Territory and the Kazakh Nation: Bordering the Alash Orda

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Abstract

This paper argues that the project for establishing the territorial boundaries of contemporary Kazakhstan originates in the late nineteenth century as part of an elite nationalist mobilisation against Russian rule and colonisation of the Kazakh steppes. In particular it notes how increasing Russian settlement and land seizures disrupted the long-established pastoralist practices of transhumance that defined the Kazakh identity, ecology, and economy, prompting an enterprising Kazakh elite to redefine Kazakh identity in terms of land and territory. It outlines the struggles to define the borders of a contested territory in nationalist terms, once this elite found itself in a political deadlock within the Russian imperial political system, thus specifying and refining the boundaries of the Kazakh nation and the borders of the future Kazakhstani polity. As such, this paper argues that most contemporary borders are the residues of historical struggles and attempts to show this through the excavation of the foundations of contemporary Kazakhstan’s borders.

Key words: Borders, Kazakh, Alash Orda, intellectuals, Russian Empire

Introduction

Malcolm Anderson (1996) argued that certain periods in history have made important contributions to the notions on which modern state frontiers are based. These include “the Roman Empire for notions of territoriality, the ‘universalist’ doctrines of the Middle Ages […] [and] the development of the frontiers of France which prefigured those of other European ‘nation-states’”. (Anderson, 1996: 12). This has led to the current understanding of the world and its state borders, or, as Agnew puts it, the modern geopolitical imagination, by which “one state’s prospects in relation to others’ were seen in relation to global conditions that were viewed as setting limits and defining possibilities for a state’s success in the global arena,” can be understood (Agnew, 2003: 16). However, relations toward territory are constantly in flux, and as this paper will show, the manifestations of

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territorial borders at a specific point in time can lay the foundations for future territorial claims and ideologies, just as Anderson outlines in his study.

One of the most striking phenomena of the world we live in today, is the speed by which impactful ideas can be transmitted globally, finding interest and manifesting themselves in the most improbable contexts. Empires have expanded and found themselves creating borders in new fronts each time they annexed new territories. Within these territories, bordering continued between tribes and religious groups and at times, they lived peacefully next to each other. However, the idea of creating national borders in the name of and for a specific nation (Brubaker 1994) can in many examples be attributed to global trends and the ideas circulated at a specific point in time. This is also the argument Anderson (1996) makes about the Roman notions of territory, which have transcended continents and centuries, albeit in transformed ways, having passed through stages such as universalism and Enlightenment.

The reason why I look at a pre-Soviet case study is, because it is through a layering process that nations emerge. In the case of Kazakhstan, the first layer was established by a group of Russian-educated Kazakh intellectuals. Over the course of years, the Soviet government’s nationalities policy would add its own layers and nuances (although it should also be noted that some of the nationalist Kazakh intellectuals were involved in this process, especially in the education committees). The ‘nativisation’ aims of the korenizatsiia policy had its own role to play as well, as the idea of the Kazakh nation continued to develop. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, a new Kazakhstan emerged with multiple ethnicities and two languages spoken: Russian and Kazakh. Although the spoken languages overlap within different ethnic groups and bilingualism is very common, social entrepreneurs and political actors had to redefine the notions of ‘Kazakhs’ and ‘Kazakhstanis’ (Kesici, 2011).

As such, I define nationalism not necessarily as looking toward the past, but as a movement in the name of a nation propagated by proponents, seeking means of political involvement in the name of said nation. That said, the aim of this paper is to show how a group of Kazakh elites decided to follow the global trend of establishing a nation for the Kazakhs and the mechanisms behind these global dynamics. Moreover, the paper shows that in propagating nationalism, these intellectuals were not interested in reverting back to a golden age, or a time when Kazakhs lived a more noble life, but instead, saw nationalism
as an opportunity to modernise Kazakh society and improve their lives by taking examples especially from France. By doing this, I intend to show how the foundation of the notion of the modern Kazakh nation was laid, which, in later years, would be layered with other notions tied to the Soviet ideology, and finally to an independent nation-state in the international community.

**Traditional rule in the Kazakh steppe**

One of the most prominent scholars of nationalism theories, Ernest Gellner (1983) argued that nations and nationalism emerged as a by-product of industrialisation and modernisation of societies. His analysis focuses on the social transformations of societies, which lead to the emergence of nations and nationalism. By emphasising the traditional in opposition to the modern society, Gellner argues that the nation is a completely modern phenomenon, brought about by the structural advance of society. In industrial societies, for instance, “a high culture pervades the whole of society, defines it and needs to be sustained by the polity” (Gellner, 1983: 18). Egalitarianism precipitates throughout the society and merit becomes more important than status. In order to fill positions meritocratically, the state then needs to educate its recruits in the same fashion all in the whole country. Gellner thus argues that “A modern society is, in this respect, like a modern army, only more so. It provides a very prolonged and fairly thorough training for all its recruits, insighting on certain shared qualifications: literacy, numeracy, basic work habits and social skills […]” (ibid.: 27-28).

Subsequently, borders were drawn around ‘national territories’ in place of imperial ones. However, on the one hand, it neglects the social behaviour of key actors on scene, i.e., rendering the social transition deterministic, as well as leaving out a myriad of nationalist movements that took place in parts of the world where industrialisation had not taken place. Moreover, Gellner focuses mainly on the British example, having neglected the modernisation processes that took place in Germany for instance, where modernisation was actively propagated by the state in order to reach the British economic development. More importantly, the relationship between territory and the national imagination has largely been overlooked.

The main contender of this strand of thinking which emerged in the past decades is the group of scholars known as ethno-symbolists. Ethno-symbolism emerged as a critique
towards modernism. They represent a more homogenous group of scholars in contrast to modernists, as they emphasise similar processes in explaining nations and nationalism (Özkirimli, 2010: 143). The core idea of this approach is two-fold: the key role of ethnic groups in the establishment of nations and emergence of nationalisms and secondly, the representation of ethnicities in symbols and their continuous use to reinforce certain identities. Although there is common agreement among ethno-symbolists that nations are modern and very much created by people, they argue that “the emergence of today’s nations cannot be understood properly without taking their ethnic forebears into account; in other words, the rise of nations needs to be contextualized within the larger phenomenon of ethnicity which shaped them,” (ibid.). Consequently, collective cultural identities need to be studied over the longue durée (Armstrong, 1982), because ethnic identities do change in a slow process. Most importantly, they reject modernists’ idea that there is a clear discontinuity between the stages of transformation within societies, such as from ‘agrarian’ to ‘industrial’. The key proponent of this approach is A.D. Smith (1987). This approach provides a closer look at the cultural contents of nationalism, yet ignores the wider political mechanisms of border creations. Although the connection between territory and ethnic narrative is made within this approach, it remains insufficient in explaining the changes that can occur within this narrative and the consequences for border making.

Since the ethno-symbolist and modernist debate, nationalism theories have taken different directions, as it became clearer that in order to truly understand not only the emergence of nations, but also their contents that are capable of mobilising masses, there should be a move from creating general theories of nationalism towards partial theories, which explain different aspects of different national phenomena (Özkirimli, 2010: 218). In this paper, I attempt to do this by looking not only at the aspect of nationalism and the strive for liberation from colonial power, but also by looking at the legacies of borders drawn almost a century ago in the Kazakh Steppe.

I propose an approach that looks at both nationalist discourse that ‘layer’ the border-making process in a point and time in history, as well as looking at the structural mechanisms of border creation. Creating, and above all, institutionalising national borders is a social transformation that must take into account all levels of action. For this reason, I propose a three-level analysis considers the transmission of ideas through social entrepreneurs, their social practice, and institutionalisation of practices. The first level is
that of social entrepreneurs, who, through global networks, translate ideas and introduce them to their regions. In this case study, these would be the intellectuals who become the founding fathers of the Kazakh nation. Through educational channels, acquisition of linguistic skills and inclusion into intellectual networks, they acquired the knowledge of how things were being done in other parts of the world. The second level to look at would be the social behaviour of intellectual, or ‘leading’ groups, who bring new ideas to the population. The masses’ reaction, on the other hand, needs observation as well, as they accept, modify, reject, or ignore their ideas. On the final level, the analysis shifts to the institutionalisation of certain practices. In this case, this would be the institutionalisation of national borders and infrastructures. The three levels are interdependent and do not follow a specific order.

Prominently, intellectuals, who claimed nationhood from colonial rule, played an important role as cultural entrepreneurs in other parts of the world. Both Benedict Anderson (1991) and Elie Kedourie (1960, 1971) highlight this point in their works. In one of the first theories of nationalism, Elie Kedourie (1960) argues that nationalism emerged as the idea of self-determination and manifested itself in the minds of significant social entrepreneurs. In an edited work of his, which looks at nationalism particularly in Asia and Africa (Kedourie, 1971), he argues that nationalism started in the West and spread to the rest of the world, as a result of the alienated and restless intellectuals, who, marginalised from politics, believed they would have a more important role in society once they generated nationalism in their own societies. He writes, “an Indian could be admitted to the civil service only if he had become so completely Europeanized as to be really and practically on the footing and imbued with the character of an English highly educated gentleman. But it did not prove to be the case that an Indian who had become ‘imbued’ with such a character would be easily or automatically treated like an English gentleman” (Kedourie, 1971: 84). Anderson makes a similar case for intellectuals. He argues that among the different types of nationalisms, there are those of ‘anti-colonial’ nationalisms, which took place especially in Africa and Asia. In most cases this is ascribed to the fact that many indigenous intellectuals were excluded from boardrooms, so that “lonely, bilingual intelligentsias unattached to sturdy local bourgeoisie” became the locomotives of colonial nationalisms (Özkirimli, 2010: 112).
Socio-economic relationships in the Kazakh steppe

In order to understand the larger context of nation building and bordering in the Kazakh Steppes, it is helpful to look at the socio-economic relationships before a Kazakh intellectual elite suggested reforms to the Kazakh socio-economic structures, which was heavily based on a nomadic economy that involved cattle breeding. This nomadic economy enabled families to produce a wide range of their own basic supplies, such as food, clothing, housing, fuel and transport. Despite that, there was a symbiotic relationship between nomads and sedentary peoples. Nomads couldn’t carry much surplus material and benefitted from trading with settled people for the goods they couldn’t produce themselves. Sabol puts it as follows: “Trade was beneficial to both groups. Accumulated goods, such as wools, hides, livestock, and so on, which could not be consumed or utilized, or became a burden to transport, had to be jettisoned or traded.” (Sabol, 2003: 13).

The social organisation of nomads was comprised of kinship ties and blood lineage. It would seem logical that this was a necessary form of organisation, as auls (nomadic bands) moved across large distances in families or kinship groups. The vast area of the steppe meant that one of the main ways of recognising others from different auls could not be limited as in the way European settled people recognised themselves through their vocation, but of their ties to the larger genealogy of all Kazakh people. They were versatile in their skills; they had to be hunter, gatherer, and handicraftsman and perform a multitude of tasks in order to survive on the steppe. Moreover, the nomadic nature of the migration of whole family units and auls meant that finding one person in one area in one season, did not necessarily mean that they would be found in the same area the next season, as they had to remain flexible in their migration in order to provide the best grazing lands and pasture for their animals.

Kazakhs identified themselves through kinship. Additionally, genealogies provided the legitimate source of authority between families, auls, tribes, and the hordes (zhuz), (Sabol, 2003: 15). Each tribe was affiliated to one of the three large confederations of tribes, known as zhuz. These were known as the Uly Zhuz (Great Horde), Orta Zhuz (Middle Horde) and Kishi Zhuz (Little Horde). The population of these three confederations used three geographical and climatic zones, which were designated to each zhuz. As such, the Kishi Zhuz controlled the western region, the Orta Zhuz managed the central, northern and eastern regions of the Kazakh steppe and the Uly Zhuz administered mainly the southern
regions (Kendirbai, 2008: 68). Originally, the zhuz reflected the principle of seniority by which the Kazakh social organisation was mainly governed. However, there was no caste system, which stratified members of the zhuz or denied access to any one zhuz. As such, intermarriages between the zhuz were common practice and more importantly, the belief of common descent was strong. According to the legend of common descent, all members of the zhuz were the descendants of the mythical father of the Kazakhs, who was known by the name of Alash. Within the zhuz then, the tribes were governed by the rules explained above, with power being divided between the aq suieks (aristocrats) and qara suieks (commons), which were quite fluid, as will be shown below.

**Map 1: Lands of the Three Zhuz**

![Map of lands of the Three Zhuz](source: Wikimedia Commons)

**Traditional Political Structures**

Kendirbai explains that the khans chosen by the sultans and tribal leaders played an important role in military actions and international affairs, whereas in times of peace, the real power was in the hands of tribal leaders, who were typically comprised of biis (traditional judges), batyrs (military heroes), bais (wealthy nomads) and aqsaqals (village eldest), (Kendirbai, 2008: 69). At the aul level, the leadership was mainly in the hands of the aqsaqal, who was revered and thought to be experienced and wise, and the bii. On a
tribal level, the khan would traditionally lead Kazakhs of the same tribe (Sabol, 2003: 18). “Leadership [...] was often based upon the ability to render justice, because of wealth and social standing, age, and numerous family ready and able to offer support.” (ibid.: 34). Above the aul level, the only symbol of a common political formation among the Kazakhs was the unified Kazakh khanate, which existed from the mid-fifteenth to the late sixteenth century. In the sixteenth century, the Kazakh khanate disintegrated and took over a tripartite system of zhuz (Dave, 2007: 31-2).

**Russian Annexation of the Kazakh Steppe**

In the eighteenth century, the Russian Empire ventured into the Kazakh steppe and started to expand into Kazakh lands by constructing a line of forts along its northern region. The first fort was constructed in 1716 in Omsk, after which followed Semipalatinsk in 1718, Ust’-Kamenogorsk in 1719 and Orsk in 1735 (Rottier, 2005: 35). At that time, a Mongol tribe, the Dzungars, posed a major threat to the Kazakh khans and all of them accepted Russian protection. Abul’khair Khan of the Little Horde signed an agreement with Russia for protection on 10 October 1731 (ibid.: 36). The Middle Horde followed suit in 1740 and the Great Horde in 1742. The Russian Empire subsequently repressed the autonomy of Kazakh khans; in 1822 the Khanate of the Middle Horde, in 1824 the Khanate of the Little Horde and in 1848 the Khanate of the Great Horde were abolished. Under the 1868 Provisional Statute the territories of the Middle and Little Hordes were divided into the new provinces of Ural’sk, Torghai, Akmolinsk and Semipalatinsk. The provinces were put under the control of the Orenburg and West Siberian administrations and subdivided into uezds, volosts and administrative auls (Kendirbai, 2008: 70). The statute also introduced a new electoral system by which the old power system was dramatically altered and replaced by a centralised administration, transforming the social and political organisation of the nomads. It is during this time that significant changes took place in the social and political spheres of Kazakhs. These changes started with the Russian education of an elite group of Kazakhs.
Colonisation of the Kazakh steppe and the relationship to territory

Russian peasant settlement on the Kazakh steppes began as a series of illegal migrations at first, which had been triggered by the land hunger and famine in western parts of the Russian Empire. However, the Tsarist government came to adopt resettlement policies that facilitated these migrations. A newly founded Resettlement Administration would aid the process. The local administration was unwilling to disturb natives’ use of the lands and provided legislative regulations in order to do so (Rottier, 2003: 69). The central government, however, put pressure on the local administration to provide increasing amounts of land, in an attempt to alleviate overcrowding among the peasant population in European Russia. As a result, a Resettlement Act of 1889 was passed, which permitted peasants to migrate legally to the steppes and settle on lands that the government deemed unnecessary for local nomads (Sabol, 2003: 38-39). Following up on these regulations, “statutory limits were established to limit the amount of land deemed necessary for agricultural production, but many peasants either ignored the law, or simply lacked the skills to demarcate properly their holdings. Consequently, peasant holdings often exceeded the fifteen desiatin⁴ norm allotted by the government.” (ibid.: 69). This did not go
unnoticed by the nomadic people and created a rising awareness over the loss of a shared habitat, namely land, that had been readily available for centuries in the nomadic traditions.

Moreover, the Russian population in the northern oblasts of the steppe region had experienced a significant boost. In 1897, a mere 16 percent of the population was Russian. By 1916, this number had grown to 41.6 percent. Rottier argues that the massive incursion into the steppe had disrupted pastoralist practices, resulting in a more sedentary mode of living among Kazakhs (Rottier, 2003: 68). This, at the time, was not deemed to be a good way of living among Kazakh nomads, as only the poor would settle down for a lack of cattle that they could cultivate.

Prior to Russian appropriation, land disputes between Kazakh and Mongolian tribes and hordes had been common and resolved in battles or agreements between tribes. However, as the former indigenous political system had been eliminated and replaced by the imperial administrative system, Kazakhs were left in the dark as to how they would contest the appropriations. An elite group of Kazakh intellectuals believed the only way to rectify the situation in favour of Kazakhs would be by working through political channels.

As Russian settlers continued to migrate into the Kazakh steppes the Kazakh elite were faced with the economic demise of Kazakh nomads, whose grazing lands were being appropriated. As a reaction, the secular, as well as the more Islamic-oriented intellectuals proposed for the Kazakhs to become sedentarised and leave the nomadic mode of life behind. They believed that by doing so, more structures would be created around the land and it would become increasingly difficult for Russian administrators to appropriate lands for Russian peasants. As a result, the permanent settlement of Russian people on lands that were freely available before provided a shift in the perception of territory among Kazakhs. The notion that they could freely roam across vast steppes had to be revised in order to accommodate the new circumstances by which lands were no longer freely available. In particular, the realisation that fertile grazing lands for their herds were becoming sparse in the northern steppes was alarming.

Initial attempts at solving the territorial problem

The Russian presence on Kazakh lands shattered the traditional relationship of Kazakhs toward their lands. Land had primarily been their habitat, upon which they built their
ecosystems and from which their identity had been derived. The notion of territory as private property was foreign to them and the symbiotic relationship that they had toward land had to be revised according to the Kazakh intellectuals. The Kazakh intellectuals form the first level of analysis that was mentioned in the first part of the paper. They were in position to propagate social change, as they were capable of speaking the administrators’ language. Randall Collins’ (2000) work *The Sociology of Philosophies* argues that through connection to intellectual networks, members acquire cultural capital, i.e., the means by which they can participate in intellectual network rituals. This, in turn, creates emotional energy within the participants, if they participate in an effective manner, which enables them to contribute increasingly more. The Kazakh intellectuals had the cultural capital to negotiate and participate not only in intellectual networks, but also in political and other social networks, which at the time were dominated by the leading and most powerful group; the Russians.

By the early 20th century, some nationalist movements within empires had been forming, either in the name of a dominant nation within the empire, or by colonised peoples. The members of the first-generation secular Kazakh intellectual groups (1830-1880) were involved in Russian intellectual circles and were in contact with notable names, for example Dostoyevsky. Within these circles, ideas from the French Revolution and the Enlightenment period were discussed. The second-generation intellectuals were also involved in the political movements at the time that were in favour of democratising the Imperial system. Alikhan Bokeikhanov, the leader of the Alash movement, became a member of the Central Committee of the Constitutional Democratic (*Kadets*) Party. He believed that the Russian liberals’ oppositional programme would aid Kazakhs in achieving their own political demands. In collaboration with the *Kadets* and the Muslim Faction of the Russian Empire, Kazakhs were in a position to receive political representation in the First (1906) and Second (1907) Russian Dumas. However, this political power, which had been granted to the Kazakhs as a result of the 1905 October Revolution, lasted only for a short period. Nonetheless, the Kazakhs’ urgency for more control in the resettlement programme can be seen by one of the Kazakh deputies of the First State Duma, Bakhytzhan Qarataev:

“We, [the Kazakhs], feel and understand very well the need for land of our Russian brothers – the peasants. But free lands are in a very small number, and the resettlement of
the Russian peasants is being accompanied at the moment by the eviction of the [Kazakhs]. [The Kazakhs] are being evicted not only from their lands, but also from their houses.” (Qarataev, 1989, cited in Kendirbay, 1997: 497).

The dissolution of the Duma by the Tsar on 3 June 1907 relegated the Kazakhs back to their status as *inorodtsy*, resident aliens, who no longer enjoyed equal rights within the Empire (Rottier, 2006: 7). They were barred from entering the Third and Fourth State Dumas, yet a Kazakh representative, Alikhan Bokeikhanov remained in St. Petersburg and was financed by Kazakhs, to report on the government’s policies. He argued that no deputies in the State Duma, including those of the Muslim Faction, were familiar with the Kazakhs’ way of life, in order to represent them in a competent manner (Kendirbai, 1997: 497). During budget discussions in 1910, the deputy Dzubinsky had accused the government of being violent toward the Kazakhs. The response he received was as follows, according to Bokeikhanov’s report of the Duma session in the newspaper, *Qazaq* from 1913:

“You’re causing a commotion, constantly repeating ‘Kazakhs, Kazakhs,’ just because we moved five or six Kazakhs from their winter camp territories and gave them to muzhiks. Is this the Duma of the Kazakh?” (Bokeikhanov, 1913).

Bokeikhanov then states that the Duma left the Kazakhs without any means and no one spoke of Kazakhs in the parliament after this incident (ibid.). It goes to show that the means of protecting the territory was unsuccessful through political channels and that it was impossible for Kazakhs to persuade the government to act in favour of their interests. The Kazakh intellectuals became aware that they had reached a political cul-de-sac and that the Russian administration was not willing to listen to them. At this point, they came to realise that they were, in effect, second-class members of the Russian Empire. This marks the most important turning point in their struggles, for it is at this point that they had to assert their political claims by means of redefining themselves as on par with the Russians.

This could also be understood as the turning point that Kedourie (1971) describes; in which the local elites, barred from political participation in the colonial administration, turn toward nationalism as an ideology in order to receive a more meaningful role in society.
However, this argument would be too simplistic for the Kazakh case, as the trigger was not only the ban from political participation, but also the pressing need to modernise as a result of the economic problems in the Kazakh Steppe. However, before modernising, the intellectuals set out to prove that Kazakhs were equal to Russians. In a second step, they would attempt to modernise the Kazakhs as a people; in their opinion, this meant sedentarisation, education and territorialisation. Moreover, they would prove that the Kazakhs were a modern nation worthy of territorial and political autonomy.

*Modernising Kazakhness: Sedentarisation*

The social behaviour of the Kazakh intellectuals changed dramatically as they were excluded from political participation. The second level analysis of the behaviour of Kazakh intellectuals shows how the political deadlock had prepared them to make fundamental changes to their modes of life. The movement brought forward by secular Kazakh intellectuals was led by Alikhan Bokeikhanov, who would also become the chairman of the first Kazakh political party established in 1917, *Alash Orda*. The political movement was named after the mythical founding father of all three Kazakh zhuz, *Alash*, and aimed at including all Kazakhs. The members of the *Alash* movement also published a weekly journal, *Qazaq*, in 1913 and continued to do so until 1918 in Orenburg. It quickly became the mouthpiece of the *Alash* movement’s ideologies and policies. It was funded by its readers and reached a circulation of 8,000, making it the most read Kazakh journal of its time (Kendirbai, 1997: 495).

Mass press and literacy plays an important role in some of the nationalism theories, also in the ones I mentioned before. Anderson (1991) goes as far as to argue that nationalism could only have spread as a result of mass media, print, and literacy among the population, which enabled the spread of nationalist ideas and the sense of belonging to a community, bound together by the simultaneous existence on the page. It must be noted at this stage that mass literacy only entered the Kazakh Steppe through the Soviet government and not before this period\(^\text{iii}\). As such, the majority of the population was illiterate at the time the Alash movement was active. However, it is also important to take into account that oral literary tradition was strong in the Kazakh nomadic culture, which enabled the communication between *auls* and the distribution of the news, which appeared in the *Qazaq* newspaper.
The newspaper was closely monitored by the Russian gendarmerie (ibid.). This led to imprisonment of the first editor of the journal, Akhmet Baitursinov, on several occasions. This journal, together with its more Islam-oriented equivalent AiQap (1911-1916), which was published in the city of Troisk, were both closely followed by the general population. They provided political news from St. Petersburg, as well as publishing reader’s letters, which provided news from different parts of the steppe. The journals also encouraged political debates between Kazakhs, including the sedentarisation debate outlined below. When Kazakhs were ousted from political participation in 1907, Bokeikhanov explained the reason as follows in an article he published in 1913 in Qazaq:

“As a result of the law [of 3 June, 1907], the Kazakhs have no deputies. It says that the Kazakh people are ignorant and political representation is of no use to them.” (Bokeikhanov, 1913).

It was in the interest of the Alash members to dispel this perception of the Kazakhs if they were to receive any form of autonomy and political power. Mukhamedzhan Seralin, a contributor to the AiQap journal, was convinced that a quick and early transition to sedentarisation would entail education for the Kazakhs. This would then lead to them joining European culture (Kendirbai, 1999: 8). The Alash members on the other hand, propagated a more gradual and informed transition toward sedentarisation, taking into account the climate and the land’s conditions that may or may not allow for agricultural economy. In the series of articles in Qazaq, under the title Changing the Economic System (1915), the author explained the reasons for the nomadic traditions. He defended Kazakh nomadism by arguing that it was due to the arid lands that made it difficult for crops to grow and that a nomadic economy was best adapted for the climate of the Kazakh steppes (Kendirbai, 1999: 9). This was his defence against the cultural stereotyping voiced by Russian administrators who claimed that Kazakhs were nomads, because it was an easier way of life for Kazakhs, as they were inherently lazy.

The Alash members in this sense were thinking strategically; by sedentarising Kazakhs, they would be able to establish territorial boundaries. It was critical that they received technical, i.e., agricultural, knowledge, according to the author of the article Do not mix religious and land problems, published in Qazaq in 1914 (ibid.). Although there was disagreement as to what was necessary to become civilised or closer to European culture,
there was a general agreement that sedentarisation was necessary for Kazakhs in order to become a nation. The Kazakh intelligentsia’s understanding of nation was similar to that of the Russian intelligentsia: it was teleological. Nomadism was a stage for Kazakhs to pass through in order to reach nationhood. Thus, they argued that sedentarisation would not take them away from their original culture, but move them toward nationhood, or “Kazakhness” (qazaqtyq), creating a greater solidarity between each other.

Rottier sums this up as follows: “They argued that Kazakhness was not an attribute of the nomadic way of life, but rather, that their identity resonated from the ata meken, the Fatherland. Territory, not tradition, became the cornerstone of the Kazak intelligentsia’s argument for sedentarization.” (Rottier, 2003: 75). In other words, there was a significant shift in the understanding of Kazakhness from a way of living to one tied to a specifically designated and bordered territory. The idea that territory was tied to nationhood enabled the intellectuals to convince Kazakhs that they were not forsaking their traditions, but rather, that they were moving toward Kazakhness united within a nation and a bordered territory. This shift in attitude, away from transhumance and land as habitat and toward territory as part of Kazakhness established the cornerstone of Kazakh nationhood. This understanding remained part of the national Kazakh narrative over the decades and forms part of independent Kazakhstan’s national narrative today.

Although this shift in thinking about the nation developed among the intellectuals, it didn’t manifest itself in the Kazakh population’s modes of life until the forced collectivisation under Stalin. Nor did this understanding of sedentarisation as the right path for the Kazakhs increase sympathies among the intellectuals toward the Russian peasant settlers in the Kazakh Steppes. Among three types of Russians, which the Kazakhs perceived according to a 1910 article written by Bokeikhanov, the first was a Russian official who was corrupt and uneducated. The second type of Russian was a land hungry peasant and also uneducated. The third Russian was the enlightened one, for whom the intellectuals had some sympathy (Rottier, 2006: 2). In addition, in the same article, Bokeikhanov demonstrates the poor relations between nomadic Kazakhs and Russians with examples from common phrases used by Kazakhs, such as “If you have a Russian for a friend then you will need to keep an axe close at hand” or “Kazakh mothers often frighten their children by saying the Russian has come, the Russian has come, the wolf is here, the wolf is here.” (Rottier, 2006: 1). As a result, despite the changing understanding of the Kazakh
nation, there was no cooperation between Russian peasants, who received support from the Imperial government in their settlements and the Kazakh intellectuals and nomads, who were in a political battle against the governmental settlement policies. On the contrary, the relations were tense between all strands of Kazakh society and the Russian settlers.

**Bordering the Alash Orda**

As the Russian Empire entered the First World War and the representatives of the Muslims in the Third and Fourth State Dumas did not bring forth any economic or social amelioration to the situation of Kazakh nomads, Alikhan Bokeikhanov and a group of Kazakh intellectuals pushed forward in order to gain control over the lands and obtain political autonomy. Although sedentarisation was seen as a long-term goal and a transition that would take time for most Kazakhs, in the face of the immediate concerns at hand, the Alash leaders decided to act fast in order to improve the Kazakhs’ situation and to be heard by the Russian government. For this reason, the February Revolution of 1917 came as a relief to the intellectuals, who believed that through the end of Tsarism, they would finally be freed from the colonial yoke and would be granted rights as a separate nation.

Bokeikhanov sent telegrams to 25 centres in the Kazakh Steppes and called for support of the revolution and the Provisional Government, formed by the State Duma, which had replaced the Tsar’s government. Moreover, the Kazakhs were called upon to prepare themselves for the elections of a new parliamentarian organ, the Constituent Assembly. Bokeikhanov and 15 members of the Kazak newspaper signed the telegram. They were convinced that the Provisional Government would bring them liberty, equality, fraternity and give them autonomy rights (Gürbüz, 2007: 20).

**Establishment of Political Party and the Alash Orda Autonomous Government**

Although Bokeikhanov wished for Kazakhs to become a full-fledged independent nation-state, he believed that there was an insufficient number of educated Kazakhs experienced in politics and statecraft, which prevented the creation of a viable independent state. Instead, they would create cultural-territorial republics, which would function within a federal Russian state. For this reason, they decided to create cultural-territorial republics within a federal Russian republic (Sabol, 2003: 140). Thus far, the Alash leaders had allied with the Kadets, as they believed their political goals for a democratic Russian republic were in line. However, by the end of June 1917, it became clear to them that the Kadets
were not addressing the land question as they wished. They were in favour of transferring land into private ownership, which was a problem especially for Bokeikhanov, as he states: “In our situation, transferring the land into private hands will result, as was the case in Bashkoria, plots that will pass into the hands of Russian peasants [mushikter] and Kazaks will become poorer.” (Bokeikhanov, 1917 as cited in Sabol, 2003: 140). More importantly, they had turned out to be against national autonomy. Bokeikhanov argues: “We, having raised the banner of Alash, aim to create national autonomy.” Lastly, they were opposed to the separation of church and state, which Bokeikhanov strongly supported (ibid.).

In late July 1917, the First All-Kazakh Congress was held and Alash Orda was established as a national political party. From the summer of 1917 until the autumn of the same year, the Alash Ordists transformed the party from a loose association into an active political organisation, making sure that the Kazakhs had delegates in the Constituent Assembly. The party claimed to have more than 5,000 members at the time. (Sabol, 2003: 141). The Alash Party Programme was published on 21 November 1917. It proposed the establishment of native courts and the creation of native military units, which would be independent of central control. Another proposal they put forward was a graduated tax system and labour laws in accordance with the program of the ‘social-democrat Mensheviks’. The programme included further proposals with regards to education in the native language and most importantly, the end of colonial practices in the Kazakh steppe and the return of lands that had been illegally seized (Sabol, 2003: 143). This was the first step in creating the structures of nationhood for the Kazakhs. The participants of the congress at first rejected the offer put forward by members of the Siberian movement to ally with them and make Alash Orda a part of Siberian autonomy. However, the Alash Ordists accepted to join the Siberian movement by October 1917, seeing as the Red Guards took over the Provisional Government’s headquarters in the Winter Palace.

Despite the alarm Bolshevik seizure of power caused the Alash members, they proclaimed independence from Bolshevik rule at the Second All-Kazakh Congress in December 1917 (Sabol, 2003: 141-2). The Kazakh autonomous government replaced the colonial administrations of the Orenburg and Astrakhan provinces. The new administration divided the former provinces into western and eastern zones, corresponding to the lands of the Little and Middle Hordes (Esenova, 2002: 18-19), i.e., Ural’sk, Altai, Akmolinsk, and Semipalatinsk (Kendirbai, 1997: 506). By claiming the Syr Darya and Jetysu (Semirech’e)
regions of Turkestan (the lands of the Large Horde), the Alash Orda had demarcated the borders of the Kazakhs, etching it into the nation’s imagination.

The first structures of the Alash government were formed during the second Congress in December 1917, when the executive bodies were elected. Fifteen Kazakh members were elected to the Provisional Council; the provisional government of the Alash Orda, with Alikhan Bokeikhanov elected as the chairman of the Peoples’ Council. Ten further seats of the Provisional Council were designated for representatives of the non-Kazakh peoples (Kendirbay, 1997: 506). However, the contestation for power between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, combined with the effects of the Civil War, undermined the Alash Orda’s political power. Another factor that contributed to the weakening power of the Alash government was the takeover of Orenburg (Ural’sk and Torghai) by the Red Army on 18 January 1918, which led to the geographical and territorial division of the government (Gürbüz, 2007: 272).

The Alash Ordists refused to join the Bolshevik efforts and they stated that their programme was not applicable for the Kazakh cause. In a 1917 article, Dulatov wrote that the Bolsheviks ideas of equality and abolition of class differences were all good, but that to achieve this, they would need centuries. Moreover, the sudden seizure of power by the Bolsheviks had caused chaos in neighbouring regions and their actions seemed unpredictable, rendering it difficult to foresee what cooperation would entail for the Alash Orda (Sabol, 2003: 144).

The years from 1918 to 1920 were marked by negotiations with the Bolsheviks and fears of prosecution for the Alash leaders. Although the Alash leaders had declared autonomy, the Bolsheviks were reluctant to recognise Alash Orda’s autonomy and entrenched them in tit-for-tat negotiations. Promises were made on both sides in order to give and receive autonomy within a federated Russia, however, this proved to be unrealistic over the course of the negotiations with the Bolsheviks. As a result, the Alash leaders had moved from negotiations to full opposition against Soviet authority by May 1918. Sabol summarises Alash’ reaction toward Soviet rule as follows: “On 24 June 1918, Alash Orda ruled all Soviet decrees null and void, reiterating its demands that the proclamations of the Provisional Government are valid, particularly those that recognized freedom of conscience, speech, press, and assembly.” (Sabol, 2003: 146).
On 10 July 1918, the Provisional Siberian Government recognised the autonomy of Alash Orda within a new federated system. The head of government, A.V. Kolchak (1874-1920), had reached agreeable terms with the Alash Ordists and the Bashkir National Committee, which was led by Zeki Velidi Togan (1890-1970), based in Ufa. The Alash Ordists called upon each volost within the Alash Orda to supply thirty men to serve in its militia. Together with the Bashkir leaders, they both formed military units that were officially subordinate to their own national authorities, but would constitute parts of the planned Siberian Army (Smele, 1996: 296-297). However, this arrangement did not last long, as the relations between the Alash Ordists and Kolchak’s government fell apart when he announced that the Soviet government’s ‘Declaration on the Rights of the Peoples of Russia’ would be abolished. This, in turn, meant that national units within the Siberian Army would cease to be tolerated. Moreover, “units already formed were to be merged with existing Russian formation” (Sabol, 2003: 148-149). According to Jonathan Smele, cooperation between the Siberian government and the Alash government stopped completely when Kolchak ordered native governments to stop mobilising “in view of the insufficiency of financial means” to maintain their conscripts (Smele, 1996: 297).

Kolchak abolished the Alash Orda and Bashkort governments on 21 November 1918. As the Red Army seized the Kazakh centres of Orenburg and Ural’sk in January 1919, the Alash leaders had to rethink their strategy in dealing with the Bolsheviks since their cooperation with the Siberian government had been severed. By February 1919, some of the troops moved to the Bolshevik side. Alash Orda members considered joining them too, as they saw no other political alternative. All members of the Alash Orda were promised political amnesty in November 1919.

In an attempt to consolidate their superiority against the Whites, the Bolshevik Russian Communist Party decided during their 8th congress in March 1919 to end the war by recognising the national autonomies of the existing Tatar, Bashkort and Kazakh governments (Gürbüz, 2007: 63). By 10 July 1919, Lenin had signed a decree on the “Provisional Regulations about the Revolutionary Committee on Governing the Kyrgyz [Kazakh] Krai”, which included pro-Bolshevik as well as members of the Alash Orda movement (ibid.: 64). By January 1920, all remaining members of the Alash Orda had joined the Bolsheviks. Under Bolshevik leadership, the Kyrgyz [Kazakh] Autonomous
Soviet Socialist Oblast had been established, marking the end of the Alash Orda Autonomous Government (ibid.: 274).

Conclusion
Although the Alash Orda failed in maintaining the borders of its own autonomous government, it laid the foundations the Kazakh nation’s ties with its territory for the first time. The structures that were institutionalised only lasted for several months and were not recognised by the Bolshevik regime. However, they created a Kazakh border that would comprise the first layer of the Kazakh territorial imagination in the following years. The notion of Kazakh territoriality that was propagated and partly institutionalised by the Alash Orda was continued as the Soviet Nationalities Policy advanced its programmes for the Kazakhs. Moreover, the demarcation of the Kazakh SSR in the 1930s comprised many of the territories that the Alash Orda had claimed for itself. Consequently, it can be seen that borders with limited juridical and military powers can nevertheless have important symbolic power within the modern geopolitical imagination.

The borders the Alash Orda attempted to establish was a desperate reaction toward a political cul-de-sac and were intended to become a barrier against Russian settlement in Kazakh lands. However, the institutionalisation of the borders was preceded by a social shift in the understanding and perception of land versus territory. Moreover, ideas of nationhood were actively propagated among the population. Nationhood itself was understood to be modern and bound to a territory, making territorial claims inevitable and necessary for Kazakhs to function as a society and improve themselves vis-à-vis Russian settlers and imperial rule on the Kazakh steppe. A three-level analysis of nationalisms and especially of the structures they create, gives the borderlands scholar, as well as the nationalism scholar, a bird’s eye view on the developments on the ground and within a nation. This view invites an understanding of the common beliefs and practices of social actors and peoples, as well as providing insights into the foundations of contemporary borders. This, in turn, enables us to understand how societies relate to their territories and why they may feel a border is necessary or contingent on their societies’ needs.
Notes

i Vremennoe polozhenie ob upravlenii v Ural’skoj, Turgaiskoj, Akmolinskoj i Semipalatinskoi oblastiakh

ii 1 desiatin equals 2.7 acres.

iii For a brief account of the Soviet campaign to eradicate illiteracy in the Kazakh Republic, see Winner, 1958: 142-145).
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