



# KAZAKHSTAN

Ethnicity, language and power

Bhavna Dave

# Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is emerging as the most dynamic economic and political actor in Central Asia. It is the second largest country of the former Soviet Union, after the Russian Federation, and has rich natural resources, particularly oil, which is being exploited through massive US investment. Kazakhstan has an impressive record of economic growth under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbaev and has ambitions to project itself as a modern, wealthy civic state, with a developed market economy. At the same time, Kazakhstan is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the region, with very substantial non-Kazakh and non-Muslim minorities. Its political regime has used elements of political clientelism and neo-traditional practices to bolster its rule. Drawing from extensive ethnographic research, interviews and archival materials this book traces the development of national identity and statehood in Kazakhstan, focusing in particular on the attempts to build a national state. It argues that Russification and Sovietization were not simply 'top-down' processes, that they provide considerable scope for local initiatives, and that Soviet ethnically-based affirmative action policies have had a lasting impact on ethnic elite formation and the rise of a distinct brand of national consciousness.

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**Bhavna Dave**

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**In memory of**

**Nurbulat E. Masanov  
(1954–2006)**



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# Preface and acknowledgements

Writing a book, as any creative and intellectual engagement, requires prolonged phases of solitude and isolation. But what made these solitary phases bearable and productive is the knowledge of being anchored within various communities encompassing colleagues, friends and family. I am pleased now to have this opportunity to thank members of these communities: my teachers, colleagues, friends and family. They have witnessed the gradual, sometimes all too slow an evolution of this project, and eagerly but caringly waited for its completion. In addition, there are countless individuals in Kazakhstan, Russia and other parts of Central Asia who impromptu made time for me, invited me to their homes and shared their ideas and parts of their life experiences with me. So many of them have waited with much eager anticipation to see how I tell my story back to them and to the rest of the world in this book. I may perhaps disappoint many, but I am profoundly indebted to them for having facilitated the writing of this book. It is to all those who have been part of this journey that I express my gratitude for helping me to embark on this journey, for letting me take my own time to meander, for offering support through the various twists and turns and for seeing me through the final delivery of this book.

This work has had a long period of germination. My professors at Syracuse University, where I began this work as a doctoral dissertation, offered steady support, guidance and enthusiasm for what then was a study about a region on which not much research existed. During my years of graduate study, my professors John Nagle (who sadly passed away in 2000), John Agnew and Daniel Field showed unwavering enthusiasm for my interest in language and identity processes in Kazakhstan as they responded very attentively to my various observations. Shantha Hennayake, who was among the first persons I discussed my interest in Kazakhstan, guided me with tips on the literature on nationalism and ethnic politics. Kristi Andersen and Linda Alcoff, for whom Central Asia is a far-off subject, showed to me that genuine scholarship results from active and passionate engagement in teaching and with one's students; and that intellectual rigour and the ability to express warmth and empathy are interlinked. I benefited vastly from the intellectual and material resources at Syracuse University.

A generous grant from the Social Science Research Council–MacArthur Foundation allowed me to conduct fieldwork in Kazakhstan, spend a semester at

the University of Chicago and begin Kazakh language studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. I thank Jeremy King for introducing me to his brother Ross King, who was among the few Westerners to have done research in Kazakhstan around 1990. Ross helped me prepare for my first trip to the region and effectively plugged me into the network of his Kazakhstani Korean friends, which allowed me a closer look into the multi-ethnic climate of Kazakhstan.

David Laitin, then at the University of Chicago, showed unabated enthusiasm for what began as my doctoral dissertation project, though he always looked at it as a book project. He invited me to spend over a year in Chicago during my graduate studies and to work with him on another research project which gave me an opportunity for further fieldwork in the mid-1990s. David taught me to think more critically and comparatively, be mindful of underlying theoretical questions and never lose sight of what was happening on the ground, especially events that contradicted one's theoretical assumptions. Vreni Naess ensconced me in very warm and comforting settings in the Windy City and made me feel a part of the local community. I fondly remember the numerous stimulating discussions with Terry Martin, Matt Payne and John Slocum.

Works by Martha Brill Olcott and William Fierman have helped me enormously to learn about Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia and to develop my research focus. Since the completion of my dissertation, numerous discussions with Edward Schatz and Pauline Jones Luong have proved to be very fruitful in further sharpening my research focus.

I have learnt a lot from my colleagues at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). In particular, from Sudipta Kaviraj, whose writings have helped me to examine the study of identity politics in contemporary Central Asia by employing theories of postcolonialism. Deniz Kandiyoti offered sustained intellectual and emotional support and encouragement all through these years, together with incisive and very constructive critique. She read sections of this manuscript at very short notice, often when I had reached a state of panic, and gave astute feedback. Kathryn Dean read several rough and unfinished sections with patience to offer fruitful criticisms and helpful suggestions. Scott Newton helped to preserve my wit and humour and also helped me during my first visit to Astana. Laurence Broers and Sossie Kasbarian, my former PhD students and now friends, have shown much sensitivity and understanding for the demands that this book made on my time and attention. I am grateful to the research grants and travel support provided by SOAS for facilitating this work, to present parts of it at various conferences, and the support of my colleagues in the Department of Politics and International Studies for sharing my teaching responsibilities during the time I was away on sabbatical.

Ruth Mandel at the University College London, who I first met in Kazakhstan in 1995, has been an invaluable friend and colleague all these years. She read very rough initial drafts to help me find my way through a maze of ideas and information and has been very generous in the time and attention she gave to this manuscript, despite being under enormous pressure to finish her own manuscript.

A year at the Watson Institute, Brown University, facilitated by Dominique Arel and David Kertzer, provided me with a stimulating and friendly environment to work on projects closely related with this book. I was fortunate to find another intellectual and spiritual community at the Providence Zen Centre in Rhode Island. They have guided me on the path to developing calmness and clarity through daily practice of meditation.

I do not know where to begin to thank the innumerable people in Kazakhstan who took great interest in my work and well-being and shared their ideas and life stories with me. My journey to Kazakhstan began from Moscow. Olga Naumova shared with me her vital insights into language and identity politics in Kazakhstan. Aleksei Malashenko enthusiastically provided me with coordinates of various Kazakhs he knew in Moscow. Nurilya Shakhanova, in what then was still Leningrad, offered a very warm welcome. All the scholars engaged in scholarship on Central Asia in Moscow and St Petersburg then pointed to Nurbulat Masanov, who was then sojourning between Moscow and Almaty.

Ever since we met first in Almaty in March 1992, Nurbulat offered unconditional guidance and help and immediately incorporated me into his vast network of colleagues – academics, intellectuals and political activists – as well as students, friends and family. During virtually every visit of mine, he pointed to new ways of understanding the prevalent political scene, provided me with coordinates or names of a broad spectrum of people to meet with, and especially encouraged me to solicit meetings with those who were unlikely to share much enthusiasm or regard for the themes I was interested in examining. It is only now that I have fully begun to appreciate the insights gained by meeting with people who then questioned my entire approach and research focus.

The various conversations with the late Aleksandr Lazarovich Zhovtis during the 1990s considerably widened my historical horizon and offered invaluable insights into the workings of the Soviet system in Kazakhstan and the responses of ordinary people. I am grateful to Zhenya (Evgenyi) Zhovtis for introducing me to both his parents in 1992, as well as for offering his own incisive analysis.

I am indebted to an anonymous acquaintance for arranging me to do research at the Archives of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan in Almaty in 1993, which remain closed to public. Not only did she risk letting me in, she also surreptitiously installed a heater and regularly offered *chai*, *pirogi* and much more so that I could stay warm and have the energy to work in the cold room.

My gratitude to Alma Qunanbai for taking me along with her to the trip to Qyzylorda in 1992 and for putting me in the safe hands of her friends, who took care of me during my subsequent visits. Almas Almatov, his students and family members, gave a most open welcome and made me feel a part of their extended family as they also made sure that I work on my Kazakh and not use any Russian. I was pleased to note that my inadequate Kazakh generated plenty of giggles and laughter among the children in the family. Thanks to Aigul who travelled with me to parts of Qyzylorda and helped with interpretation.

Almagul Kuzembaeva in Almaty helped me improve the basic Kazakh that I had acquired during a summer course at the University of Washington in Seattle.

She guided me to read and understand the various newspaper articles and checked my translations from Kazakh. In the mid-1990s, Bakhytgul Moldazhanova and Botagoz Sarsembinova invited me to stay with them and helped to resolve day-to-day concerns and made life comfortable. Sasha Din was a one-stop answer to all my computer, telecommunication and printing needs. Roza at the Abai National Library (then Pushkin Library) and Nagima at the Library of the Academy of Sciences, Kazakhstan went out of their way to help me with finding materials, making photocopies and from time to time invited me to have tea and meals with them.

Sasha (Aleksandr) Alekseenko and his father Nikolai Alekseenko – both reputed demographers in Ust-Kamenogorsk – arranged my travel within the East Kazakhstan oblast, including the memorable visit to the numerous settlements of the Old Believers (*starovertsy*), meetings with Russian and Cossack organizations, and with their colleagues and students. Igor Savin helped in practical matters as well as in arranging meetings and interviews in Shymkent. Zhuldyzbek Abylkhodzhin and Irina Erofeeva always found time to meet with me and provided vital analysis and information. Alma Sultangalieva facilitated access to the periodical collection at the library of Kazakhstan's Institute of Strategic Studies, and more importantly, invited me to stay with her in the summer of 1997.

Sergei Duvanov has continued to provide fresh perspectives and ideas and has been amongst my closest friends and colleagues in Kazakhstan. Zauresh Batalova offered a warm welcome in the inhospitable winters in Astana, together with logistical help and invaluable insights. Svetlana Kozhireva at the Gumilev Eurasian University in Astana offered me her flat during one of my visits and arranged very fruitful meetings with a number of her colleagues and students. Yerlan Karin has shared his observations and assessments of the political context in Kazakhstan with me without reservations. Thanks to Rachid Nougmanov for expanding my network of Kazakh friends and colleagues in Europe and for promptly responding to my various enquiries about Kazakhstan.

Beyond Kazakhstan, it is my family and friends who have been with me through the most demanding phases of this writing process. So I do not know where to begin and where to end. Happily, the boundaries between family and friends have become considerably blurred. Having a large extended family dispersed over India, the United Kingdom and the United States, I never had to endure prolonged isolation. Kazakhstan has become a topic of family conversation and everyone, from my 8-year-old nephew to my 88-year-old aunt, has been perfectly acquainted with its geography and general make-up. For them, the journey I have undertaken has been enthralling in its own terms, regardless of where it leads or ends. However, all of them are pleased and relieved that this particular leg of the journey is complete so that the next one can begin.

Similarly, several of my closest friends have spiritually and emotionally been through this journey with me even though their own research focus or professional field has been far removed from Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Hanna Kim, Columbia and New York University, read earlier drafts of the manuscript and in particular helped me to deepen the ethnographic component of the study. Natsuko Oka read Chapters 2–7 to offer very positive feedback and

corrected some factual errors. I was fortunate to have the friendship and company of Natsuko, as well as Hilda Eitzen during several of my extended phases of fieldwork in Almaty over the past years. Iris Wachsmuth in Berlin has been steadfast in offering her attention and appreciation. She read several sections of the manuscript out of pure interest and curiosity. Katja Rietzler introduced me to her network of friends in Almaty and then in Berlin, and made the summer of 1997 in Almaty a memorable one. Thanks to my friends Alpana Killawala in Mumbai, Sabeena Gadihoke in Delhi and Dipinder Randhawa in Singapore for all the emotional support and for creating space for me to work in the warm environs of their homes during my escapes from London to write this book.

Let me now return to the beginning of this journey, which began as a dissertation and brought me in touch with individuals who quickly became colleagues, then friends and then part of the family. Dominique Arel, Brown University and now at University of Ottawa, has been involved at all stages of this book – from its genesis as a dissertation, its slow germination over the past decade and its final delivery. He read virtually everything I asked him to read and comment on, and put on magnifying glasses to read the penultimate versions of Chapters 2–5 and rough drafts of other chapters to offer most helpful and poignant comments. Maria Salomon Arel has been a most cherished friend who has helped me and taken care of me in countless ways. She edited the entire manuscript and improved the style. Failure to make appropriate revisions or any other omissions is entirely mine. No matter how pressing their own circumstances, both Dominique and Maria have always been available for help and support.

Nurbulat Masanov's sudden and untimely death on 5 October 2006 has deprived me of the pleasure to hand this book to him. Perhaps more than anyone else, he would have appreciated this book the most, notwithstanding its various limitations. His death is a loss to all scholars and activists, local or international, who have benefited from animated conversations and debates with him. He combined a deep sense of personal integrity, intellectual depth, moral courage, optimism, warmth, humour, and above all, a spontaneous desire to help and reach out to all who wanted to discuss any issue relevant to Kazakhstan, or football. I knew that I could arrive in Almaty without a Kazakhstan address and telephone book as Nurbulat had everybody's coordinates and an amazing ability to put me in touch with people relevant for my research. Needless to say, not a single of my visits to Almaty ever went by without meeting Nurbulat, without enjoying the warmth and hospitality that he and Laura always provided. It is to Nurbulat's memory, to his profound contribution to scholarship on Kazakhstan and for the efforts by his family, friends and colleagues to continue his legacy, that I dedicate this book.

*Bhavna Dave*  
*SOAS, London*

## Note on transliteration

I use the US Library of Congress system for transliterating Russian words. There are a couple of exceptions: (1) I have used the popular Western transliterations for names well known in the West (e.g. Yeltsin, not El'tsin); (2) for sake of readability, I have removed the Russian soft sign from commonly used words, such as *oblast*.

There is no standard system of transliteration from Kazakh and other Central Asian languages. As Kazakh script will soon embark on a switch from Cyrillic to Latin, there will be further modifications before a standardized system emerges. I have generally adhered to the standard developed by the Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS) ([http://cess.fas.harvard.edu/cest/CESR\\_trans\\_cyr.html](http://cess.fas.harvard.edu/cest/CESR_trans_cyr.html)). However, I have removed diacritical marks for the sake of easy readability.

For geographical designations in Kazakhstan, I have used the official designations used by the Kazakhstani government (thus Qyzylorda, not Kyzyl orda). Wherever necessary, I have also provided the Soviet-era designations in parentheses. Some of the authors mentioned in the book have published works in both Russian and Kazakh. For the sake of consistency, I have transliterated their names from Cyrillic. I have used a simplified system for persons' names (such as Zhakiyanov, not Zhakiianov; Ablyazov, not Abliazov).



# Introduction

The early 1990s were times of turmoil and profound uncertainty for all former Soviet citizens. The sense of disorientation and rupture from the past was even greater in places such as Kazakhstan, which had very close economic, geopolitical, linguistic and psychological links with Russia. Kazakhstan is one of the best sites to investigate the contradictory and hybrid legacy of the Soviet multinational state, and to explore how this legacy continues to shape its post-Soviet transition. With its enormous land-locked territory, along with a 6,477 km long border with the Russian Federation, 2,300 km with Uzbekistan, 1,460 km with China and 980 km with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan occupies a territory as vast as that of Western Europe, but with a population of just under 15 million. It was the only union republic in which the Slavs constituted a majority from the mid-1950s as a result of tsarist colonial and Soviet-era developmental policies. The Kazakhs were able to attain a majority status only after independence. When the Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, the bulk of urban Kazakhs and those living in the Russian-dominated north-eastern regions were predominantly Russophone, acculturated in Soviet values and unable to justify their existence without close links with Russians or with Russia.

Nothing symbolized the Kazakhs' yearning for inclusion in the Soviet order better than the rapidity with which they acquired a proficiency in the Russian language. The abrupt dissolution of their pastoral nomadic life style during the collectivization drive under Stalin in the 1920s and 1930s inflicted massive casualties upon the Kazakhs: At least a third of the nomads are believed to have perished and up to a fifth fled to Western China and other neighbouring countries, including other parts of Soviet Central Asia. The forced collectivization of nomadic pastures uprooted the nomads from a century-old life style anchored in the *aul* (a mobile nomadic encampment). Massive agricultural and industrial development of Kazakhstan from the 1930s onwards caused the socially dislocated former nomads to work in the new factories, mining sites and newly developing urban settings to earn a living. Once the Stalinist order had effectively broken down resistance, the Kazakhs aspired to active integration into the new Soviet order as the best means of survival. The demographic majority of Slavs in the republic and the fact that all urban areas were predominantly Russian might have increased the rapid spread of Russian among the Kazakhs. However, mastering

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Russian was more than just a survival tool; it also became a source of personal and collective empowerment and an emblem of becoming 'cultured' and 'civilized'.

While proficiency in the Russian language enabled the urbanizing Kazakhs to attain a new status and security, it also resulted in the rapid loss of basic reading and writing skills in their native language among young Kazakhs, already alienated from a rich oral tradition. Overall, the Kazakhs experienced extensive modernization, which included considerable linguistic and cultural Russianization. The Kazakhs, more so than other Central Asians, were at the receiving end of both high levels of coercion and rewards, which turned them into the most sovietized, that is, 'internationalist' of all Muslim nations.

### **Between 'decolonization' and Soviet hegemony**

An important question is whether the above situation denotes a colonial relationship, with the Kazakhs as archetypal Soviet subjects? The dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union diminished the image that the Soviet rulers had built of their state as anticolonial, a harbinger of socialism, egalitarianism, modernity and progress. Views depicting and analysing the Soviet Union as a colonial empire gained increasing popularity and appeal.<sup>1</sup> Scholars, leaders and ordinary people within the new states, who had been socialized into hailing Soviet policies as emancipatory and modernizing, came to deplore these as colonial, characterized by exclusion, exploitation and crude 'civilizing' incursions, which dismantled their cultural framework and traditions. Accustomed to seeing themselves as a 'Eurasian' people and as more emancipated than other Muslims, leading members of the Kazakh elites also began depicting their prolonged association with Russia and the Soviet Union as a process of colonization, which was responsible for a violent breakdown of the nomadic social structure, their rich oral tradition and cultural practices.<sup>2</sup>

Abduali Kaidarov, a noted Kazakh academic and president of the *Qazaq tili* ('Kazakh Language') organization in the early 1990s, eagerly sought to forge a sense of solidarity between us [the Kazakhs and myself, as a scholar of Indian background] by referring to our shared experience of having been subjected to colonial rule. During one of my several conversations with him in 1992, he began with a Soviet textbook rendition of Marx's critique of the British colonial exploitation of India, adding a narrative of 'suffering' and 'discrimination' of the colonial subjects. Involuntarily shedding my role as a listener to resist being cast as a hapless victim of British colonial design, I began to explain how the English-educated Indian national leaders developed their own powerful critique of colonialism, utilizing categories from Western liberal discourse. Kaidarov quickly changed the argument: 'Look, you [as an Indian] were fortunate in being colonized [by the British], but see who colonized us!' Kaidarov's understanding of colonialism was quite perfunctory. What he conveyed most eloquently was not a disapproval of colonial domination per se, but a feeling of disappointment by the failure of the Soviet state to fully deliver its promised goals. The agency and responsibility for the ultimate failure to deliver modernity and progress was attributed to the empire.<sup>3</sup>

Does this mean that Soviet rule was able to establish hegemony, at least among the Kazakhs? When the *glasnost* and *perestroika* campaigns of Gorbachev in the 1980s opened up a discursive and mobilizational space to demand sovereignty, which was exploited by several nations, from the Baltic republics to the Ukrainians, Georgians and Armenians, Kazakhstan and all of Central Asia remained quiet and compliant. The Kazakh communist elites and intelligentsia failed to capitalize on the small window for mobilization created by the spontaneous protests in December 1986 in Almaty (called Alma-Ata then) against Moscow's decision to oust Dinmukhamed Kunaev, their long-term head of the republican Communist Party (CP) apparatus, in favour of a Russian. Was this a testament to the hegemony of the Soviet system, or simply a telling indicator of the close collaboration of the Central Asian elites with Moscow?

It was only towards the very end of the *glasnost* era, when cracks in the socialist system were surfacing, that the Kazakh CP leaders and prominent cultural and literary figures began expressing their alarm over the erosion of the native language among the youth and urbanized strata. Soon following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former communist elites and intelligentsia openly lamented that the young Kazakhs were turning into *mankurts*, a term coined by the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov to denote the loss of linguistic and cultural identity among the Russified strata of non-Russian nationalities.<sup>4</sup> However, *mankurtism* came to be seen as a stigma and a limitation only when the dissolution of the Soviet state suddenly ruptured the hegemony of Russian and spurred the top-down campaign to elevate Kazakh as the state language. The fact that the state-sponsored campaign to regenerate Kazakh and turn it into the sole state language did not acquire a decisive anti-Russian character shows the extent to which Russian had gained a natural acceptance among the Kazakhs. The various government bodies, organizations such as *Qazaq tili*, and other vigilante groups, zealously made efforts to regenerate Kazakh and to enshrine it as the sole state language in a context where Russian was the pervasive lingua franca. The Kazakh language proponents expediently argued that the loss of the native language, or *mankurtizatsiia*, of their brethren was reversible. The Kazakh language came to be seen as a powerful symbolic resource because only one in a hundred Slavs could claim any proficiency. If the lack of proficiency in Kazakh among the Slavs testified to a profound limitation of the Kazakh language during Soviet rule, Kazakh language proficiency became a vital symbolic asset in the post-Soviet period.

### **Kazakhstan's post-Soviet transition**

Of course, Kazakhstan today has turned its accidental statehood into an asset and represents itself as one of the most transformed, prosperous and stable of all post-Soviet republics. Many of Kazakhstan's fears and anxieties emanating from its geopolitical, socio-economic and cultural-linguistic dependency on Russia appear to have been dissipated. Sovereignty has proved to be a boon from every angle – economic, political, geostrategic and ethno-cultural. Kazakhstan under President Nursultan Nazarbaev's firm grip boasts the highest standard of living

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and per capita GDP in Central Asia, second only to that of Russia among all the Soviet successor states. Its annual GDP growth of about 8 to 10 per cent since 1999 is fuelled almost entirely by its growing oil exports. Kazakhstan aspires to be among the top five oil exporters by the year 2015, envisioning a bright future as the Kuwait of Central Asia.

The rapid prosperity of Kazakhstan has enhanced the power of patronage held by the ruling leaders and undermined the potential for autonomous political and civic activism. Nazarbaev, who assumed the top position in the republic as the first secretary of the CP of Kazakhstan in 1989 on the basis of a close collaboration with Moscow, has successfully recast himself as a promoter of economic reforms, prosperity, and ethnic harmony, along with Kazakh national and cultural regeneration. He has offered considerable economic freedom and political mobility to a network of kin, clients and cronies, as well as to the upper middle classes, urban professionals and technocrats for their loyalty and compliance. By continuing to widen the patronage base, he has generated tremendous incentives and opportunities for the accumulation of wealth for the favoured stratum. By these very means, he has also introduced implicit but well-understood constraints against engaging in any form of political or civic activism that might be viewed as ‘destabilizing’ for the country. Those who attempt to engage in economic or political activities seen as threatening to the ruling elite, or question the legitimacy of the existing political order incur heavy penalties and face a disproportionate exercise of state coercion under the guise of law. In the emerging patrimonial–clientelist system, a network of pro-presidential parties, leaders, kin and cronies have gained control of the major political institutions, allowing virtually no place for non-insiders to enter into formal political and electoral processes.

Kazakhstan’s ruling elite have strongly solicited Western recognition for having steered the country towards a market-based system, containing the potential for ethnic conflict, and for adopting legal and other safeguards against ethnic discrimination. Its claim of promoting ‘ethnic harmony’ and ‘social stability’ evokes Soviet-era ideological control and rhetoric. By judiciously blending the Soviet-style discourse on internationalism and ethnic harmony with a determined nationalization, the state has reinforced the principle of titular primacy in accessing positions and resources. This has offered a symbolic appeasement to deter the potential for ethnic mobilization. The key question is: In this depoliticized civic sphere, what do the state-sponsored discourse of ethnic harmony and the absence of conflict bode for the establishment of a genuinely democratic and civic polity? Addressing this question is the focus of the last three chapters of the book.

#### **Key questions and arguments**

What kind of a nation were the Kazakhs when the visible ‘onstage’ transcripts told the story of their successful transformation from nomads to a Soviet people and their ensuing Russianization and collaboration with Russian and Soviet rule? Soviet ideological works and post-1991 Western scholarship on Soviet nationalities alike demonstrate that a sense of nationhood among the Kazakhs

(as among all Central Asian nations) was forged entirely during the Soviet years.<sup>5</sup> An important issue to explore is the unique and unparalleled manner in which Soviet rulers used a mix of ‘emancipatory’ measures that furthered the diffusion of modernity, development and progress to all strata on the one hand, and colonial devices of group categorization, territorialization, ideological control and co-optation on the other, in order to procure the loyalty and support of Central Asian Muslims. But did national consciousness develop along the trajectories defined by the Soviet state? In other words, how successful was the Soviet state in producing an ideologically and politically desirable sense of nationality among the Central Asians? One must also give serious consideration to several other basic questions, including: How were Kazakhstan’s Soviet-installed communist elites, who remained loyal to Moscow within a clientelist framework and clamped down on a major symbolic and spontaneous outburst against Moscow in December 1986, able to redefine themselves as legitimate ‘national’ (if not ‘nationalist’ figures)? How has Kazakhstan been able to contain ethnic conflict, secessionist claims and acrimonious debates over the language issue and establish ‘stability’ and ‘ethnic harmony’? Has its apparent ethnic and social stability and rapid prosperity attained by oil exports facilitated the transition to civic statehood and democracy? Has the new state succeeded in breaking itself free from the ‘Soviet legacy’, or has it, rather, utilized and reconfigured the elements of this legacy in its transition? What does this experience tell us about analogous processes in the rest of Central Asia?

These diverse but interconnected questions are the subject of this book. They are vital for assessing Soviet rule in Kazakhstan, as well as for understanding the latter’s determined efforts to carve a distinctly Eurasian identity, seek integration into a European framework (such as Kazakhstan’s lobbying to attain the rotating Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) chair for the year 2009), redefine and deepen its close links with Russia, and to selectively separate itself from the Central Asian region.<sup>6</sup>

The crucial argument of the book is that the depiction of Soviet rule in Kazakhstan and Central Asia as predominantly colonial or imperial, and the portrayal of Central Asians as powerless subjects and recipients of Soviet modernity are both simplistic and inaccurate. The book draws attention to the hybridity of post-Soviet identities and institutions in the region, as well as the extensive involvement of ordinary people in the construction of the Soviet state and of new national identities. It details how the Soviet socialist state, through a mix of coercive, paternalistic and egalitarian measures, forged a distinct sense of ethnic entitlement among its nations or ‘subjects’.<sup>7</sup> A growing assertion of ethnic entitlements went hand in hand with a steady depoliticization of ethnicity. This contradiction helps to illuminate another paradox – the communist-turned-nationalist phenomenon – the ability of the titular communist elites to portray themselves as representatives of their nation, despite having fully collaborated with the Soviet regime in the past. The book explores how this entitlement-based national consciousness and the assumed legitimacy of the Soviet-promoted elites are being challenged and reinforced in the process of the transition to capitalism, markets and democracy.

## 6 Introduction

The book explores three crucial processes: (1) the empowerment of the Kazakhs as a nation through affirmative action and mobility opportunities provided by the socialist state; (2) the close collaboration of the Kazakh communist elites with the Soviet system through a structure of clientelism, while retaining a perception of themselves as subalterns; and (3) the enduring effects of Soviet identity categories and practices in shaping the post-Soviet transition, including the role of the incumbent elite in regenerating this legacy. By identifying the continuing efforts of the post-Soviet state to deter the autonomous participation of its citizens in political and civic spheres, to control the civic and societal sphere and to deny agency to ethnic groups, civic associations and political formations, the book identifies the processes that hamper the establishment of a proper multi-ethnic and civic polity, and ultimately, an open democratic system.

The first half of the book (Chapters 1–4) explores processes that led the Kazakhs to seek integration into the Soviet system by collaborating in the construction and appropriation of its categories and parameters to forge an identity that was at once ethnonational and ‘international’, that is, Soviet. The second half (Chapters 5–7) delineates the replication and adaptation of Soviet identity categories, institutions and practices in shaping the post-Soviet order. The latter half also explores the processes of post-Soviet transition in the absence of a regime change, in the context, rather, where the communist-turned-nationalist elites have played a critical role in the reproduction and reconfiguration of the Soviet legacy.

Chapter 1 offers a framework for debate on the nature of the Soviet state and the manner in which the Kazakhs defined themselves in relation to Russia and the Soviet Union. It brings together three distinct streams of academic literature – the new post-1991 historiography of the Soviet Union, postcolonial theory and transition studies – to illuminate the complexity and hybridity of the Soviet system, and demonstrate how these affect the post-Soviet transition.

Chapter 2 highlights the internal weakness of the nomadic economy and social organization, which facilitated the incorporation of the Kazakh steppe into the tsarist empire. Although the tsarist authorities remained ambiguous about ‘civilizing’ the Kazakh nomads, the small stratum of Kazakh elites continued to press for integration into the tsarist state and remained oriented towards Russia rather than the Muslim world. The chapter charts the forging of an anticolonial Kazakh national identity in the cauldron of tsarist land appropriations, and the emergence of pro-Russian Kazakh elites advocating territorial autonomy within a reformed and democratic vision of Russia.

Chapter 3 tracks the passage of the Kazakhs’ accommodation with Soviet rule through mastery of the Russian language, following their socio-economic and cultural dislocation. Russianization and the loss of cultural identity, as the *mankurt* metaphor conveys, was not only a top-down process, but was also connected with the manner in which the Soviet state was able to distribute the fruits of modernity and progress to the most disadvantaged strata. The realization of having become *mankurts*, instilled by the processes of perestroika and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, served as a new basis for mobilizing symbolic support for the Kazakh language.

Chapter 4 examines the failure of the Central Asian political elites and intelligentsia to develop an autonomous nationalist imagination capable of questioning the Soviet-inscribed parameters of nationhood and identity. It offers an institutional and ideological context that helps explain why there has been no regime transition in Kazakhstan and why the ‘communist-turned-nationalist’ phenomenon is so widespread. The chapter points to the salience of the deeply entrenched patron–client relations between Moscow and the Central Asian leaders to account for why there has been no overt display of ‘nationalism’.

Chapter 5 explains another paradox: Why the policy of enshrining Kazakh as the sole state language did not produce any overt conflict or resistance either among the Slavs or the predominantly Russian-speaking stratum of urban Kazakhs. It demonstrates how the ruling authorities have declared the language issue as ‘solved’ and aided its depoliticization, allowing plentiful opportunities to the Russian-speaking elites to subvert its implementation. The chapter demonstrates the gap between the statistical and political success of Kazakhstan’s language policies and highlights the state’s unwillingness to engage in an identity construction project.

Chapter 6 explores why there is little, if any, public mobilization against the nationalizing project among the Russians, the largest minority. I discuss how the continuing adaptation of the Soviet legacy through a patrimonial management of ethnic relations and a rhetorical pledge to multinationality and civic identity construction demonstrate how minorities are also trapped in the same patrimonial, illiberal framework. The chapter depicts the enduring hold of Soviet-established institutions, ideologies and cognitive approaches which continue to shape post-Soviet Kazakhstan’s conception of nation and statehood, its management of ethnic, cultural and identity politics and its policy towards minorities.

Chapter 7 examines the nature of the ‘nationalizing state’, a widely used characterization of the post-Soviet state. It compares Kazakhstan’s informal and symbolic nationalization with a more comprehensive structure of preferential policies in Malaysia and India to show how ‘nationalization’ in Kazakhstan has primarily benefited the elites. By offering disproportionate benefits to the elites and strengthening personalistic, patron–client networks, the purported remedial or nationalizing policies have contributed to the emergence of Kazakhstan as a patrimonial state.

# 1 Empire, collaboration and transition

[N]o discourse can oppose a genuinely uncompromising critique to a ruling culture so long as its ideological parameters are the same as those of that very culture.

(Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony*, 1998)

The condition then prevailing in Kazakh and Russian society did not present us with any other alternative way of forging the Kazakh-Russian Union besides a colonial dependence for the Kazakhs and a metropolitan role for Russia.

(Olzhas Suleimenov, 1993)

Other states may have other claims to legitimacy; the USSR had nothing but progress and modernity.

(Yuri Slezkine, 2000)

Sovietologists and many Cold War era commentators hailed the collapse of the Soviet multinational state as the ultimate triumph of nationalism over communism, heralding the beginning of a fourth wave of decolonization. Nowhere was Soviet rule depicted as more alien, imposed and destructive of pre-existing cultures and traditions than in the Muslim republics of Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse, a leading scholar on Central Asia, reported an unequivocal sense of jubilation among the Kazakhs upon becoming independent, 'all the humiliation vanished in favour of an idea: Kazakhstan was again becoming Kazakh and must return to the Kazakhs.'<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the upbeat picture painted by d'Encausse, the reality I encountered during my first visit there as a doctoral student in 1992 was very mixed, with disorientation widespread. A vast majority of my informants, irrespective of their ethnic, class or educational background, expressed a deep sense of incredulity at the collapse of the Soviet state and immense anxiety about the future: 'We were shocked and wept: We feared the outbreak of a civil war and inter-ethnic conflict,' said a Kazakh couple, then in their late forties, living in the predominantly Kazakh city of Qyzylorda.

Kazakhstan's long-term observer Martha Brill Olcott captured this profound confusion among the elites and masses in Central Asia in 1992, when she described Kazakhstan as an 'accidental state'.<sup>3</sup> It was no surprise then that Kazakhstan, under its Moscow-installed leader Nursultan Nazarbaev, was the last union republic to proclaim independence on 16 December 1991, after the Belavezha accord

signed by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus on 8 December 1991 declared the Soviet Union to be defunct.<sup>4</sup> Nazarbaev's ambivalence over asserting Kazakhstan's sovereignty reflected the widespread desire of the inhabitants of the republic to remain part of a broad Slavic or Eurasian entity. Indeed, Russia unambiguously represented Europe and 'modernity' to the former nomads, whose elites had pledged their allegiance to the tsarist rulers in the nineteenth century and acquiesced to Soviet rule in the early twentieth century. The near colonial dependency of its incumbent communist elites on the metropole manifested their anxieties about their personal survival and about holding together a multi-ethnic society described as among the most 'international' of all Soviet republics, without the support and protection of Moscow.

### **From Soviet nationalities theory to postcolonialism and transition studies**

Until very recently, Central Asia's experience of modernity and nation-development under Soviet rule had been analysed almost entirely within the field of 'Soviet nationalities studies' and the subfield of 'Central Asian studies'. The majority of Western works on Soviet Central Asia fall into two broad categories: One group of scholars depicted Soviet policy in the region as guided by the classical imperial objective of 'divide and rule', which they held accountable for aborting the development of a common national or social imagination on the basis of shared cultural and religious attitudes.<sup>5</sup> For the other group, Soviet rule in Central Asia was merely a continuation of tsarist colonization, which together had devastating effects on indigenous cultures, identities and institutions.<sup>6</sup> If few scholars of Central Asia saw an affinity between Soviet colonial or imperial rule and the policies of European empires, the field of postcolonial studies as a whole had also failed to incorporate a discussion of Central Asia and the post-Soviet region within its disciplinary and empirical ambit.<sup>7</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union set in motion the dissolution of the old Cold War era categories, producing a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of the Soviet state.<sup>8</sup> The post-1991 Western scholarship on the formation of the Soviet Union has made a decisive break from the Cold War era historiography. The last decade has generated a vibrant discussion among historians of the late tsarist and early Soviet periods on the meaning of the transformation of the various non-Russian populations, territories and institutions within the new Soviet state. A renewed debate on the nature of Soviet nationalities and on the Soviet Union as an 'empire', which first surfaced in the journal *Russian Review* in the year 2000, has brought Central Asia into sharp focus.<sup>9</sup> Key to these debates are questions such as how best to characterize the Soviet Union; as an atypical entity, a modernizing state, or a colonial empire? Terry Martin and Yuri Slezkine take seriously the ideology, political rhetoric and policies of the Soviet state in defining itself as an anti-imperial and anticolonial state that put forth significant effort to create nations among its so-called backward and oppressed peoples. Francine Hirsch points to the 'state-sponsored evolutionism' of Soviet nationalities' policies to

provide vital clues to understanding not just how the Soviet Union was forged 'on the ground' among different non-Russian groups, but also why it fell apart and how it endured for more than 70 years.<sup>10</sup> Offering a perspective from below, Adrienne Edgar details the skilful appropriation of Leninist categories of nation by Turkmen elites in what she sees as a 'textbook case' of transformation from a tribal people to a Soviet nation.<sup>11</sup> Rejecting categorizations of Soviet policies as 'imperial' or 'colonial', Edgar identifies the important difference between metropole and periphery produced by Soviet nationality policy, which sharpened the difference between how the Russians and Central Asians experienced Soviet rule.<sup>12</sup>

The paradigm shift from Sovietology to comparative studies of Soviet rule has contributed to bridging the prolonged mutual isolation between Soviet nationality studies and postcolonial studies. A number of recent works have taken the experience of modernization and nation-building in Central Asia outside the traditional domain of Soviet nationalities studies to initiate a comparison with similar processes in the Middle East, Turkey and Africa.<sup>13</sup> In one of these pioneering works, Juan Cole and Deniz Kandiyoti delve into the character of nationalism in the Middle East and Central Asia by analysing their contrasting experience of colonialism under Western capitalist and Soviet socialist rule, as well as their divergent encounters with modernity.<sup>14</sup> Mark Beissinger and Crawford Young explore the similarities and divergence in the legacy of colonialism in African states and the consequences of Soviet rule in the new states of Eurasia to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the new states, institutions and identities in both regions.<sup>15</sup> More recently, Adeb Khalid compares Soviet modernization in Central Asia with the reforms of the early republic in Turkey.<sup>16</sup>

While the emphasis on the mutually constitutive role of the centre and nationalities in the peripheries in the forging of the Soviet Union has yielded vital insights into understanding the nature of the Soviet state in its formative phase, there are very few empirically grounded works which illuminate these processes beyond the 1940s. How was the Soviet Union able to widen the scope of ethnic entitlements and, at the same time, produce a denationalized ethnic identity, as stipulated in Marxist–Leninist and Stalinist interpretations? While the early Soviet state promoted both 'ethnic and statist idioms of nationhood', as Slezkine notes, the ethnic idiom turned out to be much more vital and powerful than the statist one.<sup>17</sup> Rogers Brubaker arrives at a similar conclusion by looking at the enduring effects of institutions and ideological practices established by the Bolsheviks.<sup>18</sup> But Kazakhstan, as I elaborate below, was one such site, where both idioms were congruous and a distinction between the two crystallized much later in the post-Stalin period.

The new Western historiography has revolutionized our understanding of how the Soviet Union was forged. Also insightful are various ethnographic studies of post-socialist transition that highlight the fluidity of the categories 'Soviet' and 'post-Soviet' in examining the practices and actions of ordinary citizens. The latter works have questioned the rigid formulations of identities and institutions created under the socialist system.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, political science as a discipline,

with its focus on formal institutions, policies, elites, and regime types, has struggled to understand how cognitive frames, informal processes and the actions and choices of ordinary people have shaped Soviet-era institutions and identities, and how these now guide the post-Soviet transition.

In an investigation of the role of informal institutions such as 'clans', Kathleen Collins assumes a clear distinction between formal and informal institutions. She describes Central Asian societies as 'clan-based' societies, a definition that places a variety of personal and informal exchanges under the rubric of 'clans'. This perpetuates an image of Central Asia as a 'traditional' society, in contrast to the particular 'modernity' represented by Soviet rule, as well as to an assumed universal trajectory of modernization.<sup>20</sup> Valerie Bunce notes that 'countries which have experienced a decisive political break with the past have seen the development of democratization, political stability, economic reforms and economic growth.'<sup>21</sup> She implies that a break from the past, symbolized by a fundamental regime and leadership change as well as a reshaping of institutions, as has been the case in much of East and Central Europe, are crucial for democratization. This point appears valid at face value. But in the contexts where transition to market economy and wide-ranging economic reforms have been initiated without a split, we need to pay closer attention to the role of culture, historical framework and cognitive frames. They have outlived the rupture of old institutions and conferred a very different meaning to institutions that have evidently been introduced upon the recommendation of Western donors and experts.

On the whole, these transition-centred approaches have not found a way of looking at historical context and culture as constitutive and dynamic forces in the understanding of transition. In their re-conceptualization of the post-Soviet state, Anna Gryzymala-Busse and Pauline Jones Luong call for a focus on the process of 'state formation' and 'elite competition' by highlighting the role of formal and informal institutions and international factors. However, they see 'state formation' and 'regime change' as simultaneous and possibly convergent processes.<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, state formation in Kazakhstan, as well as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, has proceeded alongside the consolidation of the Soviet-erected regimes.

The ethnographies of post-Soviet transition serve as correctives to the propensity among numerous self-styled advocates of transition to assume that all non-Western economies and politics are fundamentally similar, and thus to unselfconsciously apply the categories and methods employed in analysing developing countries to post-socialist societies. The preoccupation with future trajectories among several transitologists has not only drawn attention away from an in-depth exploration of the specificity of the Soviet socialist experiment legacy, but has also hampered an analysis of the dynamic unfolding of this legacy.<sup>23</sup>

To summarize, this book draws upon three streams of intellectual enquiry: the new Western historiography of the Soviet era, the postcolonial theory and the ethnographies of post-socialist transition. The new historiography of the Soviet era highlights the active participation of all strata of society in the forging of the Soviet Union; postcolonial theory illuminates the constitutive and enduring effects of the Soviet legacy; and studies of post-socialist transition highlight the

importance of pathways, innovations and the reconfiguration of the existing categories. By interweaving these three streams, this book attempts to uncover the different layers of identity – pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet – and thus bring into focus the hybridity of each of these layers.<sup>24</sup>

### **Scholarship in Central Asia: from Soviet to nationalist historiography**

If several recent Western studies of Central Asia and the post-Soviet region as a whole are establishing a separate niche by breaking out of the Sovietological mould, scholarship in the Central Asian states still remains under both the formal and implicit control of the state. Nationalist and primordialist paradigms have substituted the dominant frame of Soviet Marxist historiography and theories of *ethnos*.<sup>25</sup> Although cursory references to Soviet colonial and imperial rule abound in several scholarly works and in popular discourse, they are yet to inspire attempts to unpack these categories, or to place Central Asia within a broader comparative framework.

On the contrary, any foreign scholar engaged in research in the post-Soviet region is cognizant of the reflexive disapproval that attempts to compare the post-Soviet world with the ‘Third World’, especially Africa, evoke among former Soviet citizens. Furthermore, the Central Asians do not take kindly to being compared to the Middle East or other Muslim states, or to being included in ‘Oriental Studies’. I recall the sheer incredulity, bordering on hostility, among my academic and other acquaintances in Kazakhstan in 1997, when they learnt that I had acquired a teaching position in ‘Central Asian Studies’ at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. It was a double blow. Kazakhstan is part of Eurasia, half of its territorial landmass is located in Europe, at the crossroads of Slavic and Turkic civilizations, Kazakhs have never been *that kind* of Muslim – so went the familiar arguments. The message was loud and clear: Kazakhstan, in its present socio-economic and cultural development and in its future outlook, is Eurasia, a bridge between Europe and Asia, and a contender for membership in the European institutional framework.

Indeed, the region known as Central Asia in contemporary parlance, constitutive of the five former Soviet republics, was referred to as ‘Kazakhstan and Central Asia’ by the Soviet state, a characterization that retains its indelible imprint among the Kazakhs. Kazakhstan holds an intermediary position in historical, cultural and geographical terms between Russia and the rest of Central Asia, between the Slavic and the Turkic or Islamic worlds, as my Kazakh acquaintances and colleagues emphatically pointed out. Last, but not the least, it cannot be juxtaposed to the Orient *and* Africa. To be analogous to Africa is seen by elites and ordinary people as an affront, given the extent to which they have embraced and internalized the linear logic of Soviet developmental categories, ethno-racial stereotypes and obsession with becoming ‘civilized’. This observation is pertinent not because I necessarily urge undertaking comparisons with Africa, but to highlight the deep imprint of the Soviet modernizing legacy and the underlying resistance to any comparison to a ‘Third World’ country.

Just as the field of postcolonial studies had, until recently, neglected Central Asia's experience, the Central Asians have also not yet developed their own contribution to colonial or postcolonial studies, as Kaidarov's benign equation of the Kazakhs' subordination to Russian/Soviet rule and the colonial experience of India reveals. Anxiety over rapidly carving one's niche in the 'civilized' club of Western states has led its elites and intelligentsia (scholars, leaders and policymakers) to portray the Soviet legacy as an external variable and a purely negative consequence of the imposed Russian rule, marking efforts that collude with some basic assumptions held by Western transitologists about Soviet rule.

## **Appraising Soviet rule: colonialism, empire, state-building**

### *The Soviet Union as an anticolonial state*

The Soviet Union was a complex, contradictory and hybrid entity. To some extent, this hybridity enabled it to maintain its existence for three-quarters of a century. Several post-1991 works have attempted to unravel the contradictory objectives and consequences of the Soviet socialist experiment. The Soviet Union has been described in some of these works as a 'State of Nations', an 'Empire of Nations', an 'Affirmative Action Empire', a 'welfare colonialism', a 'socialist parent-state' and an 'authoritarian, high modernist' state.<sup>26</sup> Since all of these characterizations are present and closely entwined in the profound complexity and multidimensionality of the Soviet socialist multinational state, efforts at isolating or highlighting a single attribute resemble the proverbial blind person's description of an elephant. It also matters whether one is describing a baby elephant, a healthy one or a sick and immobile one. For example, the 'affirmative action empire' of the 1920s and 1930s, as eloquently documented in Terry Martin's analysis, came to develop paternalistic features in the post-World War II period, which prompted Katherine Verdery to characterize it as a 'parent-state'.<sup>27</sup>

Mark Beissinger has described the Soviet Union as an 'empire-state' and argued that empire is not an objective condition, but a matter of subjective perception.<sup>28</sup> 'It was the dream of creating a state from an empire that separated Soviet-type imperialism from that practiced by traditional empires,' he notes.<sup>29</sup> The Soviet rulers' ideology, objectives and rhetoric remained avowedly anti-imperial and modernist, although the technologies of classifying and governing their ethno-culturally diverse territory and acquiring legitimacy resembled those of other colonial rulers.

The Soviet 'Affirmative Action Empire', as Martin characterizes the Soviet state during the entire period of the formation of the Soviet Union from 1923 to 1936, was designed to avoid the perception of an empire.<sup>30</sup> Slezkine reiterates this by noting that the Soviet Union's 'attempts to redress the wrongs of colonialism' perpetuated the fundamental distinction between Russians as the former imperial nation (Russians) and all other groups conceptualized as 'nationalities'.<sup>31</sup>

In a stark contrast to the traditional empires or colonial authority, the Soviet Union espoused a high modernist developmental ideal, purposefully acting to

consciously disassociate itself from the tsarist era colonial practices and mindset. At the same time, it strove to maintain what were Russian imperial borders at a time when major events in Europe were contributing to a disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires.<sup>32</sup> Lenin and the Bolsheviks were convinced that only a rapid modernization of Russia and its peripheries along a non-capitalist developmental path would enable the Russian state to overcome its persistent backwardness and attain a full-fledged European status. The Leninist promise of self-determination to the former tsarist subjects was a tactical instrument for obtaining their support and of legitimizing the new Soviet order by presenting it as fundamentally different from the European empires with their overseas colonies. The Bolsheviks' pursuit of socialist nation-building in the 1920s, by recognizing the territorial and linguistic claims of the non-Russians and by sponsoring comprehensive affirmative action, denoted a novel and unprecedented undertaking.

The Soviet Union presented itself as an anticolonial and emancipatory entity, as a 'liberator of nations' and as a champion of the proletariat or subalterns. In their pursuit of numerous practical and strategic objectives, the Soviet rulers incorporated several modern ideals to reconstitute the tsarist empire as an anticolonial, rational (atheistic), centralized, developmental, egalitarian and multinational state. They were seeking to forge a radically different order, based on a scientific and teleological conception of history, as developed by Marx and Engels. Their massive social transformational agenda was rooted in an overriding faith in science and technology, which culminated in the desire to establish what James Scott describes as a 'high modern' state,<sup>33</sup> ideologically committed to establishing a socialist, egalitarian order. Bringing into fruition Lenin's promise of the self-determination of nations led the Bolsheviks to identify and categorize several non-Russian peoples (the Muslims and nomadic groups) as 'oppressed' and 'backward people' (*otstalye narody*). They were thus targeted for compensatory nation-building and developmental policies, which were seen as a critical means of procuring their support and thus legitimizing the Soviet order. As Slezkine succinctly states, '[O]ther states may have other claims to legitimacy; the USSR had nothing but progress and modernity.'<sup>34</sup> However, a direct result of devising and implementing these categories was the creation of a sharp dichotomy between 'modern' and 'traditional' or 'backward' societies on the one hand, and between Russians and the Muslim populations on the other.

While historians such as Martin and Slezkine underscore the novelty of the Soviet socialist experiment, they have understandably analysed this experiment from the metropolitan, 'state-building' perspective.<sup>35</sup> This top-down categorization offered a template to the various non-Russian elites for advancing their claims to nationhood. Looking at the Soviet state from 'below', Edgar shows how the Turkmen elites, driven by ideological fervour as well as by instrumental reasons, quickly learnt to speak the 'Bolshevik language of nationhood' by appropriating the Leninist category of nation.<sup>36</sup> Douglas Northrop paints a different picture. He sees a basic affinity between European colonial empires and the policies of the Soviet state and depicts the Soviet

Union as a 'veiled empire' in every sense of the term.<sup>37</sup> Describing the Soviet Union as both 'a colonial empire' and a 'distinctively modern and modernizing state', he argues that the 'uneasy Soviet symbiosis of modernizing state and colonial empire created endless contradictions.' While advocating that 'its insistent anticolonialism also should be taken seriously, as more than a mere rhetoric,' Northrop discerns a typical colonial or civilizing mission in the Soviet emancipatory agenda.<sup>38</sup>

Francine Hirsch offers a more tentative, albeit awkward assessment by describing the Soviet Union as incorporating a 'non-imperialistic model of colonization' to become 'a new type of modernizing state: an empire of nations'.<sup>39</sup> She refers to its 'colonial-type economy', highly centralized administrative structures and the so-called international division of labour as illustrative of its 'colonial' intent.<sup>40</sup> However, the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and Russians were also the targets of centralized economic control and administration, as were non-Russians. The concerted and all-out implementation of affirmative action (*korenizatsiia*) in the early decade of Soviet rule and continuing support for this policy during the remaining period considerably mitigated the effects of an ethnicity-based division of labour. On the contrary, the grievances based on a perception of reverse discrimination began to surface among the Russians, as the Soviet Union evolved.

I have maintained so far that the Soviet Union was a hybrid entity, combining elements of a centralized empire and a high modernist state. This book challenges the attempts to privilege one particular element ('colonial') over several others ('imperial', 'modernizing' and 'state-building').<sup>41</sup> In so doing, it carefully evaluates several important issues: Were the centre's civilizing interventions in its 'backward' peripheries and population categories typical of a colonial power that maintains and perpetuates a distinction between its distinct (and superior) 'self' and the 'other'? Did the Central Asians, the Kazakhs in particular, uniformly see the Soviet emancipatory agenda as a colonial or civilizing mission? Did Soviet authority *always* represent itself as a 'colonial' or 'imperial' rule to the Kazakhs? Did the acceptance and internalization of its modernizing objectives by the Kazakhs simply denote the hegemony of the Soviet system? Once we accept Beissinger's claim that the empire is a subjective perception, determined by the extent to which a certain group is able to see itself as an integral part of the given order, it becomes clear that the perceptions and assessment of Soviet rule among the different nationalities in Central Asia varied significantly.<sup>42</sup> In addition, how the Central Asians saw Soviet rule, 'Moscow', and their own position in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s under Stalin was vastly different from their perceptions in the post-World War II period. Therefore, how we characterize the Soviet state, from the standpoint of the Kazakhs and Central Asians, and the reception of Soviet policies at the local level in the non-Russian peripheries have profound implications for understanding the post-Soviet processes of state building and identity formation, and for identifying the trajectories of transition in the region.

***Kazakhstan: a settler colony or an object of assimilation?***

Was the Kazakh steppe, with its nomadic inhabitants, a more natural candidate for incorporation into the Russian/Soviet state (similar to the Tatars and the Bashkirs) than the rest of Central Asia? Michael Doyle has questioned the hegemony of the ‘metropolitan’ or ‘dispositional’ model in explaining the rise of empires and drawn attention to the internal conditions within the peripheries that push them towards seeking the protection of the metropole.<sup>43</sup> The economic and military weakness of the nomadic economy and its diffuse authority structure contributed to the Kazakh steppe’s incorporation into the Russian empire. Nomadic societies had been able to sustain themselves in the medieval period through the conquest of land from settled communities and other nomadic tribes. But the military weakness of the nomadic organization and its failure to develop production capacity and technological innovation made them vulnerable to the growing power of agrarian societies. As the territorial-sedentary principle came to prevail in Europe from the late medieval period, nomadic empires underwent a terminal decline.<sup>44</sup>

How can we distinguish between colonial expansion and state building? Some scholars have suggested that empires and states are generically alike. If, after several generations, the indigenous population sees it as ‘legitimate’, it is a state, if ‘illegitimate’, it is an empire.<sup>45</sup> This suggests that the distinction between an empire and state-building is retrospective, as the boundaries between empire and state-building remain considerably blurred, at least in the initial phases. In analysing the transformation of ‘peasants into Frenchmen’ over the course of the nineteenth century, Eugen Weber notes that there was very little to distinguish between state-building and the imperial *mission civilisatrice* in the efforts by Paris to administer its peripheries. The political entity France, whether referred to as a ‘kingdom or empire or republic – [was] an entity formed by conquest and by political and administrative decisions formulated in (or near) Paris’. France represented an ‘alien’ or ‘foreign’ rule to peasants in faraway peripheries; its intolerance of the various *patois* and the imposition of standard French were imbued with a civilizing mission, and were without doubt seen as such by the peasants who resisted it fiercely. Yet over time, the logic of modernization won and assimilation worked.<sup>46</sup>

Weber identifies two crucial differences, both accidental rather than intentional, that ultimately differentiated state-building from colonization. The first was the low level of violence, a decisive contrast to the Soviet experience. The second, and far more fortuitous factor that made assimilation successful was, ‘time, and skins of the same colour’.<sup>47</sup> Notwithstanding the egalitarian and integrationist policy objectives and rhetoric of the Soviet state, it was decidedly more difficult, if not impossible, for a Central Asian Muslim to obtain a position within the central Communist Party (CP) structure than it was for a Ukrainian, an Armenian or a Georgian.<sup>48</sup> However, it would be incorrect to consider the near absence of the Central Asians from the metropolitan structure simply as evidence of colonial discrimination or exclusion. The reasons for the lack of vertical ethnic mobility among Central Asians in the Soviet state are more complex and are not convincingly explainable with exclusive reference to colonial marginalization or

‘civilizational’ difference. Despite the successful transformation of the tribal nomads into a nation and into Soviet citizens through a mix of coercion, inducements and development, numerous strategic, ideological and cultural constraints deterred the Soviet state from pursuing a full-fledged integration of non-Russian groups within the metropolitan centre. The Soviet state was constrained, on the one hand, by the historical legacy of the Russification of various Christian peoples and the segregation of non-Christians during the tsarist period and, on the other, by its own ideological commitments and strategic objectives. The fear of being accused of promoting Russification, or of spurring defensive nationalist reactions among the non-Russians inhibited the Soviet state from categorically pushing for a homogeneous Soviet identity, notwithstanding its commitment to promoting socio-economic and cultural parity and recognizing national claims.

A third factor, not mentioned by Weber because it was obvious in the French case, was a relatively even diffusion of modernization and development across what was an undifferentiated and fluid sociocultural landscape. While regional and dialectal differences were salient in nineteenth century France, they remained fluid: Its population was not classified into distinct identity categories as in other colonial empires.<sup>49</sup> The diffusion of development and modernization by the Soviet state, which substituted itself for market forces and capitalism as it divided its population into mutually exclusive nationality categories, had the reverse effect of solidifying and institutionalizing ‘nationality’, the most salient identity category.<sup>50</sup> If European colonial rule was predicated on the perpetuation of difference, then as Adeeb Khalid argues, the Soviet leaders sought to conquer it by establishing ‘a different kind of polity – an activist, interventionist, mobilizational state that sought to transform its citizenry’.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Indigenous–settler dichotomy***

The three factors that facilitated the Kazakhs’ transformation into a settler colony were the territorial contiguity between Russia and the Kazakh steppe, the internal conditions within the Kazakh nomadic economy and the agrarian expansion of the tsarist state. The rest of the territories of Central Asia were acquired predominantly through military conquests. This suggests that Kazakhstan, more than other republics of Central Asia, was a candidate for permanent incorporation into the Russian and, subsequently, the Soviet state.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the Kazakhs, like the Tatars, Bashkirs and several other Muslim groups within the Russian Federation, enjoyed better prospects of mobility and integration in the centre than other Central Asians. Even under the tsarist empire, which keenly maintained racial boundaries by segregating the Muslims and the nomads, the Kazakh tribal elites pushed these ethno-racial boundaries to the limit and did not simply accept their *inorodtsy* or ‘alien’ status as a given.

Perhaps more than any other Soviet successor state, Kazakhstan epitomized the tension, at one level, between imperial or colonial and state-building elements of the Soviet state and, at another level, the mutual grievances of ‘settler’ and ‘indigenous’ (*korennoi*) populations in the region. It remained a settler colony

from the second half of the late nineteenth century up to the first five decades of Soviet rule, when the Europeans (Slavs and Germans predominantly) constituted an absolute majority and the Kazakh share was reduced to under a third of the population.<sup>53</sup> This earned Kazakhstan the celebrated Soviet euphemism of a ‘microcosm of a hundred nationalities and languages’ during the cultivation of the ‘Virgin Lands’, decreed by Khrushchev in the 1950s.

If Kazakhs complained about being marginalized in their own republic, then Russians also lamented being at the receiving end of ‘native ingratitude’ and reverse discrimination. The following statement by Oleg, a Kazakhstani Russian in his early fifties, during a conversation with me in 1994, captures the general tenor of opinions held by Russians, who resented reminders of their ‘settler’ status:

Who built these buildings, streets, schools and hospitals? Who developed this city (Almaty)? Of course we did! It was called Vernyi then – a pure Russian name. There were no Kazakhs here when we came. They only roamed in the steppe and lived in the *yurts*. Now we are called ‘colonizers’. Where else do you see ‘colonizers’ tilling land to make an uninhabitable place worth living? Have you ever heard of an Englishman toiling in factories with their Indian boss sitting drinking tea? Has any European ever taken orders from a Negro?<sup>54</sup> Now they come and see themselves as bosses, putting their signatures on everything, changing and rewriting all the street names. That’s all they know how to do. And who taught them how to write?

Oleg’s lament encapsulates the dismay at the ‘native ingratitude’ typically encountered by colonial rulers, as well as the latter’s lack of home in a land they thought belonged to them. It also reflects resentment with affirmative action, which was seen as conferring disproportionate benefits on natives from the labour and skills provided by ‘hard-working’ Russians. Such sentiments remained muted during the Soviet years as the ideological precepts of ‘friendship of the peoples’ (*druzhiba narodov*) and ‘fraternal help’ (*bratskaia pomoshch*) given by Russians to the various nationalities socialized the latter to express their appreciation and gratitude to the ‘Great Russian people’.<sup>55</sup>

The state-building and civilizing roles of Russians were closely entwined and affirmed their status as the imperial or state-defining nation, but did not grant them the obvious privileges of status and hierarchy available to other imperial *Völk*. The Soviet state also granted cultural and territorial recognition to its ‘advanced’ groups, such as the Georgians and Armenians, as an antidote to assimilation into Russian culture. Most significantly, the Soviet state did not privilege the Russians in the way that empires privilege the imperial or metropolitan nation. On the contrary, the Soviet leaders’ explicit commitment to curbing ‘Great Russian Chauvinism’ denied the Russians the symbols and institutions of ethnic representation that had been granted to all other nationalities. The RSFSR was never constituted as a singular homeland of the Russians in the way the national republics were institutionalized as homelands of the titular nationality. Russians saw

themselves as occupying a shared 'communal' space instead of enjoying their own private quarters.<sup>56</sup>

The Central Asian national elites similarly saw themselves as powerless and marginalized because they were granted a symbolic nationhood (the Stalinist motto of 'national in form, socialist in content') and a nominal right to secede, without the proper channels for shaping the policies governing them. This created a tension between ethnicity-based affirmative action to establish parity among the nations and the implicit primacy accorded to Russians as the agents of state consolidation and as '*Kulturtraeger*' (which turned them into the 'Big Brother') in modernizing the national peripheries. Such perceptions profoundly shaped the debate on nation and state-building following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### ***The structure of coercion, rewards and entitlements***

What was unique or distinctive about Soviet modernization and its emphasis on nation-building in Central Asia? Quite obviously, Soviet modernization in Central Asia was neither a showcase of success, as represented by the Soviet leaders, nor does it qualify as a 'failure' or as a 'tragic experiment', as some scholars have suggested.<sup>57</sup> The Soviet leaders went much farther than other colonial or modernizing elites in eradicating the prevalent social customs, institutions and communities, denouncing them as 'feudal' or 'traditional', and offering material and ideological recompense to the 'backward' peoples.<sup>58</sup> This allowed the latter to transform their purported 'backwardness' into a subaltern consciousness, which formed the basis for expectations of preferential treatment. Availing of preferential mobility and the benefits of socio-economic and cultural parity served to reinforce the perception of subalternity. Contrary to what Soviet nationalities' theory postulated, the socialist state's efforts to promote parity (*vyravnivanie*) among nationalities further heightened a perception of socio-economic and political inequalities among them.

The distribution of socialist developmental benefits to the supposed subaltern national strata, the recognition of their entitlements and the ideological vision of a new egalitarian order were critical in legitimizing the highly coercive modernizing policies of the Bolsheviks. Propelled by its high modernist ideology, the Soviet state intervened in every aspect of the life of these communities in order to establish a modern, industrial, socialist state. The effects of such interventions were contradictory and mixed. In the case of the Kazakhs, their particular encounter with Soviet modernity was accompanied by considerable violence and dislocation. The Stalinist state forcibly settled the nomads and took over the land used as pastures, which resulted in the demise of at least a third of the nomadic population. The Stalinist purges of 'enemies of class' and 'enemies of nations' virtually eliminated the prominent pre-Soviet elites among all Muslim groups, practically wiping out the members of the Alash Orda, the most assertive Kazakh nationalist party in the early twentieth century, which tactically allied itself with the Bolsheviks. A zealous promotion of literacy and education during the same period also offered new channels of livelihood and socio-economic and cultural

advancement to the former nomads, who came to see themselves through Soviet categories as the new socialist proletariat and intelligentsia.<sup>59</sup>

Uprooted from their traditional milieu and lacking other options, the urbanizing stratum of Kazakhs actively vied for integration into the Soviet order and pushed for opportunities to study and work in a Russian-dominated milieu in far greater numbers than Muslims in the neighbouring republics. Certainly, working on gigantic socialist construction projects, new factories, or being huddled in a collective or state farm was an imposed 'choice' for Kazakhs, as for most Soviet citizens.<sup>60</sup> But in acceding to the dominant, all-powerful authority structure, these individuals actively and enthusiastically participated in erecting the new Soviet socialist order. Ordinary citizens were guided by the belief that their personal sufferings, together with the shortcomings and deficiencies of the socialist system, were seen as a necessary phase that had to be endured as the dawning of the 'bright future' (*svetloe budushchee*), the socialist utopia, as was guaranteed in the Soviet Marxist teleology.

The emergence of the Soviet Union as a superpower in the post-1945 world instilled a considerable sense of security, well-being, pride and expectancy among its citizens. Isolated from the rest of the world, the Muslims of Central Asia had become accustomed to seeing themselves as very 'different,' considerably more advanced and emancipated than Muslims elsewhere or than any other less-developed 'Third World' people. At the same time, informal hierarchies emerged among the Central Asian Muslims within the Soviet state, based on their perceived socio-economic and educational advancement. The mutual perceptions and stereotypes regarding the standing of one's nation in advancing towards 'parity' were reinforced by Soviet statistical ('objective') data demonstrating the socio-economic progress of various nationalities. The Kazakhs saw themselves as loyal or consummate Soviet citizens, as more progressive and as more internationalist among all the Muslims of Central Asia. As beneficiaries of the Soviet socialist order, the newly forged national elites and intelligentsia had internalized the image of themselves as the subaltern, disadvantaged strata, the rightful successors to the old 'feudal' elites and harbingers of a new egalitarian order.

The Soviet federal-territorial framework, which was supposed to deter ethnic mobilization, reinforced a formal salience of all ethno-national identities.<sup>61</sup> Rogers Brubaker notes that the socialist state institutionalized a civic or Soviet identity, but only at the state level, while promoting the primacy of nationality or ethnic identity at the sub-state level.<sup>62</sup> This indicates a failure of the Soviet state to integrate the non-Russian nations and to transcend the colonial methods of group categorization and ethnic institutionalization.

## **Nation formation: post-Soviet and postcolonial contrasts**

### ***Soviet nation-building***

Earlier I referred to a reflexive characterization by Central Asians, scholars and ordinary people alike of Soviet rule as colonial rule, without detailing what this

means. Not all colonial experiences are alike. A fundamental difference between the incorporation of Central Asia within the tsarist empire and the Soviet state and the colonial experience of several Asian and African societies lies in the conditions in which a sense of nationhood was forged and independence was achieved. Nationalism emerged in British colonial India in the context of prolonged anti-colonial struggles spearheaded by the colonially educated national elites, who were expected to be the loyal intermediaries between the colonial state and its subjects. If European colonial powers legitimized their rule through claims of having provided order, progress and good governance to colonial subjects whom they considered unfit to govern themselves, the latter validated their demands for representation and self-rule by evoking the universalism of the same liberal ideology.<sup>63</sup>

The Central Asians have not experienced a consciously organized national struggle against external rule. They owe their present territorial framework and conception of nationhood to Soviet border demarcation and nation-building policies, which sought to eliminate the potential for national mobilization aimed at separate statehood. Consistent with their historical materialist conception of history as a progression of linear developmental stages, the Bolsheviks defined nation as a socio-historical formation possessing objective characteristics, such as territory, language and a common economic mode of life, as well as the 'subjective' characteristic of 'national character', referring to the psychological make-up of a nation.<sup>64</sup> Overall, these Soviet-created nations were endowed with a standardized content and seen as following a distinct historical trajectory. A nation was a transitional entity, to be dissolved after attaining maximum development (*rastsvet*). This 'scientific' conception of the role of the nation stripped its members of subjectivity in shaping their identities, aspirations and interests, as it allowed the state a monopoly over interpreting 'scientific' knowledge. Cognizant of the fact that identities are not just objectively defined, but involve a subjective, fluid and relational component, the Bolsheviks incorporated a subjective element, 'national character', in their definition of the nation. However, the rigid regulation of the socio-economic sphere by the state turned this subjective trait into an ascribed element, to be reified and folklorized.<sup>65</sup>

Solidarity within a national community is often forged through internal debates and contestation among its members on the central questions of how they exist and how they want to define themselves. Such contestations often entail articulating a collective response to a real or perceived threat from the 'other', or a desire to differentiate the self from the 'other'. The portrayals of the Soviet Union as a 'family of nations' or as a 'union of equals', along with the rhetoric of forging a Soviet community of nations at one level, and the continuing orientation of the Kazakh elites towards Russia at another have hampered the process of such differentiation among the Kazakhs.

The Bolsheviks' claim to legitimizing the Soviet state rested on depicting it as a radically different order, committed to providing 'objective' material and cultural equality to its constituents, particularly to the people who were defined as 'oppressed' and 'backward'. Nomads and the Muslims were seen as lacking a history, a record of material and cultural achievements, and categorized as the

‘most backward people’ (*raneē otstalye narody*), ‘people without scripts’ (*bespis’mennye narody*). By taking on a role as champions of the ‘oppressed’ nations and classes, the Bolsheviks exaggerated the dichotomy between the supposed lack of cultural and material achievements of these groups and the high modernist developmental objectives espoused by the Soviet state.<sup>66</sup> This revealed an implicit ethno-racial bias as the Bolsheviks acknowledged the literary traditions and scripts of the Christian populations (e.g. Georgians and Armenians) while they devalued works written in Arabic or Persian scripts. For the Kazakhs and several other nomadic communities, the notions of status and accomplishment had rested on the cultivation of memory, manifested through developing oratorical skills in narrating epics and participating in poetry contests (*aitys*).

### ***Soviet ideological parameters and subaltern consciousness***

Certainly, several indigenous elites, as the example of the Turkmen illustrates, were able to appropriate the Bolshevik notion of self-determination and use it as a template for advancing their claims for nationhood. However, they could do so only within the given ideological parameters and the ‘scientific’ materialist formulation of nations.<sup>67</sup> The very aim of the Bolsheviks in granting national self-determination and demarcating new nations was to nip in the bud any autonomous articulation of ‘nationalism’ that could ally itself with ‘bourgeois-capitalist’ forces across the border opposed to the Soviet socialist state. Take, for example, the small group of Kazakh elites who constituted the nationalist Alash Orda party in the early twentieth century. These included members of the privileged stratum of the tribal aristocracy and other Russian-educated Kazakhs who were engaged in forging an anti-tsarist, but not anti-Russian Kazakh identity and demanding territorial autonomy within a reformed and democratic framework of Russia. The victory of the Bolsheviks forced Alash members and the remaining stratum of Kazakh intelligentsia to join forces, which was their best option for survival and for influencing the policies affecting their people. But this alliance proved to be uneasy and short-lived. Within a decade, almost the entire pre-Soviet stratum of the Kazakh intelligentsia was labelled ‘bourgeois-nationalists’, ‘enemies of class’ and purged during the Stalinist terror.

By ordering a rehabilitation of the Alash Orda and several other members of the Kazakh intelligentsia who were purged under Stalin, the post-Soviet ruling establishment has entrusted its historians to uncover the various ‘blank spots’, distortions and misrepresentations in Soviet-era history texts.<sup>68</sup> The state-sponsored re-writing of the history of the encounter with the Russian state from the perspective of the Kazakhs has invariably placed the new historiography within a nationalist and primordialist frame, which derives sustenance from categories established during Soviet rule.<sup>69</sup> While it denied a credible history to the various non-Russian peoples, Soviet rule tolerated and even encouraged efforts by archaeologists, historians, ethnographers and literary figures to cobble together a narrative of the evolution of national identity which fitted the linear Marxist–Leninist view of the progression of history.<sup>70</sup> Despite a plethora of

post-Soviet historical accounts, a proper independent and authoritative history of the Kazakhs, detailing the development of a sense of nationhood is yet to be written.<sup>71</sup>

If the Kazakhs had few material and literary artefacts, and if the nomadic oral tradition and memory were virtually eradicated under Soviet rule, then what kind of a 'national' past and history of the Kazakhs as a nation can be said to exist? How can it be documented? The Subaltern Studies scholarship, which saw itself as constituting an alternative to the dominance of both colonial and nationalist history-writing, has grappled with the political, ideological, ethical and methodological questions of history-writing and the representation of the colonized in the struggle against colonial domination.<sup>72</sup> It has criticized the dichotomous perspectives held by the 'colonialist' and 'nationalist' narratives in explaining the emergence of national consciousness among colonized subjects. Ranajit Guha, a prominent exponent of this approach, questions the tendency of British colonial historiography to see the emergence of Indian nationalism as a by-product of the colonial stimulus, as merely a native response. According to this colonialist view, the native elite did not act autonomously, but primarily in response to 'the institutions, opportunities, resources, etc., generated by colonialism' in articulating a national imagination.<sup>73</sup> The Subaltern Studies perspective has also uncovered an elitist bias within the homogenizing nationalist historiography and its neglect of the 'politics of the people', who were acting 'on their own', 'independently of the elite [in] the making and development of this nationalism'.<sup>74</sup>

The pervasive tendency to replace colonialist historiography with nationalist narratives in the postcolonial world has continued to sideline the subaltern, marginal voices, whose transcripts remain 'hidden'.<sup>75</sup> These nationalist narratives are elite-centred, seeking to produce a homogenized history that serves the particular ideological and political aims identified by the ruling elites of the postcolonial state. Subaltern studies scholars distinguish between the enterprise of writing a history *for* a subject, rather than *of* a subject, noting that there are differences in the telling.<sup>76</sup> A history *of* the Kazakhs from this perspective, which challenges both Soviet categories, as well as the nationalizing bent of the new post-Soviet history has not yet been attempted as a scholarly enterprise. The state-authorized academic analysis and history texts are embedded in Soviet categories and thus remain fully 'derivative' in Partha Chatterjee's terms.<sup>77</sup>

There are four crucial insights of postcolonial and subaltern theory which help us to explore the effects of Soviet cognitive and institutional frames on the post-Soviet nationalizing state, and to identify the processes that are leading to a replication and reconfiguration of the Soviet frame. First, the colonial legacy is profoundly critical in shaping the post-independence order. This is because colonialism brought not just a new form of rule; it introduced a new ontology and a new vocabulary of nation and statehood to apprehend the modern world.<sup>78</sup> In an analogous fashion, the Soviet legacy of top-down liberation, ethnic empowerment within the ideologically and institutionally circumscribed framework, and the forging of a high modern order have equipped the new nations with a distinct ontology and cognitive map for navigating the global system.

Second, independent statehood is not a culmination of nationhood or a collective national imagination, but constitutes only a starting point in the endeavour to create such an imagination and forge the view of nation as a community. Sovereignty is only a first step in the continuing and ongoing process of decolonization and the construction of an autonomous national imagination. One may argue that the time elapsed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union is still too short to identify the emergence of new forms of post-Soviet institutions and discursive practices: After all, the Subaltern Studies approach emerged after three decades of independence in India. The absence of regime or leadership change in Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia (with the exception of Kyrgyzstan) points to how the Soviet-era elites and networks have successfully reconfigured themselves to achieve normalization and legitimacy.

Third, the issue of the collaboration of native elites with the colonial order through an appropriation and internalization of colonial categories is central not just to evaluating the nature of domination and hegemony under colonial rule, but also to understanding how postcolonial states achieve domination, and wield control. The repeated portrayals of the Soviet state as an empire, as a totalitarian state that predominantly used coercion and ideological engineering to impose its rule, has shifted attention away from analysing the involvement and participation of the non-Russian elites and ordinary people in forging, consolidating and legitimizing the Soviet order. As the institutions and practices introduced during the Soviet period adapt to the challenges of the post-communist transition, the task of assessing the agency and autonomy of the incumbent elites has gained a new salience. The Soviet conception of nationhood, which was based on objective (material) characteristics, rather than on subjective consciousness remains at the heart of attempts by the post-Soviet nationalizing state to promote a renaissance of the titular nation, to build a multi-ethnic and civic polity.

Finally, a seminal contribution of postcolonial scholarship, particularly the Subaltern Studies approach, lies in separating the elite and the popular or subaltern domains in detailing the contestations between these domains in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. The Subaltern Studies approach has sought to replace the elite-centred nationalist historiography and imagination with an autonomous discourse from the margin that articulates the voice and contributions of ordinary people, the subordinate or subaltern groups, in questioning colonial rule and in producing the postcolonial political order. Soviet rule arbitrarily and expediently erased this distinction. Post-Soviet scholarship has not yet attempted to make an analytical and empirical distinction between the elite and people's or subaltern domain. This work marks a beginning in this direction.

## **Titular elites: agency and collaboration**

### *Patron–client relationships*

Although the Russians cannot be seen as self-conscious colonizers, Central Asia did find itself in a relationship of colonial dependency under Soviet socialism.

The Soviet state's extraction of natural resources and the cultivation of raw materials, such as cotton, oil and minerals turned much of Central Asia, together with Azerbaijan, into extractive bases.<sup>79</sup>

The dislocation associated with rapid industrialization and urbanization, including the cultivation of the Virgin Lands under Khrushchev, had a devastating impact on its ecology and in intensifying the perception among the natives of being exploited, dispossessed and victimized. The Kazakhs often bemoaned the fact that, despite possessing the 'entire periodic table of elements', they were not allowed to develop an autonomous industrial base and attain control over their rich resources. But the beneficiaries of such resource extraction were neither 'Moscow', nor the Russian Federation, nor the 'Russians' as one would assume within a framework of colonial dependency. The spoils were accumulated disproportionately and dishonourably by the party *nomenklatura* and the elites both at the centre and in the republics, with numerous crumbs falling off the table to lesser party rank and file. The infamous 'cotton scandal' in the 1970s in Uzbekistan under the tenure of Sharaf Rashidov demonstrated that massive benefits accrued to the Uzbek party leadership, with the tacit approval and perhaps even connivance of Leonid Brezhnev's entourage.<sup>80</sup> Kazakhstan's prime Soviet-era leader Dinmukhamed Kunaev enjoyed a largely untainted reputation in contrast, although it was considered quite normal that his brother was the president of the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR and that members of his extended clan, both by blood and association, faced far fewer hurdles to mobility within the party, administration and other key domains within the republic.

In a desperate attempt to re-establish control over the republican CP apparatus, both Yuri Andropov and Mikhail Gorbachev launched a battle to combat 'corruption', 'clannism', 'tribalism' and 'localism' – the various ills which Moscow saw as rife in the Central Asian republics. The deeply entrenched clan and regional networks in this region owed their existence in large part to the patron–client relationships between the central and republican elites that had emerged in the late Stalinist period and intensified during the tenure of Brezhnev (1964–81). Moscow's frequent allusions to 'tribalism' and 'corruption' as distinctly Central Asian traits reflects racial prejudice and a colonial mindset, and implies that the apparent proliferation of clan–regional ties and corrupt practices was an evidence of the rampant 'traditionalism' of Central Asian societies and their elites, which subverted the modernizing policies of Moscow.<sup>81</sup> Ken Jowitt suggests that, despite its self-proclaimed modernist bias, the Soviet model was a mix of traditional, charismatic and modern elements, which are now 'extinct', hence incapable of reproduction.<sup>82</sup> Challenging the modernist bias of these works, Olivier Roy sees the various traditional 'solidarity networks' as autonomous in formation, offering resistance to the control that the centralized CP structure sought to exert over the national republics.<sup>83</sup>

In contrast to the aforementioned works, my arguments in this book demonstrate that the pervasiveness of patron–client networks, personal ties centred on kinship and regional solidarities were integral elements of the socialist system that displaced markets and all forms of formal exchanges and competition.<sup>84</sup>

Mutual collaboration between Moscow and the republic party elites allowed the latter to maximize their gains and to obtain symbolic control by claiming to represent their ethnic constituencies, as it enabled Moscow to temper the potential for nationalist assertion from below. As allies and clients of Brezhnev, the leaders of the five Central Asian republics enjoyed considerable leeway in governing their republic in return for compliance with the centre's policies and objectives. In sum, the titular communist elites were able to enjoy informal autonomy and power within the patron–client framework, while the formal institutional structure allowed them symbolic and not real power.<sup>85</sup>

### ***Soviet institutions and subversion***

The institutional framework of the Soviet state, combining coercion, excessive centralization and ideological engineering, was geared towards depoliticizing all collective identities, spreading across ethno-national, class, clan, religious and regional, in order to eliminate the potential for organizing autonomous social action. The major difference is that identities based on religion, or rooted in clan or local community structures were seen as illicit, while ethno-national identities were reified to turn them into the basis for large-scale executive affirmative action. The state-erected institutional channels, as Charles King notes, 'were meant to work in a single direction, mobilizing economic, political, social and even cultural resources to achieve the ends of state planning, not as channels for assessing the public mood and for enabling elites to make policy accordingly'.<sup>86</sup> This generated a widespread perception among the national elites and individuals that they were powerless against the 'system' and that compliance and accommodation were the only means of survival and well-being. The popular narratives of 'collaboration' and 'survival' of the titular elites and ordinary masses imply that they lacked agency and a voice in the existing 'system'. Even under the extreme coercion and terror employed by the Stalinist totalitarian state, in real life situations, as Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, 'Soviet citizens were by no means totally without strategies of self-protection, however rooted their sense of dependency and lack of agency: Indeed, to assure the authorities and the outside observers of one's own powerlessness, was exactly such a strategy.'<sup>87</sup> The 'promotees' (*vydvizhentsy*) and beneficiaries of socialist rule, who included victims of the Stalinist terror, were also complicit in a complex way in denying their own agency and in taking refuge in passivity.

As coercion waned in the post-Stalin period, the Brezhnev period came to symbolize the desire for stability and normalization. Thus, 'survival' came to be seen as inextricably entwined with the well-being of one's person and family, and for pursuing career goals along with a continuing expectation of extracting benefits from the state. The post-Stalinist state assumed the role of a parent-state, which construed its citizens as subjects, as passive recipients of the state's paternalistic welfare policies. As the ultimate distributor of goods, services, status and rights, it reduced society, including various ethnic groups, into recipients, 'like small children' within a family, which undermined the forging of an active sense of citizenship.<sup>88</sup>

The ideological and symbolic recognition granted to the titular communist elites as representatives of their ethnic community allowed them to presume the consent of their ethnic constituencies and thus claim 'legitimacy'. These conditions also allowed them to retain a posture of subalternity, by operating within the framework of Soviet socialist ideology. This explains why direct resistance was neither feasible nor desirable. At the same time, it is impossible to identify a clear pattern of dominance and subordination in the Soviet system, or to equate non-Russian nationality with subalternity. To have been protected by the Soviet paternalistic state and its 'cradle-to-grave' socialist welfare policies and empowered by belonging to a superpower, and yet remain marginalized, presenting oneself as powerless, is a distinct element of the Soviet legacy among the Central Asians. This is one of several paradoxes that characterize the 'remedial' post-Soviet nationalizing project in Kazakhstan, which purports to assert the special claims of the Kazakhs as the 'core' nation, while pledging allegiance to multi-ethnic statehood and civic identity to legitimize the nationalist agenda.<sup>89</sup> Russians, too, share a perception of their own powerlessness and their victimization, as they complain of native ingratitude, reverse discrimination and the use of slurs, such as 'colonizers', 'occupants' and 'big brother' against them.

### **Post-Soviet transition and the Soviet legacy**

Like other Soviet successor states, Kazakhstan initially defined itself as a state embodying claims made in the name of the 'core nation', defined in ethno-cultural terms.<sup>90</sup> Its nationalization course has centred on ethnic symbols and material or superstructural markers of national identity erected under the Soviet system, and neglected a deep involvement in the recovery and regeneration of the 'inner', cultural and identity realm.<sup>91</sup> The priority for the Nazarbaev leadership has been the establishment of a firm personalist control over the country's major resources, production and manufacturing sector and political institutions.

### ***Linking postcolonial studies and the post-Soviet transition***

Several recent works exploring the various aspects of political and economic transition, such as institution-building, democratization, promotion of civil society and the consequences of markets focus exclusively on present and future directions and trajectories. Transitory as a discipline remains concerned mainly with aftermaths and endpoints, rather than structural antecedents and cultural and cognitive frames. The preoccupation with future trajectories has led the proponents of transition-centred approaches to view the Soviet legacy as an ideological and institutional remnant that can be isolated and replaced with new Western-type institutions. This has produced various static interpretations of the socialist legacy as 'path dependency, cultural persistence, or circulation of elites', as Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery note.<sup>92</sup>

The rational choice and neo-institutionalist perspectives that inform some of these analyses tend to look upon the Soviet legacy as an isolable variable, as an

‘institutional residue’.<sup>93</sup> Gryzymala-Busse and Jones Luong segregate ‘old’ (Soviet) and ‘new’ (post-Soviet) practices and institutions as they draw attention to the ‘recombinance’ of old and new, [which] ‘comprises the simultaneous dismantling and rebuilding of state institutions’.<sup>94</sup> What we are witnessing, as I suggest in this book, is not a mere dismantling or erosion of Soviet-era practices, institutions and mindsets, but rather their ongoing adaptation and reconfiguration in a changed context. As recent ethnographic studies of post-socialist transitions point out, ‘Soviet’ was not a fully formed category, but a work-in-progress.<sup>95</sup> As Soviet ideological categories, institutions and practices inscribe themselves into the new processes, they turn the Soviet legacy into a dynamic and active element. What many scholars referred to as an imposition of ‘Soviet’ categories and practices in the Central Asian peripheries was also a process of various local constructions of Soviet order through the prevalent socio-economic institutions and cultural practices.<sup>96</sup>

Barring some notable exceptions, the emergent scholarship on post-Soviet identities, institutions and transition has remained almost completely disconnected from postcolonial studies.<sup>97</sup> Katherine Verdery has made a case for post-socialist and postcolonial studies to come together and establish a ‘more comprehensive frame’, to integrate these into what she provisionally refers to as ‘post Cold War Studies’. This, she proposes, ‘[will deal with] colonialism in all its many forms: Not only the European empires of previous centuries, not only the Soviet colonies in Eastern Europe and the numerous client-states in the Third World, but also the full incorporation of both the former colonies *and* the former socialist bloc into a global capitalist economy.’<sup>98</sup> What Verdery proposes might seem a tall order, but it also heralds an opportunity to examine the economic, political, sociocultural and psychological consequences of Soviet rule and the implications of the region’s rapid incorporation into both the global capitalist order and the European security and economic framework. As the Central Asian states become deeply embedded within the global capitalist system and markets – and Kazakhstan is far ahead in achieving this integration on account of its oil wealth – the active elements of the Soviet socialist legacy will become more pronounced in their efforts to develop market economies, a multi-ethnic polity, civic statehood and electoral democracies, the central focus of transition studies. The analysis in this book lays the groundwork for advancing in this direction by probing into the enduring effects of the Soviet cognitive frame, institutional framework and ideological categories to navigate in the post-Soviet world.

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