



## *Kazakhstan in World War II: Mobilization and Ethnicity in the Soviet Empire* by Roberto J. Carmack.

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In *Kazakhstan in World War II*, independent historian Roberto Carmack (PhD Wisconsin) offers a detailed account of developments in the Kazakh SSR during World War II that “altered power relations, discourses of identity, and administrative practices in Kazakhstan and the Soviet Union as a whole” (2). He argues specifically that the war accelerated Kazakhstan’s integration into the USSR “in ways that deepened ethnic and social inequalities on the ground” (2).

The book comprises an introduction, five thematic chapters, and a conclusion. Throughout, Carmack highlights a kind of ebb and flow: in the early months of the War, Moscow had little say in the forming and implementation of policy in Kazakhstan. As the war progressed, however, Moscow gained greater control and curtailed the discretion of local officials.

Chapter 1 discusses how Soviet leaders’ attempts to overcome Kazakhs’ “backwardness” and integrate them into the Soviet military were frustrated by “institutional distrust, administrative dislocation, and outright prejudice” (13). Thus, for example, the Commissariat of Defense criticized the Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) for “excessive caution” in disqualifying men from military service because their records contained minor non-political offenses. Corruption, too, was a problem in recruitment: some men avoided military service by paying bribes (24). A striking example of the Soviet military’s widespread distrust of Kazakhs was an order by the republic military commissar excluding local indigenous nationalities from service in the elite Airborne forces (19).

Such policies confused those who took the official rhetoric of an “All-People’s War” at face value (20). Increasingly, Central Asians were to serve in varied military positions, including at the front. In general, “Slavs tended to occupy the most skilled and prestigious occupations [and] Central Asians were usually relegated to unskilled and auxiliary roles” (32). Once the strategic situation on the front improved, the Commissariat of Defense “closed the door” to conscription of Kazakhs (38). Even so, Carmack argues, party and state leaders managed to create a multinational army; however, as in other policy areas, wartime “conscription policies exposed and widened fault lines that divided the Soviet peoples” (40).

Chapter 2 examines the assigned function of the Red Army’s Main Political Administration (PURKKA). Many of this agency’s problems stemmed from a lack of cultural accommodation of Central Asians. For instance, propaganda organizers simply assumed Kazakhs could understand lectures in other Turkic languages. As for Russian, at the start of the war, most Kazakhs’ Russian skills markedly improved, but many Central Asian soldiers had little knowledge of the language. Print propaganda was often translated from Russian into Kazakh and other languages, but delays in translation, printing, and delivery to the front often made it out of date on arrival. Hence, Carmack observes, “PURKKA’s ability to reach non-Slavic soldiers remained limited” (44).

Carmack treats at length the political messages disseminated to military personnel: early on in the war, these included fewer Russocentric topics than seen in the dominant Soviet historical

narrative of the late 1930s. For example, in fall 1941, the Kazakh branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences published pamphlets describing “the struggle of the Kazakh people for their independence” (52); and the *History of the Kazakh SSR* (1943) portrayed Russia “as a predatory empire that exploited the Kazakh people in consort” (53) with the indigenous elites. Such works were an important source of frontline propaganda and likely to appeal to Kazakhs. But they were not conducive to any sense of Soviet solidarity. The Moscow Communist Party Central Committee investigated the *History of the Kazakh SSR* and found it “truly anti-Russian and anti-Soviet” (53). By war’s end, frontline agitators had to forgo the most militant and heroic chapters of Kazakh history and “construct alternative narratives that cleaved to the party’s Russocentric platform” (56).

Chapter 3 concerns the fate of Kazakhstan’s various population groups working inside the republic during the war. The author stresses the conflicting demands that local officials had to negotiate in policy implementation. Early in the war, local officials managed to interpret Moscow’s decrees more favorably and allocate resources according to local interests; but this “newfound freedom was transitory” and local authorities “found it increasingly difficult to manipulate the chain of command to accomplish their economic objectives” (63).

The issue of conscription often pitted authorities responsible for the local economy against the local military commissariats. At times, local authorities outwitted the military commissariats, as when enterprise directors (at the bottom of the administrative chain of command) responded to conscription orders by sending their sick and least productive employees (77); that said, “Kazakhstan-based officials found it extremely difficult to contest” the military’s recruitment policies.

Carmack maintains that, despite all the chaos, Kazakhstan’s local economy during the war helped the republic integrate into the all-Union economy. But the population of the Kazakh SSR paid a high price for this in terms of living conditions and back-breaking labor. Women, children, and the elderly were obliged to take jobs intended for able-bodied adult males. Consequently, 40–50 percent of the oil and coal industry employees were children; the corresponding numbers were 70–80 percent in the defense industry (66). The whole population endured food and water shortages, malnutrition, malaria, infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and typhus, and crowded, dilapidated housing.

Carmack describes a “Labor Army” consisting of (Soviet) Germans and 350,000 Kazakhs and other Central Asians (but no Slavs). This “army,” deployed in a network of camps and “columns,” worked in such key wartime sectors as mining and construction, under “inhumane” conditions (79). The Kazakh troops in this “army” were often unsuited for frontline service owing to their physical condition or politically suspect class backgrounds.

The author’s account of the treatment of evacuees to Kazakhstan from other parts of the USSR shows that they were spared harsh conditions like those in the Labor Army but were seldom employed productively; local administrators (who viewed them as a burden) had to be reminded to treat the new arrivals as “Soviet patriots” not uninvited guests (81). Carmack speculates that over the long term the evacuated enterprises and populations, including many specialists, could have diversified Kazakhstan’s economic base. As the war wound down, their return westward undermined local efforts to build a self-sustaining, broader based economy in Kazakhstan, featuring greater production of finished industrial goods (87).

Chapter 4 turns to ideology, especially the evolving relations between Kazakhs and Russians (and Kazakhstan and Russia) and the place of Islam. Nearly two-thirds of Kazakhstan’s Party members joined the Red Army and so were absent during the complicated political agitation work in the republic. Those available for such work were mainly Slavs who did not speak Kazakh; in at least some locales, many Kazakh propagandists were barely literate. The author emphasizes the

major propaganda theme of “friendship of the peoples”: Kazakhs were supposed to appreciate “the ‘enormous help’ provided by the Russians to the ‘backward [*otstalye*] and oppressed nations’ of the former tsarist empire” (102). Formulating the message in this way provided “a potent conceptual tool for associating their identities with the broader Soviet Union” (106).

Meanwhile, a new, softer policy towards Islam emerged, mirroring the regime’s change in treatment of Orthodoxy. As a result, patriotic propaganda began to make positive references to Islam. In Carmack’s assessment, Nazi recruitment efforts among Soviet Muslims, including creation of the Turkestan Legion, “almost certainly” informed the change in Soviet policy towards Islam (112). Key elements of the new approach included allowing the Central Administration for Muslims to open mosques and train new ulama. In October 1943, a separate Directorate of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan was established. Such measures embodied the Soviet regime’s “institutional and ideological partnership with sanctioned Islamic leaders [and] transformed state-sponsored Islam into an enduring repository of Soviet patriotism” (116). The author calls this co-optation of Islam “one of the only policy changes to survive the war” (155).

Carmack devotes his fifth and final chapter to the deported Soviet Germans and ethnic groups from the north Caucasus. He interprets Soviet policy toward these groups as rooted in a shift towards ethnic primordialism in the 1930s. It was manifested in

less and less optimism about the malleability of human beings and the capacity of Soviet policies to alter social and cultural traits associated with nationality. Soviet leaders increasingly treated nationality as the foundation rather than by-product of cultural and political belief. (131)

Within this framework, the wartime accomplishments of Soviet Germans and deportees from the North Caucasus were excluded “from the all-important mythos” surrounding the war. From there, “it was a short step to excluding the deported nationalities from Soviet society” (152). This contributed to a sharper distinction between outsiders and insiders in Kazakhstan and instilled in Kazakhs a greater sense of belonging to the Soviet people.

Roberto Carmack’s impressive archival research has enabled him to clarify the work of Party, state, and military officials during the war, with due attention to their shifting priorities and resources. His concise study is a welcome addition to the literature on World War II in general and more specifically on Kazakhstan’s role in that war. It is particularly relevant today in light of the current re-examination of this period by scholars in Kazakhstan, Russia, and elsewhere.