

# **The role of school education in Soviet efforts to build and break national and supranational identities among Kazakhs in the first half of the 20th century**

## **1. Introduction**

The territories belonging to the former Soviet Union underwent an unparalleled transformation of their social system during the early 20th century. The Soviet regime identified education as a vital tool to reconstruct identities and enforce ideological compliance; hence, this area experienced its complete transformation. The Soviet Union, as a newly formed multiethnic empire, maintained considerable linguistic, religious, and cultural differences among its diverse population bases. The Soviet project envisioned building citizens who would completely dissociate themselves from previous connections in order to become totally devoted to Soviet objectives.

The experiences of Kazakhstan provide a valuable framework for analysing the Soviet Union's aims. The Kazakh society existed before Sovietization with structures based on tribal connections as well as Islamic control of religious matters and oral cultural heritage. The Islamic *maktabs* and *madrasas* functioned as the main institutions for education before Sovietization provided formal education opportunities. In these learning establishments, students studied Arabic-script texts along with religious doctrine and regional cultural values. These institutions demonstrated a dual nature because they fulfilled both religious needs and supported the cultural and historical survival of Kazakh society. Education reform in the Soviet project amounted to both destruction alongside new construction.

The Bolshevik leaders recognized, since their first days of power, that their mission to build a new political system required complete control over teaching methods and knowledge acquisition, along with the fundamental self-perception of people. The Alternative System transformed schools into ideological facilities that exchanged Islamic teaching for Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Communist Party allegiance for ethnic and religious bonds. The Soviet aim extended beyond modernizing Kazakh society because it entailed the elimination of native belief systems to establish Marxist-Leninist and industrial advancement and atheist narratives.

During the 1920s, the primary element in Soviet transformation was *korenizatsiia*, which means native population development. At first glance, *korenizatsiia* acted as an initiative for supporting local traditions because it enabled native language education along with indigenous leadership engagement. Although the Soviet Union allowed this measure at first, it turned out to be a short-lived agreement. The Soviet government intended *Korenizatsiia* to use local traditions as transitional tools for creating Soviet uniformity instead of preserving indigenous cultures. The Soviet authority expanded Kazakh involvement in promoting its own socialist ideals because it wanted mass acceptance of total political reform initiatives.

Internal Soviet policies pursued such ambiguity for only a short period before ending it permanently. In the late 1920s and throughout the early 1930s, the Soviet state withdrew its previous acceptance of different cultural practices. The government established uniform learning materials while prioritizing Russian culture over others and ended existing Islamic educational institutions through destruction. The use of Arabic script as their historical writing script was abandoned in two steps when Soviet officials first introduced Latin script and then substituted it with Cyrillic script. This script reform process cut Kazakhs off from their religious texts and historical writings. The Soviet reforms represented nothing short of cultural engineering operations while pretending to be standard linguistic modifications.

Soviet political leadership launched a deliberate effort to modify both gender identities and household patterns during their reforms. In numerous Kazakh rural communities that traditionally barred women from schools, Soviet reformers selected females as their principal educational transformation targets. Soviet society promoted co-educational schools, unveiling campaigns, and vocational training for girls to display the “liberating” effects of Soviet ideology. The process of transformation faced heavy difficulties that made its implementation complex. Women gained real career chances during the period but found themselves trapped among Soviet government requirements for ideological loyalty and native cultural norms that saw introduced female empowerment as a spiritual and moral danger.

These reforms resulted in tremendous social expenses for Soviet society during that period. The Soviet authorities declared traditional elders and spiritual leaders, along with intellectual scholars, to be counter-revolutionaries and imprisoned or sent them into exile or executed them. The Soviet government punished domestic units that refused to send their offspring to Soviet educational establishments. Under Soviet rule, education evolved into a location where power decreased rather than grew, since people experienced anguish and cultural loss. Although the Soviet state reported increasing literacy rates and the formation of loyal Soviet-Kazakh intellectuals, their cultural destruction of Kazakh identity continued behind these celebrations.

The reforms left behind an uncertain combination of positive and negative influences. Education offered social advancement opportunities to people who accepted Soviet ideology and linguistic standards through their educational accomplishments. The path to access cultural opportunities demanded that older Kazakh affiliations be set aside. Soviet-Kazakh administrators, together with teachers and party officials, gained positions of authority through demonstrating their detachment from Kazakh cultural customs.

Although there is a substantial amount of scientific literature concerning Soviet national policy, education, and identity construction, there remains a significant research gap concerning the role of school education in both constructing and deconstructing national and supranational identities among Kazakhs during the first half of the 20th century. Contemporary scholarship tends to examine broader political or cultural transformations such as *korenizatsia*, national boundary-making, or the repression of *waqf* and religious learning, but it rarely focuses on the educational system as a deliberate instrument of identity engineering. Before Soviet rule, Kazakh national identity was already emerging with Alash and Jadidism movements, the spread of Arabic script literacy, and an increasing sense of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness as an opposition to tightening imperial influence (including in the form of the Russian-native school). Simultaneously, supranational identities like Muslim and Turkic solidarity, fostered by religious schools, *waqf*, and Sufi institutions, and Turkic-Tatar teachers, created a multiethnic, religiously oriented consciousness. Bolsheviks, both local and foreign, actively dismantled these supranational identities through educational and language reforms, *korenizatsia*, and modernization. Yet, the multifaceted double role of Soviet education as both deconstructive and constructive of national and supranational identities has not been considered in the Kazakh case. This capstone fills this gap by analysing how Soviet educational policy and practice functioned as tools for recasting identity among Kazakhs.

## **2. Methodology**

The examination in this research traces how Soviet education in the 20th-century early 20th century in Kazakhstan performed both instructional activities and ideological reform. The research

examines education as an arena where opposing ideologies struggle between Islam and atheism, and traditional values versus modern elements, and diverse beliefs against standardized knowledge. Soviet educational institutions played a fundamental role in the identity revolution, thus affecting every part of Kazakh communal organisation. The main method of this research is the analysis of existing literature, mainly secondary sources, including articles, books, and journal papers. The main focus of this study is how the Soviet Union's educational policies shaped and reshaped existing national/ethnic and supranational identities. By supranational identities before the Soviet Union, the author means the Pan-Turkic and Pan-Islamist identities emerging among young Kazakh intellectuals as part of the wider movement among the Turkic and Muslim people. After the establishment of the Soviet Union, Pan-Turkic and Pan-Islamist supranational identities were replaced by supranational Soviet identity (Homo Sovieticus).

This paper examines four essential issues, which are discussed in the upcoming sections:

1. What were the main techniques Soviet authorities used during their initial school reform period to dismantle religious practices, linguistic diversity, and tribal communities in Kazakhstan?
2. What approaches, implemented through curriculum design and institutional policies, and language policies, were used to embed Soviet ideology within schools?
3. How did the Kazakh communities react to the educational reforms of the Soviet government, and what resistance, compliance, and adaptation did the researchers have?
4. Are there any long-term consequences of these educational measures for the formation of Kazakh identity within the Soviet Union?

This study analyses the essential developmental stage of Soviet educational policies in Kazakhstan during the 1920s and early 1930s to exclude end-of-Soviet Union reform-based anachronisms. The analysis studies the political objectives alongside administrative transformations and cultural shifts in Soviet education. Through this examination, we understand better how authoritarian governments use education to manage physical control as well as mental reshaping and national reconstruction.

### **3. Findings**

#### **3.1 Historical Background**

During the time before Soviet educational reforms, Kazakh society maintained diverse educational traditions, which spread through tribal ties and religious frames alongside verbal cultural transfer. The Soviet attempt to establish a unified Soviet ideological identity meant to replace all existing religious, supranational, and local relationships did not occur without any historical context. The Soviet educational framework entered an established system that was structured by well-rooted knowledge systems alongside identification structures and communal arrangements. A proper evaluation of Soviet educational restructuring efforts in Kazakhstan requires investigation into pre-1920s native systems, which formed education and identity. Soviet educators identified these initial educational institutions as the main targets for destruction in their school transformation program.

Before the Soviet era, Kazakhs organized their culture through tribal networks, which connected people via traditional kinship systems and passed down knowledge through spoken means. The Kazakh steppe contained three seniority-based tribal federations called *zhuz* that

established both the local leadership system and social standards, as well as mobility rules. Education within this cultural framework maintained an informal structure that existed throughout family-based learning activities. Children learned complex knowledge of heritage information and customary legal principles (*adat*) through observing their elders, participating in traditional practices, and listening to the stories of storytellers. The transmission systems adapted well to the nomadic way of life that Kazakhstan followed before colonial rule.<sup>1</sup>

The center of formal education contained two institutions that made up the Islamic religious school system: *maktabs* for basic education and madrasas for advanced learning. The *maktabs* served as educational institutions that linked up with local mosques to offer classes about reading and writing, along with mathematics and Quran memorisation. The educational program at Madrasas enriched basic knowledge through lessons in Arabic grammar as well as logic, theology, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and Sufism. Although they received less attendance than other learning spaces, these institutions gave Kazakhstan its position within the extensive network of Islamic intellectual development, which connected Central Asia, the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and the Arab world. The Kazakh communities utilized mullahs who received their education at madrasas in Bukhara and Samarkand as their spiritual leaders to transmit cultural heritage within the community.<sup>2</sup>

Religious and educational ties with Islamic civilization gave birth to an identity system that maintained connections beyond parochial affiliations. All Turkic-Muslim peoples, including Tatars and Uzbeks, shared a supranational Islamic orientation, which strengthened their collective sense of belonging beyond tribal and local allegiances.<sup>3</sup> Through education, people learned eternal values and built ties with cultural traditions that maintained Islamic teachings and universal intellectual wisdom. Since the Arabic script endured for multiple centuries, it represented sacred authority along with the ability to participate in a scholarly spiritual heritage.

These two Islamic and oral educational systems operated in parallel to support each other. Religious information from sacred knowledge alongside scholarly knowledge was received instruction at *maktab* and madrasa institutions, but the oral traditions safeguarded community memory as well as historical records and practical information. *Aqyns* and *zhyrshylar* with wise elders performed as informal educators who preserved community unity by using song and proverb, and oral genealogical systems. The figures who taught oral knowledge within nomadic and rural areas gained unparalleled sway compared to traditional clerics in normal circumstances.

Russian imperial rule brought modifications to this system during the nineteenth century. After the Russian Empire started colonizing Kazakh lands during the 1820s to 1880s, administrators established the “Russian-native school” as their new educational institution. Earlier, the only schools that brought Kazakh elites to the Empire were Russian cadet military schools in Western Siberian cities such as Orenburg and Ufa. However, according to Toimbek, only 48 Kazakh students graduated from the Orenburg school for Kazakh children in 19 years.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, these graduates were the first Kazakh intellectuals, such as Shokan Ualikhanov and

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<sup>1</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014),74.

<sup>2</sup> Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001),11.

<sup>3</sup> Котюкова, Т. В. (2016). *Окраина на особом положении...: Туркестан в преддверии драмы*. Научно-политическая книга, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Toimbek, Diana. *The political economy of Soviet education and its implications for nation-building in Kazakhstan*, 5.

Abay Kunanbayev. Establishment of the Russian-native schools had the purpose to develop these Kazakh elite members with bilingual skills so they could become loyal civil servants in the colonial administration.<sup>5</sup> The schools taught the Russian language, arithmetic, and geography, as well as Russian history, to their students. In 1884, 254 students were studying at 12 Russian-native schools; this number grew to 3410 students in 65 schools by 1915.<sup>6</sup> However, since not only Kazakhs, but also Europeans (Russians, Ukrainians, etc.) studied at Russian-native schools, the scale of influence of native schools is hard to estimate.

The Kazakh people displayed conflicting attitudes toward Russian-native schools, which they generally avoided. The local populations held doubtful views about these educational institutions because they perceived them as endangering their traditional faith and cultural heritage. This can be observed in the memoirs of Kazakh WWII hero Baurzhan Momyshuly about his childhood. Baurzhan's father had a dilemma between keeping his son in a traditional maktab or sending him to the school of Russian settlers. The issue with Maktab was that mullas used corporal punishments on children who just recited verses from the Koran; on the other hand, he was afraid for his son's soul, sending him to the school of "infidels". The decision was made in favor of the Russian-native school after Baurzhan's uncle was tricked and robbed, and he was not been able to defend himself in front of the colonial police because he did not know the Russian language.<sup>7</sup> Thus, during Kazakh contact with Tsarist state-run educational institutions, the conflicting pull of religious approval met the colonial benefit that determined their educational relations.

Education in Kazakh society received vital changes during the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries through internal Muslim world reform movements. The Jadid movement began with Uzbek and Tatar communities, which worked to modernize Islamic education through phonetic reading practices and native language study, coupled with science knowledge and mathematics learning, and geography study. Gasprinskii, the first ideologist of Jadidism, a Crimean Tatar, wanted to use Western scientific progress to modernise the Islamic community.<sup>8</sup> The Jadidist educational institutions worked to upgrade traditional Islamic educational practices instead of discarding them. Through Jadidism, Ibray Altynsarin, Ahmet Baitursynov, and Mirjaqip Dulatov directed Kazakh educational reform by adopting modern teaching while maintaining Islamic and Kazakh values.<sup>9</sup> The Jadidist reformers chased an educational objective that fused Kazakh spirituality with scientific comprehension. The reformers wrote educational materials in the Kazakh language while teaching others to read using phonetic principles, striving to maintain national awareness while resisting Russian cultural adoption. The research gave rise to an educational approach which united national identity with progress so Kazakhs could maintain their heritage along with their contemporary status.<sup>10</sup> However, the geographical area where Jadidism generated influence was restricted, along with the varied social distribution of its impact. The reformist thinking concentrated itself in cities like Orenburg and Semipalatinsk, yet the majority

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<sup>5</sup> Mark S. Johnson, "The Legacy of Russian and Soviet Education and the Shaping of Ethnic, Religious, and National Identities in Central Asia," *Comparative Education Review* 48, no. 4 (2004): 26.

<sup>6</sup> Rather et al, *The Development of Soviet Education in Kazakh SSR (1917-1991)*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Baurzhan Momyshuly, "*Moscow behind us: Our family*", (Alma-Ata, Kazakh state publisher of artistic literature, 1962), 205.

<sup>8</sup> Rather et al, *The Development of Soviet Education in Kazakh SSR (1917-1991)*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Zhorseitova, Sembiyeva. (2021). Nekotorye aspekty deiatel'nosti kazakhskoi intelligentsii v dzhadidskom dvizhenii v Kazakhstane (konets XIX – nachalo XX vv.). *Vestnik KazNU. Serii istoricheskaja* 100, 1 (28–38), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Azmukhanova, A. (2021). The influence of the jadidic ideals of the Turkic intelligentsia on the Alash movement, 20.

of nomadic and rural areas stayed beyond its effective influence.<sup>11</sup> The majority of education in less connected areas drew from traditional religious schools, along with the oral transmission of knowledge.

The reaction to Tsarist assimilation efforts and the general trend of new-method schools led to the creation of the modern perception of Kazakh identity. The national elite that was on the locomotive of constructing the identity were the ones who received education in the Russian-native and Jadidist schools. Johnson argues that “While small, this first generation of Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs to experience modern schooling nonetheless created a modern Kazakh literary language, embraced Islam as a way to distinguish themselves from Russian colonialism, and began the process of creating a Kazakh national movement”.<sup>12</sup> However, Medynsky’s argument that Imperial Russia “deliberately hindered” education among Central Asian is an overstatement.<sup>13</sup> Tsarist policy toward native education can be best described as “cautious neglect”. Imperial officers tried to nurture loyal local elite, and were sceptical toward “new-method” schools fearing it would unite the people of Russian East. Nevertheless, the scepticism did not display in any form of repression and coercion, due to the empire’s lack of resources and will. The empire used the Kazakh steppe as a settlement destination and aimed at cultural assimilation of elites at best or maintenance of the status quo at least.

### 3.2 The arrival of Soviet power.

Those identities formed by pre-Soviet Kazakh education opposed the Soviet concept of the “New Soviet Person” because they relied on Islamic beliefs as well as tribal traditions and reformist principles. The Soviet political order demanded that citizens break away from familial ties while renouncing religious practice and developing a complete disregard for historical traditions. Social uniformity faced strong resistance from the decentralized, pluralistic spiritual educational system of pre-Soviet Muslim culture.<sup>14</sup> The opposing models of identity formation existed at an operational level in Kazakh society, where they functioned as rival authority sources. These community leaders, together with the mullah, aqyn, and elder, held authority to control behavior and determine values while directing memory. The Soviet teacher received orders to erase this traditional social network and then establish a new basis of loyalty toward Moscow, Marxism-Leninism, and Soviet Party leadership. The Soviets started their radical educational reform efforts in the 1920s, which intensified during the 1930s by discrediting current education leaders, ordering the closure of religious schools, restricting oral traditions, and implementing standard curricula.<sup>15</sup>

The philosophical difference between Soviet education and existing cultural systems emerged from actual institutional and historical practices. The educational system of Kazakh society, based on oral memory, religious teachings, and traditional leadership systems, directly contradicted the Soviet administrative and textual academic model. Educational institutions became the main site for contesting Kazakh identity before Soviet teachers constructed the first school. The Soviet state

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<sup>11</sup> Котюкова, Т. В. (2016). *Окраина на особом положении...: Туркестан в преддверии драмы*. Научно-политическая книга, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Mark S. Johnson, “The Legacy of Russian and Soviet Education and the Shaping of Ethnic, Religious, and National Identities in Central Asia,” *Comparative Education Review* 48, no. 4 (2004): 27

<sup>13</sup> Evgenii Medynsky, “Schools and Education in the U.S.S.R.,” *American Sociological Review* (1944): 288.

<sup>14</sup> Shoshana Keller, “Conversion to the New Faith: Marxism-Leninism and Muslims in the Soviet Empire,” in *Of Religion and Empire*, ed. Robert Geraci and Michael Khodarkovsky (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 321.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Loring, “Colonizers with Party Cards: Soviet Internal Colonialism in Central Asia, 1917–39,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no. 1 (2014): 81-82.

labeled this inherited system as both backward and feudal, though such terms fail to respect how the system maintained its strength within local communities.<sup>16</sup> The historical education framework of Islam provided social structure, while family teachings linked historical knowledge to existing practice, and traditional program systems kept skills active through generational transfers. The educational methods were not passive or primitive because they adapted to their context and maintained the backbone necessary for Kazakh culture to survive. The elimination of these traditions would lead to a complete change in how Kazakhs understood their own identity, instead of modernizing the people.

The Soviet claim of liberation turned into a revolutionary disruption that severed ties with previous educational systems. The population of imams, *aqyns*, and *mullas* trained in Islamic centers was redefined by Soviet authorities as outdated representatives of feudal structures. Tradition received a calculated transformation into opposition by Soviet authorities, which established ideological principles for the coming Soviet cultural institution replacements during the 1920s and 1930s. Rural and nomadic areas lacked a structured education system because it was an unknown practice to some communities. For numerous generations, the Kazakh steppe existed according to annual natural patterns. Climate-driven movement patterns among families and their herd animals determined how they received education, which adapted to this mobile existence. Because of this nature, Islamic tutors conducted their teachings at various locations between villages and nomadic camps. The system of learning could be brought anywhere, and it operated within appropriate situations while becoming embedded within regular activities. The Soviet educational policies enforced standardized buildings that did not align with the nomadic way of life.<sup>17</sup>

The rigid Soviet state imposed official codes that failed to align with the natural existence of Kazakh people, leading to systemic conflicts between their daily life and the Soviet institutional models. Under Soviet school law, students had to attend classes while the system required a total standardization of curriculum materials alongside a fixed language policy and student conduct regulations. Students were instructed to study at specific hours using textbooks that received the government authorities' approval. Families that counted on children to work during critical parts of the season or who frequently moved from district to district were breaking the rules of mandatory education. Standing in violation of school attendance laws led to threats and penalties, along with forced commitments to stay in one place. The introduction of Soviet schooling caused both cultural destruction and economic instability, as well as spatial restraints among the local populations.<sup>18</sup>

The foundation was established for an impending significant conflict. Kazakhstan experienced Soviet political domination during the early 1920s, which made education the prime means for the state to remodel indigenous identity patterns. Korenizatsiia established a new historical phase through which indigenous Kazakh people received a brief period of respect that quickly transformed into Soviet ideological control.

The structural division of education during pre-Soviet times operated according to gender-based specifications as a notable educational aspect. Practical knowledge transmission occurred

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<sup>16</sup> Mark S. Johnson, "The Legacy of Russian and Soviet Education and the Shaping of Ethnic, Religious, and National Identities in Central Asia," *Comparative Education Review* 48, no. 4 (2004): 29.

<sup>17</sup> Abikey, A. M., Kaipbaeva, A. T., Ospanova, R. R. (2022). Implementation Of The Literacy Campaign In Kazakhstan, 171 .

<sup>18</sup> A. Mynbayeva and V. Pogolian, "Kazakhstani School Education Development from the 1930s: History and Current Trends," *Al-Farabi Kazakh National University & Herzen University*, 2014, 149-150.

exclusively through women who educated young girls about household functions and childbirth practices, as well as herbal treatments and family customs, and social morals. The lessons traveled through methods that involved singing together with ritual activities and social functions, including funerals and weddings. Female education flowed through community practices that developed social roles as well as leadership abilities and family relationships.<sup>19</sup>The informalized training system for girls demonstrated how pre-Soviet Kazakh knowledge was integrated. All learning experiences took place beyond structured institutions through cycles of natural events, as well as rites of passage and collective celebrations that helped transmit knowledge. During pre-Soviet times, Kazakh communities received education that united spiritual understanding with moral behavior and technical knowledge, which spanned from weaving to livestock management. The unity of Kazakh identity is formed through the natural fusion between practical matters and sacred elements. The Kazakhs blended their spiritual teachings directly into their everyday life routine without creating separate secular vs religious education systems.<sup>20</sup>

Poetry, along with music, served educational purposes as teaching tools in this cultural setting. According to Kazakh oral tradition, they considered the spoken word as highly significant since it required mastery of rhythm, together with memory development and improvisational techniques. The cultural tradition of Kazakhs recognized *aqyns* (poets) and *zhyrshylar* (epic singers) to perform dual functions as teaching professionals and historians who also served as ethical commentators. Their compositions functioned as educational tools that taught both historical information and rules of social conduct, along with tribal law, as well as concepts of courage and generosity, and hospitality. Boys received training in both the recitation of the moral verse termed *terme* and the classical epic poetry known as *zhyr*, which developed their memory abilities as well as their intellectual capacity. Through performative practices, Kazakhs developed an internalized culture of identity and ethics because their participation and recitation played a key role.<sup>21</sup>

Russian-language literacy introduced during the 19th century transformed traditional cultural practices because it presented new written methods alongside spoken traditions. Educational institutions in Russia viewed traditional recited poetry and Islamic literature as archaic and unscientific knowledge, so they adopted courses on the Russian alphabet and literature. The introduction of Pushkin-reading and *zhyr* recitation developed into parallel kinds of cultural capital within Kazakh society. The state started to link oral traditions and Islamic teaching with backwardness, yet favored modernity through written education, which created new divisions between generations and classes.<sup>22</sup> During colonial rule, Russian authorities actively participated in the educational worldview transformation of their territories. At the beginning of the 20th century, tsarist administrators started to monitor Kazakh religious schools while establishing regulations for school registration and requiring state inspections with curriculum oversight. The clerics who refused to cooperate with authority faced accusations of both political betrayal and “fanaticism. *Maktab*s closed their doors because they refused to remove Islamic teachings, which Russian authorities considered oppositional.<sup>23</sup> The institution of educational surveillance marks its

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<sup>19</sup> Serik Mukhanov, *Women and Education in Soviet Kazakhstan: Gender, Identity, and Transformation* (Almaty: Kazakhstan University Press, 2019), 12–13.

<sup>20</sup> D.Kassymova, Zh.Khussainova, *Some aspects of kazakh traditional education system* (Almaty: BULLETIN Abay Kazakh National Pedagogical University, 2017) 7.

<sup>21</sup> Toibazar et al, *Ethnic Narratives in Education: The Role of Kazakh Epics in Preserving Cultural Heritage and Identity*, (Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, 2025), 161-162.

<sup>22</sup> Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca*, 19-20.

first appearance in Kazakh history during this period, and it later grew substantially under Soviet administration.

The construction of scripts grew to be a contested field during the tightening global conditions. During all phases leading up to the Soviet introduction of Latin and later Cyrillic alphabets, the utilization of Arabic script within Kazakh communities maintained profound cultural value. The use of Arabic script acted as a symbol that maintained Islamic heritage connections and worshipped the wisdom found in past scholars and confirmed Kazakh inclusion in the wider Muslim world.<sup>24</sup> The Soviet attempts to use Russian writing instead of Arabic script were interpreted as deliberate ploys to remove people from sacred knowledge bases. Script reform emerged as the central pillar of Soviet education after it established itself as a fundamental cultural and emotional issue preceding the nation's founding.

Education during this pre-Soviet period combined spiritual content, societal integration, and communal collective study practices. Learning situated individuals within their group rather than setting them apart from it. The combination of knowledge with ethics, together with memory and geographical placement, formed an indissoluble connection. Through educational instruction, children learned practices to exist in the world that integrated generations of a nomadic lifestyle with social responsibility to ancestors and divine authority.

The entrance of Soviet authorities into Kazakh territories in the 1917-20s revealed an entire disciplined educational culture which extended beyond basic underdevelopment. The established system rejected Party rule and rejected both dialectical materialism and Moscow being the top authority. The established authority stood as God's power alongside the sacred protection memory receives and traditional ancestral knowledge. The Soviet Union wanted to replace the traditional educational system, rather than just eliminate illiteracy, through their new school system.<sup>25</sup> During its initial stage, Soviet education policy adopted Kazakh linguistic practices to develop local community involvement while establishing trust with local communities. *Korenizatsiia* served as the Soviet official policy of indigenization. Although the rhetoric emphasized native language support, the Soviet administration sought to establish a population that was both loyal and ideologically uniform on Russian terms. This first short period would set the fundamental basis for the extensive cultural rift that developed across time.

### 3.3 Korenizatsiia and the Early Soviet Educational Experiment

Soviet educational reform in Kazakhstan began with a contradictory approach during its initial stage. During the initial portion of Soviet ideology, the government enacted *korenizatsiia*, which meant cultural accommodation before consolidating a position toward ideological conformity and linguistic centralization. *Korenizatsiia* emerged during the early 1920s as a Soviet policy which attempted to gain non-Russian population support through language education along with native leadership positions alongside Soviet socialist elements.<sup>26</sup> The Kazakh education system became the most noticeable field through which *korenizatsiia* policies played out until Soviet authorities abruptly discontinued this temporary support. Soviet schooling during the 1920s and early 1930s faced an ideological struggle to balance ethnic identity promotion with ideological uniformity

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<sup>24</sup> Zhohseitova, Sembiyeva. (2021). Nekotorye aspekty deiatel'nosti kazakhskoi intelligentsii v dzhadidskom dvizhenii v Kazakhstane (konets XIX – nachalo XX vv.). *Vestnik KazNU. Seriya istoricheskaya* 100, 1 (28–38), 34.

<sup>25</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The New Soviet School*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Martin, Terry. "The Soviet Affirmative Action Empire", 13.

establishment as it determined Kazakh educational progress. The Soviet leadership installed *korenizatsiia* mainly because it benefited their practical goals. The Soviet administration needed to unite numerous non-Russian populations into their newly formed socialist nation following the success of the revolution and civil war. The population of Central Asia, especially in rural regions, displayed severe illiteracy levels, making them inaccessible to ideological indoctrination.<sup>27</sup> Soviet officials adopted *korenizatsiia* as an integration plan which combined native language adoption with ethnic official hiring and administration of Marxist-Leninist doctrine throughout the educational program.<sup>28</sup>

The policy in Kazakhstan resulted in a brief period of Kazakh being used for educational instruction until its eventual decline. Kazakh textbooks were developed simultaneously with the admission of Kazakh-speaking students to teaching schools while the language underwent a process to establish its standardized written form. The change signified a major difference from Russian imperial historical language policy because it rejected the marginalization of local languages over Russian. Local educators and intellectuals who endorsed native-language schooling developed initial optimism about the Soviet support for the Kazakh language, which turned out to be strategic despite its positive effects.<sup>29</sup> The promotion of Kazakh identity operated with specific requirements. The Soviet objectives behind *korenizatsiia* did not include supporting indigenous autonomy since local culture served as an entry point to spread the party line. Johnson argues that “the Soviet regime systematically cultivated these narrowly defined ‘ethnic’ or national identities in a deliberate effort to subsume pan-Turkic ethnic or pan-Islamic religious solidarity”.<sup>30</sup> Marxist-Leninist history combined with collectivist values and atheist teachings became part of the educational material taught in Soviet schools through locally acceptable linguistic instructions. Native-language education formed part of the Soviet narrative, which led citizens to socialism instead of supporting ethnic nationalism. The Soviet administration recognized Kazakh cultural expression when it served socialist construction needs.<sup>31</sup>

The local teachers who worked in these schools found themselves in a difficult position due to their background from pre-Soviet and Jadidist schools. The Soviet state needed ethnic knowledge to carry out its cultural outreach programs across the population. The same educational professionals faced doubts from society because their affiliations were connected to Islamic institutions, along with reformist activities and nationalist commitment. Local teachers became subject to administrative oversight during the period when Kazakh-language education was implemented. The system kept Soviet teachers who completely accepted the Soviet ideology.<sup>32</sup>

*Korenizatsiia* developed educational programs that embodied the unified Soviet ideology. Educational content about the Kazakh language, literature, and history added value to communist teaching about social conflict and worker solidarity between different countries and nations. Students received their education at the Soviet school to reform Kazakh identity rather than preserve its original elements. Children received lessons that taught them that feudalism was evil, whereas religion remained backward, and Communist Party loyalty was essential. Through a

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<sup>27</sup> Gül, Yavuz Ercan. "Ideology and Education: Soviet Ideological Educational Practices in the Kyrgyz Territory, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Martin, Terry. "The Soviet Affirmative Action Empire", 10.

<sup>29</sup> Amanzholova, Dina A. *Sovetskiy proekt v Kazakhstane: Vlast' i etnichnost'. 1920–1930-e gg*, 337.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, "The Legacy of Russian and Soviet Education", 22.

<sup>31</sup> Amanzholova, Dina A. *Sovetskiy proekt v Kazakhstane: Vlast' i etnichnost'. 1920–1930-e gg*, 340.

<sup>32</sup> Keller, Shoshana. "Conversion to the New Faith: Marxism-Leninism and Muslims in the Soviet Empire.", 323

Marxist framework, traditional Kazakh figures were reshaped to appear as working-class fighters, and poets became pre-socialist opponents of backward ideas.<sup>33</sup> Through this approach, the Kazakh language allowed proponents to achieve cultural value transformation instead of content transmission.

Mass literacy campaigns that started from the early 1920s were the fulfillment of the promises of the October Revolution and were also consistent with the modernization policy of the “backward East”. Literacy centers were opened throughout the union, where teachers, Komsomol members, and activists taught common citizens. If by 1920, the literacy rate among Kazakhs was 2-4 percent<sup>34</sup>, by 1930, it reached 37 percent, and another 424 thousand citizens became literate in the 1930-1931 study year.<sup>35</sup> However, it should be noted that people were considered literate only if they could write and read in Cyrillic or the local Latin alphabet. Since most literate Kazakhs learned Arabic script before the October Revolution, the literacy rate among the Muslim/Kazakh population was artificially decreased.

*Korenizatsiia* was carried out with varied success throughout Kazakhstan. Fast development of Kazakh-language educational institutions took place in urban areas however, informal education practices together with Soviet resistance to schooling prevailed across rural areas. The educational experience of students in Kazakhstan varied because of the regional differences present in teacher preparation standards, teaching materials access, and administrative support systems. Certain parts of Kazakhstan experienced the successful advancement of Kazakh-language schools due to dedicated local educational leadership. The schools in some regions operated under insufficient staffing and funding<sup>36</sup> or endured destructive internal ideology-based struggles.<sup>37</sup>

Many Kazakh people at first received the educational policy favorably despite its contradictory elements. Their language, alongside cultural references, appeared in academic settings because it marked the first institutional use. Many intellectuals who fought during tsarist times for cultural rights discovered limited opportunities in the 1920s to advance Kazakh literacy and identity promotion. The initial feelings of enthusiasm among Kazakhs lasted only briefly. The Soviet government started moving away from indigenous cultural policies toward centralization combined with standardization and the adoption of Russian elements during the late 1920s. The *korenizatsiia* policy paved the way to uniform learning and ideological discipline by withdrawing institutional self-governance in educational departments.<sup>38</sup>

Studies about *korenizatsiia*'s political rollback in the late 1920s focus heavily on institutional changes, but scholars have paid insufficient attention to the deep social disturbances within Kazakh communities. The abolishment of local educational autonomy caused a complete break in traditional paternal training alongside elderly authority loss and established new power dynamics based on language ability and Soviet ideology acceptance. The educational institution served as a

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<sup>33</sup>Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 120.

<sup>34</sup> A. Mynbayeva and V. Pogolian, “Kazakhstani School Education Development from the 1930s: History and Current Trends,” *Al-Farabi Kazakh National University & Herzen University*, 2014, 147.

<sup>35</sup> Abikey, A. M., Kaipbaeva, A. T., Ospanova, R. R. (2022). Implementation Of The Literacy Campaign In Kazakhstan, 175.

<sup>36</sup> “Доклад Калинин о состоянии образования в ТаджССР,” *Russian Perspectives on Islam*, 1924, <https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/items/show/11550>. Although document discusses funding issues in Tadjikistan, similar issues were present in Kazakhstan too.

<sup>37</sup> RGASPI, f. 122, op. 1, d. 58, l. 108-109ob, Report of the CEC's Extraordinary Commission on Public Education in the Turkestan Republic, 1919.

<sup>38</sup> Mark S. Johnson, “The Legacy of Russian and Soviet Education and the Shaping of Ethnic, Religious, and National Identities in Central Asia,” *Comparative Education Review* 48, no. 4 (2004): 29.

site where past and present identities fought each other, resulting in confrontations both in political frameworks and in the normal routines of students with their relatives. The mandatory Russian-language education directive from Soviet authorities made children learn new ways of speaking and thinking, so they adopted values that contradicted or bothered their parents at home. The gap between generations became more pronounced since children learned Soviet doctrines in schools, but their parents followed Islamic values together with community practices and oral traditions. State-mandated pedagogy created substantial conflict between household members because it placed political loyalty to the party ahead of traditional kinship structures and against age-based and religious authority standards.<sup>39</sup>

The educational facilities of the Soviet Republic mirrored the ideological structure that the new state established. School environments transitioned from displaying religious texts to featuring Lenin and Stalin portraits as well as red flags while promoting industrial work and group unity through slogans. The educational system instructed students to interpret success by following atheistic principles as well as through collectivized labor activities and mastering the Russian language skills. The academic calendar shifted toward revolutionary celebrations rather than religious holidays to implement the new ideological values.<sup>40</sup> Time combined with symbols and ritual in this remade educational system worked toward the formation of new identities while breaking ties to previous relationships.

The fundamental aspect that supported this transformation was script reform. Apart from linguistic effects, the change in the writing system delivered profound emotions and cultural meanings. The switch from Arabic and Latin writing systems to Cyrillic caused a large body of religious texts, combined with family records and classical poetry, to disappear from access for following generations. The disruption transcended technical matters because it damaged fundamental cultural memory, which held Kazakh cultural identity for ages. These changes caused significant psychological distress to the population. The implementation of Soviet orthography created trouble for families because it disrupted the ability to transmit knowledge across generations as elders lost their authority through unreadable or unintelligible texts to the new Soviet-era generation.<sup>41</sup> This erosion of ancestral knowledge created both a political realignment and severed bonds between elder generations and their descendants.

Soviet education provided opportunities through education and enlightenment at the expense of total conformity and emotional disengagement from national traditions and cultural heritage. Those students who joined the new political movement suffered social isolation from both their families and their community, yet students who refused to join faced various forms of state control.<sup>42</sup> A large portion of families in rural areas refused to send their girls to integrated schools and denied state education in favor of religious studies.<sup>43</sup> The reason to decline educational programs could trigger administrative punishments, including monetary fines, along with public criticism or forced participation, thus making education both promising and worrying.

New social disparities developed over time because of the Soviet focus on teaching Russian to their citizens. More and more administrative positions, as well as academic career paths, require both ideological agreement and mastery of the Russian language. The population of Kazakhs who

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<sup>39</sup> Shoshana Keller, "Conversion to the New Faith," in *Of Religion and Empire*, 112–113.

<sup>40</sup> Shoshana Keller, "Conversion to the New Faith," in *Of Religion and Empire*, 322–323.

<sup>41</sup> Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca*, 122.

<sup>42</sup> Amanzholova, Dina A. *Sovetskiy proekt v Kazakhstane: Vlast' i etnichnost'. 1920–1930-e gg*, 344.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat*, 92–93.

lived in urban areas acquired superior ideological and cultural benefits through Russian cultural practices, which separated them from rural Kazakh populations who remained marginalized. The Sovietization divide split the Kazakh people into two distinct camps, both between Russian and Kazakh ethnicities and between Western-influenced elites and traditional culture followers.<sup>44</sup> Soviet educational policy maintained certain contradictions during this period. The Russian policy supported national cultural development in public relations, yet banned traditional expressions that differed from socialist political principles. The advancement of rationality and progress through its programs coexisted with political history, reshaping and enforcing ideological dogma. These split objectives failed to escape the notice of teaching staff, together with students, because they had previously trusted in korenizatsiia's promises. People followed official directives, but their private lives contained traditional cultural elements and mourning, overridden native languages, along with spiritual customs.<sup>45</sup>

The long-lasting consequences of these reforms showed inconsistent patterns because they were thoroughly complex. The Soviet school managed to generate a reading and working Kazakh populace<sup>46</sup>, but achieved this through cultural assimilation. Success in education required students to detach some elements of their identity because learning Russian frequently meant leaving Kazakh behind, while becoming Soviet required discarding their existing beliefs. Participation in Soviet modernity forced numerous individuals to progressively separate themselves from their ancestral traditions.

After korenizatsiia ended, there occurred fundamental modifications that transcended language policy reforms and curriculum alterations. The process of cultural transformation started toward coining a new national identity, which would persist throughout many decades. School acted as the instrument and representation of this cultural transformation, which recast linguistic expressions along with memories and philosophical beliefs to align with Soviet state doctrine. Behind Soviet socialist standardization, there existed continuous tensions between various groups, including generations and citizens who lived in different locations, as well as native identity against external Soviet identity.

### 3.4 Kazakhs' Reactions, Resistance, and Cultural Fracture

The Soviet educational expansion brought diverse responses from Kazakh society because people resisted the new ideas alongside their efforts to protect their traditional heritage. Soviet institutions started to expand their control into formerly independent communities, so the new regime used schools to impose its cultural and political mandates upon the Kazakh population. The educational decisions implemented by the Soviets transformed Kazakh rural communities because these educational orders attacked their established spiritual practices and disrupted their family relationships as well as community unity.

One main aspect of this conflict occurred through the everyday struggle between showing allegiance to institutions and holding onto personal beliefs. Teachers who learned through Soviet education received orders to impose atheistic teachings and ideological compliance while having roots in communities that preserved Islamic practices together with ancestral knowledge. Many teachers chose silence to show their defiance toward Soviet values and kept traditional cultural

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<sup>44</sup> Amanzholova, Dina A. *Sovetskiy proekt v Kazakhstane: Vlast' i etnichnost'. 1920–1930-e gg*, 337.

<sup>45</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 161.

<sup>46</sup> Rather et al, *The Development of Soviet Education in Kazakh SSR (1917-1991)*, 43.

practices hidden from surveillance. They combined professional compliance with private cultural practices. Throughout this invisible cultural memory preservation, teachers developed an alternative knowledge system existing independently from the established educational content.

The family structures of nomadic and semi-nomadic regions used specific methods to reduce the cultural impact of schooling on their children. Young learners received instructions about public display of obedience, but they preserved domestic values during private time. Students learned Soviet revolutionary slogans inside classrooms but followed Muslim religious teachings within their homes.<sup>47</sup> This situation demonstrated both Kazakh family identity strength and Soviet educational failure to disrupt local moral systems. These dual education commitments generated inner tension. When expected to break family traditions, the children functioned as messengers between divergent moral traditions and sometimes felt regret or loss because they needed to reject their elders' customs.

The changing position of women emerged as an especially controversial issue in the social transformation. The Soviet system adopted female education since it served both official goals and propagandistic purposes. Female education, together with unveiling rites, often brought disgrace to families instead of providing them with empowerment. Most women who participated in these reforms endured severe domestic criticism or total exclusion for participating in what was considered against their cultural morals.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, a small percentage of women took advantage of the reforms to enter the fields of health, industry, and teaching.<sup>49</sup>

Children endured the full impact of these cultural divisions at school and throughout their communities. Official promotion of surveillance activities combined with denunciation campaigns against similar households resulted in the disappearance of community trust. Students gradually moved away from their elders, who formerly resolved disputes while leading prayers, as party-backed youngsters preferred ideological purity above family-based loyalty.<sup>50</sup> This breakdown of intra-family relations coincided with students internalizing Soviet norms because education offered them social advancement potential, especially within Soviet administrative and cultural agencies. Success demanded that many Kazakhs deny the customs and values that previously formed their communal honor and individual identity. This historical period established an identity conflict because the Kazakh identity definition moved away from traditional spiritual ties toward the Soviet ideology-based measurement of ideological commitment. The transformation into Soviet citizens took place within the institution of schools through both content changes and symbolic activities like replacement portraits of Lenin with genealogical displays and traditional epics replaced by May Day songs.<sup>51</sup>

The heightened Soviet control in education during the early 1930s made rural classrooms into sites of power struggles, which produced daily educational practices through silent compromises and forced compliance. In environments lacking true cultural authority, local instructors played double roles as they helped either remove traditional values entirely or shielded portions of indigenous knowledge. Kazakh folklore, along with oral storytelling, found a place in academic lessons because certain teachers carefully integrated this material to bypass political aspects by teaching them as cultural traditions apart from ethnic or religious resistance.<sup>52</sup> Frequent inspector

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<sup>47</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, 196-197

<sup>48</sup> Marianne Camp, *The Hujum*, 169-170

<sup>49</sup> Adrienne Edgar, "Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation," 257.

<sup>50</sup> Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat*, 98.

<sup>51</sup> Shoshana Keller, "Conversion to the New Faith", 316.

<sup>52</sup> Dina A. Amanzholova, *Sovetskiy proekt v Kazakhstane*, 112.

visits forced teachers to eliminate pre-revolutionary customs from their lessons, but these instructors continued to utilize traditional epic metaphors to keep students paying attention. Inspectors showed poor understanding of Kazakh rural culture, so they relied on ideological checklist compliance to verify proper display of Lenin's portrait and pupil knowledge of Party slogans and negative mentions of Islamic festivals.<sup>53</sup> Under such strict surveillance, all pupils learned to show public allegiance towards the Soviet system while their hearts stayed conflicted. Students and teachers learned theatrical skills of display and concealment in this educational institution, which operated as a staged space.

The society experienced social turmoil when revealing the faces of young girls by branding it as an enlightened and equalizing act. Newspapers presented these changes as successful accomplishments, even though many families experienced them through feelings of humiliation, followed by strained relationships and disconnection. Schoolgirls who chose to unveil their faces frequently wore veils again at home because they feared reprisals such as gossip or punishment.<sup>54</sup> Numerous families chose to reinstate traditional private constraints on their women while continuing public support for state rules after their social connections eroded because of unveiling in these communities. Households with disciplined female students developing vocational skills permitted such contradictions to become routine practice. The educated girl emerged as a contradictory social figure, which brought pride but also created nervousness among families.<sup>55</sup>

The uncertain period produced several forms of resistance, which included more than direct rejection because individuals hid their knowledge through storytelling. Through wedding ceremonies and funeral traditions, elders maintained their tradition of narrating pre-Soviet Kazakh *batyrs* alongside poets and ruling khans to instill moral values through story and ritual practice.<sup>56</sup> Women silently kept genealogical knowledge and moral household ethical standards alive by passing them through songs in weddings, lullabies, and mourning chants. A hidden educational system provided girls and women a covert space for learning under intimate conditions instead of the inspection-based methods used in traditional classrooms. The authorities managed written and printed materials, but failed to regulate the freely shared words, even when they sang or whispered things to one another.

Soviet education expanded its social influence across Kazakh communities during the mid-1930s as it penetrated the geographic, emotional, and psychological aspects of communal life. The school shifted from being solely an instructional facility to serving as the key instrument that evaluated morals and filtered ideology. The redefinition of social legitimacy became one of the enduring fractures in the educational system. Russian language mastery, adoption of secular celebrations, and completion of party loyalty criteria transformed into the new definition of educational success, which formerly aligned with tribal heritage and Islamic teachings and elder endorsements. People who followed Soviet programs could proceed through bureaucracy, while any hesitation made the authorities consider them either stuck in the past or facing political investigations.

The new social order in rural areas established different rankings among the population. Youth who finished their education at pedagogical colleges wearing their red pioneer scarves and having

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<sup>53</sup> Shoshana Keller, "Conversion to the New Faith", 323.

<sup>54</sup> Marianne Camp, *The Hujum*, 169.

<sup>55</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 155-156.

<sup>56</sup> Dina A. Amanzholova, *Sovetskiy proekt v Kazakhstane*, 107.

memorized party expressions gained power in communities where individuals used to gain social standing through age or lineage, or Islamic learning ability. Children who experienced traditional family religious instruction from their parents now participated in the May Day celebrations and denounced sacred customs at public assemblies.<sup>57</sup>

The local teaching staff maintained dual responsibilities since most remaining instructors ended up being Kazakhs who passed through the first ideological selection processes. The authorities accepted teacher compliance through the required Soviet reporting system and curriculum records. The teachers introduced Kazakh linguistic elements and regional interpretive variations when teaching Soviet material to their communities in order to reduce doctrinal tension. Such balancing acts were dangerous. Educational staff discovered that making unauthorized connections to genealogical links, Islamic moral teachings, or tribal narratives faced regular denunciation procedures and mandatory interrogation and job termination.<sup>58</sup> Official instruction exhibited the presence of cultural fragments, which demonstrated that Soviet educational systems in Kazakhstan functioned as sites where memories clashed with identities and defeated the notion of complete system control.

People incorporated contradictory expressions through their decorations and verbal communication. Traditional Kazakh homes combined Soviet pictures and photo calendars with wooden storage boxes, which contained portions of the Qur'an and family writings in Arabic script and images of unveiled older women from the unveiling campaigns.<sup>59</sup> The residents would speak with Russian authoritative cues yet use Kazakh covert whispering at different times. The schoolchildren wrote about their appreciation for collective farms in their assignments, but household rituals began with prayers to ancestors. People lived with two identities without internal conflict because they needed to show complete loyalty to the Soviet ideology, while the state prohibited multi-religiosity.

Throughout the Soviet campaign, which aimed to eliminate religious backwardness, rural populations made additional alterations to their traditions. The eradication of public Friday prayers led to their discreet appearance at hidden shrines inside gardens and within mountains. The traditional Kazakh wedding vows persisted during marriage rituals even though they avoided direct Islamic references through classical folk songs. Death observances retained essential Islamic elements such as three days of mourning and typical goat sacrifices, though they were shortened in duration and displayed fewer openly religious practices. The restructured practices implemented by Kazakhs during Soviet rule managed to remain apart from state power without defying it.<sup>60</sup> The Kazakhs developed a careful approach to cultural persistence, which required submission to certain demands from the state.

The psychological weight from persistently dancing between Soviet and traditional cultures continues to threaten Kazakh populations. The people who achieved high levels in Soviet institutions documented their emotional conflict in memoirs by experiencing both professional advantages and personal suffering from collaboration. People expressed grief because they needed to set aside their grandparents' educational principles to be admitted to a university. Community celebrations became uncomfortable spaces for those who received official recognition from the

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<sup>57</sup> Shoshana Keller, "Conversion to the New Faith," 323.

<sup>58</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, 194.

<sup>59</sup> Dina A. Amanzholova, *Sovetskiy proekt v Kazakhstane*, 227.

<sup>60</sup> Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 210.

Communist Party because villagers secretly disapproved of them.<sup>61</sup> The emotional divide persisted after Soviet rule instead of fading away and shaped how post-Soviet Kazakh society would understand its educational background and cultural roots.

### 3.5 The Institutionalization of Soviet Identity in Early Soviet Kazakhstan

The Soviet educational reforms of the 1920s and 1930s made purposeful modifications to Kazakhstan, which served to establish a whole new type of Soviet citizen. The systematic programs aimed to destroy religious and tribal structures to establish a new state-centered conceptual system based on national devotion with secular advancement and social teamwork. Institutionalization took over this method to permanently transform Kazakh perspectives on self-identification and their social network structure, along with their Soviet world position.

The transformation established Soviet-Kazakh identity through education along with ideological alignment instead of traditional tribal or religious factors. By studying at schools, people received their keys to administrative positions, economic progress, and public fame. People who demonstrated mastery over the Russian language, together with complete indoctrination in Marxist-Leninist doctrines and dedicating themselves to atheism, obtained opportunities for professional and public recognition. Paine notes that “ Still, the road to social mobility ran through Russian language acquisition. Many of the memoirs of Kazakh workers who rose to prominence during and after the construction of the Turksib mentioned being taken under the wing of a "conscious" worker who taught them Russian, a trade, and how to comport oneself as a proletarian”.<sup>62</sup> These transformations detached social prestige from its previous foundations of oral traditions combined with tribal ranks, material wealth and religious powers.

Schools in rural areas undertook a complete transformation of what knowledge should consist of. The former system of passing down family stories through oral tradition transformed into Soviet schoolbooks that showed proletarian conflict as an ideal and ignored the traditional way of living as an obstacle to progress. Throughout moral education, the Soviet curriculum taught students that class warfare should replace religious introspection, while work activities represented the ultimate civic service. The former Islamic and family-based rituals fused into Soviet observances as the October Revolution and International Workers' Day emerged as primary school events on the academic calendar.<sup>63</sup>

Teachers selected from the first-generation group of Soviet-educated Kazakh intellectuals managed to maintain both their knowledge of traditional culture and their Soviet political obligations. Most teachers embraced their responsibilities to lead transformational changes in the practice of cultural understanding with the community. Public educational facilities directly joined the Soviet government's effort to eliminate traditional cultural traditions. The educational institution functioned as a little world representation of the governmental perspective by teaching Kazakh students to belong to a unified social construct that separated them from traditional native perspectives.

Possibly the most enduring legacy of this early educational transformation was the internalization of double consciousness among Kazakhs who were able to succeed within the Soviet system. On the one hand, these individuals were fluent in the ideological vocabulary of Marxism-Leninism and understood the behavioral codes required to succeed within state

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<sup>61</sup> Dina A. Amanzholova, *Sovetskiy proekt v Kazakhstane*, 121.

<sup>62</sup> Payne, *The forge of the Kazakh Proletariat*, 235-236.

<sup>63</sup> Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca*, 156.

institutions. On the other hand, many continued to carry within them echoes of suppressed traditions; genealogies they recited in childhood as their family members recited to them, Islamic values received from their families, or simply unarticulated discomfort with the denial of their past. This dualistic experience, though rarely publicly articulated, characterized the emotional terrain of early Soviet Kazakh identity.<sup>64</sup>

The early Soviet Kazakh context saw education as a means through which Soviet identity became institutionalized. In addition, emotional and psychological norms were also institutionalized within Soviet education as they became part of the quotidian school environment. Schools were the setting for instructing the future “New Soviet Person” and became, in many ways, the emotional conditioning environments that reinforced silence, conformity, and alertness, and ridiculed and punished piety to family, tribe, and community. Children were trained not only in ideological posturing but also in self-regulation and the regulation of others, thereby inculcating citizenship values in a deep and personal manner.

Among the most significant legacies of the educational experiment was the emergence of an elite Soviet-Kazakh caste who derived authority from degrees and educational certification, and not by kinship or moral standing within the Kazakh community. This new class of individuals became the brokers between Moscow and the Kazakh population, and while many of them imagined Kazakhstan as a modern state, they participated (knowingly or not) in the removal of the lived memory of community. They led education campaigns, established groups for youth such as Young Pioneers or Komsomol, and searched for traces of “superstition” which served to widen the generational divide.<sup>65</sup>

This irrevocably altered the social order among Kazakhs. Elders, who traditionally embodied cultural knowledge and acted as a source of moral authority, were now displaced by young educators or administrators. The educators were constructed as surrogates of the state, and the authority these educators wielded was in direct relation to their association with the state. The implications were far-reaching. Even in communities where age had previously conferred honor, wisdom became associated with one's capacity to articulate Party slogans or to enforce school attendance.<sup>66</sup> These transformations not only dismantled kin-based systems of respect; they also reconstructed a new internal compass by which individuals measured legitimacy and connectedness.

State-mandated schooling, as a mode of Soviet modernity, brought forth new models of temporal discipline that conflicted, often and radically, with the temporality of pastoral life. While Kazakh nomadic communities had long structured their actions based on seasonal rhythms and natural cycles, the compulsory school imposed a calendar, timetable, and expectation of daily punctuality. Disrupting not only logistical habits but also imposing a new kind of psychic order, the school dictated new timetables that superseded the authority of the family, community, or environment.

As early as the mid-1930s, the socio-spatial and auditory context of the classroom was scrutinized in a way that would influence ideological consciousness. Wall posters presented the “ideal Soviet child”; textbooks sanitised laborers and immigrant factory workers' ideas while denigrating poets; and the architecture of the school building, with symmetry and standardization, emphasized uniformity, rationalism, and ideal representation of workers. Students were told to

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<sup>64</sup> Payne, *The forge of the Kazakh Proletariat*, 240.

<sup>65</sup> Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca*, 57-58.

<sup>66</sup> Shoshana Keller, “Conversion to the New Faith”, 333.

"report on" classmates or parents who violated the ideological codes, and this reporting could invite serious consequences, such as disciplinary action at school or, in some cases, investigations by local party cells. The vigilance, suspiciousness, and mutuality of peer reporting persisted and hardened over time, promoting authoritarian avenues through structuring emotional landscapes of daily life in Kazakhstan.

Women and girls—already leveraged for reenvisioning tradition in earlier Soviet reform efforts—were employed to signify the collision of tradition. Young girls who advanced through the kinds of Soviet contexts of education were famously celebrated, lifted publicly as the ideal progressive icon, and included in leadership roles within anti-socialist contexts. While claiming to be in favor of secular progress in their education, many were regularly conflicted with returning home to their village only to face social disapproval from their own community, family, or the nature of their belonging. The same girl being celebrated for her educational accomplishments may start with diminished social, familial respect, or prospects for marriage, thus socially trapped, should she choose modern education over community relationships, including enjoyable engagement in traditional practices outside of educational contexts or ideological reckoning.<sup>67</sup>

In a more profound capacity, the classroom may be considered a laboratory for emotional transformation. Through the work of collaborative reading, morning recitations, and political theater, students were cultivated to enact loyalty, not just to comprehend loyalty in a general sense. Emotions such as revolutionary pride, fears of thinking counterrevolutionary thoughts, and guilt over family nonconformity were all a part of that education process. With time, this emotional education became second nature in a society where a misplacement of sentiment could lead to suspicion or punishment.

These aspects of institutional legacies around these reforms persisted long after the reforms had gone into place. Even as late as the late 1930s, many Kazakhs, who had maneuvered through the educational system, nominally as Soviet citizens but still carrying the sense of loss of their identity when they did so, felt that loss acutely. They had obtained new forms of power, script reforms, cultural cleansing, and disappearance of religious education at the expense of older framings and traditions of knowing. Some attempted to negotiate these losses through hybrid identities, Soviet on the surface but also at home still affixed with ancestral customs, but those identities were often flimsy, easily monitored, and too easily denounced.<sup>68</sup>

In the absence of public mourning for the lost, these changes were turned into quiet absences for children who could not read their grandparents' manuscripts, who sang songs without a spiritual basis, or who felt uncomfortable participating in rituals imposed by Soviet ideology. They carried moving underground memories of disruption. The official story claimed that they were transforming into a more enlightened society, but many experienced it as fragmentation and a kind of cultural loss enforced from above.

Therefore, by the end of the 1930s, Soviet schools had successively institutionalized not only new political identities but new emotional and social norms as well. Schools changed the world of young Kazakhs through curriculum, space, ritual, architecture, and disciplined time. This served as a basis for a new form of community and selfhood that ruptured the Kazakh past. Some could creatively navigate this shuttering and disruption, but on the whole, it constituted a transformation that disrupted Kazakh cultural structures in meaningful ways.

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<sup>67</sup> Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat*, 105

<sup>68</sup> Amanzholova, *Sovetskiy proekt*, 112.

#### 4. Discussion

The Soviet education initiative in Kazakhstan in the early 20th century was, in fact, one of the most ambitious projects of identity transformation attempted by any modern state. The Soviet authorities used education as an ideological and institutional weapon, not simply to modernize but to reconstruct Kazakh society from the ground up by removing the markers of past cultural, spiritual, and linguistic identities and replacing them with new Soviet identities. Reconstruction, as opposed to modernization, was systematic—they believed the only way to create unity as socialist subjects would be to dismantle systems of knowledge, belief, and belonging.

A core element of this reconstruction was the redefinition of knowledge, power, and memory. Pre-Soviet Kazakh society had a rich and multi-layered educational ecosystem of Islamic schooling, oral traditions, tribal knowledge, and customary practices. Each of these systems had varied domains and regimes but created a strong attachment to spirituality and community, ensuring historical memory and obligations across generations. Soviet schools replaced this foundation with curricula that celebrated anti-religiosity, sanctified industrial work, and, in effect, required political loyalty to Moscow. This effort transcended pedagogical reform and engaged a fundamental shift in the meaning of what it meant to be educated, loyal, or even modern.

Although *korenizatsiia* created an initial perception that the local culture and language would be safeguarded, this period of local accommodation was rather brief. Once a certain density of literacy and integration into the administrative structure had taken root, Soviet policy swiftly transitioned towards centralization of authority, Russification, and even the erasure of local culture. By altering scripts, notably through the shift from Arabic to Cyrillic, the opportunity to engage with a new generation's past and to break genealogical lines was not just metaphorical. It was epistemic. This change severed Kazakhs from modes of understanding the world that had persisted for centuries. The Kazakh response to disruption was a range of deeply human responses. In some cases, local communities engaged in outright resistance, maintaining Quranic study circles and oral genealogies in secret. Others complied to varying degrees, enrolling children in Soviet schools while trying to maintain some spiritual practices at home, and still others attempted to find a synthesis of sorts, attempting to marry Soviet ideology with Kazakh values. Female education became a point of conflict; for some female students, it represented the opportunity for agency and mobility, and for others, it represented moral failure and the degradation of culture. Teachers, operating within the two spaces, had competing responsibilities with contemporaneous expectations from the state and the wider community and negotiated these dynamics daily, at considerable professional and personal risk.

The most persistent outcome of these educational reforms was the emotional and generational ruptures they created. Elders feel trivialized as their knowledge is described as "feudal" or "superstitious", and children were rewarded for being fluent in Soviet discourse. The moral vocabulary of Kazakh society shifted, as loyalty to kin and tradition exchanged loyalty to the Party, often painfully. While Soviet officials may have reported success with increasing literacy and ideological agreement, this data obscured the inner fractures left behind.

However, despite these efforts, the transformation was never total. Cultural memory endures, and education was viewed in whispered stories, privately spoken blessings, and cyclical time's rhythms of nomadic life. Hence, the legacy of Soviet schooling remains deeply ambivalent: a Source of empowerment and alienation, development and loss. The Kazakh experience shows the limits of superior projects of identity engineering, particularly in conflict with existing, stabilizing cultural systems. Education, far from being a universally beneficial, objective tool of progress,

found itself as a battleground for competing worldviews - each trying to regulate not only what knowledge "mattered" but what kind of person a Kazakh ought to become.

The research project demonstrated that Soviet education reform in Kazakhstan during the early 20th century was neither an unambiguous imposition nor an uncomplicated tale of success. It was a contested, uneven, and consequential development that transformed the historical landscape of Kazakh identity, community, and memory, the effects of which are still palpable today. Engaging with this legacy helps us reflect on the larger experiences of state-building, cultural erasure, and resistance of emergent forms of indigenous knowledge in authoritarian contexts.

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