The Kazakh Famine: The Beginnings of Sedentarization

The Context

The famine that struck the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) of Kazakhstan between 1930 and 1932 belongs to the wider history of collectivization in the USSR and, more specifically, the campaign to sedentarize the Kazakhs undertaken during the same period. This famine was among the deadliest in the USSR and directly led to the deaths of approximately one third of the Kazakh population, while also triggering the emigration of several hundred thousand survivors and the rapid and irreversible decline of the nomadic way of life of the inhabitants of the region’s steppes. The Soviet census of 1926 estimated the population of the Kazakhstan ASSR at 6.2 million, with approximately four million Kazakhs and the remainder comprised of comprising European colonial populations and local minorities, including Russians, Ukrainians, and Poles. Seventy percent of the Kazakhs were nomadic livestock farmers who ranged throughout the arid, semi-arid, and steppe regions of this vast territory. The sedentary farming activities of other nationalities were concentrated in the richer, arable lands in the northern and southeastern (Alma-Ata) regions of the republic.

The acceleration of the effort to industrialize the USSR introduced by the first Five Year Plan in April 1929 at the 15th conference of the Communist Party were followed several months later by the collectivization of rural areas and its repressive corollary, dekulakization. The Kazakhstan ASSR played a key role in this program for two reasons: 1) its grain-producing lands, situated in northern regions near the Russian borders, were considered priorities for collectivization, and 2) it possessed “inhospitable” and sparsely populated regions to serve, as did the Urals and Siberia, as a “zone of special settlement” for “dekulakized” inhabitants.

At the local level, the end of the 1920s and the launching of collectivization corresponded to a policy of deliberate sedentarization that involved efforts to entice the more fragile nomadic populations to settle in kolkhozes in zones surrounding the steppes that were considered unsuitable for any kind of agricultural production. These new collective farms were theoretically intended to operate as part of an agro-pastoral economy, combining livestock raising and agriculture. This project, which was only very partially realized, constituted a central element of a cluster of measures taken to control and repress nomadic Kazakh society. These policies included a campaign to eliminate the national elites from political bodies and confiscate property belonging to bay (livestock owners) and deport them. The targets of these policies were the most charismatic and therefore influential figures of rural Kazakhstan society, and they were intended to allow the central powers to gain control over the Kazakhstan ASSR, which the government considered insufficiently Sovietized in 1925 and to be still under the sway of clans and corrupt political practices.

Systematic requisitions of commodities such as grain and livestock that were a major feature of Soviet collectivization campaigns were organized within an extremely tense political climate. In 1929, these measures took effect after—and superseded—efforts to sedentarize nomadic herders that had began in 1927-1928. Kazakhnomadic farmers’ herds, which totaled approximately 40.5 millionhead, were massively reduced between 1929 and 1932 (see chart in appendix) in order to supply urban areas. At the same time, wheat requisitions for the same period represented approximately one third of the republic’s total grain production, reaching a peak of one million tons of wheat in 1930. The combined impact of forced livestock and grain collection was a major factor in the outbreak of famine.

These policies were initially greeted with a wave of resistance in 1929 on the part of the Kazakh pastoral population that varied according to region and lasted until 1931. Insurrectionist movements (and even guerrilla activities in the Mangyshlak region) evolved into episodic rioting involving several thousand people as organized protests flared across Kazakhstan during the early years of collectivization, but these movements gradually subsided as the famine became more severe.
Growing shortages later caused the protests to fail entirely, leading the herders of the steppes to flee in order to save their livestock in an initial wave of emigration. In 1930, 35,000 Kazakh households and their 900,000 head of livestock departed for China, Iran, and Afghanistan or clandestinely crossed the borders into the USSR. These departures intensified in 1931, coinciding with a peak in livestock requisitions (which reached a record rate of 68.5% of total available livestock), involving this time the mass of Kazakh nomads stripped of their means of livelihood and seeking any possible means of subsistence. According to data collected by the OGPU (USSR political police) in 1931, 1,700,000 Kazakhs fled their native regions (Aldazhumanov, 1998: 84), and 600,000 had crossed Kazakh borders en route to China, Mongolia, Afghanistan, and Iran, as well as the Soviet Republics of Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Russia in search of sustenance and employment, (for example on new industrial construction sites in western Siberia). These internal and external migrations were linked to typhus, tuberculosis, and syphilis outbreaks that reached epidemic proportions and caused the deaths of approximately 30% of the population.

More than one million people perished from famine or during the mass exodus of several hundred thousand Kazakhs in 1932 (Ohayon, 2006: 264-268). While the authorities of the Republic of Kazakhstan were slow to react, the Kazakh leader and Vice-President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), Turar Ryskulov, first officially sounded the alarm in a personal letter to Stalin (Ryskulov, 1997, t.3: 304-358; Werth, 2003). The letter prompted the first official recognition of the catastrophe and led to the adoption of a series of measures to curb the famine and repatriate Kazakhs who had left to escape its ravages. The primary role of these policies was to oversee the return of 665,000 Kazakhs (otkochevniki or fleeing nomads) who were sometimes described as refugees. More broadly, this operation also entailed resettling the populations affected by the famine, whether exiled or not, onto kolkhozes, most of them charged with raising livestock, an initiative bolstered by acquisitions of livestock in other countries. Because of the economic priorities of the first Five Year Plan, “technical agriculture” (cotton, tobacco, and sugar beet) and industry played a significant role in reinserting a segment of the Kazakh population mobilized to respond to the needs of favored new sectors of activity (Ohayon, 2006).

By the end of the collectivization process, two thirds of the Kazakh survivors of the famine were successfully sedentarized due to the 80% reduction of their herds, the impossibility of resuming pastoral activity in the immediate post-famine environment, and the repatriation and resettlement program undertaken by Soviet authorities.

The Leaders

Several levels of responsibility were involved in the unfolding of this episode of devastating famine between 1928 and 1932. In a general sense, it was Stalin’s Soviet government that, by establishing a disproportionate plan for requisitioning livestock and food commodities, directly doomed Kazakh herders to a period of famine. It is nevertheless difficult to directly incriminate Stalin in person in this case, because no available sources, such as correspondence between Stalin and the first secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party, Filipp Isaevich Goloshchekin, contain explicit instructions referring to the Kazakh population as such, which was the case during the three most critical months of the Ukrainian famine between November 1932 and January 1933 (Werth, 2008). Indeed, there is some question concerning what precisely was known about the actual events, as well as what was transmitted to the central powers, particularly in terms of the dwindling herds and the shrinking population of nomadic herders. Between 1930 and 1932, data about the population that were supplied to the Kazakh leadership of the Communist Party greatly underestimated the losses suffered (Pianciola, 2009: 468), partly due to the difficulty of collecting reliable data over the vast Kazakh territory, and partly due to deliberate denial of the scale of the catastrophe among Kazakh authorities. However, beginning in 1930 but particularly in 1931, Moscow received a number of warnings from the regional authorities of the Volga, western Siberia, and Uzbekistan complaining of the arrival of large numbers of failing, famished Kazakhs who were causing disorder and criminality and propagating epidemics. These warnings remained unconfirmed by the first secretary of the Kazakh party, however.
Indeed, the attitude of the authorities of the Republic of Kazakhstan revealed a certain laissez-faire approach, particularly on the part of Goloshchekin. Beginning in 1930, the information departments of the OGPU and the district-level and regional executive committees provided abundant reports of mass emigration and rising mortality among nomadic groups. In 1931, however, Goloshchekin declared, not without some cynicism: “The Kazakh, who has never once left his aoul[village], who did not know the roads except for those of his nomadic itineraries, now travels from one region to another in the interior of Kazakhstan, integrates himself into Russian and Ukrainian kolkhozes, changes employment, leaves to work on construction sites in the Volga or Siberia” (cited in Ryskulov, 1997, vol.3: 327). Although he did not express a deliberate intention to eliminate the Kazakh population, they nevertheless constituted a negligible factor in the party chief’s discourse, and he often voiced contempt for nomadic Kazakh society, whose “retardation” had been the target of his policies since 1925.

Local authorities’ waiting game concerning the spread of the famine was contributed to by the general environment of chaos caused by the flight of the population, the dismantlement of agricultural production, popular political opposition, and the need to sustain industrialization efforts in Kazakhstan while also managing a swelling population of special settlers and displaced inhabitants. This deeply unsettled context led to a certain loss of control over the society, but also over the supply chain, housing, and other key factors. Under such extreme crisis conditions, tensions worsened in 1932 within the Kazakh Party that ultimately led to formal denunciations of the catastrophe. The first outcry came from the president of the Council of the People’s Commissars of Kazakhstan named by Goloshchekin, the Kazakh Uraz Isaev, in several letters addressed to Stalin. This was followed by other voices, such as the vice-president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), the Kazakh Turar Ryskulov, between August and September of 1932. The leaden shroud over the matter was finally lifted, and recognition of the facts by central authorities, who were primarily concerned by the precarious economic situation, led to Goloshchekin’s forced resignation. He was assigned responsibility, thereby removing blame from the central authorities and Goloshchekin’s fellow officials.

The Victims

The famine that resulted from collectivization and the confiscation of agricultural commodities in Kazakhstan affected the rural population of the territory to varying degrees of severity. Nomadic Kazakh society paid the heaviest toll, however, primarily due to the fragility of the economic basis of nomadic pastoralism when faced with significant losses of livestock. Unlike grain-based agriculture, the production cycle of herding was devastated by the disappearance of herders’ resources and steep declines in grazing conditions for their remaining herds. Because these conditions impeded the reestablishment of the herds, pastoral populations became extremely vulnerable, as herders became totally dependent on the agricultural products of sedentarized farmers whose own production was largely confiscated by the government. Statistical reports of the actual number of victims of the famine vary depending on source and author, although this variation has never become a matter of true debate. In the population deficit recorded for the administrative territory of the Kazakhstan ASSR, it is also difficult to distinguish which deaths were related to emigration and to assess with any accuracy the mortality rate among those who crossed the republic’s borders. Indeed, these estimates are highly problematic due to the co-occurrence of large waves of migration and periods of high mortality rates.

It has been firmly established, however, that between 1,150,000 and 1,420,000 Kazakhs succumbed to the famine during collectivization (it is widely agreed that these figures included a majority of elderly and children), while 600,000 definitively emigrated (Ohayon, 2006: 268). The Kazakh demographer Makash Tatimov, a pioneer concerning this question, offers several estimates of the mortality rates based on his analysis of the Soviet censuses of 1926, 1937, and 1939, and on the reasonably credible hypothesis that the Kazakh population was under-reported in the 1926 census due to deception and non-disclosure among certain categories of the population and to the geographical isolation of many nomad encampments. According to Tatimov’s studies, the number of Kazakhs who died during collectivization is either approximately 1,750,000 (Abylkhozhin, Kozybaev, Tatimov, 1989: 67) or 2,020,000 (Tatimov, 1989: 124), which he contends corresponds to about half of the Kazakh population. These figures include mortality due to famine and epidemics, as well as
definitive departures from the Republic of Kazakhstan. On the whole, Tatimov’s estimates agree with my own (Ohayon 2006: 267-268), as well as those of Niccolò Pianciola (2009: 463-466), which are based on archival records.

During this same time period, the other rural and farming populations in Kazakhstan also experienced a strong decline. Between the censuses of 1926 and 1937, the Ukrainian population of Kazakhstan fell from 859,396 to 549,859 individuals and the Uzbek population from 124,600 to 109,978, while other native minorities such as the Uighurs experienced similar losses (Abylkhozhin, Kozybaev, Tatimov, 1989: 67). Primarily due to famine and epidemics but also emigration, these figures represent between 12% and over 30% of each population and constitute, for these groups, a casualty rate that is roughly equivalent to that suffered by the Kazakhs.

The Witnesses

Because of the absence of a commemorative policy worthy of the name in Kazakhstan and the lack of mediated testimony, it is difficult to assert that actual witnesses to the Kazakh famine constitute an operational source of information. Both local administrators and Soviet politicians and leaders and survivors would have been potential witnesses, but the rare reports by these two groups are very different in nature and status. Official sources only exist in concrete terms in the form of archival records. Documents containing the reports of government officials, whether directly involved or simple observers, are occasionally published in academic studies. Strangely, the archives of the Kazakh government often contain a greater number of observations by representatives of Soviet regions bordering Kazakhstan than they do by Kazakhs themselves. These voices, no matter how limited, provide a valuable resource for historians because they offer “warm” perceptions of the events. For example, there is testimony from officials of the Volga and western Siberia describing the arrival of starving groups of empty-handed Kazakhs wearing tattered clothing and seeking food and work. A number of these reports point out the absurdity of directives received from on ordering high regional administrators in order to organize the return of Kazakhs when there was little security for them in their native territory and above all no resources available to meet the needs of waves of refugees not yet qualified for refugee status. Other letters addressed to the central government from Siberia and Kirghizia revealed cases of cannibalism in some extreme cases. Among the far less frequent survivor accounts, Mukhamet Shayakhmetov’s narrative, written and initially published in Russian in 2002 before appearing in English in 2007, corroborates this catastrophic portrait of the famine and the flight of Kazakh families, while insisting quite revealingly on the total incomprehension of the victims of the deeper reasons behind their situation and the government’s policies and objectives. Shayakhmetov’s narrative also reveals the pernicious impact of this episode on social cohesion, codes of morality, and Kazakh societal values. There also exist lesser-known sources of testimony to Kazakh emigration, particularly to China and Turkey, but they remain practically inaccessible because of the languages in which they were recorded and their highly limited accessibility.

One extremely rare source of observations of the famine and its ramifications by an outsider was the Swiss reporter Ella Maillart, who traveled through Soviet Central Asia and China in the early 1930s. Revealing her curiosity, and perhaps her naiveté or at least total ignorance about the policies behind the events, Maillart described Kazakh refugees’ suffering during the repatriation campaign that was initiated in the fall of 1932:

"In every wagon carrying merchandise there were Kazakh families wearing rags. They killed time picking lice from each other. [...] The train stops in the middle of a parched region. Packed alongside the railway are camels, cotton that is unloaded and weighed, piles of wheat in the open air. From the Kazakh wagons comes a muted hammering sound repeated the length of the train. Intrigued, I discover women pounding grain in mortars and making flour. The children ask to be lowered to the ground; they are wearing a quarter of a shirt on their shoulders and have scabs on their heads. A woman replaces her white turban, her only piece of clothing not in tatters, and I see her greasy hair and silver earrings. Her infant, clutching her dress and with skinny legs from which his boney knees protrude; his small behind is devoid of muscle, a small mass of rubbery, much-wrinkled skin. Where do they come from? Where are they going?" (Maillart, 2001: 287-289, translated from French by the author)
The Memory

In Kazakhstan, as in the other post-Soviet republics, public debate concerning Soviet repression first emerged during Perestroïka and extended into the 1990s, a period that signaled a decisive break with earlier policies with respect to past events. But in Kazakhstan, despite numerous studies of the famine and demographic losses published during this period (Abylkhozhin, 1989; Mikhailov, 1990), there was no corresponding increase in individual expression or public outcry regarding the crimes associated with the Soviet past. A variety of reasons explain this memorial lethargy on the part of the government and the Kazakh population as a whole.

First, the bearers of the memory of this story—the witnesses, the actors, the victims of the famine—traversed the Soviet century in obscurity by virtue of the ideological ban on discussing this tragic chapter in the collectivization campaign, but also due to the hiatus generated by the powerful phenomenon of acculturation, or even deculturation, after the death of a third of the nomadic population. Indeed, the social, economic, and cultural upheavals brought on by Sovietization and contributed to by the vulnerability of traditional Kazakh society ruptured society broke the bonds between generations.

Furthermore, because mortality was greatest among the elderly during collectivization, the traditional bearers of collective memory were unable to tell their stories. Abruptly introduced into Soviet modernity—with its new forms of authority and its obsession with written records and bureaucracy—surviving elders no longer found conditions in which they could relate their experiences. Oral history had always served as the primary vector of historical memory in pastoral Kazakh society, in which the important moments of Kazakh history achieved status as historical events by being situated within heroic epics. Oral history or “orature,” the term used by Rémy Dorto to describe the corpus of oral narratives (Dor, 1982)—was unable to function as the relay of the story of sedentarization/collectivization any more than has modern Kazakh literature (Ohayon, 2006).

The fact that this episode has remained without even a specific name is symptomatic of this effacement of history. Only the historian Talas Omarbekov (1994 and 1997), who works on the mediatization of these memories, describes the Kazakh famine as the second “Aqtaban Šubryndy” (an expression that evokes the frantic flight and exhaustion of populations), explicitly establishing a parallel between two major tragedies in Kazakh history: the devastating Zunghar invasion of the eighteenth century, and the 1930s famine. His audience is limited to the press and Kazakh-language literature, however, a rather small circle.

Until very recently, this atonal familial and collective memory did not encourage the government to implement a commemorative policy, a silence explained by weak social pressure but also by political choices and imperatives governing relations between Kazakhstan and Russia.

The Kazakh government has maintained a privileged relationship with Russia as a major economic and political partner within the Community of Independent States (CIS) and has sought to avoid disrupting the relationship by pointing a finger at Russia, the heir to central Soviet power, in the matter of the demographic losses of the Kazakhs, an accusation that furthermore could have led to the assimilation of Kazakhstan into Ukraine. Within the public sphere, however, intense commemorative activity surrounding the Ukrainian famine and the desire of the Ukrainian people and government for the international community to recognize the genocidal nature of the famine has motivated several initiatives. For example, the expression “Kazakholodomor” (a Ukrainian term meaning extermination by hunger), far from the public eye or official speeches, continues to this day to be found in certain history textbooks and in the press (Gubaydulin, 2009). But from the point of view of civilian society, despite increasingly frequent public references to the famine, there exists no project of the stature scale of the Memorial Association in Russia, which has made considerable efforts to sustain collective memory since Perestroikaby attempting to assess the number of victims of repression and collecting testimony.

Commemorative policies concerning the 1930s famine experienced a turning point on May 31, 2012, when the head of state dedicated a monument to the memory of the victims of the famine in
the capital city Astana. Other commemorative stones dedicated to this episode were simultaneously erected in other large cities on May 31, a date that had been designated as “the memorial day for the victims of political repression” several years earlier. This initiative finally satisfied expectations that had been bitterly expressed on a sign in 1992 in front of one of the central parks of Almaty (Alma-Ata during Soviet era) that stated: “Here a monument will be erected to the memory of the victims of the famine of 1931-1933.” While the memory of the famine is now accepted, and studying and teaching about it are officially encouraged, it nevertheless remains framed in public discourse within the wider context of Soviet repression and, to listen to President Nazarbaev, it should not be the object of the slightest politicization.

The many deportations to Gulags camps in Kazakh territory between 1930 and 1945 are considered linked to the famine in analyses of the aftermath of Stalin’s totalitarian regime. This over-arching link informs the meaning attributed to the Alzhirmemorial in the Astana region, which is dedicated to the all Stalin-era repressions but was erected on the site of the first camp created for the wives of victims of the Great Terror. The Karlag Museum, which opened in 2010 in the administration building of the Gulagon the outskirts of the city of Karaganda, is framed within a similarly broad rhetoric of commemoration of Stalin-era repression. The work of commemoration as encouraged by public authorities thus tends to fold merge the famine into a broader set of repressive episodes, significantly attenuating the singularity of the famine itself.

Ultimately, the relative listlessness of Kazakh society concerning the past can be explained by an ambivalence relationship with nomadism, a vanished way of life that nevertheless remains at the center of Kazakh identity and group cohesion. This identification has become problematic in recent times with the emergence of new standards for collective self-representation of the new Kazakh nation, which prefers not to hark back to a pre-Soviet “lost paradise” and which embraces values that do not mesh well with a nomadic past that is perceived as backwards. Contemporary Kazakhs prefer to emphasize their modernity, pointing to two major attributes: The construction of a capital, Astana, which is modeled on Singapore, and their globalized lifestyle. The obliteration of the memory of the famine, and hence of sedentarization, is closely bound to this tendency to obscure the nomadic past, forever relegating it to the mists of the remote, folkloric past.

Interpreting and Describing the Facts

Although it was unintentional, the famine was the outcome of a political project of brutal transformation that paid little attention to its human costs. There has been no real discussion among historians about the status of the episode of mass violence represented by the Kazakh famine. There has been an observable willingness to favor higher estimates of famine-related deaths and to acknowledge the scope of the tragedy (Tatimov), but there are no disagreements over interpreting the records and, among academics, there is a relative degree of consensus in terms of how these events are currently portrayed.

In the early 1990s, some Kazakh historians (Abylkhozhin, Tatimov) characterized the famine as “Goloshchekin’s genocide,” attributing sole responsibility for this tragedy to the first secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan and accentuating his contempt towards the people, whom perceived as backwards. Although unmentioned in the magnum opus of the history of Kazakhstan (Istorija Kazakhstana s drevnejshyhvremen do nashihdnej, 2010: 284 et sqq.), the genocide argument currently found in certain textbooks were to some extent an empty exercise because it was not based on the international legal definition of genocide and did not go particularly far in terms of evidence. Instead, these arguments were consistent with the official Soviet contention that considered that the forced resignation of Goloshchekin and his replacement by Mirzojan reveal that the entire episode was the work of a single man. Although it has been demonstrated and acknowledged that as political leader, Goloshchekin played a key role in covering up the full extent of increases in mortality between 1930 and 1933, it remains there is scant evidence of a desire on the part of the government or particular individuals to exterminate the Kazakhs as a group, or even to identify compelling motives for such a deliberate strategy. Indeed, the Kazakh population never represented a political danger for the Soviet government, nor did the protest movement or secessionist leanings among the population at any time imperil Soviet territorial integrity (Ohayon, 2006: 365).
As a consequence, recent studies have distanced themselves from the genocide argument (Istorija Kazakhstana s drevnejshyh vremen do nashihdnej, 2010; Cameron, 2010: 19-22; Pianciola, 2009; Ohayon, 2006), while also raising a number of finer-grained questions. For Niccolò Pianciola, “extermination” of the nomads did in fact take place, and the authorities’ laissez-faire approach did arise through conscious decision-making. Although not among the objectives of the policies developed by the central government in Moscow, it was nonetheless the price that the Soviet leadership was willing to pay to reach their goals of transforming—and gaining economic and political control over—the Kazakh steppes. Pianciola also emphasizes the colonial dimension of the Kazakh government at the time, in a region with a large Slavic peasant population left over from imperial colonization, further reinforced by the predominance of civil servants of European origin who held strong anti-Kazakh prejudices within the local Soviet bureaucracy. Power relations between “national” Kazakhs and Europeans helped to explain why the Europeans allowed the herders to bear the brunt of the fallout from forced collectivization. This ethnic- and ethnicized-aspect of the famine has also been explored by Matthew Payne, who contends that the discrimination revealed by the European bureaucrats’ administrative practices in Kazakhstan is powerfully explanatory (Payne, 2001: 76). More broadly, however, according to Pianciola’s analysis, the pattern of discrimination was also symptomatic of the paradoxes of the Stalin government, which was seeking to construct the State based on policies that promoted nationalization and the nativization of the civil service, while at the same time attacking national groups. This policy oscillated between an administrative utopian ideal that simultaneously promoted territorial control, economic rationalization, and modernization, as well as Realpolitik, all of which were integral features of the first Five Year Plan, whose explicit priority was the exploitation and extraction of resources, whether natural or human.

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APPENDICES

Monument to the Memory of the Victims of the 1932 Famine

Inaugurated at Astana, Kazakhstan on May 31, 2012

Credit: Alexey Ozerov

Comparison of evolution between livestock and cattle and crops requisitions
Évolution comparée du cheptel et des réquisitions de bétail entre 1928 et 1933

Credit: Ohayon (2006 : 218)