



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.

1. Title of Research Proposal: Identity Through History:

The Kenesary Kasymov Revolt and the Evolution of Kazakh National Identity

2. Topic of Research

The Kenesary Kasymov Rebellion has become a focus of scholarly attention in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Fought between 1837 and 1847, it has emerged in this new socio-political environment as a revolt to be revered as a “nation-liberation” revolt by Kazakh scholars. This is a different interpretation; one that is being used to demonstrate how and why the Kazakhs were subjugated by Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century. What it represents, however, is a new interpretation that is designed to show Kazakhs had a national identity that was subjected to more than a century of russification that weakened the Kazakh nation, society, culture, and historical traditions. It is being used to Kazakhify the current socio-political climate in this new republic that is struggling to unify its multi-national population and justify the dominance of Kazakhs. Moreover, it reflects a growing consensual history in which alternative interpretations are dismissed.

3. Relevance and Contribution to Field

This is a unique case study of the use of history and institutional memory, the use of history, to create a common interpretation of a collective past. Understanding the nationalizing efforts of ruling and intellectual elites in the post-Soviet world is crucial to

understanding the socio-political transition from Soviet to Kazakh. This case study reveals the underlying efforts to justify the efforts to desovietize not just the economic and political structure in Kazakhstan, but, more importantly, the dominance of Kazakhs in culture, society, education, and numerous other civil society functions. Given the demographic situation in Kazakhstan this is a much more difficult task than that in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan. In addition, it is a unique case study to understand the “national” project in a decolonization process in a relatively stable and prosperous state.

4. Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

This research trip consisted of long hours spent in the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Academy of Sciences’ library in Almaty.

5. Research findings and preliminary conclusions

The revolt was not the “national-liberation” struggle as characterized by Kazakh scholars. The revolt failed to enlist majority support among the masses, it had no national or political agenda, and it resulted in widespread destruction that ultimately weakened generalized resistance to Russian expansion in traditional Kazakh lands. Nonetheless, the legacy of the revolt remained a potent force, a means to rally support to encourage sporadic acts of resistance in later years. This is perhaps the most important feature of the revolt. The legacy and memory was fixed in popular imagination and, therefore, makes it a suitable tool in the contemporary arsenal of Kazakh nationalism processes.

6. Future research agendas

I will be returning to Kazakhstan in May and June 2006 to conclude the archival research. On returning to the United States I will finish writing the manuscript and submit it to a publisher for consideration.

7. Policy recommendations

Policy recommendations are difficult for this sort of a topic; however, it remains necessary to observe the use of history, myths, and traditions by the state to manipulate the socio-political environment in its favor. The consequences of these efforts might be continued, and deeper, hostility by the non-Kazakh population against the ruling elites and its marginalization of the large non-Kazakh population. Benign nationalist agendas generate little overt opposition, but efforts to emphasize Kazakhness while denigrating others might prove to be the catalyst for stronger opposition that is frustrated by failed economic and social progress. While the Kazakh government has been careful to limit Kazakh nationalism against a non-Kazakh population, it must be equally cautious to avoid an exclusionary agenda in the state building process. Opposition to the government might easily embrace the “negatives” of “kazakhification” in society to generate support for its agenda that could increase national tensions and enmity.