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Nationalist Riots in Kazakhstan*

TARAS KUZIO

INTRODUCTION

Violent nationalist riots erupted in Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, on 17 and 18 December 1986. The public acknowledgement of the unrest is much more unusual than the fact of the unrest itself. One western newspaper report stated that this was the first time riots had been reported in the USSR in "at least 25 years" (UPI, 20 December). An editorial in the Los Angeles Times (21 December) was typical of the comments at the time: "The riots were the first known instance of resistance taking a violent turn." These comments are characteristic of the lack of understanding of Soviet nationality affairs in western media reporting.

Numerous nationalist demonstrations and disturbances have occurred in the USSR, including at least three which are known of in Kazakhstan (see Soviet Nationality Survey, January 1987). In the majority of cases demonstrations have taken place in protest against anti-Islamic policies, russification, and Russian immigration into the respective republics. Consequently, it is no wonder that nationalist disturbances have taken place in practically every non-Russian republic, including regions of the Russian Federation inhabited by national minorities. The Christian Science Monitor (21 December) claimed that:

The riots are, however, a disturbing reminder of the ethnic tensions that have occasionally flared up in Central Asia and other minority areas, such as Georgia. Kazakhs seem, however, to have retained a strong degree of linguistic cohesion. Despite official efforts to foster the Russian language, almost all regard Kazakh as their native language. According to official figures, only about half say they are fluent in Russian as a second language.

PAST PROBLEMS

Indications that all was not entirely well in Kazakhstan were evident at a plenary session of the Kazakh Communist Party Central Committee in July. A report in Pravda (7 July 1986) strongly criticised the plenum for not dealing with “shortcomings”: “Instances of irresponsibility, mismanagement and violations of labour and plan discipline, and manifestations of formalism and bureaucratism.” Pravda commented that although “a lot had been said about it,” “things were not improving”. The report also cited instances of inadequate investment, poor quality production, low productivity in the republic’s industry and agriculture, and corruption. Few ministers during the plenum offered adequate explanations for this state of affairs. Although “lessons were drawn from the past . . . some party executives are having trouble ridding themselves of all traces of administrative interference and direction by fiat”. Other questions not raised at the plenum: “How was it possible for people with corrupt ways and unsuitable work methods to obtain responsible jobs, and who was responsible for its happening? Isn’t this evidence of outright blunders in the personnel policies of the Central Committee itself, its bureau and secretariat?”

On 9 December Kazakhstanskaja Pravda noted “that the level of organisation and political work of the republic’s party, soviet, economic, administrative and control organs in fighting the inflation of statistics and falsification of accounts in all spheres of the economy, and cultural construction does not as yet meet the requirements of the Communist Party Central Committee”. In fact, “the number of such violations has considerably increased.”

REPLACEMENT OF KUNAEV

On 16 December, TASS announced that Dinmukhamed Kunaev had been replaced as the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Kazakh CP, after having been in power for nearly a quarter of a century and a full member of the Politburo since 1971, “due to retirement at his request”. He was replaced by Grennadi Kolbin, a Russian by nationality, making him the only republican party leader who is not a member of the titular nationality of the republic he leads. In the words of an editorial in the Los Angeles Times (24 December), “The country’s unwritten rule has previously been that the provincial governments are headed by the representatives of local ethnic groups, whose power has frequently been more apparent than real, with Moscow’s man sitting in as No. 2.” Kolbin was brought in from
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outside Kazakhstan which would suggest that Moscow would use him to assert control over the USSR's second largest republic. Kolbin is a noted Gorbachev loyalist who has been prominent in the anti-alcohol and anti-corruption campaigns.

Western diplomats have said the riots "took place against an increasing resentment toward Russians and Soviet policies under M. Gorbachev, who has cracked down hard on corruption and inefficiency" (UPI, 31 December). The tightening of control over Kazakhstan "appears part of a wider effort by Gorbachev to crack down on independent Asian administrators" (UPI, 24 December). But the Kazakh party refused to publish material from the central committee meetings, which replaced Kunaev. The first reports of the riots appeared in TASS, which Kazakhstanskaja Pravda reprinted. This all "pointed to a carefully weighed decision by the central party authorities in Moscow on how to present the affair to the public" (Reuters, 22 December).

Dinmukhamed Kunaev appears to have been something of a paternal figure in his republic, and although his removal was not entirely unexpected, the tactless way in which he was replaced by a Russian was an insult to Kazakh national pride. Soviet television reported on 10 January that a Kazakh, Kubashev, had been appointed as second secretary, in an apparent move to dampen criticism. Moscow has long been worried about the Islamic problem in the southern republics, and has recently stepped up the campaign against Islam and nationalism in Central Asia. Russians outnumber Kazakhs at 41% to 36% of the total population of the republic but by 1990 the higher Muslim birth rate will mean that Kazakhs will be in a majority again in their republic. Few western commentators have mentioned that the occupation of Afghanistan has also increased anti-Russian feelings in Soviet Central Asia and Kazakhstan. In March 1981 there were demonstrations in Alma-Ata protesting at the burial in the city's common graves of Kazakhs killed in Afghanistan. They demanded burial in accordance with Muslim rites.

What could the Kazakhs expect from Kolbin? In a revealing interview in Argumenty i Fakty (No. 49, 1986) he portrayed himself in the Gorbachev mould. His recipe for success included the establishment of discipline, application of glasnost' in public affairs, crack down on alcoholism and corruption, replacement of older leaders with younger appointees and the maintaining of a puritanical rectitude in official life.

RIOTS

On 17 December a crowd tried to march to the city's Communist
Party headquarters. The militia did not use force to disperse them, apparently with the connivance of the local authorities. During the evening military cadets were brought into the main square, near the university, to try to break up the crowds of students and busloads of Kazakh peasants who had gathered. A young Uzbek told The Guardian that the cadets were attacked by a mob “with wooden poles which had nails stuck in their ends. It was like a massacre.” On 22 December, The Guardian reported that at least several militiamen and thirteen or fifteen demonstrators had been killed.

Two days later, TASS admitted that: “A group of students, incited by nationalistic elements, last evening and today took to the streets of Alma-Ata expressing disapproval of the decisions of the recent plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan.” TASS continued: “Hooligans, parasites and other anti-social persons made use of this situation and resorted to unlawful actions against representatives of law and order. They set fire to a food store, to private cars and insulted townspeople.”

A journalist at Kazakhstanskaia Pravda told Agence France Presse (AFP, 19 December) that the trouble had lasted from Wednesday morning until Thursday evening; “It had begun with students, who were later joined by young workers . . .” The journalist said that, “at first the demonstrations were not taken too seriously . . . we thought students were having fun but then the other people, including young workers, joined the students”. Although the situation was calm, the journalist said, “we must remain vigilant.”

According to TASS (18 December) meetings held in the wake of the riots in Kazakhstan “condemned the totally unwarranted actions of the group of students and declared the adoption of resolute measures against the hooligans and for the restoration of complete order in the city”. On 22 December a Novosti correspondent reported that he had seen young people armed with sticks and iron rods battling with police and shouting “Kazakhstan is only for the Kazakhs”. According to this account, the rioters were under the influence of liquor and drugs. The hooligans replied to officials with “abuse, nationalistic slogans and attacks on innocent people”. The students smashed windows, “plundered a wine shop, damaged cars and so on”.

What is undoubtedly clear is that reports reaching western correspondents in Moscow pointed to more serious and violent disturbances than those admitted to by the authorities. According to The Guardian, at the peak of the anti-Russian demonstrations there were upwards of 300,000 people on the streets of Alma-Ata (a city of only 1 million). When TASS reported that “people were insulted”, this was obviously a reference to anti-Russian slogans. The militia
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were overwhelmed by the number taking to the streets and had not
been trained to deal with a riot. One Soviet official did admit to Le
Monde (21–22 December) that "several people were killed and many
injured" in the riots. According to him, the agitation continued on
Friday, but on a limited scale: "only a few groups were still
demonstrating". The authorities clearly feared the riots would spread
to other Kazakh cities. One westerner in the remote Kazakh city of
Karakaralinsk said that the day after the riots began, "special militia
with red armbands appeared to patrol the streets" (New York Times,
11 January).

One of the most detailed accounts appeared in The Guardian (30
December), which was heavily criticised by TASS seven days later as
"sensational" and merely an excuse "to have a go at us if they can". According to The Guardian, more than 200 people were seriously
injured in Alma-Ata hospitals, and two of the temporary prison
camps, used to accommodate drunks, had been cleared to make room
for the 1000 arrested rioters. The demonstrators had carried banners
with the slogans: "Autonomy and separate seat for Kazakhstan at the
UN", "We want to join China", "America is with us, the Russians
against us" and "Kolbin, go back to Russia". The violence was so
intense that Russians in the city were told over the radio to stay off the
streets on the second day. A Russian woman living in Alma-Ata, was
reported as saying: "The Kazakhs were coming in from the
countryside, commandeering buses. Some bus drivers were killed
when they tried to keep the mobs out of their buses. The rioters had
building materials . . . and one bus driver was bludgeoned to death
with scaffolding poles." The Russian woman thought the demon-
strators "seemed very well organised", and many brought vodka and
drugs from the countryside. The rioters attacked at least one
kindergarten, where Russian children were killed.

Similarly, Radio Moscow (26 February) criticised the reporting of
the riots by "Voice of America" as "ideological sabotage". According
to Soviet television (24 February), the riots occurred because of
infringements of Lenin's nationality policies. Yet, what "Voice of
America" had concluded "was in direct opposition to the truth; that is,
the events took place as a result of Lenin's socialist nationality
policies".

A detailed account of the riots appeared in Komsomolskaia Pravda
(10 January), which admitted that "the roots of what happened lie
primarily in serious omissions in ideological work among young
people . . ." As in previous reports, "the facts confirm that the events
did not begin spontaneously", and included "the burning of cars, the
beating of totally innocent people, the smashing of bus windows,
hooliganism". The rioters had "sticks, iron bars and bottles" and
were under the influence of “liquor and drugs”. Militiamen were attacked, although they maintained restraint and rumours of militia brutality were scoffed at. One volunteer militiaman “spent two days rampaging through the city streets”, and only on the third put on his armband. Echoing previous articles, it was claimed that “nationalist views did not emerge only yesterday among some young people”. Complaints were made about segregation of students according to nationality in hostels and discrimination against Russians in higher education. Mention was also made of those students expelled from the Komsomol, who came from villages in the southern part of the republic with a Kazakh population, and few had a good knowledge of Russian.

A Kazakh writer in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (1 January) described the events in Alma-Ata as “a provocative attempt to engender alienation between people and between nations”. Although “tranquillity has descended on the capital”, it is “still too soon to say that everything is back to normal”. According to this account on the morning of 17 December, “... some people managed, by means of persuasion, deception and threats to bring inexperienced, politically illiterate young people out into the streets and squares. Nationalist slogans appeared, drawn from the darkest depths of history and discarded and ruled out by life itself. Hooligans, drunkards and other anti-social individuals joined the crowd. Wild rowdies, armed with metal rods, sticks and stones beat up and insulted citizens, overturned cars and set fire to them and broke the glass in stores, hostels and other public buildings”. Militiamen were “subject to attacks”. The author listed all the causes behind the disturbances: favouritism, flattery, servility, a personality cult, parasitism, careerism and deception, hooliganism, drunkenness and drug addiction in Kazakhstan.

Until early January no official figures for casualties or damage had been published. After all, the trials of rioters could be a focal point for further unrest. What was more interesting was the fact that the Kazakh author in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* admitted that “a time will come when we learn who organised the events in Alma-Ata... We will learn who deceived our children, who led them from their student hostels with vile lies placing ignorant banners into their hands, and withdrew.” Obviously, at that time the authorities still did not know the identity of the rioters. An article in *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda* (10 January) confirmed “that the events did not begin spontaneously”. Young people who gathered in the city's square “broke pieces of marble off the facings of nearby buildings and threw them at unarmed members of people's volunteer militia and officers of the militia. Young people, inflamed by alcohol and drugs, had wooden and iron bars and bottles in their hands.” This same report admitted that
several militiamen needed hospital treatment. Despite these reports, *Izvestiia* admitted on 9 January that “a detailed analysis of events” is still to come. The authorities had already prepared the population for harsh reprisals against the rioters by publishing letters supposedly from “workers” demanding that they did not go unpunished.

A detailed account has since appeared in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (14 January). We read that when the Kazakh procurator, G. B. Yelemisov, addressed the crowds, they stopped him. In addition, many have been expelled from the Komsomol and institutes of higher education: “Legal proceedings have been instituted against others for malicious hooliganism and for organising mass disorders.” This article gives the first admission of a militia casualty: “... nationalism-minded elements came into direct conflict with workers from the law and order service. As already reported, there were a good many wounded among militia workers and the volunteer people's militia. One member of the volunteer people's militia, 28-year-old television centre worker S.A. Savitskii, was killed.”

Western reports speculated that the police were badly beaten after they were ordered not to use guns (Reuters, 10 January).

The Kazakh prime minister gave the fullest account to western journalists (*The Guardian*, 19 February). He stated that two people had been killed (one policeman and one student), 200 were injured and needed medical treatment, 3000 had taken part in the riots (compared with the official figure of no more than a few hundred), 100 had been arrested and three sent to labour camps. Twenty eight were still under investigation. Kolbin had tried to address the crowds but had been shouted down. The prime minister admitted that there were some genuine grievances (such as food shortages) and that they had occurred because of the selection of a Russian for the post of first secretary. He claimed the riots were suppressed without the aid of MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) or KGB troops.

The detailed coverage of the riots is an example of the way *glasnost’* is used as a political weapon, in this case against Kunaev. On the question of nationality tensions, “the sense of order and discipline and above all the belief in the need for strong central power to prevent chaos in a multinational state is deeply ingrained in many conservatives and reformers alike” (*Christian Science Monitor*, 22 December). In addition:

From where Gorbachev sits, all this has to be a disturbing demonstration of the fact that his anti-reform enemies in the bureaucracy are willing to go to any lengths — including the stoking of racial hatreds among the Soviet Union's dozens of nationalities — to oppose his efforts to bring the country out of the economic and social dark ages (*Los Angeles Times*, 24 December).
The dispatch of Mikhail Solomentsev, a member of the Politburo and chairman of the Party Control Committee, underlined the seriousness of the events in Alma-Ata. As one report put it, “His mission was viewed as a demonstration of the gravity with which the Kremlin regards the Alma-Ata disturbances” (Reuters, 23 December). He arrived on the weekend after the riots had subsided. A similar procedure was undertaken after the Chernobyl disaster, when two leading Politburo members were rushed to the Ukraine. Solomentsev attended many meetings with Gennadi Kolbin, the new republic leader. Commenting on this visit, Moscow television reported on 22 December that “the Komsomol committees have become detached from the masses and are only weakly involved in the internationalist education of young people and students”. In discussions between Solomentsev and Kolbin this was further outlined, with calls for the elimination of “any formalistic approach, paper shuffling or superficial and light-minded approach to solving problems” (Radio Alma-Ata, 22 December). In fact, during the course of his visit there were numerous references to improving “internationalist education”. On 25 December TASS said that the Politburo had ordered the Kazakh CP to deal thoroughly with the disturbances and punish the instigators. Internationalist education in Soviet terms refers to the fact that the USSR is a multinational state with many nationalities, “which according to Soviet law are equal. Non-Russians, however, frequently complain about russification, citing compulsory instruction of Russian in politics, the military and other fields” (AP, 23 December).

The Kazakh press has voiced criticism of the education system in the republic, which was not instilling an “international and communist morality”. Internationalist education was not taken seriously enough. It “frequently assumes the characteristics of episodic festive events, timed to coincide mainly with holidays and memorable dates and all similar to each other”. In addition, “the burgeoning national sentiments among young people were ostentatiously ignored and did not receive a proper and timely rebuff” (Kazakhstanskaia Pravda, 3 February).

POSTMORTEM: EDUCATION ESTABLISHMENTS

Kazakhstanskaia Pravda (20 December) reported on a “routine” meeting of the Kazakh Supreme Soviet which examined “the state of educational work and the prevention of law-breaking among
students . . .” There had been “grave shortcomings and omissions in the vocational school reform”, whilst there was a need to improve “the ideological-political, moral and legal education of the future generation of workers”. A Komsomol conference complained that “individual Komsomol organisations are still conducting their restructuring slowly, and a considerable number of unresolved issues and unexhausted opportunities remains outside the field of vision. In some places there occurs a gulf between words and deeds . . .” (Radio Alma-Ata, 12 January). A day later a report described “additional measures” to placate students by improving hostels in Alma-Ata.

Many senior university officials, who were among the leaders of the riots, were under arrest. Concern about student involvement in the riots was evidenced in an article in Kazakhstanskaia Pravda (25 December) which called for education to provide people with a “firm world outlook”: “If someone has not formed a firm world outlook . . . — and this should be a communist world outlook — then this ideological vacuum is filled with all sorts of rubbish: prejudices, philistine pretentions and confusion of ideas. It is not difficult to contaminate such a person with, for instance, the mania of consumerism or with nationalistic ravings.” This absence leads to a readiness to commit “socially dangerous actions”, and students, “deceived by nationalistic elements, the way of the thoughtlessness, political ignorance towards abnormal protest, carry out unlawful actions in an unprecedented orgy of passion”. Kazakhstanskaia Pravda the following day discussed the reform of higher education and “restructuring the ideological, moral, international and patriotic education of future specialists . . . Students . . . must daily strengthen the friendship and fraternity of the peoples . . .” Official sources have admitted that informal gangs were allowed to get away with accosting and beating up Russian students on many occasions (New York Times, 11 January).

Ideological problems in Kazakh higher education have led to expulsions from universities and the Komsomol. In Pravda (9 March), the Kazakh party leadership discussed ways they had introduced to overcome nationalism in the republic: “The editorial offices of newspapers, journals, television, radio and the other mass media are instructed to step up the propagating of the Leninist nationality policy and to demonstrate graphically and profoundly, . . . the advantages of the Soviet way of life and the friendship of the Soviet peoples.” Ideological education work among the “masses” is to be “fundamentally restructured”. Kazakhstanskaia Pravda (11 March) admitted that, “While the Komsomol workers were thinking about indicators to measure their successes in ideological work, life
itself was making its assessment of it. The December events in Alma-Ata mercilessly exposed the results of inactivity, self conceit and detachment of ideological activity from real life and the masses.

PUBLIC ORDER

Although Soviet reports stressed that everything had been brought under control after the second day, a report on Radio Alma-Ata (31 December) discussed a meeting on measures to improve public order in the capital. The meeting consisted of members of the militia and people’s volunteer militia. Their functions will be to “protect the rights of citizens and verify the observance of socialist law”. As late as 7 January, the Soviet authorities cancelled visits by western reporters to Alma-Ata, suggesting that the security situation was still tense. A Kazakh party resolution was passed to “strengthen socialist legality and law and order . . . Measures against persistent offenders, thieves, burglars and other anti-social elements must be made more severe. The whole of society must rise up and struggle against alcoholism, parasitism and non-labour incomes” (Radio Alma-Ata, January 8).

Reports which reached Moscow pictured “considerable ethnic tension between the Kazakh and Russian residents”. Readers of Izvestiia attributed the trouble to discontent over inequality between ethnic groups. A Russian woman described how Kazakhs had attacked Russians and their property. Police, denied permission to use their guns, “had stood helplessly by, shouting to Russians to save themselves”. Some readers said Slavs should now be given special privileges in each republic (Reuters, 9 January). At a conference of communist youth league border guards from Central Asia, they had been ordered to “show more discipline, vigilance and military preparedness”. These units are under the control of the KGB (UPI, 24 December).

FOOD SHORTAGES

A report by TASS from Alma-Ata indicated that food shortages may have played a part in fuelling the riots. Mikhail Solomentsev called for the harvest to be increased during his visit to Kazakhstan. Calls to improve the food supply to the republic have since been made. Soviet television reported on 13 January that, “The Kazakh Party has mapped out a broad programme to improve the supply of foodstuffs to the population of Alma-Ata.” Two days later, Soviet television
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described the complaints aired at the Kazakh Women’s Congress: “... housing, the food problem, organisation of commerce, consumer services. There are insufficient children’s pre-school establishments... instances of refusal to take the sick into hospitals... and there are great omissions in the provision of medical care to children. Unfortunately, the number of families in difficulty is very great.”

A regular meeting was held in January of the working group established to study the “prompt solution of the tasks of improving food supplies to the republic’s population”. It called for the “correct and fair distribution of the available food resources and toward increasing the quality and expanding the range of the foods on sale in the stores” (Kazakhstanskaia Pravda, 11 January). There have since been a number of calls for improving the food supply, as well as criticism of “unsatisfactory provision of housing” due to the “serious miscalculation in organisation, planning, incomplete use of production potential and inadequate putting into operation of new reserves” (Radio Alma-Ata, 21 January).

PUBLIC OPINION

Concern about the disturbances is evidenced in the establishment of a group to study public opinion in the republic under the auspices of the party’s propaganda and agitation department, which was reported in Kazakhstanskaia Pravda (7 January). It would deal with criticism in areas such as housing, public transport, alcoholism, violations of labour discipline, errors in the selection and placement of cadres, improving food supply and corruption. Later we are told of the real reasons for the establishment of this group: the prevention of a repeat of the riots. Therefore, again there are calls to strengthen “international education, the further improvement of practices in the study of public opinion and the timely exposure of various rumours, fantasies and immature views”.

ARRESTS

A total of three people reportedly had been sentenced by February. A teacher, Zh. A. Sabitova, was sentenced to five years for “making a placard and pamphlets of a provocative content and using them to try and kindle international enmity and incite young people to unlawful actions” (Literaturnaia Gazeta, 14 January). She was also deprived of the right to teach for five years. K. Rakhmetov, a former
Komsomol buro secretary for first year students at the Kazakh State University physics faculty “disguised with demagogic talk his apolitical attitude and the real face of the rowdy and hooligan he is. His true moral make up was revealed during the Alma-Ata disturbances, in which he played an active part.” He was sentenced to seven years in a harsh regime labour colony. He was also accused of inciting “students to the flagrant violation of social order and insubordination in response to the demands of the people volunteer militia and the militia”. Another student, V. A. Omarov, had criminal proceedings brought against him because of false evidence he presented in court. An “out of work alcoholic”, M. M. Asylbaev was sentenced to ten years in labour camps for inciting crowds to attack police and army units sent to quell the riots (The Times, 2 February). The trial of these three individuals took place in January–February. Since then no reports of trials have appeared, and Sobesednik stated that legal action would only be taken against those who had committed violence and vandalism but not against “passive participants”.

Although official figures have varied of the numbers injured and arrested during the riots, glasnost does not seem to have penetrated to this issue. Although the official death toll is two, a samizdat document states that 280 students were killed, as well as 29 militiamen and soldiers (The Independent, 8 May). A Russian version of the samizdat document on the Kazakh riots was published in the journal Strana i Mir (Munich), No. 1/2, 1987.

Various official Soviet sources have given conflicting figures for the number of casualties, and there has not appeared a definitive account of exactly what happened. A correspondent of Argumenty i fakty (No. 16 1987) attempted to obtain information on the riots from the Kazakh Department of Propaganda and Agitation’s A. A. Ustinov. He said that the largest number of participants in the riots at any one time was 3000, but the size of the crowd varied from day to day. He gave no figures of those arrested or injured, but merely stated that one public order volunteer had been killed. In early February a Novosti chief, Valentin Falin, repeated to the German newspaper Die Welt that only one public order volunteer had been killed. A few days later, the chairman of the Kazakh Council of Ministers, Nursultan Nazarbaev, told foreign journalists that two had died in the riots, a public order volunteer and a student. A Novosti report in May reported that 200 people had been injured and an employee of the Kazakh Television Centre, S. Savitsky had died. That same month Sobesednik (No. 22, 1987), the weekly supplement to Komsomolskaja Pravda, quoted the Kazakh minister of internal affairs as saying “there were no other victims”. There seems to be a lack of co-
DEATH SENTENCE

A report in Izvestiia (23 June 1987) documents the trial of participants in the riots in Alma-Ata. The trial lasted three weeks. In the dock were K. Ryskulbekov and E. Kopesbaev, students at the Alma-Ata Institute of Architecture and Construction, Zh. Taidzhumaneyev, student at the Technical School of Power and Electrification, T. Tashenov, carpenter, and K. Kuzembaev, a welder.

According to the report, the guilt of the accused was proven in full. The report said that they had aroused unaware young people with demagogic appeals and slogans, drew them into fights, riots and acts of arson and incited them to commit outrages. K. Ryskulbekov and E. Kuzembaev seriously maimed a militia sergeant. Kuzembaev beat him using unarmed combat methods. Zh. Taidzhumaev was the initiator of acts of arson and attempted to murder a member of the people's voluntary militia. Two others, Ryskulbekov and Tashenov, killed a number of the people's militia. The Kazakh SSR Supreme Court sentenced Ryskulbekov to death by shooting and Tashenov and Taidzhumaev to 15 years, Kuzembaev to 14 years and Kopesbaev to four years imprisonment.

The report claimed that the proof of these crimes was irrefutable. Special attention was paid to the reasons behind the riots. The stagnating atmosphere in the Kazakh party had a "pernicious effect on the moral complexion of some young people and their international education". When a threat loomed to the privileges of people who had obtained ranks and titles by virtue of "nepotism and home-town favouritism", they became troublemakers.

The students who took part in the riots were from theatrical and arts institutes, the university, the Institute of Architecture and Construction and Veterinary Medicine. The organisers and active participants in the riots have also been appropriately punished. The leaders of a number of higher educational establishments have been dismissed from their posts and expelled from the party.

Participants were not confined exclusively to the above groups. Young workers also took part: "A large amount of work is now being done in the republic to eliminate the reasons which led to the sorry events, and the restructuring of work on young people's education is under way."

Moscow News reported on the trial in its 28 June issue. According to the report, K. Ryskulbekov "pleaded for mercy, for compassion, for a pardon". With him in the dock were Z. Taidzhumaneyev, K.
Kuzembaev, Tashenov and Kopesbaev. They were accused of trying to incite the mob by demagogical slogans, arousing inter-ethnic strife, inciting others to pogroms and arson, beating up militiamen, *druzhinniki* (volunteer militia) and passersby.

The trial revealed that together with the mob, they tore off marble facings from fountains and threw them at the members of the republic's government, who were trying to remonstrate with the demonstrators. The procurator of the republic tried to reason with the rioters, but in vain. In reply they threw stones, toppled and burned cars and broke down fences. They attacked militiamen, beating them with metal rods.

According to *Moscow News*, "the guilt of all the culprits was proven beyond all possible doubt. The verdict was harsh." *Moscow News* could find little to answer the question: "What urged them to commit the crime?" But it believes that they could not "have shaken the firmness of our traditional internationalism . . . it hasn't been shaken and it never will be".

**POSTMORTEM: NATIONALITY POLICY**

The riots in Alma-Ata also led to many re-evaluations of Soviet nationality policy. A *Pravda* editorial (28 December), entitled "In a Unified Family," led the way in the aftermath of the riots. This was reprinted in the 30 December editions of *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda, Bakinskii Rabochii, Sovetskaia Kirgiziia* and *Sovetskaia Litva*. *Pravda* claimed that "Marxism is irreconcilable with nationalism", although one must "not give the impression that there are no problems in national processes". Claiming that "the party is loyal to the Leninist principles of nationalities policy", *Pravda* stated that "it is necessary to resolutely rebuff any attempts to place local interests above statewide interests", whilst "correct cadre policy has a great role to play in improving national relations". Apparently, "national arrogance and conceit" have "still not been eliminated", although "the struggle against manifestations of nationalism and chauvinism . . . is a task of abiding significance".

Another author stated, "Our society's strength lies in the unity of all its nations . . . But it would seem that some people have started to forget this truth and are trying to sow discord among the fraternal peoples. It is advised that the slightest manifestations of nationalist trends be repulsed most resolutely." Radio Moscow (30 December) admitted that "Relations between nationalities are a complex area — and not without contradictions — of our political life, and need constant and close attention." This requires "a resolute struggle
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against backward customs and habits and manifestations of nationalism and chauvinism”. The commentator voiced his concern when he complained that:

...bourgeois nationalist manifestations... are actively incited by imperialist propaganda... Our class enemies seize with great fervor on any manifestations of this sort; inflicting and encouraging them, they are pursuing the aim of weakening, by any method, the unity of the peoples of our country.

Sovetskaia Kultura complained that “for years officials have allowed publication of nationalist literature, creating a controversy about the quality of Russian schools in the republic compared with those teaching children in the native Kazakh language” (AP, 10 January). Radio Moscow admitted in another report on 2 January that, “like any multinational country... the Soviet Union is not immune to problems of nationalism”. Whilst, “if there is one lesson to be drawn from the events in Alma-Ata it is that while some problems in ethnic relations are solved others may emerge”. Trud (14 January) admitted that “we lulled ourselves into a false sense of security” and criticised the myths that had been used to describe the republic as a “laboratory of friendship among the peoples”. Trud went on to say: “Clearly we must now take part of the blame for the fact that the distinctions between national dignity and vulgar, philistine nationalism have not always been clearly and precisely drawn for young people. But this vulgar, philistine nationalism has now erupted... What we saw recently on the streets of our republic’s capital was a bitter surprise for all of us. Groups of young people incited by nationalist elements turned into plain hooligans. That is the price of failure in ideological work.” Trud believed that the rioters “simply did not understand the harm that they could cause to the friendship with the great Russian people...”

Soviet reports cannot seem to decide if nationality problems were the cause of the riots, the corruption and poor quality of the previous Kazakh party leadership, or merely naive youths who were incited by drugs and liquor. Yet, Kazakhstanskaia Pravda has admitted, “It was not yesterday that nationalism arose among some of the young people. They grew up in the public eye like weeds grow if they are not pulled out fast enough” (Reuters, 10 January). As the New York Times (11 January) commented, reports suggested that the Kazakh CP itself was guilty of nationalism and “explosive ethnic tensions lay behind the disturbances and university administrators and groups like the young communist league had allowed them to foster”.

At a meeting of the Central Committee of the Kazakh CP on nationality relations, Kolbin admitted: “It would be an error to consider that the national processes which are taking place are
without their problems.” He also called for a “fair national representation in the party and government bodies and a fair enrolment of young people of various nationalities in higher education establishments” (TASS, 21 January). That there exist problems in inculcating atheism among Kazakh Muslims was admitted in Sotsialistik Kazakstan (26 December): “One of the important tasks of atheistic education is to stop young people swelling the ranks of those who go to church and the mosque.” The newspaper disagrees with the view of some sections of the Kazakh authorities that Islam is not harmful to society, and mentions that “former itinerant mullahs have been called to account. Pseudo-mullahs who organise funeral ceremonies of their own, and the practice of other religions’ customs are becoming noticeable.” Often religious festivals are linked to national traditions.

The Kazakh press itself has been accused of promoting nationalism. Negative phenomena were encouraged by “high-flown phrases, statements of fact and over-emphasis of successes”. Little attention was paid to internationalist education, and there was a failure to distinguish between “genuine national pride and national self-admiration”. National life in the republic was presented one-sidedly. Kindergartens were encouraged to be exclusively Kazakh, with a campaign to increase the number of Kazakh-language schools. The press often boasted that by the year 2000 the republic would be 50 per cent Kazakh, and in the near future 65-70 per cent. The December riots highlighted the shortcomings in the work of the Kazakh party, whilst the press showed “survivals of national narrow-mindedness, self-admiration and pomposity” (Pravda, 11 February).

To appease the Kazakh sense of lost pride, the post of second secretary was given to a Kazakh, S. Kubashev. This is a reversal of the usual system of a member of the titular nationality as head and a Russian as his second in command. But a Slav has been elected for the first time to the Taldy-Kurgan oblast’, a region with a majority of Kazakhs.

Gorbachev has also commented on nationality policy and relations, stating that he would never tolerate any manifestation of nationalism. There will be no glasnost’ in this area. In Pravda (28 January) he stated that no question in the USSR could be tackled without realising “the fact that we live in a multinational country”. He called for greater internationalist education, because “it is especially important to save the rising generation from the demoralising effect of nationalism”. Certain leaders did not always adopt correct policies in dealing with the sensitive question of national relations. He criticised some writers who “for a long time preferred to tolerate upbeat treaties reminiscent at times of
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complimentary toasts rather than of serious scientific studies”. He declared:

Let those who would like to play on nationalist or chauvinist prejudices entertain no illusion and expect no loosening up.

Academician Bromlei, a noted expert in this field, wrote a lengthy article in Pravda (13 February) where he complained of the “divergence between words and deeds”. He especially stressed that, “The problems arising here are strongly reflected among young people”. He stated that education and the press needed to promote “practical interest in close union, in desire for the common good and in inculcating lofty love for the homeland”. Past events “demand that ideological works pay due attention to national aspects”. He admitted that internationalist education was often seen as the “impending loss of national originality, culture, language and so on. Hence the feelings of tradition, the underestimation of the Russian language as a means of contact between nationalities, the temptation to isolate them, within the framework of national culture . . . National elements take advantage of such feelings, at times quite successfully.”

TASS (5 March) reported on resolutions passed by the Kazakh Central Committee to improve the instruction of Kazakh and Russian in schools. A large number of Kazakhs in rural areas do not know Russian, whilst in the urban areas, “the trend towards a decline in the prestige of the Kazakh language became evident . . .” Study of Russian will be done “willingly” because it “was voluntarily accepted by Soviet people as a vehicle for communication between nations and nationalities . . .”

RUSSIAN NATIONALIST BACKLASH?

Radio Alma-Ata (7 April) reported on the desecration of a Muslim cemetery by Russians who caused 40,000 rubles worth of damage. The authorities were evidently worried that, “The senseless actions of the hooligans could have been used by individual people of negative outlook to inflame national enmity and dissension.” A careful investigation has been launched by the local party “of the causes and circumstances which promoted this blasphemous crime”. In the usual tone, calls were made to improve ideological and internationalist upbringing of the population.

TASS (8 May) reported on the trial of young “hooligans” who committed the vandalism at the Muslim cemetery, supposedly in a “state of intoxication”. The report stated that all the damaged
monuments have been restored and new ones produced at state expense. They admitted that the act “had shocked the citizens of Alma-Ata”. Cowing to local feelings the authorities “have shown great respect for the memory of the Muslim deceased and attentiveness to their relatives. All damage was speedily made good.” *Izvestiia* on the same day claimed that the trial “aroused a broad response amongst the public”. In the trial “great attention was devoted to the reasons and conditions which led to the perpetration of this sacrilegious crime”. Criminal liability for outrages against graves has been increased by the Kazakh presidium to up to five years imprisonment.

These acts demonstrate the reaction of Russian nationalism, which has been allowed to foster under Gorbachev and previous Soviet leaders, to the Kazakh riots. The *samizdat* account of the riots speaks about the appearance of “gangs of hooligans” who beat up everyone they came across. In addition, “Russians are unashamedly saying: what is needed is a machine gun to kill them all (the Kazakhs) . . .”

**POSTMORTEM: THE KAZAKH PARTY**

Radio Alma-Ata (8 January) again blamed the previous party leadership for the “serious harm to the moral and international education of young men and women caused by protectionism, bribe-taking and favouritism on the basis of local contacts”. In addition, “The mistakes made in the policy on cadres had a negative effect on the world outlook of students and had become one of the causes of the unlawful acts of hooliganism.” In a major attack on corruption in Kazakhstan, *Pravda* (7 January) stated that “relationships between friends or relatives must not be allowed to influence the work sphere, the solution of cadre matters”. “Favouritism” had been used in the selection of cadres to positions of power in the republic, denying Russians entry into various departments.

Kolbin established a co-ordinating council charged with ensuring “due proportion of representatives in all elected public and managerial offices on the basis of nationality” (*Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*, 18 January). Part of the blame for the riots had already been laid at the door of ethnic segregation in universities and discrimination against Russian students (*New York Times*, 11 January).

*Kazakhstanskaia Pravda* (21 January) reported that senior officials will have to undergo “certification” twice every five years, “with the aim of assessing their political, professional and moral qualities”. In the Arkalyk town party committee, a meeting noted that the struggle against crime, alcoholism and unearned incomes “is conducted
Nationalist Riots in Kazakhstan without profound analysis or due account of the real situation, and is not aimed at preventative influences. In 1986, in comparison with the previous year, the number of criminal acts increased, and material losses resulting from embezzlement, misappropriation and theft of social property increased threefold" (Radio Alma-Ata, 20 January). Numerous party members have been expelled, many for corruption (including the illegal purchase of country dachas), whilst TASS (21 February) admitted that: “Not all the members of the Central Committee, however, are models of honesty, party principledness and selflessness . . .” Koibin called for the solution to the many problems he inherited, but this “involves considerable difficulties, primarily because it demands the fundamental demolition of old views and stereotypes and the restructuring of everyone’s thinking, from workers to leaders” (Kazakhstanskaia Pravda, 16 January).

POSTMORTEM: THE YOUTH

A great amount of attention has been focused upon the youth, the Komsomol and education. At the Kazakh Komsomol conference it was admitted that “there was a lot of criticism, but nothing specific”. Not enough was being done in internationalist education, drug addiction, crime and the production of “politically aware young people”. Yet the previous Kazakh leadership bragged that theirs was the most “internationalist” republic. One delegate admitted that “we really have received a very bitter lesson”, whilst another said: “The events of the 17th and 18th were shameful events for us. All our shortcomings were revealed in those events” (Radio Moscow, 29 January). When foreign journalists were finally allowed to visit the Kazakh State University they were told of the numbers of students expelled. The reasons for their actions were described as follows: “They were instigated by nationalistically-minded people who feared losing their privileges with the emergence of the new leader . . . and an unhealthy atmosphere of protectionism, nepotism and clannishness . . .” But the spokesman concluded by stating that it “would be utterly wrong to accuse the entire Kazakh people of nationalism” (TASS, 19 February). The Academy of Sciences meanwhile was criticised in Pravda (14 February) as having falling standards, with a decline in the amount of original development work. In addition, not a single scientific discovery has been made or licence sold in the last few years.

In a long article on the campaign to “restructure” Kazakhstan in the Gorbachevian mould, Kazakhstanskaia Pravda (22 February) called for “the compulsory study of Russian” in rural areas and the
provision "for the compulsory, in-depth study of the Kazakh language". The "bitter December days" were again discussed. They required a "profound analysis based on Leninist principles". The author advised that "foregone conclusions" should be avoided, and believed that it is incorrect, "on the basis of individual mistakes by individual people or even a group of people, to form generalised, hasty opinions such as that certain regions of Kazakhstan are inhabited solely by crooks and smart operators and others solely by angels". He claimed, "it is far more sensible to take care to preserve and not to violate in any circumstances the fundamental unity of people".

Like many commentators, the author blames the riots on the absence of "full openness". The delay in restructuring "gave negative elements the opportunity to pool their efforts in order to prevent their own final exposure . . . to resort to purely provocative sorts of the nature of utterly reckless hooliganism, while clumsily disguising this fact with demagogic blather about supposed violations of national interests".

But the campaign to restructure the republic is coming up against the obstacles of "patronage and nepotism" according to Radio Moscow (10 March). In addition, a commentator on Central Asia, S. Enders Wimbush, believes that glasnost' "is an unlikely palliative for the grievances of the USSR's numerous national minorities" (Encounter, June 1987).

Radio Moscow (10 March) reported on the Kazakh Komsomol conference under way, where the December events were discussed. A vicious rebuke was made against western reporting: "They immediately started squealing about the collapse of our national policies." Although they admitted that "Soviet people were alarmed by these events", Leninist internationalism would prevail. However, "those involved in the disorders numbered dozens, perhaps hundreds. The majority remained true to the ideas of friendship and internationalism." Routine calls were made for stepping up "work on ideological and internationalist education", because the roots of the events "have to be sought, first and foremost, in serious omissions in ideological work among young people, and in the weakening of patriotic and internationalist education".

Pravda (16 March) revealed that mail it had received showed considerable interest in the riots, "determined not so much by the flare-up of the nationalist phenomenon . . . (their importance should not be underestimated . . .) as by precisely the experience of overcoming the crisis . . ." Pravda (4 April) also admitted that "numerous letters" arrived at its offices: "Readers express their concern and demand serious analysis and principled evaluation of the
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events.” Criticism was again levelled at the false picture that all problems had been “solved” which was promoted by the previous leadership: “In other words, there was plenty of idle talk while everything was bursting at the seams.” Calling the “extremist nationalist elements” “flammable material”, Pravda claimed they were small in number and had no organisational structure, “but they did manage to attract a certain group of young students…” Confused answers again are given to the question. “If the flammable material did explode, who set it alight?” Pravda also said that nationalism in Kazakhstan had “thrived on people's dissatisfaction in the social sphere”, and revealed that for the first time a Central Committee Commission for National and Inter-National Relations had been established in the wake of the riots.

A conference in Alma-Ata of personnel from the procurator’s office evaluated the riots but were no nearer to “finding out who organised these occurrences”. The manifestations of nationalism that took place “occurred among a very narrow range of people, namely, extremists who incited young people with no firm resistance to such things yet”. One speaker was skeptical of reports that they are only dealing with just a few “dozen extremists” who inflamed young people, “while the great mass were unaffected by the manifestations of nationalism and chauvinism” (Kazakhstanskaia Pravda, 24 March).

A one-day conference on “internationalist education” took place in Alma-Ata in April. The conference stressed the need to improve inter-ethnic relations, improve the ethnic balance to Kazakh universities (where Russians were under-represented according to their proportion of the republic’s population) and increase the study of both the Kazakh and Russian languages. It was noted that in 1979 only 0.7 per cent of Russians living in Kazakhstan had a good command of the local language. The main theme of the conference was the due representation of all nationalities in party, state and economic agencies. The conference did not discuss the riots in any great detail, merely relegating them to the work of a few “extremists”. Criticism was directed at the preoccupation of Kazakh historians with glorifying the past.

CONCLUSION

Thus far, the nationalities question has played little part in Gorbachev’s policy of “restructuring”. However, if plans for decentralisation in decision-making are to accompany the proposed economic reforms, this is likely to encourage nationalist aspirations,
which will be a source of further problems for the unity of the Soviet state. The riots in Kazakhstan have again shown that nationalism is often present within the non-Russian communist parties themselves. In addition, calls for more emphasis on “internationalist education” (i.e. a thinly disguised russification) could have the opposite effect to that intended, creating further discontent. But whatever Gorbachev’s plans may be, the aftermath of the Kazakh riots have shown that nationalism in the non-Russian republics requires urgent attention and will undoubtedly continue to be a factor to be reckoned with for the foreseeable future.

Nobody expected Kazakhstan of all the Central Asian republics to be the one to experience such an outburst of discontent. As Pravda in April described it, “there was plenty of idle talk while everything was bursting at the seams”. Kazakhs are a minority in their own republic and have the highest degree of russification of any of the Muslim republics. Consequently, despite this one can see just how deceptive “successful” Soviet policy looks from the outside. Alma-Ata, where the main riots took place, is over 60 per cent Russian. The riots also exposed the limits of glasnost’, and I suspect that more information is yet to appear. More information has appeared than before glasnost’ (in itself a dangerous precedent, because since the riots other nationalities have demonstrated for their rights) but still less than what would have appeared in the West.

The riots also exposed the weakness of western reporting on Soviet affairs, with little attention given to the non-Russian republics (who will soon account for over 50 per cent of the population). The western press was quick to repeat what appeared in the Soviet press without comment or analysis. Few understand the deeper grievances that lay behind the riots. The nationalist riots in Kazakhstan were a serious threat to Soviet order in that republic. What would have been the outcome if a similar threat had occurred in other regions of the USSR at the same time is easy to imagine.

NOTE

1. The death sentence of Ryskulbekov has been commuted by the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet to 20 years imprisonment at a special regime camp according to the USSR News Brief, No. 15, 1988.