көтерілістер кезіндегі көтерілістер арасындағы

сабақтастық немесе алшақтық; көтерілістегі қазақ элиталарының рөлі және олардың билігінің қуат көздері; империялық үстемдік қазақ қоғамын қаншалықты өзгертті және оның Кеңес мемлекетінің тегеуріне төтеп беру қабілетіне әсері; және де «азаматтық соғыс» категориясы ұжымдастыру және ұлы ашаршылық кезінде Қазақстанды жайлаған зорлық-зомбылықты түсіну үшін пайдалы ма деген сұрақ. Мақала аштық қарсаңында Қазақстанның әртүрлі аймақтарындағы көтерілістердің көп бағытты динамикасының біртұтас саяси жоба мен мәмлеге жанаспайтындығына назар аударумен аяқталады. Сондай-ақ, саяси полиция мен жергілікті мұрағаттың материалдары негізінде көтерілістің жекелеген эпизодтарының микротарихын құру қажеттілігі жайында баса айтылған.

Түйін сөздер: ашаршылық, көтеріліс, жергілікті элита, ұжымдастыру, Қазақ даласы, сабақтастық.

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**Неуловимые мятежники: исследование восстаний накануне
Великого голода в Казахстане
(1929-1931 гг.)**

В статье представлен обзор новейшей научной литературы о волне антигосударственных мятежей против коллективизации и заготовок скота и зерна в период с 1929 по 1931 годы в Казахстане. После краткой оценки ограничений первоисточников для изучения темы статья предоставляет периодизацию и типологию различных восстаний, обзор их развития и причин. Затем авторы суммируют результаты самой последней и полной монографии на эту тему, написанной Таласом Омарбековым. Книга Омарбекова дает наиболее четкое изложение «национальной интерпретации» волны восстаний накануне великого голода, тесно связав их с восстанием 1916 года в Казахской степи. Кроме того, авторы обсуждают другие недавние историографические вклады на заданную тему, особенно европейских историков, тем самым предоставляя актуальный обзор научных дискуссий на этой важной странице казахской и советской истории. Наиболее важными вопросами, которыми занимается научная литература о восстаниях, являются преемственность или разрыв между мятежом во время коллективизации и антиколониальными восстаниями в девятнадцатом и начале двадцатого века; роль казахских элит в мятежах и источники их власти; степень, в которой царское господство изменило казахское общество и повлияло на его способность противостоять натиску советского государства; и вопрос о том, полезна ли категория «гражданская война» для понимания широко распространенного насилия, охватившего Казахстан во время коллективизации и большого голода. Статья завершается подчеркиванием несводимости разнонаправленной динамики восстаний в разных областях Казахстана накануне голода к унитарному политическому проекту и языку. В нем также подчеркивается необходимость создания микроисторий отдельных эпизодов мятежа на основе материалов политической полиции и местных архивов.

Ключевые слова: голод, восстание, местная элита, коллективизация, Казахская степь, преемственность.

Introduction

The historiography on the wave of uprisings that rocked Kazakhstan during collectivization and forced procurements was only able to flourish after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since the 1990s, studies on the violent resistance against Soviet policies during the Stalinist “revolution from above” have benefited from the opening of the archives. At the beginning of the decade and for a limited period, researchers were also able to use the political police archives. We now have a fairly complete picture of the events, due to the

work of both Kazakhstani and foreign scholars (Aldazhumanov, 1998: 66-94).

The most thorough treatment of the issue in foreign historiography is perhaps a chapter in Isabelle Ohayon’s monograph, published in 2006 (Ohayon, 2006: 179-221). As Ohayon has shown, the three main hotbeds of resistance to state policies in Kazakhstan were “on the Turgai plateau, in Southern Kazakhstan (the region north of the Syr-Darya and of Kzyl-Orda), and on the Mangishlak peninsula”, among the Adai (Ohayon, 2006: 180). These regions were largely pastoral and nomadic: this is where the main uprisings, each involving thousands of

insurgents, broke out. However, episodes of violent resistance also took place in the agricultural districts of the Soviet Republic. The rebellions involved not only Kazakhs, but also Uzbeks, Karakalpaks, and the Russian and Ukrainian peasants who had settled in Kazakhstan over the previous decades. In northern Kazakhstan, at least one major uprising involved both Kazakhs and Russians. OGPU troops and Red Army units sent from Russia and Uzbekistan rapidly repressed the uprisings. The cycle of resistance against collectivization and procurements was eventually ended by the spread of famine conditions to the entirety of Kazakhstan during 1931 (Cameron, 2018: 111-116; Kindler, 2018: 120-147).

The main causes of the uprisings were procurements of grain and livestock; arrest of local authority figures (or the threat of it, which pushed local communities to organize uprisings in anticipation of imminent repressions); and anti-religious campaigns, with the closure of mosques and sites of pilgrimage. The more the alimentary situation in Kazakhstan deteriorated during 1930, the more the fear of an impending famine acted as a push factor for the uprisings.

It is possible to identify three main phases of the 1929-31 insurgency cycle. The first was the rebellions in the period between the autumn of 1929 and the spring of 1930. This phase can be called the *state-dismantling* phase. It was characterized by violence against representatives of the state, destruction of fiscal and administrative documents, and dismantling of state institutions in the countryside, such as collective farms. Party and state administrative offices were raided and torn down; hospitals were sometimes also targeted. In some locales, insurgents took control of requisitioned grain and distributed it back to the population. The state retreat in March 1930, which led to the dismantling of most collective farms created during the winter of 1929-30 in Kazakhstan, must surely have been seen as a victory by herdsmen and peasants (Ohayon, 2006: 195). Nonetheless, all the major revolts were ruthlessly repressed. This wave of repression marked the transition to the second phase of the insurgency cycle: the *flight-rebellion* phase. Mass flights were caused by OGPU and army repressions in the main areas of insurgency. This led repressive state institutions to conflate communities of fleeing herdsmen and their families with insurgent groups and, in many cases, to treat them accordingly. Approximately 80 percent of the Mangishlak peninsula's population left the region in order to flee state repression (Ohayon, 2006: 200). With the increase in spoliation and

starvation, entire nomadic communities fled to other Soviet Republics and to China in order to avoid famine. The OGPU and border guards treated them collectively as insurgents, killing thousands of men, women, and children in 1930 and 1931 (Cameron, 2018: 122-142). This phase ended in mid-1931, when the famine eventually engulfed the entirety of Kazakhstan. In the period between the summer of 1931 and the summer of 1932, at the height of the famine, major uprisings did not take place. However, violent attacks by groups attempting to control scarce food resources were common, especially along the railways connecting Kazakhstan to Russia. Between early 1931 and mid-1932, the OGPU counted more than 100 attacks on the state organization overseeing meat and livestock procurements, *Soiuzmiaso*. In some cases, these "mass disorders" involved up to 500 people, who looted grain from state deposits and redistributed the requisitioned cattle among the starving herdsmen (Pianciola, 2018: 108). While there were no major revolts after 1931, the three types of illegal act (destruction of state institutions in the countryside, flights, and looting of food resources) were commonplace throughout the entirety of the collectivization period between 1929 and 1932. However, their relative occurrence changed over time, meaning that the periodization sketched above provides a useful outline.

For the last 20 years, studies of specific uprisings have been conducted using provincial archives in different regions of Kazakhstan, especially those by Tuganbek Allaniiazov and Amangeldy Taukenov (Allaniiazov, 1999; Allaniiazov, Taukenov, 200; Allaniiazov, 2001; Allaniiazov, 2006). Recently, Talas Omarbekov has published the most detailed study so far of the issue in Kazakh, using the Kazakhstan archives (Omarbekov, 2018). This article will summarize the conclusions of Omarbekov's most recent study, and discuss the contribution of non-Kazakh historians to the issue. The paper will also discuss how we can use the sources at our disposal for our study of the uprisings. Our study risks reproducing the "primary type of counter-insurgency discourse", because we rely on administrative documents produced by the institutions repressing the uprisings (Guha, 1988: 47-48; O'Hanlon, 2002: 135-186).

Talas Omarbekov's "National Interpretation" of Kazakh Anti-Soviet Resistance

Talas Omarbekov is one of the few historians who had access, during the 1990s, to political police files on the 1930s repressions. His book

heavily relies on these sources, and also makes use of documents from state and party archives. Scholars are often dismissive of Soviet political police documents, which are often seen only as potentially useful for the study of the political police itself, and of its repressive policies. However, OGPU interrogation materials referring to the early 1930s rebellions are different from interrogations from the late 1930s. OGPU operations in 1930-31 were not preemptive physical elimination policies targeting quotas of Soviet citizens, as they were in 1937-38. They were instead responses to real rebellions against state policies, during which police interrogators tried to extract information about the organization of the uprisings (Pianciola, 2013: 314). Thus, OGPU sources are fundamental to outlining the development of the uprisings, as Omarbekov's work shows.

Omarbekov describes the rebellions, and notes that some of the rebels elected khans and formed armed detachments following tribal divisions. During some uprisings, the rebels mobilized forms of religious legitimization. This was especially frequent during the Suzak, Irgiz, Karakum, Adai, Batpakkara, and Asan uprisings (Omarbekov, 2018: 17). According to Omarbekov, the Kazakhstan Communist Party secretary Filipp Goloshchekin aimed to destroy not only the Kazakh pastoral economy, but also tribal relations, as well as "national traditions and psychology". Given that the rebels tried to create limited areas with alternative proto-administrations led by local "khans" and defended by military detachments formed on a tribal basis, and that they were defending their religious practices and authority figures, Omarbekov concludes that what happened between 1929 and 1931 was a "national liberation" movement, comparable to the anti-Tsarist 1916 revolt (Omarbekov, 2018: 18). This interpretation is strengthened, according to Omarbekov, by the fact that participants in the 1916 revolt were also at the forefront of uprisings against collectivization in many districts (Batpakkara, Nauryzym, Irgiz, and Turgai in 1929; Karakum in 1930). In general terms, the insurgencies of 1929-1931 were better organized and more threatening to the Soviet state in the areas where uprisings had also taken place in 1916. The specific ways in which the uprisings were organized also echoed the 1916 events: mobilization of *sarbaz*, and recruiting the mobilized men from different local lineages (Omarbekov, 2018: 18). Omarbekov explains that, almost invariably, the rebellions were a response to the arrest of local authority figures and other repressive state policies. An important aspect of the rebellions is the issue of their leadership

and organization. On this, Omarbekov trusts the OGPU documents, which show that, in a number of cases, the leaders of the revolts were former Tsarist *volost'* chiefs (Omarbekov, 2018: 166). He explains that the preeminent role of local authority religious figures, mostly *ishans*, in the uprisings was due to the Communist anti-religious campaign that was unleashed in 1929 (Omarbekov, 2018: 19). Many *ishans* were hastily executed, or sentenced to years in forced labor camps (Omarbekov, 2018: 19-20). According to official OGPU data, during 1929-1931 the OGPU sentenced 5,551 people for participating in revolts. Among them, 883 were shot (Omarbekov, 2018: 458). It is necessary to add to these numbers participants in the uprisings that were killed immediately after the armed conflict between rebels and Red Army soldiers or OGPU troops.

To summarize Omarbekov's conclusions: first, taken together, the insurgencies and other protest episodes during 1929, 1930, and 1931 were the second act of a national liberation movement against colonial oppression. The first act had been the 1916 revolt, and the insurgency cycle of 1929-31 stands in strong continuity with this in terms of the people involved, the leadership, and the methods. Through bloody, punitive measures and putting a stop to the uprisings during their initial stage, the authorities prevented the insurrectional movement from growing in size, becoming centralized, and posing a threat to Soviet power in the region. Secondly, the leaders of the insurgent movement were not descendants of the pre-colonial Kazakh Chinggisid nobility, but instead common herdsmen and religious figures who had authority among the populations of specific areas. According to Omarbekov, they were the only ones who could defend the objective Kazakh "national interest", even though they mobilized people to revolt by invoking the defense of religious institutions and practices rather than the nation. The leaders of the Alash movement, who could have become the leaders of the national liberation uprising, had only just been repressed by the communist state on the eve of the "revolution from above" (Omarbekov, 2018: 20).

Other Recent Historiographical Contributions

While Talas Omarbekov put the 1929-31 insurgency cycle diachronically into the context of a medium-term "national liberation movement" that started in 1916, other historians have preferred to analyze it synchronically within the Soviet "peasant protest movement" against collectivization. So far,

no study has underscored the difference between the forms of resistance among the Kazakhs and the Russian and Ukrainian peasants in Kazakhstan – for instance, the role of women seems to have been much more prominent in the Slavic peasants' resistance than in the resistance of the Kazakhs (Viola, 1999: 183-205). In general, a gendered analysis of resistance to collectivization in nomadic Central Asia is still largely lacking.

The issue of continuity and discontinuity with past resistance movements is also relevant if the focus remains on placing the Kazakh resistance within the larger violent movement against collectivization throughout the whole of the Soviet Union. Andrea Graziosi has described the conflict in the Soviet countryside during 1929 and 1933 as the “second act” of the “Great Soviet peasant war”, unleashed by a Soviet state that aimed to subjugate the peasantry. The first act of this war had been the conflict between the newly-established Bolshevik power and the peasantry in territories controlled by the Reds during the civil war of 1918-1921 (Graziosi, 1996). In the case of Kazakhstan, a medium-term study of the continuity in the form and organization of the revolts could potentially be fruitful, especially if focusing on the northwest of the Kazakh steppe, a region that fell under Bolshevik control earlier than other areas.

Other scholars have investigated the 1929-31 uprisings, and more specifically their leadership, as a way to explore how Kazakh society had changed over time since the nineteenth century. In particular, the question of the salience of lineage divisions has been at the center of scholarly interest (Pianciola, 2013; Hallez and Ohayon, 2020). In his recent monograph, German historian Robert Kindler focused on the collapse of social bonds among Kazakhs during collectivization and the great famine (Kindler 2018). He also underscored that the refugee crisis unleashed by the famine, accompanied by massive internal movements of population, led to an increase in conflicts among Kazakhs as a way of surviving the crisis.

Studying the uprisings and the reaction of the Soviet state is also a good way of investigating the character of the early Soviet state in the Kazakh steppe. During the insurgency cycle, the state administrative pyramid did not remain intact. It broke, as in the case of the 1916 revolt, at its lowest level. Many police officers were killed, but others sided with the rebels (the 1930 revolt in Suzak is a good case in point). State agencies were not very well coordinated, and military control over the territory was weak. No regular Red Army units were

permanently stationed on Kazakh soil (Kindler, 2018: 133). Even though Kazakhstan bordered China, the situation in Xinjiang was not judged sufficiently threatening to require the stable presence of Red Army troops in the Soviet-Chinese borderlands (Xinjiang became a de facto Soviet protectorate in the second half of the 1930s). In order to quell Kazakh uprisings, troops were sent from the north (central Russia and Dagestan across the Caspian Sea) and the south (Tashkent). In June 1930, the commander of the Red Army's 11th cavalry division complained that the information provided by the OGPU in Kazakhstan was not reliable (AP RK, F. 141, Op. 1., D. 2953, ll. 38-76, in A.S. Zulkasheva (ed.), 2018: 479). In vast regions of Kazakhstan, especially the Aralo-Caspian region, the Soviet state ceased to exist in the first half of 1930. Kindler quotes a report from Kliment Voroshilov from April 1930, in which the Commissar of War claimed that “from Turgai to Aral'sk, there exists no Soviet rule and no party organization” (Kindler, 2018: 121).

Kindler claims that the events in the Kazakhstan countryside between 1929 and 1931 should be considered a second civil war in the region, following the first into which the Kazakh steppe had plunged in 1916-1920. This second civil war in the Kazakhstan countryside was “fragmented”, in the sense that the fighting groups were not united on broad political fronts. Instead, they were small lineage groups, struggling against each other for the control of scarce food resources in a time of famine. Referring to the most influential political science study of violence in civil conflicts, namely the work of political scientist Stathis Kalyvas, Kindler recalls that civil wars are often not simply fought by two camps (he refers to “dichotomous conflict”), but by a myriad of armed groups fighting for their own local aims, “with varying degrees of violence” (Kindler, 2018: 123; Kalyvas, 2006). He is particularly critical of the idea that the violence in early-1930s Kazakhstan can be explained simply by the aggression of the state against “the people” (Werth, 1999: 33-268), and by the latter's “resistance” to it: “resistance alone cannot explain either the motives of individual aggressors or the dynamics of spiralling violence” (Kindler, 2018: 123). Kindler does not deny that local Kazakh communities resisted predatory state policies with “spontaneous eruptions of violence... limited in scope and aim, [that] constituted a large part of the resistance to collectivization measures” (Kindler, 2018: 126). However, the mechanisms of violence escalation cannot be explained by this simple dichotomy. Violence fueled itself because its practice created a set of expectations among both the

local communities and the repressive organs of the state: “groups often embrace violence when the risk of waiting things out seems too great” (Kindler, 2018: 126). Kindler’s analysis is refreshing, as he attempts to avoid presenting the Kazakh population as devoid of any division and internal conflict. Kindler is convincing in sketching a picture of Kazakh society during the trauma of collectivization that is more nuanced than that of a national community united in its resistance against Soviet repression. However, the concept of “civil war” presupposes the existence of organized armed formations, able to exercise violence for a significant period of time. The main characteristic of the herdsman and peasant violence during collectivization was precisely that it was small groups of insurgents, almost invariably armed with only an extremely limited quantity of firearms, who broke out in “eruptions of violence... limited in scope and aim”, as Kindler himself contradictorily underscores. Furthermore, Kindler was ultimately unable to retrieve significant examples of inter-Kazakh conflict from the archives, either between tribes or within them. He instead claims that Stalinist policies “strengthened the standing and authority of local elites more than it undermined them. In times of crises people gathered round an elite that had resources, connections, and status, in the hope that these men might rescue them from the impending catastrophe” (Kindler, 2018: 123).

The role of local “elites” is the research focus of other works on the 1929-1931 uprisings. It is here that the uniformity of the sources at our disposal, and the fact that they use Guha’s “primary type of counter-insurgency discourse”, makes them a fairly shaky base for analyzing the internal dynamics of local insurgent communities. This is also due to the fact that Soviet state institutions and the political police were eager to attribute a strong organization to the uprisings, which were allegedly always led by “class enemies”. The political police focused on the “class” background of the leaders, or the forms of religious legitimization for their acts of insurgency (in particular, the presence of Sufi authority figures among the uprisings’ leaders), or the presence of former local Tsarist administrators. For instance, on the basis of Soviet police reports underscoring that it was *ishan* and other authority figures who led many of the revolts, Xavier Hallez and Isabelle Ohayon claimed in a recent study that religious figures were more important in the leadership of the 1929-31 insurgency cycle than in the 1916 revolt and in earlier anti-Tsarist insurgencies. It is difficult to ascertain whether this was true. It seems telling that the most important study of Sufism in Kazakhstan

during the Stalinist period does not give much credit to the Sufi-led insurrections in Kazakhstan (Frank, 2019: 61-83). In the case of the Suzak rebellion of 1930, the OGPU interrogations did not suggest that Sufi connections played a significant role in the organization of the rebellion (Pianciola, 2013: 316-322).

Hallez and Ohayon assume a diachronic approach, focusing only on one region of the Kazakh steppe, Turgai. They underscore both continuity and ruptures over three episodes of anti-state violent rebellion: the 1840s Kenesary anti-colonial “war”, the 1916 revolt, and the 1929-31 uprisings. They point at the fragmentation of Kazakh authority as a consequence of colonization, and claim that the radius, magnitude, and duration of the revolts steadily decreased over time between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. They opine that, over time, the episodes of anti-colonial rebellion among the Kazakhs were marked by a process of loss of political potential and project. In the mid-nineteenth century, the “war” led by Kenesary Kasymov had a clear political framework, based on pre-colonial authority. Due to his Chinggisid authority and his descent from Ablai Khan, the last khan to rule over the three Kazakh *zhuz*, Kenesary could claim to represent the entire Kazakh people. Hallez and Ohayon thus sum up: “Kenesary led a ten-year war over a large territory, involving forces gathering many tribes from the three *zhuz*. The 1916 rebellion only lasted six months and was divided according to lineages [... while the] 1929-1930 [sic] insurgencies were even sparser and more short-lived, lasting from one week to a month. The number of participants also decreased sensibly between these three episodes, even if the revolts of 1916 and 1929-1930 were part of larger movements of resistance: that of Central Asia in 1916 and of the USSR in 1929-1930. However, the revolts’ *modus operandi* remained the same with violent reactions to measures deemed illegitimate, ‘*batyrs*’ leading feats of glory, the constitution of armed groups, the election of a khan and an attempt to set up a structure to organise the revolt” (Hallez and Ohayon, 2020: 280). According to Hallez and Ohayon, the strengthening of colonial state capacity and its ability to project power in the Kazakh steppe led to a process that weakened the political authority of the Chinggisid nobility, especially that of khan lineages that had the potential to create super-tribal coalitions among the Kazakhs. This resulted in what the authors call “primitivization” of protest events, referring to the notion of “primitive rebels” put forward by the influential Marxist historian Eric J.

Hobsbawm. Like Nicolas Werth before them, Hallez and Ohayon see the anti-collectivization rebellions as a case of “social banditry”, a form of violent “protest” that Hobsbawm described as “extremely archaic, and indeed pre-political” (Hobsbawm, 1971: 6). He explained that social banditry breaks out on a large scale “when a peasant society which knows of no better means of self-defence is in a condition of abnormal tension and disruption. Social banditry has next to no organization or ideology, and is totally inadaptable to modern social movements. Its most highly developed forms, which skirt national guerrilla warfare, are rare and, by themselves, ineffective” (Hobsbawm, 1971: 5). Ohayon and Hallez hint at an opposite historical arc for rebellions in the Kazakh steppe. They do not follow Hobsbawm in his analysis of the archaic “primitive rebel” as a precursor to the modern revolutionary. Instead, they point out the declension from the pre-colonial or early colonial rebellion, which was still associated with a clear political project based on Chinggisid authority, to the late-colonial and early-Soviet limited mobilization potential of lesser tribal leaders, who often needed some sort of religious legitimization to organize their uprisings.

In a study on the Suzak uprising of early 1930, one of the authors of the present article put forward a hypothesis on what the geographically circumscribed character of the anti-collectivization revolts tells us about the effects that integration into the Tsarist state had on Kazakh society (Pianciola, 2013: 297-340). “Predation” by the nascent Stalinist state can explain why people resisted and rebelled, but not the character (size, organization) of the specific uprisings or their leadership. The leaders of many of the biggest 1930 rebellions in Kazakhstan had built their authority within the Tsarist state structure, and the integration of a social layer of Kazakh society into the Tsarist state had consequences for the way it resisted the “revolution from above” of 1929-1933. The inclusion of Kazakh lineages in the Tsarist state structure also resulted in an appropriation of those same structures by “society”. By the early twentieth century, there were not many (if any) figures of authority above the *volost* level capable of organizing a mobilization in any specific region of the Kazakh steppe. The pre-colonial “khanate” was not the only notion of a legitimate state that the Kazakhs had at this point: former local imperial administrators, often non-Chinggisids, enjoyed influence and authority in the early-Soviet Kazakh steppe.

Hallez and Ohayon have criticized the interpretations of scholars who have underscored

that quasi-state practices were employed by the rebels, who followed an order of legal legitimation that was different to the Soviet one. The two French historians point out that the uprisings had no political horizon, and that leaders had a “reactionary” attitude. Moreover, they had no chance against the repressive apparatus of the Soviet state. In hindsight, this has been proven true. However, the situation in the spring of 1930 might have appeared different to a casual observer in the steppe. Everywhere in the Soviet countryside, from Siberia to the Caucasus, from Central Asia to Ukraine, the state was fighting bloody battles against a peasantry that was not yet subjugated. Nicolas Werth has stated that one of the most important factors fueling peasant uprisings was “the belief, very widespread during the first half of the 1930s, that the collectivized system in the countryside was ephemeral. The innumerable rumors about the imminent dissolution of the kolkhozes, the imminence of war (a Polish invasion of Western Ukraine, a Japanese campaign in Siberia) and the inevitable collapse of the regime bear witness to this” (Werth, 2007: 156). These hopes seem more realistic if one recalls that just a few months after the rebels had engaged in battle against the Tsarist state in 1916, the latter had collapsed. In Turgai, groups of rebels were still fighting when Nicholas II abdicated, thus achieving their aim: to prevent the “requisition” of men from the region during World War I. In 1916 and early 1917, the rebellion against the state was much less widespread than the Soviet-wide peasant insurgencies of 1930. On a purely military level, peasants and nomads did not stand a chance against the Red Army and the OGPU troops. Most likely, the insurgents knew this perfectly well. Not by chance were the rumors about a forthcoming war so insistent. Peasants and herdsmen knew that they only had a chance of being freed by Bolshevik repression if popular insurrections were paired with a simultaneous attack from abroad. Moreover, their most realistic plan was actually to flee abroad – something that was indeed achieved by tens of thousands of Kazakhs who lived closer to the Chinese border.

Conclusion

The “civil war” interpretation of the 1929-31 period in Kazakh history seems to confuse more than clarify. The archival evidence showing that what Soviet repressive organs often called “rebel groups” were in fact entire communities trying to flee state expropriations and looming starvation is overwhelming (Ohayon, 2006: 189). Even the most

organized among the uprisings suffered from an extraordinary shortage of weapons. According to most political police reports, which surely had no reason to downplay the magnitude of uprisings, it was often the case that only about 10 percent of participants were armed – and with blade weapons, or obsolete guns (Omarbekov, 2018: 463-465). It is not by chance that in one of the major insurgency episodes, the Suzak uprising of February 1930, one of the first actions of the rebels was to search for firearms in the region (the attempt ultimately failed, leaving the rebels at the mercy of the OGPU and Red Army detachments) (Pianciola, 2013: 319).

The historiography has shown a continuity in the intensity of the rebellions in 1929-31 in areas that had also been hotbeds of the 1916 rebellion. However, this continuity was far from uniform across the steppe. Suzak, for instance, which was one of the most important hotspots in 1929-30, had not been an area of intense violence during 1916. Moreover, the historiography has so far largely failed to highlight some crucial discontinuities between 1916 and the collectivization uprisings. These differences are more immediately evident if we free ourselves from a “national history” perspective and at least include Kyrgyzstan in the comparison. This way it becomes clear that while 1916 was also, in very precise areas, a bloody ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Slavic colonists in particular, in 1929-31 there was no widespread anti-settler violence. Further research is needed on the matter, but the fact that control over the land and its products was being expropriated by the state surely played a role. The mainspring and main stake of settler colonial situations, the fight for control over land between immigrants and locals, was lost because of the peculiar Communist “solution” to the settler colonialist legacy in Central Asia. Russians (in general, Europeans) were specifically attacked during some of the uprisings. However, they were targeted as administrators and representative of the Soviet state, i.e. as the enforcers of a revolution from above waged against religious institutions and practices, and local figures of authority. Insurgents often directed their rage against local state administrative buildings. Fiscal files that kept track of expropriations (the true essence of the extraordinary taxation imposed starting from 1928) and procurements were often burned. Russian peasants were not victims of the 1929-31 uprisings in any significant number. This does not mean that ethnic divides were not relevant in the early 1930s in Kazakhstan. This was partially due to the fact that the violence in 1929-31 followed an urban-rural divide to some extent, with “communist detachments” of

urban dwellers mobilized to quell the revolts. The urban population was overwhelmingly European in early-1930s Kazakhstan, and therefore this front in early Stalinist violence in Kazakhstan partially – but by no means exclusively – overlapped with the ethnic divides in the Soviet Republic.

The discontinuities between 1916 and 1929-1931 are also relevant in discussion of the “national liberation” character of the two insurgency cycles. The historiography has firmly established that in many insurgency episodes, Kazakhs fought against state impositions together with members of other groups. In Suzak, local Uzbeks took part in the insurrection. In the north of the Republic, Kazakhs, Cossacks, and Russian peasants fought side-by-side in some locales (Aldazhmanov, 1998: 315-317). Most importantly, a “national liberation” movement implies a political project along “national” lines. The extremely localized uprisings during collectivization did not share a project of national independence: a nationally-based polity was well beyond the horizon of what was possible at the time, and was not a mobilizing hope for the insurgents. It is telling that the OGPU papers did not attribute this political aim to any of the major revolts, even though the political police saw former Alash party members as the most dangerous political opponents in Kazakhstan up until the late 1920s, when they were arrested almost to the last man.

On the other hand, the absence of a *future* coherent state project should not lead us to dismiss the legacy of the *past* state administration too hastily. Reading the 1929-31 insurgency cycle as the “primitive rebellion” of a society deconstructed and weakened by the encroaching of the Tsarist colonial state, as Hallez and Ohayon do, misses an important social consequence of Tsarist domination in the steppe. The Tsarist state had partially acknowledged, and partially promoted, a social stratum of local administrators who had consolidated their authority over the population of small districts (*volost*’) and were familiar with administrative and fiscal procedures. During the Stalinist onslaught against Kazakh rural society, their experience and leadership was seen by local communities as a valuable resource in a time of crisis. The religious dimension of the rebellions, and the role that *ishans* played in them, is perhaps the most difficult to assess on the basis of the political police documentation at our disposal. The cultural distance (and plain ignorance) of OGPU operatives in terms of the pious networks within Kazakh society and beyond makes their report and interrogations on the matter of very limited use for historians. It seems evident,

though, that forms of Islamicate legitimization were pursued by the organizers of many but by no means all uprisings.

Perhaps the plurality of the local experiences of resistance during the 1929-31 years, irreducible to a simple formula of Soviet atheist state vs. society/nation/community of believers, should be the most important takeaway of the recent historiography on the last rebellion cycle before the great *Asharshilyk* divide in Kazakh history. So far, the 1929-31

insurgency cycle has not been unified into a singular “rebellion” label, as the 1916 events have been both in memory and historiography. This is probably for the best. Future historians, who will hopefully be able to make more extensive use of the materials still inaccessible in Kazakhstani and Russian archives, will do well to read OGPU interrogations against the grain, and to examine with care the materials produced by the insurgents that the political police collected but did not fully understand.

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