Islam and the Nation: Debates on Religion in the Early 20th-Century Kazakh National Movement in Sources and Historiography

Rustem Zholdybalin

For citations:

Zholdybalin, R. (2025) "Islam and the Nation: Debates on Religion in the Early 20th-Century Kazakh National Movement in Sources and Historiography", *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom* 2 (43): 64–89.

Рекомендация для цитирования:

Жолдыбалин Р. Ислам и нация: дебаты о религии в казахском национальном движении начала XX века в источниках и историографии // Государство, религия, церковь в России и за рубежом. 2025. № 2 (43). С. 64–89.

Received: 20.10.2024; Revised: 26.02.2025; Accepted for publication: 01.04.2025.

Поступила в редакцию: 20.10.2024; прошла рецензирование: 26.02.2025; принята в печать: 01.04.2025.

Research Institute for Jochi Ulus Studies, (Astana, Kazakhstan). rustemktl@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0004-2473-6925

The historiography of the pre-revolutionary Kazakh national movement often presents a simplistic dichotomy between pro-Islamic traditionalists and secular national liberals. This binary view fails to capture the nuanced perspectives of Kazakh nationalists on religion and its role in shaping national identity. It is well-known that many early Kazakh intellectuals from both sides participated in the Soviet secular nation-building project, influencing the development of Kazakhness. My paper examines the history of early Kazakh nationalism through the lens of secularism, focusing on the educational and personal backgrounds of the intelligentsia and their reactions to historical changes and arguing that pragmatic considerations largely drove the evolution of their nationalist views. The study involves a historiographic review and a reassessment of critical moments that shaped the intelligentsia's shift toward secularism. It reveals that, despite the controversy, the Alash movement included intellectuals who viewed Islam as an integral component of Kazakh identity. The diversity of their perspectives supports the thesis that the nation's boundaries were negotiated before the Soviet national project.

Keywords: Kazakh nationalism, nation-building, national identity, national idea, historical memory, national code, Islam

Ислам и нация: дебаты о религии в казахском национальном движении начала XX века в источниках и историографии

Рустем Жолдыбалин

РГП на ПХВ[1] «Научный институт изучения Улуса Джучи» КН МНВО РК (Астана, Казахстан). rustemktl@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0004-2473-6925

Историография дореволюционного казахского национального движения часто представляет упрощенную дихотомию между происламскими традиционалистами и светскими национал-либералами. Эта бинарная точка зрения не отражает нюансы взглядов казахских националистов на религию и ее роль в формировании национальной идентичности. Хорошо известно, что многие казахские интеллектуалы обоих лагерей участвовали в советском проекте светского государственного строительства, оказав влияние на становление «казахскости». В статье рассматривается история раннего казахского национализма через призму секуляризма, особое внимание уделяется образованию и личным особенностям интеллигенции, их реакции на исторические изменения. Исследование включает историографический обзор и переоценку ключевых моментов, которые повлияли на переход интеллигенции к секуляризму. В нем показано, что, несмотря на противоречия, в движение «Алаш» входили интеллектуалы, которые рассматривали ислам как неотъемлемый компонент казахской идентичности. Разнообразие их точек зрения подтверждает тезис о том, что воображаемые границы нации обсуждались еще до советского национального проекта.

Ключевые слова: казахский национализм, национальное строительство, национальная идентичность, национальная идея, историческая память, национальный код, ислам

This work was supported by the Science Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan under Grant No. BR21882266 received by the Research Institute for Jochi Ulus Studies as part of program-targeted funding for «The study of the historical memory of the population and the policy of nation-building in Kazakhstan during the years of Independence». I thank Prof. Rozaliya Garipova of Nazarbayev University and anonymous peers for their advices during preparation of this article.

[1.] Республиканское государственное предприятие на праве хозяйственного ведения.

Introduction

In the early twentieth century, in the Russian-ruled Kazakh Steppe, there was a rising notion of the community by the native intellectuals, nowadays known by the vague term "Alash intelligentsia". They had different visions of what "Kazakh" was; these visions included debates on the role of Islam in the political, social, and cultural aspects of forging the nation. Although this issue stayed behind the hotter topics like land, language, or autonomy in their debates, their placing of Islam inside the boundaries of "Kazakhness" was influential in imagining the Kazakhs as a Muslim nation. Although the Kazakh intelligentsia had a heterogeneous social and educational background, religious observance, and political allegiance, it did not stop them from interchanging ideas and collaborating to forge a unified identity.

Nowadays, local scholarship considers the Alash intelligentsia to consist of sympathisers of Islam in their nation-building project[2]. While the Islamic problems consistently (though not like other issues such as land or autonomy) appear in their narratives, I argue that these intellectuals adapted their rhetoric toward religion due to the political agenda that changed throughout the vulnerable early 20th century. This "realpolitik" transformation of the rhetoric, from a supporter of Islamophobic discourse of the imperial period through a search for an alliance with pro-Muslim groups, and finally falling into the grace of Soviet secularism, is better exemplified by the leader of Alash, Alikhan Bokeikhan (Bukeikhanov) (1866–1937). Focus on Bokeikhan is justified by his overwhelming influence on the whole Kazakh national movement, which enhanced the secularist agenda even among pro-Islamist national activists, making his personal views dominant among the future Alash movement[3].

[2] Nurtazina, N. D. (2008) *Peoples of Turkestan: Problems of Islam, Integration, Modernisation and Decolonisation, at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries*, p. 123, 127. Almaty: Qazaq universiteti (in Russian); Kakishev, T. (2011) *Kazakh Intellectuals*, pp. 42–45. Almaty: Qazyghurt (in Kazakh); Khazretali, T. (2013) *Alash and Turkestan*, pp. 133–136. Almaty: El-shezhire (in Kazakh); Nurtazina, N. (2017) "What kind of Muslims were the Alash Orda members?", *Altyn-Orda*, July 17 [https://altyn-orda.kz/kakimi-musulmanami-byli-alash-ordyntsy, accessed on 24.03.2025] (in Russian); Ismakova, A. (2017) "Religious views of Alash intellectuals", *Islam.kz*. [https://islam.kz/kk/articles/islam-jane-qogam/alash-ziyalylarynyn-dini-kozqarastary-2396, accessed on 24.03.2025] (in Kazakh).

[3] Tomohiko Uyama showed how Bokeikhan's authority changed Mirzhaqyp Dulatov's pro-Islamist rhetoric to more moderate and then secularist agenda, see: Uyama, T. (2013)

The barely challenged legacy of the Marxist scholarship categorises Kazakh intelligentsia into ideologically distinct groups such as liberal/conservative, nationalist/pan-Islamist or pan-Turkic, and secular/traditionalist[4]. I challenge this categorisation by exploring recently published primary sources[5], focusing on the thinker with the most controversial views toward Islam, Alikhan Bokeikhan. While Bokeikhan's example shows the decolonising trend of rhetoric from a loyalist colonial intellectual to a nationalist leader (and how he treated Islam in this pragmatist journey), the narratives of the other Alash leader, Akhmet Baitursynuly (Baitursynov) (1872–1937), show his agenda of preserving Islamic cultural heritage during nation-building (in which Baitursynuly played a significant role even after the establishment of Soviet rule). Works by other intellectuals, such as an anti-Islamist poet Sultanmakhmut Toraighyrov (1893–1920) and Bolshevik activist Sanzhar Asfendiyarov (1889–1938), show the complex interplay between national aspirations and religion. Other than these sources, patched memoirs, and biographical notes, I studied Soviet and modern Kazakhstani, Russian[6], and international

"The Changing Religious Orientation of Qazaq Intellectuals in the Tsarist Period: Sharīʿa, Secularism, and Ethics", in N. Pianciola, P. Sartori (eds) *Islam, Society and States across the Qazaq Steppe (18th—Early 20th Centuries)*, pp. 95–118. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

4. Kendirbay, G. (1997) "The National Liberation Movement of the Kazakh Intelligentsia at the Beginning of the 20th Century", *Central Asian Survey* 16(4): 490–492. The tradition of challenging Communist-proposed dichotomy started with Martha B. Olcott, who acknowledged the role of Islam in the political mobilisation of Kazakhs, see: Olcott, M.B. (1987) *The Kazakhs*, pp. 108–109. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press. On the contrary, some Kazakhstani studies still claimed that Islam had no influence on development of Kazakh national movement, or simply disregarded it. See: Sultangaliyeva, A.K. (1998) *Islam in Kazakhstan: History, Ethnicity, and Society*, p. 46. Almaty: Kazahstanskii institut strategicheskih issledovanii pri Prezidente RK (in Russian); Abzhanov, Kh. (2014) *Kazakhstan: National History, Idea, and Methodology*. Almaty: Eltanym (in Kazakh); Nurov, K. I. (2021) *Kazakhstan: national idea and traditions*. Almaty: Vox Populi (in Russian).

5. Bokeikhan, A. (2018) *Complete Works*. Astana: Alashorda qogamdyq qory (in Kazakh and Russian); Baitursynuly, A. (2022) *Complete Works in 12 volumes*. Astana: Alashorda qogamdyq qory (in Kazakh and Russian).

6. Russo-Kazakhstani author Dina A. Amanzholova focuses mostly on the movement's political agenda. While she explicitly depicts the interaction of Bokeikhan with Muslim deputies of the Russian State Duma, she claims that the "Alash" leaders viewed all-Muslim movement in Russia merely as a tribune to speak on Kazakh concerns, and that Islam had very weak role in political and ideological agenda of Kazakh intelligentsia (noting that the latter fact contributed to the continuing influence of secularist Kazakh activists in the Soviet nation-building project). Her colleague Tamara Krasovitskaya points out that Bokeikhan was afraid of Turkestani conservative Islamism. See: Amanzholova, D. A. (2009) *On the Break: Alash in the Ethno-Political History of Kazakhstan*, pp. 74, 100. Almaty: Taimas (in Russian); Amanzholova, D. A.,

scholarship on the "Alash intelligentsia." The scant international scholarship is instrumental in tackling the Marxist categorisation[7].

Soviet scholarship created a categorical but confusing image of the early Kazakh intelligentsia[8]. At first, it juxtaposed "patriarchal" and "liberal" groups, labelled as pro-feudal reactionary and progressive, respectively. Marxists identified reactionism as a tie to Islam: the dominating class of Kazakh feudal promoted religious "superstitions" to justify the current socioeconomic and power relations[9]. Therefore, Islamic-oriented "patriarchal" thinkers idealised the primordial past and viewed Islam as the way of survival for nomads. At the same time, "liberals" criticised the increasing influence of Tatar missionaries and the backwardness of nomadic culture. Patriarchal and liberal

Krasovitskaya, T. Y. (eds) (2020) *Cultural Complexity of Soviet Russia: Ideology and Administrative Practice, 1917–1941*, p. 45. Moscow: Novyi Hronograf (in Russian).

7. D'Encausse, H. C. (1994) "Social and Political Reform", in E. Allworth (ed) *Central Asia: 130 Years of Russian Dominance, A Historical Overview*, pp. 189–206. Durham and London: Duke University Press; Kendirbay, "National Liberation Movement"; Sabol, S. (2003) *Russian Colonization and the Genesis of Kazak National Consciousness*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Karpat, K. H. (2004) "The Roots of Kazakh Nationalism: Ethnicity, Islam or Land?", in *Studies on Turkish Politics and Society: Selected Articles and Essays*, pp. 580–611. Leiden and Boston: Brill; Uyama, T. (2008) "Were There an Islamic Alternative? Role of Islam in the Early 20th Century Kazakh National Movement", *Shygys* 2: 143–147 (in Russian); Uyama, "Changing Religious Orientation".

8. Yermukhan Bekmakhanov, Kassym Beisembiyev, and Viktor Demidov accused Kazakh intelligentsia, in particular the editors of national newspaper *Qazaq* (1913–1918), in preservation of religion and boosting religious fanaticism. Beisembiyev also distinguishes Alash as medium group occupying niche between reactionary conservatives and progressive materialists (and lists Toraighyrov in the last group). Despite the harsh official atheist rhetoric, there were still works advocating for Kazakh print media's Islamic tradition. For example, Mukhtar Auezov emphasised on the role of religious poets of that period in nurturing the spiritual culture of Kazakhs, and Nigmet Sabitov claimed that the Jadid-Qadim debates in 1913–1914 inspired the critical publishing of Alash intellectuals. Modern scholarship considers Soviet school of Islamic Studies in Kazakhstan to be "far from a schientific approach". See: Bekmakhanov, Y. B. (1949) "Reactionary Role of Muslim Clergy, 2nd Half of XIX — Early XX Centuries", *Vestnik KazSSR*11: 65–76 (in Russian); Sabitov, N. (1950) Maktabs and Madrassahs of Kazakhs: Historical-Educational Essay, p. 32. Alma-Ata: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk KazSSR (in Russian); Auezov, M. (1961) *Thoughts in Various Years: On Literary Paths*, edited by *I. T. Dyusenbayev*, p. 38. Alma-Ata: Kazahskoe gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo hudozhestvennoi literatury (in Russian); Beisembiyev, K. B. (1961) *Political Ideas in Kazakhstan in Late XIX — Early XX Centuries*, pp. 8, 284. Alma-Ata: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk KazSSR (in Russian); Beisembiyev, K. B. (1970) *Victory of Marxist-Leninist Ideology in Kazakhstan*, p. 272. Alma-Ata: Kazahstan (in Russian); Demidov, V. A. (1983) *October and National Issue in Siberia, 1918–1923*, p. 42. Novosibirsk: Nauka (in Russian); Nurtazina, N. (2024) *Islam and the Genesis of the Kazakh Muslim Tradition*, p. 60. Astana: Muftiyat (in Russian).

9. Beisembiyev, K. B. (1976) *Essays on History of Socio-Political and Philosophical Thought in Kazakhstan: Pre-Revolutionary Era*, p. 423. Alma-Ata: Kazahstan (in Russian).

groups evolved as Jadid-oriented[10] and Kazakh "national liberation" movements by the beginning of the early twentieth century. Such a division seems tentative because some of the labelled "pro-Islamic" leaders are now considered part of the "national liberation movement" (i. e., Shakarim) and received a proper Russian education (i. e., Bakhytzhan Karatayev)[11]. In contrast, not all the "secularist" leaders shared the same sentiment towards religion. The second problem is mixing the members of different movements, the nationalist Alash and the pan-Turkist Turkestani federalists, under the one label of the "Kazakh liberation movement."[12] The two movements had very different images of the role of Islam in their political program.

Nowadays, the national liberation movement, or Alash, is the conventional term for the Kazakh intelligentsia of the early twentieth century, united by Kazakh nationalism. This vague and ambivalent concept fits my vision of the Kazakh intelligentsia of that period

10. Historiography of Alash has complicated tradition of "Jadidisation". Hélène Carrère d'Encausse and Nurtazina called Baitursynuly a "Kazakh Jadid leader"; the latter also claimed *Qazaq* and *Aiqap* to be providers of Jadid ideology. On the other extreme, Grigol Ubiria downplays Jadid movement in the Steppe as non-existent. I support Adeeb Khalid's notion of Jadidism as series of reformist movements within Islamic tradition, represented among Kazakhs as an educational movement championed by Russian-educated elites; however, his take that there was little connection between Jadids and Kazakh nationalism is debatable. Recent Allen J. Frank's article finally drawed a line on usage of the "Kazakh Jadids" term. See: D'Encausse, H. C. (1994) "The Stirring of National Feeling", in E. Allworth (ed.) *Central Asia*, p. 176; Khalid, A. (1998) *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*, pp. 93, 103. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press; same author, (2006) "What Jadidism Was, and What It Wasn't: The Historiographical Adventures of a Term", p. 4, *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 5(2): 3–13; Nurtazina, *N. D. Peoples of Turkestan: Problems of Islam, Integration, Modernisation and Decolonisation, at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries*, pp. 92, 123; Ubiria, G. (2016) *Soviet Nation-Building in Central Asia: The Making of Kazakh and Uzbek Nations*, pp. 56, 62. London: Routledge; Frank, A. J. (2024) "Who Were the Kazakh Jadids?", *Journal of Central Asian History* 3(2): 170–198.

11. Beisembiyev was first to "acquit" Shakarim as an "idealist" rather than traditionalist, describing him as a fighter against irrational and "surplus" contents of Islamic teachings, in 1961. The timing of this acquisition coincides with the official posthumous acquittment of Shakarim in 1958. Nurtazina surprisingly calls pro-Islamist activist Karatayev a "radical supporter of European assimilation". See: Beisembiyev, K. B. *Political Ideas in Kazakhstan in Late XIX—Early XX Centuries*, pp. 176–177; Nurtazina, N. D. *Peoples of Turkestan: Problems of Islam, Integration, Modernisation and Decolonisation, at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries*, p. 127.

12. Alima Bissenova and Assel Mukasheva describe this trend as "Alashisation" of history of Kazakhstan in early 20th century, finding the similarity of problem with "Jadidisation" of Central Asian history of the same period. For example, Tursun Khazretali brings Mustafa Shokay, a leader of Turkestani federalists, as an example of pro-Muslim Alash activist. See: Khazretali, *Alash and Turkestan*, p. 136; Bissenova, A., Mukasheva, A. (2020) "Colonial Intellectuals: Caught between the Enlightenment and Representation of their People", *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 166 (6): 445–459 (in Russian).

because it refers to a larger group of intellectuals than just "liberals" or "secularists." This group includes those who later joined the communists but still viewed Islam as an integral part of Kazakhness.

Islamic Allegiance and Observance by the National Intelligentsia

The image of Alash as an anti-religious intellectual derives from two points. One is that they were critical of the nomadic lifestyle and Tatar missionaries as foes of progress[13]. Another one is that the Alash Party, often confused with the Kazakh national liberation movement, had a secularist agenda, succeeding the "secularist" elites of the Kazakh Khanate[14]. Despite these factors, most Alash intellectuals shared a deep sense of religiosity and highly regarded Islam. It is evident from their religious education, work, activities, and material belongings. They built a tie between Kazakh nationalism and allegiance to Islam because that era's actualisation of a national identity building demanded an "interiorisation" of religion[15], shifting its balance from the shared social reality toward personal choices.

Most of the Alash intelligentsia gained religious education at some point[16]. Some did not attend religious schools but obtained basic knowledge of Muslim customs at home: Russian-educated Bokeikhan showed a thorough understanding of Islamic narratives, mainly of the folk version, resulting in narrating some ridiculous assumptions of "Islamic" customs. For example, at the Russian Muslim Congress in St. Petersburg in 1914, he cited the story of the mythological Zengi Baba, whose wife's acceptance of physical abuse is described as the virtue of the Muslim woman[17]. His another controversial notion is that wealthy

13. Kendirbay, G. "National Liberation Movement", p. 492.

14. Kemal Karpat justified the adoption of secularism by Kazakh intelligentsia by the prevailing "folk" version of Islam among Kazakh nomads, and by following the "secular" tradition of feudal Kazakh statehood, as opposed to the concept of *dawla* in Muslim countries (despite the strong sense of allegiance to Islam by its elites). See: Karpat, "Roots of Kazakh Nationalism".

15. Nurtazina, N. "What kind of Muslims were the Alash Orda members?".

16. Soviet historiography denied the intellectuals that predominantly gained Islamic training the status of "intelligentsia" because they were not fitting its anticlerical agenda. See: Sabol, S. *Russian Colonization*, p. 54.

17. "Woman according to the Kyrgyz tale Qoblandy", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 1, pp. 154–155 (in Kazakh and Russian).

Muslims should visit Mecca three times in life instead of once[18]. Most Kazakh intellectuals, including A. Baitursynov, Mirzhaqyp (Mir Yakub) Dulatov (1885–1935), and Khalel Dosmuhammedov (1883–1939), received primary education from rural mullahs before pursuing formal education in Russian schools. Many Alash intellectuals received a Jadid education[19]. Madrassah Galiya in Ufa was the alma mater for Alash Orda government members Magzhan Zhumabayev (1893–1938) and Akhmet Mametov (1895–1938) and the *Aiqap* journal's contributor Nugman Manayev (1894–1942), who also studied at Khusainiya in Orenburg. Another Khusainiya alumnus is "younger" Alash poet S. Toraighyrov, who would later join Bolshevists and become critical of Islam.

While studying intellectuals' backgrounds reveals their communal allegiance to one of the significant religious education centres of the time, often Jadidist, it is more important to examine the records of contemporaries and sometimes their own that witness the signs of intellectuals' religious devotion. The slightest examples of personal religious observance by these people would advocate for their sympathy towards Islam more evidently than the certificates of their education, which, like in the case of Toraighyrov, was no guarantee of pro-Muslim choices by the intellectuals. Such examples might appear as sporadic signs of respect toward Islam: Bokeikhan, while visiting Kazakh rear workers in 1917, devoted Quranic verses and *du'a* (a prayer) toward fallen compatriots while kneeling. Manifestations of faith could appear in times of desperation, like when Baitursynov wrote a panegyric to Allah in imprisonment. Finally, some personal belongings expose a high level of religious competence or observance. Zhumabayev's prayer mat, nowadays an exposition in a museum, was worn out in places where the forehead, palms, and kneels bow to the ground (*sajjada qadimah*), as when its owner performs the regular prayer[20].

The anti-religious image of Alash is challenged by the concept of "awakening" in the nationalist propaganda, deriving from 1909 M. Dulatov's poetry collection *Oian, Qazaq*! ["Awake, Kazakh!"]. The concept claims that Dulatov's poetry reflected the political situation

[18] "Open letter to the hajjees", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 1, p. 222 (in Kazakh and Russian).

[19] Frank, A. J. (2016) "Muslim Cultural Decline in Imperial Russia: a Manufactured Crisis", p. 170, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59 (1/2): 166–192.

[20] Nurtazina, N. "What kind of Muslims were the Alash Orda members?".

and advocated Islamic revivalism. Uyama argues that Bashkir poet Miftakhetdin Aqmulla partially influenced that call, although Dulatov's emphasis was on national progress, in which Islam served the nation in a tie with European education[21]. Though Uyama finds the religious motives of early twentieth-century "progressive" Kazakh literature and sheds light on the debates on secularism within Alash, the question remains whether these intellectuals were bearers of Muslimness as an integral part of their identity.

Decolonisation and the Change of Rhetoric

Modern scholarship leans to view indigenous intelligentsia of the early 20th century as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the native population. This intermediary role is best represented in the figure of Alikhan Bokeikhan. He received an excellent education in Russian institutions, contributed to regional Russian newspapers, academic publications, and census expeditions, actively participating in debates on the colonial fate of Kazakhs as well as economic development of the region, effectively becoming a leading Kazakh "colonial intellectual"[22]. Early Bokeikhan was very critical of the institution of mullahs, which was very popular among nomads as contrary to sedentarised Muslim communities with more grounded Islamic institutions. In an 1889 publication called *A Mullah in K. Uyezd*, he questions their status as representatives of religion, often lacking primary education. He claimed that a typical mullah reads the Qur'an without understanding because he does not know Arabic; therefore, they are full of superstitions and prejudices, which they transmit to uneducated common Kazakhs. The problem is that the commoners believe in anything a mullah says, accepting his infallibility and counting disobedience to his word as a sin. The author states that such a mullah can only perform the external side of religious duties[23].

Does it show the author's hostility toward Islamic institutions? Besides accusations of lack of religious knowledge, Bokeikhan states that the sinful actions of mullahs contradict the Shari'a law.

[21] Uyama, T. "Changing Religious Orientation", pp. 102–105.

[22] Amanzholova, D.A. *On the Break: Alash in the Ethno-Political History of Kazakhstan*, pp. 40–41.

[23] "Mullah in K-district", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 1, p. 41 (in Kazakh and Russian).

These actions include pseudo-Shari'a justification of perjury against "infidels" in favour of fellow Muslims and of violating the sanctity of private property of the "infidels." This way, it is ignorance and violation of religious laws, but not the religion itself, that is the root of social injustice and corruption. Moreover, the author does not call to abandon the institution of mullahs at all: they have to be "the fathers of a nation" and be tested on both knowledge of the faith and the customs of the local community. Bokeikhan focuses on a critique of foreigner Tatar, Tajik, and Sart wanderers who become mullahs and obtain a juridical status of "Kirghiz" for economic reasons[24] — this way, he fits his anticlerical rhetoric into the nationalist agenda. In 1889, he could not be critical of colonial policies yet, so he established the distinction of Kazakhs from other colonised–the fellow Muslim Turkic peoples.

In another publication from the same year, Bokeikhan portrays a crime committed by a local "khoja." Notably, he confuses two consonant terms, "khoja" and *hajji*: the former usually refers to a separate ethnic group of Kazakhs claimed to be descendants of the Arabic missionaries of Islam. In contrast, Bokeikhan refers to "khoja" as a pilgrim, which must be *hajji* instead. The convicted criminal was a usurer who kidnapped the debted nomad's wife but failed to succeed in the colonial court despite using his money and connections. "Honor and glory to the pilgrims," sarcastically comments Bokeikhan, following with the rhetorical question: "Is not it a mockery of religion?"[25] It is hard to detect whether the author tries to make an example out of that criminal "khoja" as a critique of the respected social group of *hajji* or tries to make some point regarding the social relations within a nomadic community. What is apparent is that he refers to the religion and the institution of Hajj being mocked in one personal case, which is a recognition of the exalted status. After the story, the author reports that the community forced the husband to surrender his kidnapped wife to the "khoja" and let them marry. Local mullah blessed their union. The author claims that the religion should condemn such a "disgraceful" event, and it would be so if good men were serving as mullahs[26].

[24] Ibid., pp. 42–44.

[25] "About Kyrgyz officials' lives in K-district", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 1, p. 46 (in Kazakh and Russian).

[26] Ibid., p. 47.

A decade later, Bokeikhan tackles the Muslimness of Kazakhs in a review of the Qobylandy folk epic in a more severe manner that rhymes with the most hostile anti-Islamic Orientalist narratives[27]. Although the events in the poem occurred in the 17th century, the author retranslates the depiction of then-society to the current one. The epic, he states, depicts the people's deep sympathy toward the old "paganistic" beliefs, already replaced with Islam by the author's time. Paganism holds a passive, subordinate role in communal life, while Islam introduced "the inexorable law of predestination," which derives the oracle woman of her foreseeing power[28]. The review shows the position of a woman in a nomadic society from the perspective of the pagan woman becoming a Muslim and the differences in views on women between pagan and Muslim Kazakhs. Therefore, this publication analysed the cultural transformation of Islamizing society. On behalf of the protagonist woman, Analyq (literally meaning "motherhood"), who fails to get pregnant for a long time, both mullahs and shamans share the prayers. Then she travels from one Muslim saint to another to get the cure for infertility, finally obtaining it from Baba Tuqty (consonant with famous Baba Tuklas from Nogai epic) after spending the night at his grave[29].

This trope reflects the remnants of indigenous religion among newly converted nomads. Bokeikhan shares the colonial view of Kazakhs as superficial Muslims with a high concentration of para-Muslim customs, such as the veneration of saints and visiting their graves. Moreover, he shares the Orientalist vision of the Muslim family as a patriarchal tyranny, where the husband behaves like an animal male toward the wife. The only requirement for a Muslim woman, he claims, is to maintain an attractive body and to be eager to fulfil the husband's lust. Even the infertility of Analyq is a divine punishment for her frivolous lifestyle of a popular leader—the "baibishe" (senior wife), the status itself insulting to a Muslim community. However, Analyq is a "real Muslim by her character,"[30] therefore, she does not go through any transformation when becoming a Muslim. Bokeikhan claims that Islam transformed women into "timid and downtrodden creatures" and does not let the women lead the main heroes of the epic

[27] "Woman according to the kyrgyz tale Qoblandy", 152.

[28] Ibid., p. 158.

[29] Ibid., pp. 152–155.

[30] Ibid., pp. 153–154.

but only assist them. The female characters of the poem share a tragic fate, with the "tragic and the apathetically dying heroine obediently bowed her head before the sword of Islam." The author claims that the poem warns nomads against adopting the harem institution with its "stinking atmosphere of moral decline and debauchery" accompanied by the inciting of mullahs that "exploit the trust of a simpleton." The "guilt of Islam in humiliating and insulting women is well known," the author states[31].

The protagonist of the epic, Qobylandy, does not insult the smug wife "despite his Muslimness" and cannot recognise her right to personal happiness because he is "imbued with a Mohammedan disregard for personality, especially female" that made him see cruelty and immorality behind her actions. In contrast to a zealous Qobylandy who condemns the apostasy and treason of his Kalmyk wife, the people justify and pardon her actions out of passion and "the elevation of the feelings of her healthy and uncomplicated nature." Therefore, the author juxtaposes "corrupted and depraved" Qobylandy to the nomadic community that "did not lose its living soul."[32] In line with the story mentioned above of Zengi Baba and his wife, Bokeikhan brings up the custom of *droit du seigneur* by the father, whether it is a reference to the father of a bride or her father-in-law.

Both these stories are ridiculous assumptions about the Islamic lifestyle that contradict any known canon, which reflects either on the poor knowledge of Islam by the Russian-educated author or the amusing variant of folk epic that he got acquainted with. I assume that both these factors played their role in such a bemusing depiction of the Islamic family, while the former does not contradict the imperial discourse on Islam. Even the officials who worked with and within Islamic countries for years shared many stereotypes about Islam[33], while renowned academicians (Vassiliy V. Bartold) were not hiding their derogatory biases toward it. Bokeikhan claims that the evaluations of Muslimness and "Paganism" behind the actions of the

31. Ibid., p. 160.

32. Ibid., pp. 159–163.

33. For example, Russian ambassador Nikolay Ignatiev in Turkey describes the hajj as a "Muslim worship to the tomb of Mahomet," in a report to the Ministry of Internal Affairs from March 15, 1873. See: Yunussova, A. B. (ed.) (2011) *Islam and Muslims of Southern Urals in the Legal Domain of Russian Empire: Documental Antology, XVI–XIX Centuries*, p. 162. Ufa: GUP RB UPK (in Russian).

poem heroes are not his but of the *Jyrchi* (storyteller) and were given by the Kazakh people themselves[34].

Bokeikhan, unlike Valikhanov ("*Sledy shamanstva u kirgizov*"), does not believe in the revival of "paganism" among Kazakhs nor its significant role in contemporary Kazakh social life. The death of indigenous nomadic religion, he claims, is inevitable and is barely seen during the times of Qobylandy. With an expression of the almost class hatred for mullahs and the derogation of the Oriental lifestyle in a harem mention, the author wishes for the "quickest cultural development" for Kazakhs[35].

On the turn of the century, Bokeikhan finally took the anticlerical position. His publication on the Kazakh memorial dinners ("as") refers to the "Steppe clergy" as tending to adapt the customs and interpretations of the Holy Scripture toward the changing circumstances. The clergy condemns the tradition of "as" because the Qur'an has no mention of it and calls for replacing the custom with the recitation of the Qur'an by mullahs[36]. This accusation is a generalisation of an unidentified social group that he refers to as "clergy." In contrast, it is hard to say whether the nomads had clergy in the typical definition of Westerners. It seems that Bokeikhan fully adopted the imperial anti-Islamic discourse to fit his secularist nationalist agenda.

In an obituary of Abai, he develops the image of a modern progressive Muslim. Abai, without a classic Islamic education, obtained knowledge of Arabic, Persian, and sacred texts to the point that local mullahs avoided facing him in disputes. The greatest Kazakh poet neglected the prescribed Islamic practices despite being raised in a highly observant Muslim family, which the author sees as a sign of "the power of his character," probably meaning that Abai had a unique vision of morality and righteousness. Like Bokeikhan himself, Abai criticised mullahs and praised Russian education[37]. To this day, the figure of Abai Kunanbaiuly remains semi-mystical, with some scholars even questioning his bare existence, claiming that Bokeikhan could forge the mythologised figure of the "father of Kazakh literature" by

34. "Woman according to the kyrgyz tale Qoblandy", p. 164.

35. Ibid., p. 160.

36. "About Kyrgyz wake", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 1, p. 176 (in Kazakh and Russian).

37. "Abai (Ibragim) Kunanbaev. (Obituary)", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 5, pp. 88–90 (in Kazakh and Russian).

himself and be the real author of Abai's poetry[38]. Without discussing that claim, I would point out that Bokeikhan had his reasons for portraying Abai as he did, presenting the latter as a proto-Jadidist and pro-Russian cultural reformer. These reasons might justify Bokeikhan's national-liberal aspirations toward the cultural reform of Kazakhs.

With the Revolution of 1905, Bokeikhan changed his rhetoric. His discourse switched from colonial to decolonial, full of critique of colonial administration and slightly rising as high as the Tsar's. This switch is detectable in the rhetoric about Islam, too, showing the soft turn from the typical imperial hostility to the appeal for Kazakhs as Muslims who have to correct some of their habits but not withdraw Muslimness as it could be interpreted from his pre-revolutionary critique.

The new platform for Bokeikhan's rhetoric is nationalism. In a 1905 publication, he speaks on behalf of Russianate Muslims as opposed to Transoxiana's orthodox Muslims. "If we, Russian Muslims, did not know Bukharans, we would be enlightened long ago."[39] This juxtaposition creates a distinction between two groups of Muslims, and in that new distinction, Kazakhs are becoming allied with the Volga-Urals Muslims criticised before. Another difference is a notion of a new division among Muslims of Russia that became notable by that period — between Jadidist and Qadimist followers. Bokeikhan labels mullahs of Central Asian education as anti-progressive. He hoped that with the death of the mosque's imam in Semipalatinsk, the new appointment would be to an "all-round educated, a real scholar of progressive views with a knowledge of the official language." For the author, the commitment to the Russian educational paradigm and the ability to deal with the imperial administration signify a non-fanatical, progressive Muslim. He calls to cut off the ties with the Transoxian tradition of Islamic knowledge, which halts the progress due to unfamiliarity with the Russian language and reluctance to accept the

[38] Batayeva, Z. (2022) "In Search of Abai: the Letters of Adolf Januszkiewicz, Another Soviet Forgery", *Personal blog*, May 25 [https://www.zaurebatayeva.blog/post/abai-adolf-januszkiewicz-soviet-forgery, accessed on 24.03.2025].

[39] "From the Muslim world", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 5, p. 55 (in Kazakh and Russian).

innovations. At this stage, Bokeikhan pulls down the critique of Tatar influence and chooses the Sart one as a primary "other."[40]

With a loosening of imperial censorship during the Revolution, Bokeikhan started to question the regulations of apostasy, blaming the local administrations for persecuting the Kazakh widow with her 7-year-old son who wanted to apostate after the death of her Orthodox-converted husband[41]. He then accuses the colonial government of Russification policies and the "invasion of the state to the sphere of religious issues," which made Kazakhs see it as an abuser of their religion[42]. He becomes a defender of politically persecuted Islamic religious leaders and teachers like Nauan Khazret. He blames the Christianization policies for pushing nomads toward the radicalisation of Islam in the Steppe. He brings an example of the local administration denying the pleas of Kazakhs to return the Arabic script and Kazakh as a language of instruction in the religious schools. In another example, a magistrate denies the complaint of natives who accused a Christian preacher of insulting Islam, with a comment that "the impudent Kirghiz slanderer forgot that he does not live in Turkey but in Orthodox-Christian Russia."[43] Bokeikhan not only exposes the colonialist nature of administrative policies but also shows sympathy toward the oppressed Muslims. The discriminational policies, he states, led to the spread of rumours of thriving Muslim communities that are supposedly ruled with Islamic justice and law—in Turkey and even in Japan (sic). Another result of Russification policies is that Kazakhs preferred religious issues to political ones as a primary agenda during Revolutionary debates. As a result, the "Turcophile-Panislamist" intelligentsia, he claims, dominate among the most active parts of Kazakh civil society[44].

A critic of Tatar clerics in the Steppe, Bokeikhan exposes the state's intention to expel them due to its own Christianization plans[45]. Finally, by 1906, Bokeikhan referred to both Kazakhs and Tatars as

40. It should be noted that Bokeikhan deeply admired Ismail Gasprinsky, see: Khazretali, T. *Alash and Turkestan*, p. 133.

41. "From the exploits of the Kazakh mission", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 5, p. 129 (in Kazakh and Russian).

42. "Answer to the true sons of the steppes", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 5, p. 155 (in Kazakh and Russian).

43. "Kazakhs", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 8, 294 (in Kazakh and Russian).

44. Ibid., pp. 296–297.

45. "Russifiers in the role of legislator", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 5, p. 342 (in Kazakh and Russian).

victims of Russification policies by criticising von Kaufman's decision to adopt the Cyrillic script in Muslim religious schools[46]. That reference shows that the author, at this stage, promoted the common Muslim identity for mutually intelligible and culturally close peoples, juxtaposed to both "fanatical" Sarts and abusive colonisers.

As we can see in the pre-1917 publications, before becoming a leader of the Kazakh national movement, Bokeikhan obtained an ambivalent position toward Islam. He criticised some of its features, both real and imaginary, and defended the rights of Muslims to observe their faith simultaneously. He accepts Kazakhs as Muslims and denies the perspective of revitalising the shamanistic beliefs contrary to his direct predecessor, Valikhanov, and prefers the cultural significance of Muslimness to the practical side of the religion. His 1913 translation of Leo Tolstoy's *The Surat Coffeeshop* best displays his ambiguous position toward religion. This short novel manifests Tolstoy's preference for ethical religiosity over a practical one. That publication, next to the presentation of Abai as a moral and non-observant Muslim, explains Bokeikhan's vision of Muslimness. That vision is similar to those of Jadids, who later viewed Islam as a tradition rather than a religion[47].

Islam, Language, and Identity

In early 1910s, with the development of Kazakh print culture, Akhmet Baitursynov adapted the Arabic script for the Kazakh vernacular and designed the reformed script — *tote zhazu*. That reform was inspired by Islamic knowledge: it purposed to acquaint Kazakh students with the legacy of the Turkic peoples and make it easier for them to start reading the Qur'an[48]. Although supporters of Arabic script in the linguistic debates on script reform in the 1920s presented more arguments, the intention of the national intelligentsia to preserve the cultural ties with the Muslim world shows their awareness of Kazakhs as a predominantly Muslim nation.

46. "Russian transciption in Muslim schools", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 5, p. 512 (in Kazakh and Russian).

47. Khalid, A. *Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, pp. 11, 33, 102.

48. Qabdolda, Q. (2017) "ATote writing of our father Akhmet – fruit of Qur'an")", *Official website of Kazakhstan Muslim Spiritual Government*, December 4 [https://www.muftyat.kz/kk/articles/islam-and-society/2017–12–04/18834-ahmet-babamyizdyi-tte-zhazuyi-rannyi-zhems, accessed on 24.03.2025] (in Kazakh).

Before Baitursynov's orthographic reform in 1913, educated Kazakhs preferred Chagatay to vernacular Kazakh writing. This might be explained by the lack of written literary tradition among nomads and the massive influence of Transoxian madrassahs in the education of Kazakh elites. Things started to change with the introduction of the Jadidist reformed Arabic script, which suited Turkic languages more with the introduction of vowels. Baitursynov made writing the vowels obligatory for Kazakh, thus creating an orthographic distinction from other Turkic orthographies. In the coming two decades, *tote zhazu* became popular among Kazakhs, dominating the national press. Even Baitursynov's opponent in the debates on the script, T. Shonanov, praised the reform's civilisational efforts[49].

During the debates with the supporters of the proposed Latinization, Kazakh intellectuals led by Baitursynov participated in them on two levels—the All-Union and the local Republican. On the regional level, the arguments were mostly linguistical, with the main concern being the potential loss of nine signs specific to Kazakh phonology in case *yanalif* is introduced[50]. Seeming as a narrow professional debate, it had a cultural context. These phonemes are similar to Arabic ones already excluded from Turkish and Azerbaijani grammatology, such as the ﷲ sign, referring to one of the *tajwid* rules exclusive to classic Arabic grammar. Therefore, similar to previous Altynsarin's efforts in preserving the phonology of the Qur'an in Kazakh Cyrillic, Baitursynov and his followers tried to protect the *tajwid*-ic pronunciation in the vernacular Kazakh. On the broader scene, they allied with Tatar scholars at the First Turkological Congress in 1926, arguing that abandoning the Arabic script would cut off the Turkic Muslim people from the rest of the Islamic world[51]. These concerns could not be about dialogue only: like Jadidists, Alash intellectuals saw the Muslim world as backward; therefore, there was no value in keeping ties for their sake. The context under these concerns should be a fear of antitheist efforts by Bolsheviks. That fear could not be expressed directly due to both the authoritarian style of the new

[49] Kuderinova, Q. (2013) *History and theory of Kazakh Writing. A textbook*, pp. 167–183. Almaty: Eltanym (in Kazakh).

[50] Karatayeva, G. (2017) "From the History of Kazakh Code: Arabic, Latin, and Cyrillic Graphics", *Tengri News,* October 18 [https://tengrinews.kz/article/istorii-kazahskogo-alfavita-arabskaya-grafika-latinitsa-639/, accessed on 24.03.2025] (in Russian).

[51] Daudov, A., Mamysheva, Y. (2011) "From the History of Latinisation of USSR's National Alphabets", *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, Istoriya* 2: 8 (in Russian).

regime and the vulnerable status of recently amnestied intellectuals. The arguments on local and All-Union level debates show that the Kazakh intelligentsia cared about the Islamic legacy as part of the Kazakh cultural code.

The *Aiqap* writers believed Islam "was a significant characteristic of the Kazakh way of life and mentality." They advocated for the sedentarisation of Kazakhs, believing that it would increase Islam's role by promoting the construction of mosques, maktabs, and madrassahs[52]. Therefore, that part of the intelligentsia shared the view that Kazakh society was not a proper Muslim community because of its nomadic lifestyle and wanted to change it.

Debates on Islamic Institutions, State, and Law

Alash intellectuals are usually defined as neglecting religious considerations, preferring the debates on the nation instead[53]. However, this was not the case from the beginning[54]. The debates on shari'a and secularism were the primary issue among Kazakh intellectuals circa 1914 when they culminated in three publications of the Islamic-oriented *Aiqap* journal criticising Bokeikhan's opposition to returning Kazakhs under the jurisdiction of the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly. The argument in support of the implementation of shari'a among Kazakhs by *Aiqap* authors Z. Seidalin and B. Karatayev was that it "could reduce abuse and violence" via establishing strict order. Kazakh deputies of the fourth All-Russian Muslim Congress in 1914 supported that proposition because they found the occasion appropriate to do so. The only respondent was Bokeikhan, who found shari'a impractical for a nomadic lifestyle as opposed to customary law. He idealised adat, with *Qazaq* newspaper in his support, claiming that Russian law was responsible for its decline and succeeding

52. Uyama, T. "The Changing Religious Orientations", p. 112.

53. Karpat argued that Kazakh intellectuals were interested in pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism solely because of national considerations, see: Karpat, K.H. "Roots of Kazakh Nationalism", p. 588.

54. It should ne noted that both *Qazaq* and *Aiqap*, major Kazakh news media of that period, were inspired by the newspapers from other Muslim regions. To name a few, d'Encausse lists Turkish *Sirat-i mustaqim*, Indian *Habl-ul watan*, and Afghan *Siraj-ul akbar*, as inspirations. Her French colleagues emphasised on the pan-Islamist ideas of *Aiqap* and of *Qazaq*'s editor Dulatov. See: D'Encausse, H. C. "Social and Political Reform", p. 201; Bennigsen, A., Lemercier-Quelquejay, C. (1991) *Press and National Movement of Russian Muslims before 1920*, translated from French, pp. 166, 171. Almaty: Alem (in Russian).

corruption of Kazakh society. It stated that studying Russian and Islamic institutions does not help the revival of customary law. *Qazaq* writers also blamed shari'a for the interference in the decline of adat. *Aiqap* writers responded with a sheer defence of shari'a and criticism of Bokeikhan: the accusations of *Qazaq* editors reached as far as "intending to leave Kazakhs without religion."[55]

These debates broke the ice between *Aiqap* and *Qazaq* publishers, creating the distinction between defenders and opposers of shari'a, respectively, and ended almost randomly with the bankruptcy of *Aiqap* and the rising political activities of secularist Alash leaders[56]. Therefore, the underrated heat of debates shows that the secularist choice by Kazakh intelligentsia on the edge of the revolutionary 1917 was not a predetermined and inevitable way to develop Kazakh nationalism. The debates lost intensity when Aiqap declined, and the Qazaq editors wished the journal to recover and continue serving the people[57].

There is a connection between the debates on shari'a and the question mentioned above of returning the Kazakh Steppe to the jurisdiction of the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly. The imperial administration, Bokeikhan believes, withdrew Kazakhs from that jurisdiction in 1868 because of the intention to baptise seemingly less obedient nomadic Muslims and of the notion of growing Tatar influence over nomads[58]. Secular Kazakh intellectuals shared this notion, starting with Chokan Valikhanov in the 1860s. In his first-ever newspaper publication (1889), Bokeikhan criticises Tatar mullahs, along with "sarts," for receiving Kazakh privileges despite being born elsewhere[59]. In the same year, he blames Tatars, "profiteer" Sarts, and the "good" (i. e., loyal to the administration) Kazakh elites for the impoverishment of nomadic commoners[60]. Therefore, Bokeikhan's vision of Kazakh nationalism, which would soon dominate the *Qazaq* and Alash Party ideologies, initially had an anti-clerical sentiment and intention to distinguish Kazakhs from Tatars. That could explain

55. Kendirbaeva, G. "We are Children of Alash", pp. 13–15.

56. Uyama, T. "Changing Religious Orientations", 112–113.

57. "Journal Aiqap," in Baitursynuly, *Complete works in 12 volumes*, vol. 5, 211 (in Kazakh).

58. Kendirbaeva, G. "We are Children of Alash", p. 15.

59. "Mullah in K-district", p. 43. Kazakh nomads enjoyed exemption from military conscription and had lower taxation, which attracted migration from other Muslim communities of the late Russian Empire.

60. "About Kyrgyz officials' lives in K-region", pp. 46–49.

his position against the return of Kazakhs under the Tatar-dominated Orenburg spiritual jurisdiction. This issue was resolved after the Revolution of 1917 when the then-created Alash Party held two congresses of Kazakh people. In July, the First Congress questioned creating a separate spiritual administration for Kazakhs. In November, the published Program of the Party established muftiyat, putting that issue as a lesser topic such as land. Finally, in December, the Second Congress removed the problem from the agenda[61], and Kazakhs decided to join the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly[62].

The influential figure of Bokeikhan changed the agenda of the Alash nationalists toward the social role of Islamic institutions. Baitursynuly, who is renowned for his advocation of Islamic culture and the conversion of his Russian wife to Islam, started writing critically about the Steppe mullahs in a similar fashion[63]. The distinction between *Aiqap* writer Karatayev and Alash leaders on Islamic matters even drove him to the Bolshevist camp: this shows that personal agenda in these debates sometimes drove the participants into politically unexplainable positions.

Anti-Islamist Rhetoric: from Nationalism to Communism

While the Alash Party took a course toward secularism and creating a nation based on civil rights, many Kazakh intellectuals considered the creation of an Islamic state as well as participating in federalist projects with other Turkic Muslim peoples of Russia. Mustafa Shoqai is nowadays considered a nationalist leader, an Alash intellectual, and a leader of Turkestani federalists. *Aiqap* author Serali Lapin participated in the Muslim clerical movement of revolutionary Russia. Shakarim and other religious thinkers considered Alash an ally in promoting national culture while not having problems with its neglect of religious affairs. Therefore, there was an Islamic alternative for the nationalist project of Kazakhs in that period.

While initially, nationalists tried to ally with pro-Muslim parties, Alash Party leaders argued against the Islamic parties when it came to the challenge of power and representation of the native

61. Uyama, T. “Changing Religious Orientations”, p. 113.

62. Kendirbaeva, G. “We are Children of Alash”, p. 15.

63. “Two hajjees (from Akmolinsk district)”, in Baitursynuly, *Complete works in 12 volumes*, vol. 8, p. 312 (in Kazakh).

population. With the creation of the pan-Islamist *Shura-i-Islam* party in Moscow (1917), the editors of *Qazaq* newspaper argued against the underrepresentation of Kazakhs in it and the fact that the Muslim congress had no right to create a Party on behalf of all Muslim peoples of Russia; therefore, they denied its claim to represent Kazakhs in particular[64].

After 1919, secularist Alash activists, except Bokeikhan, swore allegiance to the Soviets and participated in their nation-building project. However, while Bokeikhan now focused on scholarly and educational activities in a quietist fashion, his position toward Islam was a focal point where his and Soviet ideas intersected, and he used it to find reconciliation with the new regime, probably trying to incline into the Soviet nation-building project. In 1927, that position became highly hostile, as expressed in a state newspaper article, "New School" (Jana Mektep). He greets the state secularisation of the school and adapts the Marxist concept that Islam was a tool for misleading people into exploitation. The vague interpretation of God by Muhammad as an unintelligible being without a physical form, he claims, suppressed people's desire to recognise the Creator. "The state [education] program is Marx's program. This program has no room for Jinn/Shaitaan, Mullah/Khoja, or religion. Marx described religion as opium for the people. It is right. Marx valued it right."[65]

Other nationalist intellectuals fell into obscurity or went into emigration, nullifying the debates on Islam in nation-building. Some of the younger Alash intellectuals, positively labelled by Soviet historiography as "democratic poets," such as Sultan-Makhmut Toraighyrov, adopted the typical Soviet criticism of Islam. His fierce attacks on different Muslim customs and institutions, such as *nikah*, mosques, madrassah, the position of women, and even the faith itself, played a significant role in his memorialisation as a prominent Komsomol figure (he died at the age of 27) and the "true" Communist poet. Zhumaghali Ismaghulov collected the anti-religious works of Toraighyrov posthumously into a book entitled by verse "Meaningless Mosque" (*Maghynasyz Meshit*), and it totaled 75 pages of anti-Islamic resentment. The problem with defining Toraighyrov as an opportunist to the Soviet agenda is that his earliest verses on religion date back

64. "Shura-i Islam", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 10, pp. 72–73 (in Kazakh and Russian).

65. "Religion and school", in Bokeikhan, *Complete works*, vol. 14, 294–295 (in Kazakh and Russian).

to 1910, when he finished local madrassah and even before he attended Jadid madrassah Rasuliya in Troitsk. Therefore, we cannot underestimate personal reasons and views when speaking about the rhetoric of particular authors, avoiding the generalisation of putting forth the political agenda as the leitmotif of their works.

One notable Soviet disputant on the role of Islam in the forging of Kazakh culture is Sanzhar Asfendiyarov. In short, even the proponent of Soviet antitheistic rhetoric and one of the foremost intellectual leaders of early Soviet Kazakhstan could not deny the critical role of Islam in the creation of Kazakh society. However, his "Bedouin" theory is highly disputable. This notion is essential because before switching to the Soviets, Asfendiyarov was considered a Kazakh liberal nationalist (i. e., Alash), too[66]. The "Bedouin" theory, as well as a biased deconstruction of Islamic origins, points to the significance of Islam in the cultural life of Kazakhs that was insufferable for the Soviet nation builders in Kazakhstan.

Conclusion

The early twentieth century native intellectuals forged the idea of Kazakhness. Despite the neglect of Islam issues by the main nationalist force of Kazakhs, the Alash Party, it was always a point of discussion and considered an integral part of the discourse on what Kazakh is. The literature shows that despite the debates on political Islam, the leaders of Alash leaned toward accepting the role of religion as an integral part of national culture. That evaluation can be seen through even negative references to Islam. The views of Kazakh intellectuals changed in a whirlwind of transformations of Kazakh society and the Russian/Soviet state. However, there was also room for their individual preferences, which let people like Bokeikhan surf around the situational agenda while others like Toraighyrov established a firm position. Finally, those like Bokeikhan express their cultural identity under pressing circumstances. The ambivalence of Alash as a political movement without a clear ideology toward the cultural definitions of Kazakhness let its leaders choose different paths toward expressing their views on Islam as a particular issue of nation-building.

[66] Kemper, M. (2009) "The Soviet Discourse on the Origin and Class Character of Islam, 1923–1933", *Die Welt des Islams* 49 (1): 15–22.

Библиография / References

Abzhanov, Kh. (2014) *Kazakhstan: National History, Idea, and Methodology*. Almaty: Eltanym (in Kazakh).

Allworth, E. (ed.) (1994) *Central Asia: 130 Years of Russian Dominance, A Historical Overview*, Third edition. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Amanzholova, D. A. (2009) *On the Break: Alash in the Ethno-Political History of Kazakhstan*. Almaty: Taimas (in Russian).

Amanzholova, D. A. and Krasovitskaya, T. Y. (eds) (2020) *Cultural Complexity of Soviet Russia: Ideology and Administrative Practice, 1917–1941*. Moscow: Novyi Hronograf (in Russian).

Auezov, M. (1961) *Thoughts in Various Years: On Literary Paths*, edited by I. T. Dyusenbayev. Alma-Ata: Kazahskoe gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo hudozhestvennoi literatury (in Russian).

Baitursynuly, A. (2022) *Complete Works in 12 volumes*. Astana: Alashorda qogamdyq qory. 12 volumes (in Kazakh and Russian).

Beisembiyev, K. B. (1961) *Political Ideas in Kazakhstan in Late XIX — Early XX Centuries*. Alma-Ata: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk KazSSR (in Russian).

Beisembiyev, K. B. (1970) *Victory of Marxist-Leninist Ideology in Kazakhstan*. Alma-Ata: Kazahstan (in Russian).

Beisembiyev, K. B. (1976) *Essays on History of Socio-Political and Philosophical Thought in Kazakhstan: Pre-Revolutionary Era*. Alma-Ata: Kazahstan (in Russian).

Bekmakhanov, Y. B. (1949) "Reactionary Role of Muslim Clergy, 2nd Half of XIX — Early XX Centuries", *Vestnik KazSSR*11: 65–76 (in Russian).

Bennigsen, A., Lemercier-Quelquejay, C. (1991) *Press and National Movement of Russian Muslims before 1920, translated from French*. Almaty: Alem (in Russian).

Bissenova, A., Mukasheva, A. (2020) "Colonial Intellectuals: Caught between the Enlightenment and Representation of their People", *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 166 (6): 445–459 (in Russian). EDN: WVWANC

Bokeikhan, A. (2018) *Complete works*. Astana: Alashorda qogamdyq qory. 15 volumes (in Kazakh and Russian).

Daudov, A., and Mamysheva, Y. (2011) "From the History of Latinisation of USSR's National Alphabets", *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, Istoriya* 2: 7–12 (in Russian). EDN: NTUCGT

Demidov, V. A. (1983) *October and National Issue in Siberia, 1918–1923* Novosibirsk: Nauka (in Russian).

Frank, A. J. (2016) "Muslim Cultural Decline in Imperial Russia: a Manufactured Crisis", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59 (1/2): 166–192. https://doi.org/10.1163/15685209–12341396

Frank, A. J. (2024) "Who Were the Kazakh Jadids?", *Journal of Central Asian History* 3 (2): 170–198. https://doi.org/10.1163/27728668–20240025

Ismakova, A. (2017) "Religious views of Alash intellectuals" [Religious Views of Alash Intellectuals], *Islam.kz*. [https://islam.kz/kk/articles/islam-jane-qogam/alash-ziyalylarynyn-dini-kozqarastary-2396, accessed on 24.03.2025] (in Kazakh).

Kakishev, T. (2011) *Qazaq ziialylary* [Kazakh Intellectuals]. Almaty: Qazyghurt (in Kazakh).

Karatayeva, G. (2017) "From the History of Kazakh Code: Arabic, Latin, and Cyrillic Graphics", *Tengri News*. October 18 [https://tengrinews.kz/article/istorii-kazahskogo-alfavita-arabskaya-grafika-latinitsa-639/, accessed on 24.03.2025] (in Russian).

Karpat, K. H. (2004) *Studies on Turkish Politics and Society: Selected Articles and Essays*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Kemper, M. (2009) The Soviet Discourse on Islam's Origin and Class Character, 1923–1933. *Die Welt des Islams* 49 (1): 1–48. https://doi.org/10.1163/157006008X364677

Kendirbay, G. (1997) "The National Liberation Movement of the Kazakh Intelligentsia at the Beginning of the 20th Century", *Central Asian Survey* 16(4): 487–515. https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939708401009

Kendirbaeva, G. (1999) "We are Children of Alash...' The Kazakh Intelligentsia at the Beginning of the 20th Century in Search of National Identity and Prospects of the Cultural Survival of the Kazakh People", *Central Asian Survey* 18 (1): 5–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939995722

Khalid, A. (1998) *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Khalid, A. (2006) "What Jadidism Was, and What It Wasn't: The Historiographical Adventures of a Term", *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, 5 (2): 3–13.

Khazretali, T. (2013) *Alash and Turkestan*. Almaty: El-shezhire (in Kazakh).

Kuderinova, Q. (2013) *History and theory of Kazakh Writing. A textbook*. Almaty: Eltanym (in Kazakh).

Nurov, K. I. (2021) *Kazakhstan: National Idea and Traditions*. Almaty: Vox Populi (in Russian).

Nurtazina, N. D. (2008) *Peoples of Turkestan: Problems of Islam, Integration, Modernisation and Decolonisation, at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Almaty: Qazaq universiteti (in Russian).

Nurtazina, N. (2017) "What kind of Muslims were the Alash Orda members?", *Altyn-Orda*. July 17 [https://altyn-orda.kz/kakimi-musulmanami-byli-alash-ordyntsy, accessed on 24.03.2025] (in Russian).

Nurtazina, N. (2024) *Islam and the Genesis of the Kazakh Muslim Tradition*. Astana: Muftiyat (in Russian).

Olcott, M. B. (1987) *The Kazakhs*. Studies of Nationalities in the USSR, volume 338. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.

Pianciola, N. and Sartori, P. (eds) (2013) *Islam, Society and States across the Qazaq Steppe (18th—Early 20th Centuries)*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Sabitov, N. (1950) *Maktabs and Madrassahs of Kazakhs: Historical-Educational Essay*. Alma-Ata: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk KazSSR (in Russian).

Sabol, S. (2003) *Russian Colonisation and the Genesis of Kazak National Consciousness*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sultangaliyeva, A. K. (1998) *Islam in Kazakhstan: History, Ethnicity, and Society*. Almaty: Kazahstanskii institut strategicheskih issledovanii pri Prezidente RK (in Russian).

Toraighyrov, S. (1958) *A Meaningless Mosque. Works on Religion*. Almaty: Qazaq memlekettik baspasy (in Kazakh).

Ubiria, G. (2016) *Soviet Nation-Building in Central Asia: The Making of Kazakh and Uzbek Nations*. London: Routledge.

Uyama, T. (2008) "Were There an Islamic Alternative? Role of Islam in the Early 20th Century Kazakh National Movement", *Shygys* 2: 143–147 (in Russian).

Yunussova, A. B. (ed.) (2011) *Islam and Muslims of Southern Urals in the Legal Domain of Russian Empire: Documental Antology, XVI–XIX Centuries*. Ufa: GUP RB UPK (in Russian).

