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ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL TRANSFORMATIONS BETWEEN THE
KAZAKH AND UZBEK SSR'S (1920-1936)

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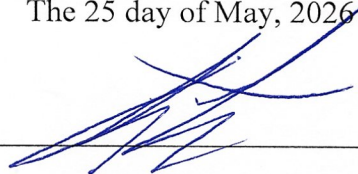
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Abstract

The research examines the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia during the early Soviet period. It focuses on the relationship between the ideological principles and the administrative application of these principles, and the actual use and modification of the theoretical principles that were directly declared and implemented at the level of Soviet policy, nationality and ethnographic criteria. The study employs a qualitative historical-analytical approach and draws on archival materials from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, digitalized materials from The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, and existing literature on Soviet state-building. It pays particular attention to administrative reports and statistics, and considers their role in knowledge production in the Soviet state as a whole.

The study focuses on specific instances of demarcation between the Uzbek and Kazakh SSRs, archival materials that shed light on this issue. This contributes to the field by examining and analyzing the perspectives of both sides, including their arguments and the processes that demonstrate internal decision-making.

The findings show that the geographical boundaries of administrative units were not defined solely by ethnolinguistic variables, but were determined by a combination of economic, mobility, and administrative governability factors, in which the status of a population (as nomadic or sedentary) and the heritage of imperial administrative divisions played a significant role. The research shows how statistical and ethnographic knowledge participated in creating the national categories and how census statistics and institutional classifications participated in the delimitation of the national groups. Overall, the research treats Central Asia's delimitation as a contingent, negotiated process, shaped through a combination of ideological, administrative, and material considerations.

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Glossary and terms

AO — Autonomous Oblast

AR — Autonomous Republic

ASSR — Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

BPSR — Bukhara People's Soviet Republic

Byt (rus.) — way of life

Goskolonit — State Colonization Research Institute

Gosplan — State Planning Commission

Inorodtsy — a term used for non-Russians or non-Slavic people in Tsarist Russia, “aliens”

Jadids — Muslim reformists

KASSR — Kyrgyz (Kazakh) Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

KazASSR — Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

KIPS — Commission for the Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of the Borderlands

Kirrevkom — Kyrgyz (Kazakh) Revolutionary Committee

Narkomnats — People's Commissariat for the Affairs of the Nationalities

Narod (rus.) — people

Narodnost' (rus.) — people or nation

Natsiia (rus.) — nation

Natsional'nost' (rus.) — nationality

Oblast — province

RSFSR — Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

Revkom — Revolutionary Committee

Sovnarkom — Council of People's Commissars

Sredazburo — Central Asian Bureau

SSR — Soviet Socialist Republic

TASSR — Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

Turkburo — Turkestan Bureau

Turkkomissii — Turkestan Commission

Turksovnarkom — Turkestan Council of People's Commissars

Uchastok — subdistrict

Uezd — district

Volost — part of a uezd; a small rural district

VTsIK — All-Russian Central Executive Committee

Introduction

1 Context

The collapse of the Russian Empire and the establishment of the Bolshevik government in 1917 created a new political-administrative reality over the territory of the former empire. One of the challenges that the new Soviet authorities had to face was the issue of governance of Central Asia, a huge space that was heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity and territory. The situation in Central Asia was complex, due to the customary division of the imperial bureaucracy combined with ethnic, economic and cultural diversity. Central Asia was particularly challenging, as it had the imperial legacy of administrative fragmentation in addition to clashing ethnic, economic, and cultural realities. The region corresponding to modern-day Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan was not an administrative unit during the time of Russian imperial rule. The empire was subdivided into directly governed provinces (such as the Syr Darya, Samarkand, and Fergana oblasts of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship) and semi-autonomous protectorates (including the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva).

Following the Bolshevik revolution, a transformation of imperial space into a socialist, Soviet state required both political and territorial transformation. The new Soviet leadership embraced the principle of national self-determination, representing a principled break from imperial politics associated with domination and control over peoples and territories. However, the reality of this logic was more complex. Often, borders between states in places such as Central Asia had not been clearly established or politicized, and populations were not easily separable. Furthermore, economic systems were organized along very different lines such as that of settled agriculture and nomadic pastoralism. It implies that administrative-territorial reorganization in the early Soviet period cannot be

interpreted solely as a process of “nations” being placed on territorial entities, but must also be viewed as a compromise between ideology, administration, and socio-economic circumstances.

Preparation for the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia by the Soviet authorities began in the early 1920s, and the system of union and autonomous republics was implemented in 1924, including the Uzbek SSR and the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Although officially justified on the basis of ethnographic and linguistic criteria, the contemporary debate and historical records indicate that delimitation was a much more complex affair, one that tried to take into account economic integration, the administrative governability of the new units, the availability of natural resources, and the competition of various groups for the exclusive rights to certain territories. For example, the disputes over the Syr Darya region, the Semirechye region, and the city of Tashkent show that territorial relations between different regions were actively contested between local elites, regional structures, and central Soviet authorities.

Delimitation was part of broader Soviet state-building and nation-making processes. The establishment of national republics did not only reflect pre-existing conditions, but also implied a process of constructing new national identities and further institutionalizing new political and territorial relationships and borders. In this context, the practice of administrative decisions concerning borders, republican capitals and population groups played a considerable role in shaping the political geography of the region. The interaction between imperial legacies, Bolshevik ideology and administrative practice provides the backdrop for the territorial and administrative reorganization of the Kazakh and Uzbek Soviet republics in the early years of the Soviet Union.

2 Research gaps

Despite the substantial existing scholarship on the Soviet nationality policy and the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia, little is known about the actual internal delimitation process and its mechanisms in the early Soviet era. According to the Soviet historical narratives, the delimitation was presented as a process that was based on ethnographic and linguistic principles. However, it makes the process look like a straightforward decision and does not take into account the other factors that shaped the boundaries. The creation of the Central Asian republics began under conditions of pre-existing state administrative fragmentation, overlapping settlement patterns, and uneven approaches and projects among various local participants.

Archival evidence suggests that divisions such as that between the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) ASSR and the future Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic rarely corresponded directly with the current territorial divisions between the countries. Boundaries and territories were determined by economic integrations, administrative governability, mobility patterns (in particular the nomadic and semi-nomadic way of life), and political control. Whereas the ideological context of Soviet nation-building has been studied before, less is known about the micro-level of territorial reorganization, and the relationship between the introduction of central directives and their implementation in the local context. Local elites and regional party structures, and their proposals and ideas played their part, but the extent of their influence could be researched further.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing the design of administrative-territorial delimitation between the Kazakh and Uzbek Soviet republics in the early 1920s, focusing on how competing ethnographic, economic, and administrative principles were selected and applied in practice. By using archival documents and combining them with other existing historiography, it contributes to a new analysis of the nature of Soviet territorial reorganization in Central Asia.

3 Research question

The research focuses on the formation of the administrative-territorial divisions of Central Asia in the early Soviet period, in particular the borders of the Kazakh and Uzbek Soviet republics. The main research question is: How were the administrative-territorial boundaries between the Kazakh (Kyrgyz) and Uzbek Soviet republics formed in the early 1920s and to what extent were they determined by ethnographic, economic or administrative factors?

The goal of the study is to investigate the role of the economic structures, mobility structures and the governability of the administrative apparatus in regard to space delimitation, in particular with reference to the coexistence of nomadic and sedentary types of life. Another aim of the research is to examine the role of different local actors, their claims, and their acceptance or rejection by the central Soviet authorities.

4 Literature Review

4.1 Tsarist legacy

The historical background section of the research is primarily based on the works of d'Encausse (1994), Soucek (2000), Khalid (2024), and Khodarkovsky (2002). These authors highlight the gradual, at times discontinuous, process of incorporation of the Central Asian areas into the Russian Empire and coexistence of fully administered territories and semi-autonomous protectorates such as the Khanates of Bukhara and Khiva. Whereas Khalid argues that imperial administration in Central Asia did not produce a unitary administrative system, but rather a composite, layered administration, providing a precedent for the administration of Soviet territory (Khalid, pp. 103-104). Khodarkovsky highlights that the expansion into the steppe can be understood as an entrenchment of colonial imperial rule through administrative experimentation (Khodarkovsky, 146-149).

4. 2 The Bolsheviks and the ideology

The role of the Bolshevik ideology and nationalities policy is extensively discussed. Martin (2001), among others, has argued that the Soviet Union was an “affirmative action empire”, where the Bolsheviks promoted national identities while they held all power (Martin, pp. 32-33). Meanwhile, using the work of Hirsch (2005), who also discusses this paradox, the author argues that the Soviet nation-building project relied on ethnographic knowledge and statistical practices (Hirsch, pp. 67-68, pp. 162-163). Hirsch also addresses issues of identity and nationality related to the process of drawing borders. For instance, Hirsch writes about how the concept of nationality was applied to the people of the region before and after the Bolsheviks came to power, and how this fit into the political framework of Bolshevism (Hirsch, pp. 165-166). Scholars such as Suny (2001) and Smith (2013) have written about the tension between ideological proclamations of the right of national self-determination and the political need to maintain the multinational Union. These works show that the practical implementation of Soviet nationality policy was not a purely ideological exercise but was instead a practical undertaking grounded in administrative and political practice.

4.3 The delimitation of Central Asia

The delimitation as a process is also well researched by scholars, such as Haugen (2003) and Ubiaria (2016), who have wrote that delimitation is process of negotiation and conflict between the central authorities and local elites rather than a one-time decision of the authorities. Ubiaria argues that the ethnic republics’ intention was to consolidate ethnolinguistic groups, reduce inter-ethnic tension, and reinforce Soviet government control (Ubiaria, pp. 105-106). Here, Khalid (2016) also argues that Central Asian elites were deeply involved in the process of delimiting borders (Khalid, pp. 273-274).

4.4 Censuses and statistics as part of the construction of national identity

Statistical methods have also been a focus of interest to Soviet nation building, in particular in Hirsch's (1997) work, who argues that Soviet censuses were involved not only in measuring but also producing national categories. Similar arguments had been made earlier in studies of Soviet census practices by Schwartz (1986) and by Soviet era scholars such as Bruk and Kozlov (1967), who wrote about methodological and political concerns in dealing with ethnically diverse populations in Central Asia. This suggests that statistics were a key part of the process of legitimizing territorial claims and the organization and administration of the newly created territories (Schwartz, pp. 52-53, Bruk & Kozlov, p. 4).

Theoretical framework

This research draws on theories of nationalism, empire, and state-building. While delimitation was often seen as essentially an ethnic and ideational domain, it is explored here as a process of political practice and administrative techniques as well as a socio-economic environment. Thus, it uses three analytical models: theories of Soviet nation building, approaches to the role of ethnographic and statistical knowledge in creating categories of nationality, and studies of empire as a form of flexible rule and governance.

One of the theoretical concepts used in the research is the concept of "affirmative action empire", developed by Martin (2001). The theory claims that the Soviet national policy was not merely reacting to but also shaping the ethnic diversity of the USSR. The Bolsheviks continued promoting ethnic national identities in terms of national territories, languages, and institutions, while retaining centralized political control. The theory provides an explanation for the paradox of Soviet nationalities policy: namely, that the Soviet state promoted national self-determination, while simultaneously denying the republics political autonomy. The national republics were not seen as self-standing units of their own, but as administrative units of a highly centralized state (Martin, pp. 30-33).

Meanwhile, Suny argued that Soviet nation-building was intrinsically political and utilitarian; national categories were not something which simply had to be recognized. They were instead instruments created and transformed by the state to secure its power over its multi-ethnic and religious population (Suny & Martin, 2001, pp. 70-78).

Another theoretical approach underlines the importance of knowledge production in forming national classifications. As Hirsch writes, the Soviet state used knowledge like ethnography and statistics in creating categories of ethnicity, as well as determining the contents of national identities (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 162-163). This has allowed the Soviet Union to be described as an “empire of nations” since the nations within it were not pre-existing entities, but constructed through state categorization. This is important in relation to censuses and population statistics where statistical practices did not only represent population but, rather, constituted population by defining who belonged to which nationality. Earlier works on this topic, such as Schwartz (1986) and Bruk and Kozlov (1967) also explored the political and methodological challenges of politically classifying ethnically heterogeneous populations, confirming that statistical categories were unstable, subject to conflict, and politically charged.

The third theoretical idea is the approach, which sees the empire as an adaptive administrative system. Scholarship by Khalid (2024) and d’Encausse (1994) has shown how the Russian Empire and Soviet Union relied on a combination of direct and indirect rule and developed a highly differentiated system of administration. From the perspective of imperial legacy in Central Asia, the Soviet regime did not inherit one administrative structure but an entire system of direct rule, protectorates, and varying degrees of self-rule across the region. Hence, the delimitation process needs to be understood not just in relation to nation-building, but also as an administrative response to the legacy of the imperial period.

Building on these theories, the research views national-territorial delimitation as a result of multiple competing factors. Ethnographic criteria were underlined by some scholars, but other scholars, such as Haugen (2003) and Ubiria (2016) have foregrounded economic, administrative and political rationales. This argument is relevant to that made by Hirsch that the Soviet nation-building was built on ethnographic, economic and administrative principles on a more or less equal basis, but that in practice the borders of the new regions were governed by considerations of governance, resource distribution and political stability. This allows one to reinterpret archival material and underscores that the arguments of nomadic lifestyles, economic networks, and administrative efficiency were not ancillary but rather the main rationale for the delimitation in many cases.

Using above mentioned theories, the study considers archival material as the evidence of Soviet ideological and administrative frameworks, focussing on ethnographic, economic and political arguments used in practice, and their correspondence with the logics which characterized the Soviet state's approach to nation-building. Considering these different methods and combining them, the aim is to show that delimitation should be seen neither as an exclusively ethnographic nor a political-technical exercise but rather as a multidimensional and negotiated process.

Methodology

Following a qualitative historical-analytical method, the research seeks to reconstruct the practices and concepts of territorial re-division based on archival and secondary historiographical materials. The archival materials were obtained from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, including administrative reports, decrees, memorandums, and statistical reports on the delineation and formation of the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) and the Uzbek republics. These documents are important primary sources, and provide understanding into how ethnographic, economic and administrative

arguments were used and understood in Soviet decision-making in the context of border-making and border change in the Soviet Union. Following Hirsch's theory, archival documents are used to understand the process of knowledge production in the Soviet Union, meaning that they were based not only on empirical observations, but also on political interests, institutional preferences and ideological frameworks. The study also drew on digitized archival materials from the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, primarily by implementing the central government's directives regarding Central Asia.

The research also applies elements of discourse analysis to the language and the categories of argumentation in the archival documents, and especially the classifications between populations, such as "Kyrgyz", "Uzbeks", "nomadic" and "sedentary". It explores the justification of territorial claims, and the centrality of different types of arguments (ethnographic, economic, historical, administrative).

However, there are also limitations in the research, such as the fact that the historical documents used were largely from Kazakhstani archives and may be locally biased. As such, other actors' views, especially those of Uzbekistan or other central Soviet institutions, may be neglected, distorted or filtered through the Soviet viewpoint. Many of the archival materials are not dated or do not have a clear authorship. When working with such materials, the research relied on a cross-reference to other records or secondary literature to place them in the chronology of the events. As is the case with the official documents, these records may not accurately reflect informal or local practices, local resistance, or other viewpoints.

Chapter 1. Regional background before the October Revolution of 1917

The chapter provides the context for understanding how the national-territorial units in 1920s Central Asia were conceived and delineated by placing the Soviet delimitation process in the longer history of imperial conquest and colonial rule in Central Asia. By providing an overview of the administrative, economic and settlement changes caused by the Russian colonization, the chapter lays out the structural prerequisites to Soviet policies and places the national delimitation project in an appropriately historical context. This will be important in the context of territories that will later become significant in the demarcation process and whose importance will grow by the mid-1920s. It thus shows that the national delimitation was not purely a spontaneous, ideological project but also the result of a large-scale territorial and political reorganization of Central Asia.

1.1 Imperial conquest of Central Asia

Starting from the mid-16th century, Imperial Russia began its conquest of Central Asia. Russian influences emerged in the late 1500s, as caravan trade networks from Tobolsk to Bukhara were established. In the 1730s, Russia extended its hold over the Kazakh steppe when the Lesser and Middle Hordes — Kazakhs tribal confederations — became the tsar's as suzerains (Hosking, 2001, p. 322). Before 1850, the region was not of large importance to Russian policymakers. For the most part, Russia's goal was to secure its southern borders and develop trade with the Orient. Trade between Russia and Central Asia bounced back and grew threefold between 1851 and 1861, while the turnover of Russian industrial goods grew sixfold (McKenzie, 1974, p. 168).

Gradually, the weakened Kazakh khans sought protection from enemies from Russia in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, counting on the Russian government to initiate an alliance, while Russia aspired to complete subjection. Subsequently, Russia pursued this policy of consolidation through the liquidation of the Kazakh hordes, the division of Kazakhstan into military provinces, and the suppression of uprisings such as Kenesary Kasymov's. By the late 19th century all of the major Central Asian khanates (Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand) had been conquered or made protectorates, and the whole region was under Russian control by 1900, with treaties concluded with surrounding empires (Ubiria, 2016, pp. 49-50).

In the first half of the 19th century, after the unification of the Kazakh steppe, the Russian Empire began its movement into Mawarannahr (Transoxiana). General Mikhail Chernyaev and his troops captured Turkestan, Shymkent and Aulie-Ata in the 1860s, then advanced to Tashkent. Too weak for resistance, the Kokand Khanate eventually surrendered, while Tashkent capitulated in 1865. However, instead of establishing a vassal state, Russia created a new administrative territory — Turkestan — that became a major center for further Russian expansion in Central Asia (Khalid, 2024, pp. 81-85). The empire was ruled through a provisional statute (1865 to 1867), which was designed to minimize interventions in local customs, ownership, and justice (d'Encausse, 1994, p. 154).

The conquered areas then were organized into the newly formed Governorate-General of Turkestan with a headquarters in Tashkent. Administratively, Turkestan was divided into five provinces including Syr Darya, Semirechye, Fergana, Samarkand, and Transcaspia, and two protectorates, including the Khanate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva. Northern Kazakhstan was split into administrative oblasts with administrative connections with Orenburg, Uralsk, and Omsk. Russian and Ukrainian immigrants settled in the most fertile areas of land. Nomadic society was destroyed, and European-style

colonies and infrastructure were built, marking the transformation of the region into a colonial periphery (Soucek, 2000, pp. 200-204).

The Governor-General of Russian Turkestan, who was responsible for relations with the protectorates of Bukhara and Khiva, was also under the direct control of the Tsarist Minister of War. In 1868, all lands where Kazakhs predominantly lived, excluding Syr Darya and Semirechye oblasts, were incorporated into four new provinces — Uralsk, Turgai, Akmolinsk, and Semipalatinsk provinces/oblasts. The Uralsk and Turgai oblasts were transferred to the Orenburg Governor-Generalship and under the Ministry of the Interior, while the Akmolinsk and the Semipalatinsk oblasts transferred to the Western Siberian Governor-Generalship. In 1882, following Western Siberia's reorganization, authorities merged the Akmolinsk, the Semipalatinsk, and the Semirechye oblasts into the newly created Governor-Generalship of the Steppe with its center in Omsk. In 1898, the Semirechye oblast was transferred from the Steppe krai to the Turkestan krai (Ubiria, 2016, p. 51).

Therefore, while some regions and cities were fully incorporated into the imperial system, such as Syr Darya, Samarkand and Fergana, others like Bukhara and Khiva remained separate protectorates and were given their own political systems, in contrast to the more strict policies in the Kazakh steppe.

Regardless of the administrative changes, Russian policy continued to be based on the principle of colonial rule, and Russia never intended to assimilate the population in Central Asia. These peoples remained *inorodtsy* ("aliens") and were exempted from military service and granted no Russian citizenship. Local administration and law were left in the hands of local elites. First proposed by General von Kaufman, this policy was intended to make colonial rule efficient and inexpensive by governing through local intermediaries, rather than direct assimilation (d'Encausse, 1994, pp. 157-160).

1.1.2. On the reasons for the conquest of Central Asia and the importance of Central Asia for Russia

The motive behind the Russian invasion of Central Asia had mainly a strategic reason. Since the Russian Empire had never shared a natural border with any of its Central Asian neighbors, the Russians hoped that they could use the subjugation of the steppe to form a clear border. Furthermore, it was believed that the “natural border” should be beyond the steppe, in the more fertile Mawarannahr (Transoxiana), and these considerations, along with a desire for more Russian presence in the steppe, spurred its expansion (Khalid, 2024, p. 83).

In the 16th century, Russia maintained contact with the outside world mainly to the south with the Nogays and Kalmyks, the Kazakhs being too far away. Diplomatic relations with the Kazakhs were established in the 1570s-1580s following the conquest of Kazan and Astrakhan. However, Russia’s relations with neighboring peoples, particularly the Kazakhs, were inconsistent. In the 17th century, only sporadic contact with the governors of Siberia kept the Russians in contact with the Kazakhs. With the appearance of Moscow’s fortified towns further south in the late 17th century, the Russian state began to pay attention to the Kazakhs, not in order to conquer them, but to protect trade routes to Bukhara through Kazakh territory. The first crystallization of Russian policy towards Central Asia came in the early 18th century. From then on, Russia started its attempt to conquer the Kazakhs. This laid the basis for the final and systematic expansion of the steppe that would lead to Central Asia’s colonization (Khodarkovsky, 2002, pp. 146-149).

After the Russian defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856), expansion abroad was temporarily halted, and attention was turned to Central Asia. This new capitalist stage of development in the Russian Empire meant that the steppes and oases were considered to be a potential consumer market and a source of raw materials. During the American Civil War

(1861-1865), the world's cotton supply was severely interrupted. In turn, this led to the increased demand from Russian merchants for supplies of cotton from Bukhara and Turkestan (d'Encausse, 1994, pp. 131-132). The real target was Tashkent, the key commercial hub, which was viewed by the Russian government as a key to the control of trade routes to Bukhara, Kokand and China.

By the mid-19th century the St. Petersburg authorities had decided to abolish the Kazakh hordes altogether with the remaining khanates to prevent potential resistance in the future. The Russian conquest of Merv and Kushka brought the Russian Empire to the gates of Afghanistan. Among other reasons, many in the Russian military and elite, having been humiliated in the Crimean War (1856), came to support the idea of “revenge through expansion” and came to view the conquest of Central Asia as an element of an emerging European-style colonial project to bring “order”, “civilization”, and modernization to “backward” lands (Soucek, 2000, pp. 195-199).

Geopolitically, Russia's heartland was mainly landlocked, and Russia sought access to warm-water ports on the Baltic, Black Sea/Mediterranean, Caspian Sea, and perhaps, via an Indo-Persian corridor, the Indian Ocean. Ideologically, the Russian elites promoted Russia as the successor of steppe empires, justifying its annexation of the lands abandoned by the Mongols with a “refilling of the void” narrative based on ethno-religious chauvinism (Orthodox, Russocentric ideas of civilizing mission). Practically, intelligence about resources (such as the rumored gold mines on the banks of the Amu-Darya) and rivalries between the khanates provided a convenient excuse for the intervention (Khan, 1996, p. 48). By the 1880s Russia established a colonial administration in the region, which, although tactically and imperially important, was otherwise economically unprofitable (McKenzie, 1974, p. 177).

However, it is important to point out another perspective, such as Khalid's argument. Khalid argues that rivalry with the British Empire and the desire to annex Central Asia before them were of little relevance to the Russian expansion. The same can be said about the "cotton fever". Soviet historians liked to attribute economic motives to the conquest, whereas Western historians stressed the economic and commercial aspect of cotton; while cotton was exported from Central Asia to Russia even before the conquest, the young Russian textile industry relied upon supplies imported from the United States. When supplies were disrupted due to the American Civil War, the situation became a crisis but, as Khalid writes, there is no evidence that the Russian officials responsible for Central Asian policy were concerned with the cotton question (Khalid, 2024, pp. 82-83).

1.2 Imperial colonial policies and changes

With the Russian conquest, the empire applied the same administrative divisions that it used in other parts of Russia — oblast (province), uезд (district), and uchastok (subdistrict). Unlike the rest of the empire, Central Asia was entirely under military administration. Civil institutions and local government were allowed under military supervision, and formal institutions at the local level were preserved alongside the Russian institutions. Local autonomy remained largely intact in non-Russian and non-state matters. Most aspects of everyday life, particularly family, land, and inheritance, were thus still ruled by *adat* (customary law) or *sharia* (Islamic law). Such indirect governance reflects the way Russian colonialism was introduced to the region by folding into existing structures rather than imposing new ones (d'Encausse, 1994, pp. 153-154).

The attitudes of Russians toward Muslims hardened in the 19th century, with Central Asian Muslims often labeled as "barbaric" or "fanatical". Islam was seen as a possible source of rebellion. However, instead of persecuting it openly, the government

had a policy of “ignoring Islam” (*ignorirovanie*) and imposing some limits on its institutions and influence. In the Kazakh steppe, however, Russian state policy was more active, promoting settlement, secular education, and the sedentarization of nomadic tribes to “civilize” them and integrate them into the economy. The steppe was also the site of early modernization projects and helped produce the Kazakh intellectual elite that would later ease Soviet nation-building projects (Haugen, 2003, pp. 50-51).

Russia drew new borders, assigning different areas of new administrative units according to its own geographical and political goals. Thus, the political map of the new Central Asia was drawn without acknowledging ethnic and linguistic differences, which became relevant later only under Soviet rule. The Russian conquest had both good and bad sides, as it brought an end to the internal conflicts, which had plagued the region. On the other hand, the local population lost its independence, and became the subjects of a foreign, non-Muslim empire. The new colonial capital was built in Tashkent, which had a suitable climate, a location between the southern cities of Transoxania and the northern Kazakh steppe, and access to commercial supply lines that moved down the Syr Darya River. The city was home to the Turkic and Persian-speaking Sarts, as well as Kazakh-speaking nomads in the surrounding countryside (Soucek, 2000, pp. 202-203).

The indigenous population of Central Asia was never fully assimilated into the imperial structure and hierarchy, and the empire continued to define native people of the region as *inorodtsy*, or “alien”, which implies that Central Asians were considered as backward. As to the indigenous population of Turkestan, the term *tuzemtsy* (“natives”) was a colonial term for the local populations. The Central Asians did not have to serve in the Russian military, which was considered a marker of Russian imperial belonging. While at the same time, having Central Asian protectorates such as Bukhara and Khiva was a

unique phenomenon for the Russian Empire, modeled after other European empires (Khalid, 2024, pp. 103-104).

Also, Russia worked on developing the cotton industry. Due to the growth in cotton production, by 1905 Turkestan supplied about a third of Russian cotton needs. Silk farming was another important industry. By 1890, it met most of Imperial Russia's raw-silk needs. The settlement of Russian peasants increased, but the numbers remained small. The peasants' domains often displace the local nomadic pastures (McKenzie, 1974, p. 180).

The colonial presence was consolidated through military presence and infrastructure, particularly through the construction of railways and telegraphs. The network linked the colony to the center of the empire's economy and strategic planning. Russia's Asian territories were contiguous parts of a single, expandable Eurasian empire. Most Central Asians were still illiterate, and the education consisted mainly of the Qur'an and Persian classics. However, some Central Asians studied at new schools opened by the Russian colonial administration: the Russo-native schools (*russko-tuzemnye shkoly*), which used the Russian language and the local vernacular languages. An even more important influence was the rise of Muslim reformers — Jadids — inspired by similar movements throughout the Muslim world (Soucek, 2000, pp. 204-206).

The situation in the steppe was different due to the more centralized and tight colonial administration of the region, because it was close to Siberia and lacking large urban centers like Turkestan. At this time, the early Kazakh intelligentsia was emerging, and separate schools for Kazakhs were opened. Graduates of such schools were typically engaged in colonial administration or attended Russian universities (Ubiria, 2016, p. 55). A Kazakh national awakening happened when local Kazakh intelligentsia started emerging, which included figures such as Chokan Valikhanov, Abai Kunanbayev and Ibrai

Altynsarin, although it was more pro-Russian or pro-Western than Pan-Islamic or Pan-Turkic as a result of the Russification (Khan, 1996, p. 51).

It is also important to mention that both the Russian government and the native conservative elites (especially the religious authorities) were suspicious of reform movements, and the Emir of Bukhara and the Russian government cooperated to repress it should one occur and endanger the existing colonial order. In the early 20th century, the greatest threat to the empire was not from the native nationalists, but from Russian revolutionaries and socialist exiles sent to Central Asia. Although the revolutionaries had organized among the Russian population of the colony, which consisted largely of intellectuals and workers, little attention was given to the Muslims. The Muslims would come into their own when it was they who occupied Central Asia for the Bolsheviks when the 1917 Revolution broke out (Soucek, 2000, pp. 207-208).

1.3. Approaching internal conflicts

1.3.1. Revolution of 1905

One of the first conflicts that led to dissatisfaction with the tsarist regime was the revolution of 1905 (the first Russian revolution). By the late 19th century, migration out of villages, the breakdown of customary ties, a decline of religious authority and estate-based self-identity, and the emergence of a new urban culture meant less social support and protection, and lower living standards. When a peaceful demonstration marched to present a petition to the tsar in January 1905, the soldiers fired. The 1905 Revolution was an empire-wide release of long-building social tensions. Workers began looking to socialist activists, forming *soviets* (directly elected workers' councils), which briefly became powerful engines of mass protest. The resulting October general strike forced the tsar to

issue the October Manifesto. The revolution was suppressed, but it brought some results — the revolution forced the autocracy to grant an elected legislative assembly to Russia and permanently weakened its power (Hosking, 2001, pp. 362-372).

1.3.2 Uprising of 1916

After Russia finished its main conquests, there was not much resistance to the Russian rule. The opposition had been weak and divided. In the case of the Kazakh steppe, the old noble elite (the sultans and khans) had burned much of its political and military energy in a long series of uprisings against Russia between 1783 and 1870. As the steppe leaders had been unable to unite the tribes and to offer serious resistance to Russia, the Kazakh steppe experienced no organized large-scale opposition for a time after these battles. It was disrupted in the 1890s, when Russian and Ukrainian settlers moved into the southern steppe. Between 1896 and 1916, more than a million peasants were settled in the steppes, taking away pasture land and restricting the nomads' movements. As living conditions collapsed, relations between the settlers and nomads strained to breaking point, culminating in the 1916 revolt. The southern oases of Turkestan (like Bukhara and Samarkand) were densely populated and had little land, so even limited colonization caused common conflict in the region. These regions were further transformed when the railway network linked them to the Russian economy, encouraging the development of a textile industry and the arrival of many Russian workers who settled in towns with a Russian-only population, creating colonial cities (d'Encausse, 1994, pp. 160-163).

Most of the Kazakhs were forced to become sedentary farmers on marginal land, despite their inexperience in agriculture. Kazakh nomads, angry at the seizure of their lands, deprivation and discrimination, attacked the Russian settlers, destroying property and cutting communication lines. Revolts broke out not only in the Kazakh regions but also all through Turkestan (Samarkand, Ferghana, and Khiva). The uprisings in southern

Turkestan were even more fractured, with the Emir of Bukhara supporting the Russians against other local rulers while the rebels adopted pan-Islamist slogans (Ubiria, 2016, pp. 58-61).

In the settled areas, the rebels attacked police stations and the houses of local officials, while in the steppe, the revolt was more extensive. Imperial power collapsed in most places, large groups of Kazakhs were formed and new khans were proclaimed. In Semirechye, grievances over Russian settlers' land seizures motivated the rebels to target not only Russian officials but also Russian settlers, having their houses burned and tools and crops destroyed (Khalid, 2024, pp. 147-150). The uprising of 1916 was the largest internal revolt, and in several places, like Turgai, tsarist rule was not even restored prior to the February Revolution of 1917. Thus the revolt was one of the first cracks in the Russian Empire, fueling a series of uprisings and civil wars that would reshape Eurasia's political landscape.

1.3.3 Revolutions of 1917

The February Revolution of 1917 rose up as one of the most spontaneous mass uprisings, which led to the overthrow of the old regime. The revolution created a power struggle between the Provisional Government (formed from the Duma) and the Soviet, who created Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, which had popular legitimacy. The Provisional Government announced civil liberties and democratic reforms for all. However, the new Provisional Government still faced a set of problems that were left after the tsarist regime. The lifting of authoritarian restrictions led to a state of anarchy in both the army and society as a whole (Chamberlin, 1967, pp. 4-12).

All these reforms fueled Muslim thinkers in the former empire. In Central Asia, the reformist Jadids created the Shura-yi Islamiya, while conservative Muslim clerics

established the Ulama Jamiyati. In the Steppe region, the Kazakh elite founded the Alash Orda Party. In 1917, Muslim congresses discussed the future of Muslim territories in the post-Tsarist state. The main idea was that of territorial Muslim autonomies rather than a single Muslim state. The Provisional Government hesitated to dissolve Tsarist colonial governance in Turkestan and the Steppe, leaving little representation for local Muslims in local governance and continuing past administrative and governance structures (Ubiria, 2016, pp. 73-74).

The revolutions of 1917 and the Russian Civil War were major historical events in both Russia and Central Asia. The Bolsheviks were an unknown force in early 1917, but gained popularity as the year went on and society grew more radical. While non-Russian minorities mainly saw the revolution as a national liberation, most Russians understood it as fundamentally social and class-based in nature. The Bolsheviks who came to power following the Russian Revolution of October 1917 acted from a universalist Marxist worldview that justified class war through systemic violence and radical social engineering to create a classless society. Their seizure of power would lead to the lengthy Russian Civil War, fought not only by the “Reds” and the “Whites” but also other factions (Khalid, 2024 pp. 166-178).

Conclusion

As can be seen, the subsequent Soviet administrative divisions did not arise out of nothing. The Russian Empire and its administrative structure served as the foundation for further changes during the Soviet era, such as the Turkestan Governor-Generalship, the Steppe Region, and the division between settled and steppe zones. This shows that an administrative map that the Soviet authorities would use in the future already existed at that time, especially when it came to territories such as Tashkent, which had played an

important role since imperial times. This shows that the importance of certain cities did not arise suddenly.

This chapter shows how the region had already been divided by the time of the demarcation, and why it was more difficult for the Soviet authorities to reorganize everything, given the mixed population and the absence of “natural” boundaries between ethnic groups. The chapter explains the emergence of local elites who later played a role in the delimitation of the 1920s, as well as their origins.

The chapter also highlights the differences between the steppe and Turkestan. Unlike the Kazakh steppe, which was directly incorporated and transformed by the empire, the territories of modern Uzbekistan were incorporated into the empire under a different imperial strategy. In addition to directly administered areas like Syr Darya River, Samarkand and Fergana, the protectorates of Bukhara and Khiva were placed under Russian administration while retaining their native political structures as semi-autonomous regions. In the steppe, imperial policies were more far-reaching and integrationist, such as the abolition of the Kazakh Hordes system and resettlement policies, while in Turkestan, the role of local elites and traditions was preserved and stronger, and there was less interference in daily life, factors that would later prove significant.

Chapter 2. The ideological basis for territorial changes

The 1924 national-territorial delimitation in Central Asia was not a mere technical demarcation of zones of administrative responsibilities, but rather a direct relation to the project of the Bolsheviks to reorganize the territory of the former Russian Empire along new political lines, which followed the 1917 revolution and Civil War. After the empire collapsed, the Bolsheviks had to rule an enormous and complex territorial entity where the question of class, identity and political legitimacy was central. In this sense, the so-called “national question” became especially important for the new regime, which had to address its complex challenges.

The Bolsheviks had to resolve the “national question” in order to maintain power and influence, employing principles of nation and territory that later led to national-territorial divisions. This chapter will examine the principles upon which future territories were originally planned, such as the right to self-determination and issues of cultural autonomy, as well as the contradictions they encountered in the course of implementing their policies. Most importantly, Bolshevik policy explains why nationality became a category and a basis of politics.

The chapter also addresses the specific conditions of Central Asia, including its social structure, political fragmentation, and partial integration into the Soviet polity, and includes an archival document concerning the early Turkestan and Kyrgyz Republics, which gives insights into how the Soviet government approached the territorial question in practice.

2.1. The Bolsheviks and their ideology

The Bolsheviks seized control during the Russian Revolution by making their ideology compatible with popular pressures and by exploiting the collapse of the existing political system. The Bolsheviks came to power through public discontent, joining the mass movement of peasants, soldiers and workers, and gradually worked to strengthen their power and authority, taking over the institution that had been formed from below. In the rest of the country, the Bolsheviks used similar methods: relying on the soviet majorities where possible, and coercing the people through armed revolutionary committees (*revkomy*) in regions where the Bolsheviks had little popularity. After coming to power, the Bolsheviks quickly suppressed political pluralism by closing non-socialist newspapers, creating the Cheka, closing the Constituent Assembly, and dissolving the civil institutions of late imperial Russia (Hosking, 2001, pp. 399-400). The Bolsheviks immediately set about transforming Russian society, issuing decrees that abolished private ownership of land, nationalized most industry and banks, abolished legal distinctions of class, and proclaimed national self-determination. These decrees fostered a social revolution, while market relations were destroyed and economic collapse was accelerated (Hosking, 2001, pp. 404-406).

The Bolsheviks, awaiting the international revolution, faced two major tasks: defending the power in the territories of the former Russian Empire and transforming the principles of revolutionary theory into real government policy. They had experience in propaganda, agitation, and political struggle, but lacked experience in government. The Bolsheviks had to rule a huge multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-regional empire. The Bolsheviks had no clear idea how to govern such a vast and diverse territory (Hirsch, 2005, p. 21).

The events of the Russian Revolution of 1917 were influenced primarily by decisions taken in major cities such as Moscow and Petrograd, and indirectly by events on

the Russo-German front. It is important to mention that the soviet power was declared in Tashkent months before Petrograd. However, Soviet power in such areas had a much narrower social and ethnic base, with the soviet being almost entirely Russian, and the countryside being almost entirely Muslim. The Russian workers and soldiers controlled the city; they were isolated from the rural population, which meant the Soviet power had very little base in the countryside (Smith, 2013, p. 17).

The class and the national questions proved even more important the more the Revolution turned into a Civil War. In most of the empire the national question was a peasant question; however, social questions, such as land and power, were bound up with national issues in the Russian Empire, where national movements were often led by anti-Bolshevik intelligentsia and politicians. Thus, independence was a prominent demand among these nationalities. Where populations were more ethnically homogeneous and territories were not occupied by White or foreign armies, national governments appeared quickly (Smith, 2013, p. 18).

Soviet nationalities policy began with the creation of national territories: administrative units defined by plurality-ethnic composition. The existence of national territories automatically produced a major problem: national majorities also create national minorities, because most of the Soviet population was ethnically mixed and many ethnicities had been dispersed in Russia. Dealing with minorities proved especially difficult for the Bolsheviks because they rejected both assimilation and autonomy. The Bolsheviks rejected even voluntary assimilation as both unjust, because Russian dominance had been stacked into the system, and dangerous because it could provoke defensive nationalism from non-assimilated groups. The Bolsheviks also rejected extraterritorial national-cultural autonomy — the idea that dispersed minorities would be granted national-cultural autonomy without being tied to a territory. Lenin and Stalin

rejected this view, insisting on a strictly territorial definition of nationality. This presented Soviet authorities with a contradiction: if you were a cultural Soviet citizen in your own national republic (for example, an Uzbek in the Uzbek SSR), but there were no equivalent institutions outside it, then the authorities did not want you to assimilate. But the authorities also did not want extraterritorial institutions, such as a general national-culture organization to protect the national life outside the republics, and so the problem became one of territorial nationality versus personal nationality (Martin, 2001, pp. 32-33).

Thus, to attain power in a multi-national polity, Lenin knew they must solve the “national question”. Classic Marxism handled nationalism as a bourgeois distraction; the founders of Marxism, Marx and Engels, believed nations and nation-states would wither away under communism. However, at Lenin’s insistence, an essay by Stalin from 1913 defined a nation as a stable community of people having a common language, territory, economic life and common culture/psychology, calling for regional autonomy for Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and the Caucasus with equal rights for minority nations (inclusive of the role of language in public life) and a single party organized by regions, rather than nations, to keep class questions paramount. (Ubiria, 2016, pp. 66-67).

Lenin extended the right of self-determination to include the right to secession, not for bourgeois aims, but only to serve the interests of class struggle. He expected that after a revolution few countries would decide to secede, but economic benefits would favor staying together. Lenin argued that the political rights of minorities were preserved because their own representatives had voting rights at all levels of decision-making. In practice, it is rather more difficult to imagine the internationalist Bolshevik leaders allowing the little nations to secede. (Ubiria, 2016, pp. 68-69).

Lenin recognized that “Great Russian chauvinism” existed in every communist (Suny & Martin 2001, p. 68). Russian nationalism was a form of “great power chauvinism”

because it was imperial by its nature. Stalin, on the other hand, spoke of the “Great-Russian chauvinism” without connecting it in any way to the imperial past or making it special. Lenin seemed to downplay local nationalism, considering it a backlash, while Stalin considered them all equally dangerous, and this is what later influenced Soviet policy (Suny & Martin, p. 72).

Bolshevik nationalism is thus an ideology which covers class interests by turning class battle into a general, and “above-class”, national one. As such, national identity itself is not historic but linked to modern capitalism (and early socialism), and is thus not a state of society in itself but a stage which must be progressed through on the path to proper worldwide socialism. Because national identity is real, what is called the nationalism of oppressed non-Russian nations is not only the concealed class protest of the oppressed, but a just battle against Russian great-power chauvinism. Nationalism can not be purely reactionary. Demands limited to national “forms” (language, schools, symbols, local autonomy, etc.) are defensible, and their fulfillment breaks the alliance of the national bourgeoisie with the above-class national intelligentsia, accelerates the process of disintegrating classes, and rallies all non-Russian workers and peasants around the socialist program. In effect, nationalism can be neutralized by granting the forms of nationhood (Martin, 2001, p. 8).

2.2 Implementation of the Bolshevik’s plan in Central Asia and the region’s response

As was mentioned above, Soviet policy started creating national territories after establishing its power. The first announcement was in March 1918 when the Bolsheviks planned to create a Tatar-Bashkir republic, and then planned to do the same with Turkestan. The first of these so-called national republics (the Bashkir ASSR) was created

only in March 1919, due to the Russian Civil War. This was quickly followed by the creation of other autonomous republics, autonomous oblasts, and other national entities. This process was further accelerated in 1922 with the recognition of the Ukrainian, Belorussian, Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani republics in the USSR constitution, and reached the turning point in 1924 with the Central Asian national delimitation, which finally established the Soviet national republics (Martin, 2001, p. 31).

After the overthrow of the Tsarist regime, even before the Bolsheviks seized power, the political liberalization led to the rise of organized Muslim activism across the former empire, with reformists Jadid, and conservative Muslim intellectuals forming *Shura-yi Islamiya* and *Ulama Jamiyati* in Turkestan. Meanwhile, in the Steppe, Kazakh intellectuals founded the Alash Orda Party in March 1917. Muslim congresses discussed the future: the Tatars were in favor of a single Muslim entity, while Central Asians advocated regional autonomies. Determined not to disrupt the colonial system of Central Asia, the Provisional Government left Turkestan and the Steppe largely under the control of the government in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks, in turn, chose a different path. To appeal to the non-Russian masses, the Bolsheviks issued the Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia and an address “To the Toiling Muslims of Russia and the East”, promising them equal rights and self-determination; however these were largely seen as a tactical measure, and by January 1918, Stalin would state self-determination was conditional on being a “proletarian nation” (Ubiria, 2016, pp. 74-76). This proclamation was addressed to Muslim workers, the “proletariat” of Marxism, and implicitly excluded the bourgeoisie. This mattered because in Central Asia, as in most other Muslim countries in the world at the time, there was no industrial working class, and most of the local population were educated classes, clergy, property owners or petty bourgeoisie. So the Soviets could plausibly argue they wished

Muslim self-determination, but only for the “right class” of Muslims (Soucek, 2000, p. 212).

After the Bolsheviks takeover in Tashkent, Muslims in Central Asia had to choose between cooperating with a government that repeatedly rejected them or establishing authority of their own. The split between liberals (reformists/Jadids) and conservatives (Ulema) in Central Asian society remained as conservative leader Shir Ali Lapin attempted to cooperate with the Bolsheviks and sought a coalition government. However, the Third Regional Congress of Soviets (15 November 1917) seized power in southern Central Asia, creating the Turkestan Council of People’s Commissars (*Turksovnarkom*). Kolesov rejected local autonomy, excluding Muslims from power (d’Encausse, H. C, p. 225). As a response, a Kokand congress formed a Turkestan (Kokand) Autonomy, and was led first by Tynyshpaev and then by Mustafa Chokay. This government aimed to support a shari’ah-compatible regime and grant non-Muslims a third of its seats. The autonomy remained weak and was defeated by the Red Army in February 1918. The defeated opposition went into exile or began resisting within the Basmachi movement. The Bolsheviks unified the territory and declared the Turkestan Soviet Republic on 30 April 1918, while Uzbek, Kazakh and Russian were proclaimed the official languages (Ubiria, 2016, pp. 74-76).

After the Kokand autonomy failed, there were other Muslim and Kazakh movements in Central Asia that fought for political rights and autonomy. In December 1917, at the Third Kazakh Congress in Orenburg (Dec 5-13), Kazakh autonomy was announced, and the Kazakh government was formed under Aliqan Bokeyqan-uli with such figures as Baytursin-uli and Dosmaghambet-uli. Due to its size and the realities of tribalism, Alash Orda was divided into Western and Eastern parts. In early 1918 Orenburg was captured by the Bolsheviks and its railroad connection with Tashkent, the Orenburg-

Tashkent railway, was disrupted, separating the two parts. However, some Kazakhs had started supporting the Bolsheviks. Former 1916 rebel leader Amangeldi Iman-uli supported the Soviets, while Alibii Jangeldin became a leading Bolshevik organizer in the steppes. In March 1919, Jangeldin convinced Baytursin-uli to defect to the Bolsheviks, and by November 1919 the Western Alash Orda shifted towards the Soviets (d'Encausse, 1994, pp. 237-238).

In July 1919, Lenin provisionally governed the steppe via the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) Revolutionary Committee (*Kirrevkom*). Headed by a Russian, Pestkovskii, the committee included Kazakhs such as Jangeldin. After being reorganized, the *Kirrevkom* included the former leadership of Alash Orda in January 1920, and ordered the dissolution of its institutions in March 1920. Alash Orda elites continued to hold influence, as there were few other local political alternatives (d'Encausse, p. 238). Moscow soon established its own Soviet structure for Kazakhs. On 26 August 1920, Lenin and Kalinin signed a decree establishing the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) ASSR, which was officially established in October 1920. Unlike Turkestan, the main principle of this republic was based on the ethno-linguistic “native nationality” component, which later became one of the main principles of the creation of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan in 1924 (Soucek, 2000, pp. 215-216).

After Kokand was destroyed, the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic ((TASSR) was established in April 1918. In Turkestan, even though the Soviet power existed it was not dominant; non-Bolsheviks had great influence, and some Muslims joined Soviet political institutions due to the Soviet pressure. Moscow directly interfered in 1919 by demanding better treatment for Muslims, nativization (*korenizatsiya*), and the creation of a Muslim Communist wing (*Musbyuro*). National leaders, such as Turar Ryskulov, became members of the party, combining socialism with national autonomy. Muslim

Communists pushed for the creation of a single autonomous Turkic republic instead of creating separate national republics in Central Asia, culminating in a congress endorsing Turkic unity and more autonomy in January 1920. However, Moscow rejected this idea in March 1920, refusing to support the creation of a Turkic republic, and completely subjugating Turkestan to the Russian Communist Party. In addition, Moscow centralized the military, financial and foreign affairs of Turkestan (Soucek, 2000, pp. 216-220).

After Khiva, the last independent, major threat came from Bukhara; the Soviet forces moved to destroy the emirate in 1920. The emirate was collapsing; trade with Russia had ceased, the economy was ruined (70% of the herds destroyed), and public anger was increasing. The Soviets relied on the Young Bukharan and the Bukharan Communist Party. Nevertheless, despite Young Bukharan hopes for a local revolution rather than a Red Army invasion, the Red Army invaded Bukhara. As the emir fled the city, the city was taken on 2 September 1920. A revolutionary committee led by Faizullah Khojaev seized power, pledging land reform, nationalization of major resources, and equal treatment of nationalities. The new Bukharan People's Republic sought a middle ground between revolutionary commitments and customary values. It also protected private property and guaranteed Islamic law as the basis of the new state, although freedom was restricted if it contradicted Islam. The leadership avoided deep class conflict and relied on the old elite. Although the independence of Bukhara was formally recognized by the Soviets, the pressure remained. Over time the Young Bukharans slowed reforms and increasingly became nationalists (supporting Turkification and modernization), moving away from the Marxist line favored by Moscow. By 1921-1923, when Soviet rule was consolidated, Moscow began to attack this "nationalist deviation" and sought to reintegrate the territory with political means rather than violence (d'Encausse, 1994, pp. 245-250).

2.3 About the Turkestan and early Kyrgyz Republic

First and foremost, it should be noted that in pre-revolutionary literature (and prior to 1925), today's Kazakhs were referred to as Kyrgyz-Kaisaks or Kyrgyz, a name borrowed from the neighboring Kyrgyz people — who were known as Kara-Kyrgyz — and thus these terms are used interchangeably in this work. The term “Kyrgyz-Kaisaks” was used to distinguish the Kazakhs from the South Russian Cossacks, whereas the term “Kara-Kyrgyz” (now “Kyrgyz”) literally means “black Kyrgyz” or “mountain Kyrgyz”, since the lifestyles of these two ethnic groups differed as much as their geographical regions.

As an archival record of early Soviet views on territorial organization and the “national question” in Central Asia, a document containing arguments in favor of the administrative redistribution of regions between the Kyrgyz (KASSR) and Turkestan republics is of particular interest. The following document is a report presenting the administrative commission's arguments in favor of the need to transfer the Syr Darya and Semirechye regions to the Kyrgyz ASSR (KSSR). In the excerpt, the commission explains why the Syr Darya and Semirechye regions (within the Turkestan Republic), where the core population consists of Kyrgyz/Kazakh nomads, should be transferred to the Kyrgyz Republic. According to the authors, this is necessary not only for administrative reasons, but also because the population of these territories is historically, economically, and kinship-related to the Kyrgyz/Kazakhs of the KSSR and therefore should not be divided by artificially imposed borders (*Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (TsGA RK)*, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, pp. 118–119).

The commission emphasizes that the living conditions of the Kyrgyz population, nomadic and semi-nomadic in both Turkestan and KSSR, differ significantly from the lifestyle of other groups, especially Uzbeks, who were predominantly sedentary

agriculturalists. For this reason, governance and political approaches, in the commission's view, should be distinct and adapted to the specific social and economic realities of the Kyrgyz/Kazakh population. The authors also note that nomadic communities have traditionally crossed administrative boundaries in search of pasturelands and markets, and although the border between the KSSR and Turkestan stretched for roughly 3,000 versts, the population on both sides in practice formed a single historical and social unit. Finally, the commission argues that dividing the Kyrgyz population between different republics was an artificial barrier created by the Tsarist administration, and that the Soviet government should remove it in order to facilitate policy implementation, strengthen the "power of the poor," promote economic development, and raise the political consciousness of the population (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, pp. 118–119).

Thus, the commission concluded that the transfer of Kyrgyz (Kazakh) districts from Turkestan to the KSSR must not be delayed, as "any postponement would be harmful to the political and economic balance between the neighboring Turkestan Republic and the KSSR". It is necessary to attach not only the Syr Darya and Semirechye regions, but also the Kara-Kyrgyz region (carved out of Semirechye), the Jizzakh district of Samarkand province, and the Amu-Darya Department, particularly because the Kyzylkum pastures within this territory are historically essential for grazing and seasonal migration of Kyrgyz/Kazakh nomadic groups. The commission also considered the location of the KSSR's administrative center in Orenburg to be impractical and inconvenient, since in the republic's new borders it would be too distant from the main concentration of the Kyrgyz population, both politically and economically (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, pp. 118–119).

Therefore, the commission proposed relocating the capital/administrative center of the KSSR to a more densely populated area with a predominantly Kyrgyz population, specifically, to one of the cities planned to be incorporated into the republic. The final

decision on the new center should be made by the All-Kyrgyz Party and Soviet Congress representing the KSSR in its new borders. Finally, the commission proposed removing Orenburg province from the KSSR, since its population is almost entirely European, with the exception of only two Kyrgyz volosts. Instead, the province should be placed under the direct authority of the federal center as a separate provincial (*губернское*) administrative unit (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, pp. 118–119).

Thus, based on the report of the administrative commission, the justifications for redrawing the borders were not so much ethnically motivated as based on administrative governability and socio-economic ranking. The arguments for transferring territories lay mainly in the reasons of the nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle of the Kyrgyz/Kazakhs, the historical and kinship links on both sides of the borders, and the elimination of “artificial” territorial demarcation stemming from the tsarist colonial policy. This reasoning aligns with Hirsch’s argument that the border-making process was not a purely national project, but was created through ethnographic, economic, and administrative considerations. Mobility, economic practices, and governability suggest that “national” borders were not about accurately representing existing ethnicities, but about constructing administratively viable and politically manageable territories (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 148-149).

Furthermore, the following section introduces archival statistics on population size and ethnic composition across the Turkestan ASSR and its constituent oblasts. It helps to demonstrate the demographic presence of the Kyrgyz/Kazakh population within the republic and clarify why territorial reallocation was framed as an urgent administrative and political issue.

Table 1. Population of the Turkestan ASSR by oblast (archival data)

Administrative unit (Turkestan ASSR)	Population
Turkestan ASSR (total)	5.221.963
Amu Darya oblast	160.595
Semirechye oblast	959.620
Samarkand oblast	729.649
Syr Darya oblast	1.305.831
Turkmen oblast	333.793
Ferghana oblast	1.669.475

Source: TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, p. 129.

Table 2. Ethnic composition of the Syr Darya oblast (total, urban, and rural population)

Population group	Kyrgyz/Kazakhs (%)	Uzbeks and Sarts (%)	Russians (%)	Other (%)
Total population (oblast-wide)	50.8	28.3	12.8	8.1
Urban population	—	58.3	25.5	16.5*
Rural population	64.5	18.9	8.8	7.8

*For the urban population, “Other” is calculated as the remainder to 100% (in case the original figures were incomplete/unclear in the excerpt).

Source: TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, p. 130.

Table 3. Share of “Kyrgyz oblasts” in the Turkestan ASSR (percentages)

Indicator	Share
Kyrgyz population as a share of total Turkestan ASSR population	43.4%
Territory of “Kyrgyz oblasts” as a share of total Turkestan ASSR territory	53.2%

Source: TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, p. 132.

Thus, according to these data, the Kyrgyz/Kazakh regions constituted a crucial part of the Turkestan ASSR, both in terms of ethnic composition, demography and the territory: Kyrgyz/Kazakhs constituted 43.4% of the population of the Turkestan ASSR, and the Kyrgyz oblasts constituted 53.2% of its territory. This means that the question about their administrative affiliation was significant. Furthermore, Syr Darya oblast data suggest it lacked ethnic homogeneity, and the distribution of people of different ethnicities differed sharply between town and countryside. Kyrgyz grouped together inside the Syr Darya population, constituting the majority (50.8%), but they proportionally were larger in the countryside (64.5%) than in cities, where Uzbeks (58%) and Russians constituted the most populous ethnic groups. This clearly shows the colonial administrative division of rural nomadic areas from urban settings and sedentary populations. Overall, the statistics demonstrate that the commission’s further reorganization was motivated not only by the ethnicity of the people but also by a pragmatic logic which linked population policy, economic structure (in particular, nomadic and sedentary life) and territorial integrity. The concern for spatial consolidation and the administrative goals of the Soviet state played a more prominent role than strict adherence to ethnographic representation. The statistics

and demography may also explain why urban centers such as Tashkent became sources of conflict, as they were surrounded by rural areas where the population was ethnically diverse and heterogeneous. As such, the archival materials are a fitting example of early Soviet state-instrumental attitudes to territorial reorganization and the “national question” in Central Asia.

Next, as a normative source documenting the transition from political debate to the legal institutionalization of autonomy, the Decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) and the Council of People’s Commissars (SNK) of the RSFSR “On the Autonomous Kyrgyz Socialist Soviet Republic,” published in *Izvestia VTsIK* on 1 September 1920, is of particular importance. The document defines the territorial composition of the Kyrgyz ASSR, outlines its system of governing bodies, and demonstrates the limits of autonomy within the RSFSR (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 1, d. 2, p. 1-2).

Table 4. Territories Included in the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR), according to the Decree of 1 September 1920

Administrative unit included in the KASSR (1920)	Uezds / volosts listed in the decree
Semipalatinsk Oblast	Pavlodar Uezd; Semipalatinsk Uezd; Ust-Kamenogorsk Uezd; Zaysan Uezd; Karkaraly Uezd
Akmolinsk Oblast	Atbasar Uezd; Akmolinsk Uezd; Kokchetav Uezd; Petropavlovsk Uezd; part of Omsk Uezd (<i>exact delimitation to</i>

	<i>be agreed between Kirrevkom and Sibrevkom)</i>
Turgai Oblast	Kustanai Uezd; Aktyubinsk Uezd; Irgiz Uezd; Turgai Uezd
Uralsk Oblast	Uralsk Uezd; Lbishchensk Uezd; Temir Uezd; Guryev Uezd
Mangyshlak Uezd (Transcaspian Oblast)	Mangyshlak Uezd; 4th and 5th Adaev volosts of Krasnovodsk Uezd
Areas transferred from Astrakhan Governorate	Sinemorskaya Volost; Bukey Horde; adjoining state lease lands near the 1st and 2nd Primorsk districts; Safronovskaya, Ganyushinskaya, and Nikolaevskaya volosts (<i>administratively subordinated to Kirrevkom except in economic matters; joint commission to regulate relations</i>)

Source: TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 1, d. 2, p. 1.

This excerpt from the decree reveals how the Autonomous Kyrgyz/Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic was to function. First, it states that the inclusion of Kyrgyz/Kazakh territories currently belonging to the Turkestan Republic into the Kyrgyz Republic would take place only on the basis of the expressed will of the local population. At the same time, the decree demonstrates that the republic's autonomy was strongly constrained. For example, several key commissariats and institutions (including finance, food supply, workers' inspection, economic administration, communications, statistics, transport, and

security bodies) remained directly subordinate to the corresponding central RSFSR commissariats, in order to preserve unified financial and economic policy. Foreign affairs and foreign trade were explicitly retained as the exclusive competence of the central RSFSR authorities.

The decree assigns full authority to the Kyrgyz Revolutionary Committee (Kirrevkom) until the republican Congress of Soviets could be arranged, and it establishes transitional arrangements whereby certain regions (notably Akmolinsk and Semipalatinsk) remained temporarily under the jurisdiction of the Sibrevkom, with unresolved disputes to be settled by the central RSFSR institutions. Thus, the decree shows a compromise version of early Soviet “national self-determination”: autonomy was formally recognized, but in reality it was tightly controlled by Moscow. The system of governance was designed to keep the republic integrated into the wider Soviet framework and dependent on central authorities.

Conclusion

Overall, administrative processes in Central Asia were not an isolated measure, but rather as the result of the entanglement of Bolshevik ideology, imperial, colonial legacies and local considerations. Although national self-determination and the question of national boundaries were key issues of Bolshevism, the practical application of those principles was always constrained by the realities of governing such a highly diverse and unevenly integrated region. Furthermore, it has been shown in archival materials that the early Soviet ideas of territorial organization were guided by governability, economic integration, and settlement patterns, as well as ethnographic considerations, suggesting that delimitation was a tool of stabilization and statehood consolidation, rather than an objective implementation of the principle of national self-determination.

Chapter 3. Approaching national-territorial delimitation

The establishment of borders between the Kazakh and Uzbek Republics during the early Soviet period was a multifaceted process, based on several principles that led the decision-making process. The formation of such units was the product of the interaction of Soviet nationality policy, administrative experimentation, ethnographic research, and the interests and desires of Soviet central authorities and local leaders. Hence, the early 1920s were a transitional period in which Soviet authorities were gradually discarding imperial rule and introducing a new system based on ethno-federalism and national-territorial units.

The chapter explores the development of Soviet nationality politics for Central Asia, including the debate around the Turkestan administrative structure and the rising importance of ethnographic and statistical knowledge in addressing national questions. Furthermore, I use what seems to be the archival traces of how these same questions were debated at the time. These include the possibility of unifying the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) lands of Turkestan with the Kazakh Soviet republic. Taken together, they shed light on how Soviet policymakers and local political figures understood ethnicity, territory, economic organization, and political power.

3.1 A period after 1920

By the mid-1920s, the USSR comprised a hierarchy of union republics, autonomous republics, and autonomous oblasts, within which it created new “national majorities”. To promote non-Russian national languages, cultures, and national elites within their territories, the Soviet government issued several decrees in 1923 in favor of indigenization. In addition, the policy was informed by the Soviets’ belief that Russian

culture had been privileged in the Tsarist era at the expense of other cultures, prompting the promotion of national cultures, combined with de-Russification (Martin, 2001, p. 31).

Starting from the Turkestan Republic, after its creation in 1918, the Bolsheviks changed their approach to the administrative issue, moving towards ethno-federalism in 1919, which also forced a change in the administrative structure of Turkestan, since it was multi-ethnic. In late 1919, the Turkestan Commission (*Turkkomissii*) was sent to Tashkent to eliminate “Great Russian chauvinism”, replace imperial administration with local Muslims, and propose reorganizing administrative units based on ethnic and economic factors. After some debate, the Commission identified three main national groups that could serve as the basis for future nation-building: Uzbeks as sedentary Turkic-speaking populations, Kazakhs as nomadic steppe peoples, and Turkmen as pastoral nomads. However, the plan met resistance from the Muslim national communists, led by Turar Ryskulov, who advocated that all Turkestan be united into a single autonomous Turkic Soviet Republic and a single Turkic Communist Party, as dividing was detrimental to economic integration and the colonial character of Turkestan. Although Moscow rejected Ryskulov’s plan, it accepted the claims about Russian chauvinism. In 1920, the Party began preparations for the future national-territorial delimitation, with particular emphasis on ethnographic data; although Turkestan was still under central control. Ryskulov and his allies resigned in favor of more loyal cadres, and the republic was later renamed the Turkestan ASSR (Ubiria, 2016, pp. 102-104).

The delimitation plan was under development, and the first steps were taken between 1921 and 1923, when the Turkmen oblast and the East Iranian (Pamir) oblast were created. There were also attempts to form a Kara-Kyrgyz oblast, but it was not established due to internal divisions among Kara-Kyrgyz groups, and opposition from Kazakh communists, who rejected their separate national status (Kazakh communists argued that

the Kara-Kyrgyz constituted part of the Kazakh people). Similar events took place in Bukhara and Khorezm, where the ethnically delineated Turkmen, Uzbeks, Karakalpaks, and Iranian speaking populations were effectively established, while the Kazakhs were excluded. Thus, the Soviet government tried to consolidate ethnolinguistic communities within autonomies, reduce intertribal conflicts by creating new administrative boundaries, promote national cultures as part of Soviet nation-building, while keeping everything under Moscow's control (Ubiria, 2016, pp. 105-106).

The ethnographic approach was favored by the People's Commissariat for Nationalities (*Narkomnats*), which was tasked with winning the support of non-Russian peoples for the revolution. The State Planning Commission (*Gosplan*) favored the economic approach and consisted mostly of non-party experts who were responsible for creating the centralized economic plan. However, both institutions relied on the imperial ethnographers (Hirsch, p. 65), specifically on The Commission for the Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of Russia (KIPS). By the early 1920s, KIPS ethnographers were key figures in the regionalization debate, and engaged in practical ethnographic knowledge for both sides. For *Narkomnats*, KIPS ethnographers drew the ethnographic borderlines, advised on the creation of national-territorial units, and guided the process of grouping tribes and clans into new nationalities. The same ethnographers also worked for *Gosplan* and *Goskolonit* (the State Colonization Research); for these institutions, the ethnographers analyzed humans as productive forces, correlating their ethnicity, the way of life (*byt*), and economic specialization for economic-administrative planning and enterprise development (Hirsch, 2005, p. 92).

After *Narkomnats* established its own ethnographic institution, the Central Ethnographic Bureau, KIPS deepened its cooperation with other state institutions. However, with *Narkomnats*, ethnographers worked on language development projects for

the former “*inorodtsy*”, and constituted the core behind the preparation for the 1926 Soviet census. With Gosplan and Goskolonit, KIPS participated in major scientific conferences, promoting the idea that ethnographic data could be used to assign labor to maximize economic output. In 1923, the Communist Party accepted the compromise, approving economic-administrative regionalization only “in principle”, deploying it to test regions, and reaffirming national-territorial autonomy. Party leaders rejected overt nationalism and colonial exploitation, arguing that Soviet growth would be fundamentally different from European imperialism. Thus, the implementation of both approaches allowed the creation of new economic-administrative units, such as oblasts and *kraia*, while leaving the republics and autonomous units the jurisdiction over their internal affairs and also the right to reject incorporation. In practice, ethnic divisions were often changed to further economic goals, while nationalities’ prerogatives continually conflicted with those of Gosplan, limiting them. By the mid-1920s, the Soviet state had adopted both models as part of its institutional framework; the contradiction between economic rationality and ethnographic nation-building would be the source of tension throughout the decade (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 94-98).

3.1.1 “The Question of Unifying the Kyrgyz Territories of Turkestan with the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) SSR and the Problem of State Delimitation of Central Asia along National Lines”

In light of the further division of Turkestan into republics, archival material on the problem of demarcation of Central Asia along national lines appears revealing. This document appears to be a joint report authored by the Kyrgyz side, and dates from 1923-1924. The report presents a detailed argumentation from the Kazakh side about the unification of the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) territories of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic with the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) Soviet Socialist Republic, simultaneously

placing this issue within the broader context of the planned national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia.

The report attempts to justify the inclusion of Kyrgyz (Kazakh) territories of the Turkestan ASSR with the KSSR, emphasizing that the unification of the Kyrgyz territories had a solid political and legal basis well before the discussion of Central Asian delimitation began. The report uses official documents and decrees in its argumentation, such as the decrees of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (*VTsIK*) of 26 August 1920, which recognized the clearly expressed will of the population of the territories concerned; the decisions of the First All-Kyrgyz Congress of Soviets (October 1921), which supported the necessity of uniting the Kyrgyz people within one state framework; resolutions adopted by the Kyrgyz population of Turkestan, including the congress held in Aulie-Ata in 1921, which also favored accession to the Kyrgyz SSR (*TsGA RK*, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, p. 195). The reference to the congress in Aulie-Ata is based on the archival material and does not widely discussed in the secondary literature, which may reflect the historical unevenness in the recording of local-level political mobilization for historiography. Here, it is not used as widely recognized congress, but as an example of how authorities documented “local support” for territorial reorganization.

According to the report, the border between the Kyrgyz SSR and the Turkestan ASSR was artificial and divided a single national body of the Kyrgyz people as well as an economically unified territory. This division produced negative consequences, depriving the Kyrgyz economy of a unified administrative center; fragmenting already limited cultural and intellectual resources; and creating constant conflicts over land and water use. It also complicated dispute resolution because decisions had to be coordinated between distant administrative centers, such as Tashkent and Orenburg (*TsGA RK*, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, pp. 196-197).

The report argues that having the Kyrgyz areas in the territory of the Turkestan ASSR was politically dangerous. Due to the different economic systems, the coexistence of the relatively equal indigenous groups, such as Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, could put the national struggle above the class struggle. The isolation of the Turkestan Kyrgyz from the general political line of the Kyrgyz ASSR meant that they were to be subject to political measures directed primarily towards the Uzbek population. This hampered the development of class differentiation among the Kyrgyz and the political education of the Kyrgyz youth. This was important from a Bolshevik standpoint, as the Bolshevik Party described class struggle as a prerequisite of socialist transformation. Without a relatively stable class structure, it would be difficult for the party to mobilize the population along class lines and set up the newly formed Soviet political system

The report also considers the national and cultural principles to be the most important, yet also acknowledges the importance of natural, historical, and economic factors in the delimitation process. A national territory is a geographical area, in which a given nationality, or culturally related groups, constitute an absolute and relative majority. The report then lists several regions that would become part of a future Kyrgyz ASSR: most of the Syr-Darya region, the Semirechye region, and several districts of the Samarkand region. However, it also proposed that a separate Kara-Kyrgyz autonomous region be formed if the Kara-Kyrgyz people so desired (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, p. 197).

The report also presents a very important point for consideration, namely the question of Tashkent's affiliation. A significant part of the report is devoted to the disputed issue of Tashkent and the Mirzachul district. The authors directly challenge Uzbek claims to these territories. As it is presented in the report, historically, Tashkent had never been an Uzbek city, as it had existed long before the emergence of Uzbekistan, and for many

centuries had been part of the sphere of political and economic influence of Kyrgyz nomads. The report pointed to the period of Kyrgyz political domination over Tashkent from 1598 to 1798, as well as the role of Kyrgyz leaders in defending Tashkent from the Russian conquest. From an ethnographic perspective, the report criticizes the 1920 census figures as representing an undercount of the Kyrgyz population, and erroneous classification of the Kyrgyz and affiliated groups (like the Kurama) as Uzbeks. It is also critical of the methods used to count nomadic people. The Kurama are described not as a separate group, but as part of the Kyrgyz nation. Economically, Tashkent is mainly seen as an important market and supply center for the Kyrgyz nomadic economy, not for the agriculture of the Uzbeks. The development of irrigation in the region is discussed. The control over the Tashkent and Mirzachul areas is presented as important for the eventual sedentarization of the Kyrgyz and the development of irrigated agriculture in previously Kyrgyz settled regions (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, pp. 198-200).

However, the report deliberately excludes the Tashkent urban population from the national figures, following a socialist principle that the cities are the product of the labor of the entire surrounding region, not only of their residents, and contrasting this with the transfer of mostly Russian cities such as Ufa and Orenburg into national republics elsewhere in the USSR. In this light, the report finds no principled reasons for denying the Kyrgyz SSR control over Tashkent, particularly given the size of the city's European (non-indigenous) population during the 1920s. The report mentions that Tashkent is the regional center of an area that is 75% populated by Kyrgyz people, and this city is the only center of the future Kyrgyz Republic, closely linked in its historical ties and in its present economic situation with the Kyrgyz people's regions (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, p. 205).

Thus, the report concluded that the national question could only be successfully resolved if the nation-building policies of the state gave the historically oppressed peoples

the best possible prospects. It followed that the unification of the entire Kyrgyz territory of Turkestan and the Kyrgyz SSR, including Tashkent, could be considered to be a logical, justified, and politically necessary measure of Soviet nationality policy.

3.2 The Question of Identity and the Role of the Census

3.2.1 Census

The issue of national identity of people was also important because it was closely linked to the formation of borders. In the early 1920s, the majority of people in the eastern territories of the former Russian Empire had no defined sense of nationality. Some authors also note the role of censuses in shaping the sense of belonging to a particular nationality. As an example, rural and non-urban subjects registered their nationality in the 1920 census in terms of clan, tribe, religion or place of origin (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 146-148). Generally, the early censuses were incomplete or inaccurate, but later censuses, especially those during World War II, prohibited the publication of certain detailed results due to the strict censorship.

Due to the revolution, civil war, famine, and economic transformations, censuses in the Soviet Union were conducted irregularly. The official census rounds were held in 1920, 1926, 1939, 1959, 1970 and 1979. The first Soviet census was conducted in 1920, during the conditions of the Russian Civil War and economic catastrophe. The census was intended to record demographic, agricultural and industrial data. For the first time, the census also recorded nationality, native language, education and literacy, but religion was abolished from the census on Lenin's advice. However, there was little paper or trained staff, some enumerators were attacked or murdered, and many areas were not counted at all. Around 28% of the population were excluded, while territories such as Central Asia,

most of Ukraine, Siberia, and the Caucasus were not counted. Despite the fact that it was incomplete and not fully published, historically it was the first to include nationality as a census category (Schwartz, 1986, pp. 52-53).

The archival report mentioned in the previous section also mentions the 1920 census in the context of the division into national territories. This report highlights the erroneous nature of the 1920 All-Russian Census data and states that that: “due to a number of errors that found their way into the materials of the 1920 All-Russian Census and into the data concerning the administrative zoning of Turkestan — or more precisely, due to the overall unreliability of this information — it would be highly inappropriate and mistaken to use statistical data of this category as the basis for judgments regarding the question of the state delimitation of Central Asia, as some Turkestanis are inclined to do. The use of such data is possible only after careful verification and comparison with pre-revolutionary statistical materials”. (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, p. 201).

As an example of potentially erroneous conclusions, the report mentions the data of the Central Statistical Administration (TsSU) of the Turkestan Republic, specifically the attempt of the TsSU to assign an Uzbek majority to the ethnographic composition of the population in a number of volosts of Tashkent uezd, whereas eight years earlier — that is, in 1912 — these same areas had been characterized by a predominance of Kyrgyz (Kazakh) population (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, p. 201).

Presenting further arguments, the report states that a distinctive feature of the recorded growth of the Uzbek population appears in the suburban areas, whereas in these areas the increase should in fact have been attributed primarily to the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) population — rather than to Uzbeks — due to the inflow of famine migrants from Kyrgyz regions during that period. The extraordinary rise in the number of Sarts-Uzbeks is explained by the inclusion in the 1920 census of urban agricultural workers who at that

time were living in *kishlaks* but were also enumerated in parallel at their place of permanent residence in the city. On the other hand, a number of Kyrgyz rural communities were not recorded at all, or, if recorded, were classified as Uzbeks. As an example, there were cases in Tashkent uezd where a number of settlements that in 1911 had been populated exclusively by Kyrgyz inhabitants, according to the data of the Turkestan Central Statistical Administration, were listed as Uzbek in later records.

Based on these excerpts from the report, it can be concluded that the census in the early Soviet period was not simply a technical tool for population counting, but rather part of the political process of nation-building. The census was inaccurate, but its errors were not accidental, as demonstrated by examples of double counting or deliberate undercounting. The census shaped the ethnic landscape, which made the territories easy to divide.

According to Soviet ethnographers Bruk and Kozlov, the results of the 1920 and 1926 censuses were used by government, party, and economic bodies to address a wide range of issues, including national-territorial demarcation and the development of national culture. This demonstrates that this was not simply a demographic project, but a tool for governing a multinational state (Bruk & Kozlov, 1967, p. 4).

The comparison between the 1920 and 1926 censuses revealed how the wording of questions changed the statistical outcome. For example, the 1920 census asked “To which nationality do you consider yourself to belong?” while attempting to distinguish nationality from citizenship. In 1926, the instructions for these questions were simplified. The term for “nationality” was given in a more easily understandable alternative for the population —“*narodnost*” (people/ethnicity), which had fewer political implications than “nation”. The enumerators were also instructed not to confuse religion, citizenship, or residence with ethnicity. Nationality could differ from that of one’s native language; the answer should

not be amended; and if respondents hesitated, preference was to be given to the mother's nationality. Changes in the formulation of the question and methodology altered the statistical results, without reflecting the real demographic picture, such as the statistical increase in the number of Ukrainians in the North Caucasus. Thus, the author shows that these changes were mostly methodological, and that census categories and instructions served not only to measure ethnic reality, but also helped to shape it (Bruk & Kozlov, 1967, pp. 5-6).

The concept of nationality as defined by the Soviet census was based largely on individual ethnic self-consciousness, not language, religion or descent. An individual was allowed to declare the nation or nationality with which they identified at the time, regardless of the nationality of their ancestors (Bruk & Kozlov, 1967, p. 6). While this strategy would come to institutionalize ethnicity as a formal category of personal identity, the census served also to normalize national self-categorization as an expected and legitimate mode of political belonging by repeatedly structuring individuals' engagements with the state around a recognized national framework. In this sense the census was not simply an instrument of measurement, but also a site of nationalization, shaping how the populations understood and articulated their identities.

However, census taking was also difficult, as many of the census enumerators were Russian university students with little knowledge of the local languages; they were not welcomed and many locals rejected the official categories. In the Russian Far East, for example, people identified themselves with regional terms like "*Sibiriak*", which were not accepted by authorities, while in the case of the Uighurs in Central Asia, local demand forced authorities to recognize groups that ethnographers would not count as ethnic. Once the data was collected, ethnographers and statisticians finalized the official list of nationalities. The original list included approximately 200 nationalities, synonyms for

nationalities, and a category of “questionable nationalities”. By the end of 1927, 172 peoples were registered as nationalities, while very small groups had been eliminated and merged with adjacent ones. Larger groups considered “questionable” were classified as subgroups of larger nationalities, with others designated as “unfixed” and studied further in ethnographic projects in the late 1920s (Hirsch, 1997, pp. 262-264).

Thus, using censuses and border-making, the Soviet state attempted to undertake a “double assimilation”: the assimilation of many different peoples into a group of officially defined nationalities, and the assimilation of those national groups into Soviet politics and society. The state adopted different policies in different national regions, according to how developed or backward the nationalities in each region were thought to be, according to Marxist theory. Regions seen as less developed were provided special assistance, while areas seen as more developed were carefully monitored for nationalist activities (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 146-148).

3.2.2 Self-identification and local elites

The introduction of these changes also required the cooperation of people and the local elite. The Soviet institutions issued new categories and rules, and attempted to induce people to adapt their lives to these categories, by encouraging experts, local officials and ordinary people to submit petitions and complaints to the center. Gradually people learned to formulate their demands in the state language, for instance that of combining ethnicity and territory into one, and generally recognized the principle that each ethnic group should occupy a single territory. This had two consequences: ethnic clashes over borders and resources, which sometimes slowed down the economic development of the region. In the longer term, however, it ensured that the whole population was assimilated to the Soviet

system, defining themselves and their rights in Soviet national categories (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 146-148).

In January 1920, it was proposed that Turkestan be reorganized according to ethnic and economic realities. Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Turkmen were identified as the three major population types that new national units could be based upon. Uzbek was used as a blanket term for the sedentary Turkic peoples that the imperial census categorized as Sart or Turk. The label “Kazakh” described mainly the steppe-dwelling, nomadic, Kipchak-speaking Turks, while Turkmen described the pastoral tribes of alleged Oghuz origin. These three terms were codified as official national identities by Moscow (Ubiria, 2016, p. 102). These categories became key administrative and political units, and the Uzbek and Kazakh languages were declared the official languages by Soviet authorities in 1918, with Turkmen following soon after. This represented a huge reduction from the dozens of ethnic categories recognized before the revolution to three national groups in the new Soviet regime. It was also a matter of practical convenience. A large number of small national groups in a highly centralized political system would have been extremely difficult to manage. National reorganization also allowed the Soviets to efficiently communicate and train the local elite while giving an impression that Soviet rule was coming not from Russians but from indigenous society (Haugen, 2003, pp. 114-115).

Even before delimitation, national identity began to influence how people perceived social conflicts and demanded their rights. As an example, in 1923-1924 in the Turkestan ASSR, there were conflicts between Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Turkmen, as illustrated by the letter of thirty high-ranking Kazakh communist officials, including several government ministers, to the Central Asian Bureau. These officials noted that the Uzbeks predominated in cities, state institutions, and economic development, while the Kazakhs and Turkmen, who predominated in rural areas, experienced marginalization.

While these complaints may not demonstrate the actual balance of power and dynamics of authority, it shows that political struggles came to be framed increasingly in national, rather than class or regional, terms, as conflicts between “Uzbeks”, “Kazaks”, and “Turkmen”. Even the leaders responsible for resolving such disputes were forced to acknowledge the role of the national question in political life (Haugen, 2003, pp. 117-118).

Regarding the Kazakh and Uzbek relationship, administrative changes in Turkestan before the official delimitation caused tension. In 1921, Kazakhs from Turkestan proposed that the Semireche and Syr Darya region be transferred to the Kazakh republic. This proposal was seen as controversial due to the fact that Tashkent was a part of Syr Darya region and the urban center. Moscow had to intervene to calm the situation after rumors began circulating in Tashkent that the city was being handed over to the Kazakhs, and by 1924, the sedentary Muslim population of Transoxiana had begun to be seen as distinctively Uzbek, unlike the nomadic Kazakhs and Turkmen (Khalid, 2016, pp. 268-270). According to Khalid, the delimitation of 1924-25 became a major moment of political agency for indigenous cadres, as Central Asian Communists had to promote their own projects of national organization and compete for the influence in the Soviet system. As Khalid emphasizes, Fayzulla Khojaev was a key political figure of the Bukharan People’s Soviet Republic and author of the first major proposal for the unification of Uzbekistan. Khojaev’s plan suggested that Uzbekistan should be established mainly based on Bukhara and should cover the most important areas of sedentary Central Asia, such as Ferghana, Samarqand, and part of Syr Darya (Khalid, pp. 273-274). In the years preceding the delimitation, Khojaev was one of the most important regional allies of the power in Moscow. While the Bolsheviks had the necessary military and institutional capacity to draw up a new direction of development in Central Asia, Carlisle argues that Khojaev and his supporters were the key figures who provided political support. By cooperating with

the Soviet leadership they were also consolidating their own political position in the regional order (Carlisle, 1994, pp. 109-111).

Conclusion

The creation of borders in light of the upcoming delimitation was the result of negotiation, competition, and the articulation of historical, economic, and ethnographic arguments. One of the above archival documents, for example, shows how Kazakh actors argued for incorporating Kyrgyz (Kazakh) lands of Turkestan into the Kazakh republic, by stressing historical connection, economic reasons, and demography, while also criticizing the inaccuracies in census data. The role of censuses and ethnographic classification speaks to the active involvement of Soviet administration in the construction of national categories which underlay the territorial organization of the Soviet system. Census techniques, analysis, and ethnic categorization did not merely reflect existing categories, but were instead an integral means of cementing such categories in the Soviet administrative system. In this sense, Central Asia as a demographic space was not given, but rather created by a combination of the Soviet political power and statistical knowledge alongside the initiatives and aspirations of the native elites within a larger Soviet nation-building project.

Chapter 4. National territorial delimitation and Its Consequences

The national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia in the early 1920s demonstrated the Soviet project of state-building in Central Asia. It was part of the wider Bolshevik nationalities policy of the reorganization of the former imperial borderlands into a system of national republics. Framed on paper as a state-promoting measure of self-determination and national formation; in reality the process was constructed from a combination of different factors. This chapter draws almost exclusively on archival sources, which will provide insight into the internal processes associated with national-territorial delimitation, specifically, the logic behind the formation of borders, discussions regarding borders and territorial disputes, and the influence of local elites.

4.1 National territorial delimitation

In 1920, the policy of governing the Turkestan region was carried out by the Turkestan Bureau (*Turkburo*), which was a regional representation of the Russian Communist Party to coordinate the work of the party in the Turkestan ASSR. *Turkburo* was created partly due to the remoteness of the Turkestan ASSR from Moscow, poor infrastructure and communication conditions in the region. The *Turkburo* was responsible for implementing the Soviet nationalities policy in the region. Later, it was reorganized as the Central Asian Bureau (*Sredazburo*) following the abolition of the emirates of Khiva, Khorezm and Bukhara, and the acceptance of the communist parties of Khorezm, and Bukhara into the Russian Communist Party(b). The *Sredazburo* and its authority then extended over all of Central Asia (Talskaya, 2015, p. 108).

Sredazburo had tactical responsibilities, such as conducting the Leninist nationalities policy, which officially promoted the equality and free development of all

peoples of the USSR. In contrast, it was mainly a bureaucratic body for executing orders from Moscow. The bureau consisted of both local and Russian employees who were carefully trained. The Central Asian Communist University had 84% local nationalities among its students. The Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) opened in Moscow in 1921 and had around twenty branches in Central Asia. Party schools, study circles and what were termed “red corners” in factories, collective farms and state farms also provided additional political education (Talskaya, 2015, p. 108).

The first formal step toward the delimitation was a meeting of the Organizational Bureau of the Russian Communist Party held on 31 January 1924. The secretary of the Central Asian Bureau of the Russian Communist Party (*Sredazburo*), Jānis Rudzutak, was tasked to coordinate with the governments of the Turkestan ASSR, Bukharan People Soviet Republic, and Khorezm People’s Soviet Republic. The plan was approved in Bukhara, the question being discussed on 25 February 1924, and the delimitation was approved on 10 March. It also supported the formation of the Uzbek and Turkmen Soviet republics, the establishment of the Tajik oblast within the Uzbek SSR, and the transfer of the Semireche and Syr Darya oblasts populated by Kazakhs to the Kazakh ASSR (Ubiria, 2016, pp. 106-107).

According to a memorandum by Karklin, who served as deputy chairman of *Sredazburo*, the demarcation was intended to “put an end to friction between the various nationalities of Turkestan.” Thus, it is shown that the demarcation was viewed as a means of halting ethnic conflicts, but it would also “allow class contradictions to emerge more clearly” (*Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History* (RGASPI), f. 17, op. 112, d. 566, p. 207). This indicates that the ethnic division of the population would help focus people not on ethnic conflicts but on class struggle, which underscores the goals of socialism.

Discussions regarding the delimitation took place among various parties, and the initiative did not originate solely in Moscow. For instance, the Communist Parties of Bukhara and Turkestan, as well as Khorezm, participated in the discussions, underscoring that the process was not one-sided and that local elites played an active role in it. For example, Faizulla Khojaev, having presented his theses on the territorial delimitation of Central Asia and the creation of national republics on 25 February. His theses were programmatic proposals for the delimitation of the territory of the Uzbek, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz peoples. These theses were taken into account in the resolutions of the meeting of March 10. Thus, it was resolved that Soviet republics for the Uzbeks and Turkmen would be established, while part of the Kyrgyz population would join the already existing Kyrgyz Republic. Uzbekistan unites the Uzbeks of Bukhara (excluding the left bank of the Amu Darya), Fergana, the Syr Darya region (excluding the Kyrgyz population), the Samarkand region, and Khorezm (excluding territories inhabited by Turkmen and Kyrgyz) (RGSPi, f. 17, op. 112, d. 566, p. 208). On March 23, 1924, a decision was also made to create the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen Republics from the Turkestan Republic, creating two autonomous regions, the Karakyrghyz and Tajik. Following the results of the meeting on May 11, the Tajik Autonomous Region remained within the Uzbek Republic, while the question of the Karakyrghyz Region's affiliation remained unresolved. The Kyrgyz living in the Turkmen Republic were also incorporated into the Kyrgyz Republic. Tashkent, however, remained within the borders of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The document noted that the territorial inclusion of Tashkent in the body of the Uzbek Republic was not justified purely on the basis of ethnographic and economic reasons, but was a political decision made by the central party leadership in view of the claims by surrounding republics (RGASPI, f. 17, op. 112, d. 566, p. 210). However, the issue of Tashkent will be

discussed in greater detail in the following section, based on the same document discussed here.

The role of economic factors can also be highlighted, as it was decided to establish an economic regulatory center to coordinate economic processes, which underscores the importance of economic ties. Judging by the arguments in the report, Sredazburo served as a party center with a general economic body. It is precisely this general coordination of economic processes that underscores the fact that the new republics were not to become fully independent, which would have allowed Moscow to retain control. The demarcation process itself was not entirely planned in advance, as Rudzutak, who was in charge of this matter, telegraphed “do not rush the border issue,” which may indicate the gradual nature of the process and the development of a plan as it unfolded (RGASPI, f. 17, op. 112, d. 566, p. 210).

The difficulties in drawing the boundaries were compounded by factors such as a lack of reliable statistical and ethnographic data on the region. Isaac Zelensky, who was the secretary of the Central Asian Bureau and the chairman of its Territorial Committee, noted that “there is neither sufficient statistical data on the economy and ethnic composition of the regions, nor sufficient knowledge of remote areas even among local officials.” He immediately points out that it would be impossible to establish the borders of national republics and regions, given the diversity of the ethnic composition and the variety of economic ties (Zelensky, 1924, pp. 71–72). Thus, borders were viewed as a flexible administrative experiment. As one example of the complexity of the ethnic composition, Zelenksy writes about the presence of Kyrgyz settlements in territories inhabited by Uzbeks, while Russian and Uzbek settlements are found in Kyrgyz territories. It is important to note that almost all cities were either Uzbek or Russian (Zelensky, pp. 72–73),

which would later become a cause of territorial conflicts over such sedentary cities as Tashkent and other urban centers.

Zelensky also outlines the economic dimensions of the division for each future republic. Thus, the future Uzbekistan is presented as the most economically powerful republic. Uzbekistan had a developed agricultural sector, and cotton was a strategic resource, as 87% of cotton exported from Central Asia is produced within the territory of the future Uzbekistan, which underscores that Uzbekistan's borders were formed around the cotton industry (Zelensky, 1924, p. 75).

The resolution of the Organizational Bureau dated June 4, 1924, provided for the establishment of the Uzbek SSR (which included the Tajik Autonomous Region) and the Turkmen SSR, which became part of the USSR as Union Republics. The Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Region was established as part of the RSFSR. The Kyrgyz regions of Turkestan were incorporated into the Kyrgyz ASSR. The Communist Parties were reorganized along national lines, but the Central Asian Bureau was retained as a supraregional body, and an economic council was also established to coordinate the economy. A territorial commission was established to further define borders, and Tashkent was assigned to the Uzbek Republic (RGASPI, f. 17, op. 112, d. 566, pp. 221-222).

4.2 The Tashkent Issue and Disputes Among Local Elites

The choice of a capital was largely a political decision. The capital was intended to serve as a symbol of the republic, a center for cultural modernization, and a place where the national elite would be formed. Since Tashkent was the largest city in the region, a cultural hub, and an economic center, three republics — Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Kara-Kyrgyz — all laid claim to it. The fact that Tashkent had been a center of Russian colonization in the past was problematic, as the Soviet authorities sought to distance themselves from the

tsarist colonial past. Therefore, as part of the decolonization process, there were proposals to make an Uzbek city the capital of the Uzbek Republic. In the case of the Uzbek Republic, it was important for the capital to be near Bukhara, as the influence of the old religious order was strong there and Soviet authority was less stable, so Bukhara needed to be kept under tighter political control. Another problem was the lack of large cities among the nomadic peoples, since in order for a city to become the capital, the majority of its population had to be of the same ethnic group. This became a problem in the case of the nomads because most cities were Uzbek and Russian (Zelensky, 1924, pp. 79–80).

The conflict over Tashkent is also mentioned in the aforementioned memorandum by Karklin dated June 2, 1924. By a preliminary decision, Tashkent had been assigned to the Uzbek Republic, a decision that, however, provoked a reaction from the parties also laying claim to the city. The Kyrgyz side stated that the question of Tashkent's affiliation must take into account the population of the regions gravitating toward it, economic ties, and the ethnographic composition of the population, since the city serves the steppe regions as the regional center. They refer to Tashkent as an "Uzbek-Sart colony on the territory of the Kyrgyz nomads," claiming that its separation would violate the principles of national policy, and even proposing to make Tashkent the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic or the center of a Central Asian federation (as a free city) (RGASPI, f. 17, op. 112, d. 566, p. 213).

However, according to the archival documents that discussed the project of the future Uzbek Republic, Tashkent has strong grounds for becoming the republic's capital, as it is the most populous city in the planned republic and the largest Uzbek center, with a larger concentration of Uzbeks than any other city in Central Asia (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 2, pp. 3-4). This document seems to be pro-Uzbek, reflecting an Uzbek position, and serves to justify the decision to create the modern Uzbek Republic and make Tashkent its

capital. It is based on a multi-pronged argument involving demographic, economic, geographic, and historical claims. Its viewpoint is expressed in the context of Soviet administrative discourse, incorporating nationalistic arguments alongside considerations of economic planning. Thus, the Uzbek position is prominent here, however it appears to have been filtered through the central authorities, though it reflects the views of the local population.

Table 5. Population of the largest cities in the Uzbek Republic

	Population	Percentage of Uzbeks
Tashkent	263.219	65
Kokand	50.338	82
Andijan	52.789	88
Samarkand	79.456	4
Bukhara with Kaghan	88.509	Unknown, but they form a small group, with Tajiks making up the majority

Source: TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 2

The above mentioned document (project of the future Uzbek Republic) presents arguments for making Tashkent the capital, even though other cities have a higher percentage of Uzbeks. Although Samarkand has a relatively central position within the proposed republic, as a city with a predominantly Tajik population, it is unlikely to qualify as the republic's capital. Although Andijan and Kokand have significant trade volumes, they are located away from the "main arteries" of the Republic of Uzbekistan and therefore offer few advantages in terms of establishing republican centers there. Although Bukhara is located on the main artery crossing the Republic (railway), its freight turnover is almost

three times less than that of Tashkent. Furthermore, it is unsuitable for housing a republican center in terms of both infrastructure and sanitation; in particular, one must not overlook the fact that Bukhara is one of the major centers of disease in Central Asia. Additionally, Tajiks predominate in Bukhara, though not to the same extent as in Samarkand (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 2, p. 4).

Thus, of the five cities listed, only Tashkent has sufficient grounds to become the republican capital: here, Uzbeks make up 65% of the total population; the second largest ethnic group inhabiting this city is Russians; the indigenous population of other ethnic groups constitutes a very small percentage here (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 2, p. 4).

It argues that the significance of Tashkent for the Uzbek regions is evident from the entire historical development of Turkestan, such as the constant wars over control of Tashkent between the Uzbeks and other ethnic groups inhabiting Turkestan, and subsequently the constant strife between the Bukhara and Kokand Khanates over control of this city, attest to its importance for the agricultural regions of Central Asia. This is also evident from the transportation network: Tashkent is not only well connected by rail to other settled regions of Central Asia, but a number of major dirt roads fan out from it, linking it to Fergana, Samarkand, Khujand, Bukhara, and others (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 2, p. 5).

Members of the territorial commissions representing the Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Kara-Kyrgyz also sent a joint protest to Zelenksy regarding the administrative affiliation of certain volosts in the Tashkent Uyezd and the irrigation area of the Mirzachul Uezd. Thus, the protesters noted the unfair conduct of the Central Asian Bureau, specifically its favoritism toward the Uzbeks. They pointed to structural bias, such as the Uzbeks holding a majority of votes on the commission (the Uzbeks had 6 representatives, the others 3

each), while the Kyrgyz representatives had been entirely replaced by Europeans from Tashkent (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 3, p. 74).

Another argument is that Kyrgyz territories were given to the Uzbeks, as stated: “in the reports of the Territorial Commission, particularly in the section concerning the mutual interests of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz — concessions favoring the national interests of the Uzbeks are more evident,” stating that there were no instances where territories with a majority Uzbek population were granted to the Kyrgyz Republic. As an example, the protesters cite the Chinaz district, where the majority of the population is Kyrgyz. Initially, the district was supposed to be transferred to the Kyrgyz, but the decision was overturned and the district was transferred to the Uzbeks. This case demonstrates interference by the central government (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 3, p. 75).

The protesters also raised economic arguments regarding the *Golodno-Steppe* Canal. In this region, 32% of the population were Kyrgyz and 18% were Uzbeks; the land was used by the Kyrgyz, and the irrigation system was unified, yet the Sredazburo divided these economically integrated lands. Thus, given the above, the protesters claim that the Bureau violated “fundamental principles of national demarcation,” such as the balance of interests and the protection of weaker groups. This case demonstrates that the demarcation process was conflict-ridden, uneven, and politically driven (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 3, p. 75).

According to the report by the Kyrgyz side, mentioned in Chapter 3, it also provides data on the demographic composition of Tashkent and the Mirzachul District. Thus, the following picture emerges.

Table 6. Mirzachul Uezd

Ethnic composition of the volosts	Number of the volosts
Purely Kyrgyz	1

With a Kyrgyz majority	2
Russians	2
Purely Uzbek	2
With an Uzbek majority	2
Total	9

Source: TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, p. 117.

Table 7. Tashkent Uyezd

Ethnic composition of the uyezd	Number of the volosts
With Predominantly Kyrgyz Population	8
Purely Kyrgyz	7
Purely Kurama	4
With Predominantly Kurama	1
Purely Uzbek	1
With Predominantly Uzbek Population	4
Russians	1

Source: TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, p. 117.

The authors of the report note that these figures, based on the 1920 census, are distorted, making the Uzbek population appear larger and the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) population smaller. The authors note that Uzbeks were double-counted (both in the city and in the village), while Kyrgyz were undercounted or recorded incorrectly. It was also more difficult to count the Kyrgyz simply because they were nomads. The statistics also include the Kurama. The authors explain that the Kurama are part of the Kyrgyz people but were erroneously recorded as a separate ethnic group, and they propose counting them together.

The text also mentions issues regarding agriculture and water in the Mirzachul District. Thus, the text asserts that the majority of the population in these territories consists of Kyrgyz (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 4, d. 68a, pp. 201-204). This text highlights the unreliability of demographic data, as well as the role of economic factors in resolving territorial issues and the various ethnic interpretations.

4.2.1. The Principles of the Organization of the Uzbek Republic (Based on Archival Materials)

This document has materials related to a proposal for the organization of the Uzbek Republic, apparently drafted by the Uzbek side. It constitutes a proposal by the Uzbek bureau for the organization of the country, and does not merely list territories but also explains the rationale behind the “correctness” of the borders, attempting to present it as reasonable and well-founded. The document proposes including in the republic not only Uzbeks but also other ethnic groups who speak Uzbek or consider themselves related to Uzbeks (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 2, p. 16). This shows that the very concept of “Uzbek” is not yet fully defined, and that the borders themselves are based on shared culture and language rather than on the concept of nationality alone. It is also significant that the authors acknowledge that it is impossible to unite absolutely all Uzbeks, and that some of them will still remain outside the republic (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 2, p. 17). This indicates that the Uzbek Bureau did not insist on a mechanical and absolute unification of all Uzbeks within a single state, demonstrating that the demarcation was constructed as a compromise.

Some Uzbek regions were also left to the Kyrgyz republics, “in recognition” of their need for established cultural and commercial centers to ensure that the borders remained viable. However, the same argument follows for their side: if the Uzbek bureau

agrees to leave a portion of the Uzbeks in the Kyrgyz republics, then the Kyrgyz must make similar concessions (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 2, p. 18). This position demonstrates how the Uzbek side sought to present this process as a mutual one. Another important argument is the economic one, because, as stated: “the right to the territory belongs to that part of the population which currently cultivates and irrigates it.” Borders were drawn not only on the basis of ethnicity but also for economic reasons, since control over water was a strategic issue. By adopting the economic argument, the Uzbek side abandoned the use of “historical rights” to the land. In the case of the Mirzachul district, as mentioned earlier, the economic principle was also applied. Both sides asserted that, economically, the territory was a single unit and could not be divided.

The document also reflects a kind of “compensation policy” that can be seen as a balancing of national minorities. For example, according to this document, approximately 229,000 Kyrgyz and Kara-Kyrgyz will remain in the Uzbek Republic, while the Kyrgyz republics will have 214,000 Uzbeks (TsGA RK, f. 625, op. 1, d. 2, p. 30). This shows that the parties accepted that minorities would remain on both sides of the border and attempted to present this as mutual compensation.

Therefore, the document makes it very clear that the national-territorial demarcation was not “purely national”; it was a result of political and economic decisions in which the borders of the new republics were drawn as a compromise between ethnicity, the economy, and the interests of state administration.

4.3 After the delimitation to 1936

It is important to mention that while the original plan for national delimitation did not include the creation of the Kara-Kirgiz Autonomous Oblast in 1924, the oblast was officially established on October 14, 1924. The oblast was renamed several times to reflect

its new status, first becoming the Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast in May 1925, an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in February 1926, and a Union republic (SSR) in December 1936. The Soviet terminology also started to change, and the people called “Kara-Kirgiz” began to be consistently referred to in official documents by the name “Kyrgyz”. Meanwhile, the term “Kyrgyz”, which used to refer to Kazakhs, was officially changed to the latter one just as the name of their republic (Haugen, 2003, pp. 167-168).

The process of uniting the Kazakhs within a single national Soviet republic was completed in 1924-1925, alongside the national delimitation of Central Asia. At that time, the southern Kazakh regions (the Semirechye and Syr-Darya provinces) were reintegrated into the Kyrgyz ASSR, and the related Kara-Kalpak Autonomous Oblast was also incorporated into it. In 1925, the capital of the republic was moved from Orenburg to Kzyl-Orda (formerly Ak-Mechet); at the same time, the Orenburg province was separated from the Kyrgyz ASSR. And then, on April 19, 1925, at the 5th All-Republic Congress of Soviets, the historically correct ethnonym “Kazakhs” was officially restored, and the Kyrgyz Republic was renamed the Kazak Republic (TsGA RK, f. 5, op. 8, d. №16a, p. 28).

With the intended dissolution of the Khorezm and Turkestan republics, The future presence of the Karakalpaks of the two republics, living in the borderland on either side of the Amu Darya River; became controversial. The Soviet leadership was faced with a choice: either to merge Karakalpaks into the growing Kazakh, Turkmen or Uzbek nations, or to acknowledge Karakalpaks as a nationality. The decision was made that a new Karakalpak Autonomous Oblast was to be created, separate from the Karakalpak regions of Khorezm and Turkestan, and be incorporated into the Kazakh ASSR. Geographic and economic reasons also played a role: as the Karakalpaks shared the Aral Sea with Kazakhstan, this region was connected to Kazakhstan via transport and economic links (Ubiria, 2016, p. 113).

However, there are arguments that this was part of a political deal between the Kazakh and Uzbek national bureaus on the division of the city of Tashkent and the surrounding Tashkent district, which contained 31 volosts. Uzbekistan was to receive the city of Tashkent and 21 volosts of the Tashkent district, while Kazakhstan was to receive the Karakalpak Autonomous Oblast and the remainder (Ubiria, 2016, p. 114). Interestingly, the city of Shymkent was also transferred to Kazakhstan by Uzbekistan in exchange for Tashkent remaining part of the Uzbek Republic (Haugen, 2003, p. 199). Thus, the Karakalpak Autonomous Oblast had a complicated history, having initially been given to the Kazakh republic in 1924, prior to being transferred to the RSFSR in 1930 due to dissatisfaction with the speed of local development. And then it was then upgraded to ASSR status in 1932, and became part of the Uzbek SSR in 1936 (Ubiria, pp. 123-125).

In 1936, a major political change was the elevation of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics to the status of full Union republics. Thus, by 1936, six national republics had been fully established in Soviet Central Asia: Uzbek (including the Karakalpak ASSR), Kazakh, Turkmen, Tajik, and Kyrgyz SSRs, constituting five full union republics.

Conclusion

Thus, the first part of this chapter has shown that the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia was not a structured realization of a coherent or purely ethnographic plan, but rather a negotiation between different, and often competing, objectives. Even though Soviet authorities presented delimitation as a rational and scientific settlement of the “national question”, this analysis has shown that it was rather a flexible administrative experiment based on limited statistical data, economic interdependence and political bargaining between central and regional authorities.

By using primary source materials, this chapter attempts to show that regional institutions like the Sredazburo were not merely implementers of Moscow policy but also had their own agency, serving as mediators for various local opinions while also being actively involved in the decision-making process by participating in disputes over regional boundaries and the location of Tashkent. These disputes show that delimitation was not just technical, but also the site of power asymmetries, alliances, and conflicting interpretations of demographic and economic realities.

Conclusion

One of the main conclusions that the research shows is that the territorial delimitation of Central Asia had historical precedents. The legacy of the Russian Empire's administrative and political divisions influenced how the Soviet regime tried to reshape territories in the region. As an example, Turkestan was divided into several administrative units with uneven and overlapping territorial lines. These included governorates of the empire (such as Syr Darya, Semirechye, Samarkand and Fergana), and protectorates (such as Bukhara and Khiva) administered according to different logics. While there was more direct imperial rule in the steppe, such as the dissolution of customary political structures, resettlement and incorporation into imperial administrative system (like linking the steppe to Orenburg, Omsk and other centers of the empire), in Turkestan, the customary political and legal order was mostly preserved, and local elites and institutions operated under military supervision in a context of indirect rule. Thus, the Soviet authorities inherited a country comprised of a fragmented and multilayered colonial space rather than a single and distinct regional entity.

This imperial legacy had important consequences in the Soviet era. It created different legal, bureaucratic and social traditions in the area which made delimiting the borders in the 1920s difficult. There were no "natural" national boundaries. These consequences created further political difficulties, such as the question of how and why some other cities, especially Tashkent, remained politically important, the latter's centrality being not merely a new creation of 1924, but first consolidated during the imperial period. It also reveals that many of the key historical figures involved in later delimitation conflicts were products of the imperial education, administration, and society. In this sense, the Soviet delimitation process was as much a reworking of an imperial inheritance as it was a revolutionary act of national state-building.

The other major conclusion concerns the contradictions present in Bolshevik nationalities policy. As Chapter 2 shows, the Bolsheviks approached the former imperial borderlands with a highly ambivalent ideological framework. On the one hand, they accepted the principle of national self-determination, rejected “Great Russian chauvinism” and recognized the equality and development of non-Russian peoples. On the other hand, they rejected the imposition of assimilation and extraterritorial, national-cultural autonomy, and insisted on a territorial definition of nationality. It created a fundamental tension: the Bolsheviks wished to organize nationality through territory, in an area where ethnic identities were deeply intermixed, where identities were often not easily defined, and where the ideal of territorial concentration was oftentimes opposed. Despite being presented as the correct institutional form of nationality, the territorialization of nationalities would create minorities, ambiguities, and disputes that Soviet authorities would administer rather than resolve.

The archival materials analyzed in Chapter 2 show that even before the delimitation in 1924, the Soviet authorities had approached the question of delimitation rather pragmatically rather than in strictly ethnographic terms, as evidenced by the report of the commission that discussed the transfer of the Syr Darya and Semirechye regions to the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) ASSR. Beyond an ethnic definition of national belonging, the report advocated the existence of nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyles, trans-administrative kinship, a common history, economic complementarity, collective access to pastures and markets, and the abolition of “artificial” administrative frontiers inherited from the tsarist empire. It also acknowledged a political danger in extending Kyrgyz/Kazakh enclaves within Turkestan, since Kyrgyz/Kazakh subjects would be subjected to identical policies as sedentary Uzbeks, inhibiting their development of class differentiation and socialist political consciousness. The report framed delimitation as a question of governability,

socio-economic coherence, and class transformation as much as nationality, thereby corroborating Hirsch's (2005) argument that the Soviets abandoned border-making on the basis of statehood in favor of ethnographic, economic, and administrative considerations.

The making of demographic and ethnographic knowledge was also a core part of the making of Soviet Central Asia. As shown in Chapter 3, census-taking, classification, and ethnography were neither innocent nor merely technical reflections of pre-existing social realities. Rather, they were constitutive of those realities; the ethnographic and economic-administrative outlooks of Narkomnats and Gosplan were not entirely separate attempts, as Soviet institutions gradually combined them into a hybrid model. Exploring the question of nationality identification, ethnographic borderlines, simplification of groups and their correlation with ethnicity, way of life and economic specialization, these ethnographers showed that Soviet state-building was based on the production of expert knowledge which was needed for classifying a population and embedding it within a Soviet territorial, economic and administrative system of governance.

The most vivid example of the territorial logic of the Kyrgyz/Kazakh parts of Turkestan merger with the Kazakh republic is shown in the archival report addressing the unification of the Kyrgyz/Kazakh regions of Turkestan. Territorial claims were justified by the legal norm, demography, history, migration and economy. The census data was an object of political struggle; for example, the authors of this document recognized the flaws of the 1920 census, such as all Kyrgyz/Kazakh were undercounted, Uzbeks were double-counted, nomads were especially difficult to count, and groups like the Kurama were incorrectly identified. Ultimately, these claims were important not only in identifying errors in any particular census, but also in illustrating the political importance of census results. Results could be used to support or negate claims to territory. Census results became part of the political contest rather than simply a byproduct of it.

The fourth and perhaps the most important conclusion concerns the process of delimitation in 1924 and after. As it shown in Chapter 4, the delimitation was not about creating a coherent ethnographically envisaged national-territorial map; rather, it was a process which saw numerous exchanges of discussions, draft proposals, commissions, protests, and resolutions between Moscow, the Sredazburo and the republican authorities. The Communist Parties of Bukhara, Turkestan and Khorezm were also involved in deciding the character of the debate, while local leaders, like Faizulla Khojaev, made important recommendations about the future structure of the region. However, the center still had the right to arbitrate and modify (and sometimes overturn) local requirements. It is likely, then, that the Sredazburo was not simply a transmission belt of Moscow policy, but actually represents a middle level of government that had a degree of agency to mediate local needs.

The Tashkent question has been central to most of the arguments made in the research. The archival documentation of the various misapprehensions about Tashkent shows that the inclusion of the city in Uzbekistan did not have a single specific factor for demarcation. Kyrgyz/Kazakh actors were equally convinced that Tashkent was theirs to keep: the center of the steppe's economy, culture, and politics. They claimed it on the basis of having ruled it before, census discrepancies, the hinterland used to build the city, and proposals for Tashkent to become the capital of the Kyrgyz republic. The Uzbek side could also offer demographic arguments due to the numerical predominance of Uzbeks, economic arguments such as trade turnover and import export, and the fact that Tashkent was the transport center of Central Asia. The Samarkand, Bukhara, Kokand and Andijan of the Fergana Valley could not be capital cities of the other Central Asian republics. The most important point is that the decision about Tashkent was made on a political basis, in

view of the claims of the surrounding republics; it cannot be explained on ethnographic or economic grounds alone. Delimitation is flexible, negotiated, and asymmetric.

This logic applies well to the earlier Uzbek and Kyrgyz/Kazakh projects (Chapter 4), and, as the Uzbek records show, not even the construction of Uzbekistan itself was conceptualized along exclusively ethnic lines. The “Uzbek” category was also fluid, and it included Uzbeks in the narrow sense, as well as various culturally or linguistically defined groups. The document acknowledged that Uzbeks could not all be included in a single state, and accepted that large non-Uzbek minorities would also have to be included as part of a “compensation” logic. Kyrgyz/Kazakh and allied protests against Sredazburo decisions show that ethnicity, economy, irrigation, infrastructure, demography, and administrative balance were all considered, but not all equally. This confirms one of the main contentions of the research, namely that the borders of the new republics were not drawn on the basis of nationality alone, but were compromises between often incompatible principles.

In a broader sense, this study argues that the Soviet Central Asia was the product of a historically contingent, politically mediated process that involved empire, revolution, expertise, and local ambition. These frontiers were not the result of a historic development, nor were they purely artificial designs. They were instead the historical result of a situation in which borders had to be drawn according to the needs of state-building, administrative logic, political centralization, and the national categorization of the Soviet authority. It was about creating governable republics, institutionalizing national categories, embedding a diverse region into a wider Soviet state structure.

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