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**THE HISTORY OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN SOVIET KAZAKHSTAN:
A REVIEW OF MAKHBAT KOZYBAEVA'S MONOGRAPH
“THE HISTORY OF EVERYDAY URBAN LIFE IN NORTHERN
KAZAKHSTAN IN THE 1920S AND 1930S.” ALMATY: CH.
VALIKHANOV INSTITUTE OF HISTORY AND ETHNOLOGY, 2023.
232 P.; AND ON THE MULTI-AUTHORED MONOGRAPH “HISTORY
OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN CENTRAL KAZAKHSTAN IN 1946–1991
(INCLUDING NARRATIVES ON DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL
HISTORY)” KARAGANDA. 2024. 456 P.,
EDITED BY ZAURESH SAKTAGANOVA**

Abstract. The article reviews two modern Kazakh monographs addressing the history of everyday life of Kazakhstani urban population during the Soviet period. Although considered a relatively new area, the history of everyday life is an established trend for Kazakhstani historical knowledge – in line with the global trends. The review examines the book by M. Kozybayeva, which covers the period of the 1920s – 1930s, and a monograph written by a research team led by Z. Saktaganova, which looks at the post-war period up to the 1990s. Both books are an essential contribution to the study of the social history of Kazakhstan, based on an extensive source base, including archival documents and oral history materials. At the same time, the monographs have a shortcoming common to many post-Soviet studies: while claiming to study “everyday life,” historians often replace an analysis of specific strategies and practices employed by people with a quantitative description of their living conditions. Consequently, a person as a historical actor disappears from historical research. The authors of the monographs under review mitigate this issue by incorporating memoirs; nevertheless, they do not completely solve it. Such interpretation of everyday life is quite different from that in the Western tradition, which typically draws on microhistory and qualitative analysis. The above considerations underscore the importance of academic dialogue between Russian and Kazakhstani historians, so that a proper methodology for studying the common Soviet past could be developed.

Keywords: history of everyday life, social history, Soviet period, Kazakhstan, urban population, strategies and practices, historiography, historical memory.

Over the years of sovereignty of Kazakhstan, the country's historical research has been re-vamping its theoretical and methodological groundwork. In recent decades, historians have been actively developing crucial areas of study and novel approaches. Contemporary history is paying increased attention to the study of everyday life and the living of ordinary people in the midst of major historical events. Meanwhile, “everyday life” is given an extremely wide interpretation, ranging from the history of customs and mundane routines to that of behavioral strategies and practices of different population groups fac-

ing various political, socio-economic, and cultural challenges. In this regard, addressing the history of everyday life by Kazakhstani scholars is in line with the global trends. Therefore, it is worth considering the approaches taken and results achieved by Kazakhstani colleagues in this area. It is also essential to find out whether the study of everyday life by Kazakhstani historians demonstrates any peculiar features as compared to Russian and global historiography.

According to Zauresh Saktaganova, one of the leading researchers of everyday life in Kazakhstan, this area of Kazakh historical science is rela-

tively new and has only intensely developed over the last decade. During this time, research teams have been formed and a substantial body of papers have been published. It is no coincidence that two books appeared almost simultaneously, each one delving into the history of everyday life of Kazakhstani urban population throughout almost the entire 20th century. A monograph by the well-known Kazakhstani historian Makhbat Kozybaeva explores everyday life of townspeople in Northern Kazakhstan in the first decades of Soviet power. The other monograph reviewed was written by a research team from the Center for Ethnocultural, Historical, and Anthropological Research at Karaganda University, led by Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor Z.G. Saktaganova, and looks at the history of everyday life of Kazakhstani urban population. The latter book aims to reconstruct everyday urban life in Central Kazakhstan over the post-war period and the years that followed, up to the early 1990s.

Even though these books depict everyday lives of city dwellers in different regions of Kazakhstan, together they create a broad picture that is representative of the entire urban population of the country. There is no comprehensive study of everyday life in Kazakhstan during the Great Patriotic War, which is a major gap. However, research on this topic is already underway, and some of it is presented in publications by Z.G. Saktaganova and her colleagues on the lives of women during the war. Arguably, an exciting research direction, or rather, a research school has emerged in Kazakhstani historical science. That school explores the history of everyday life.

The two monographs have a shared theme and a similar structure; therefore, it seems logical to consider them in one review. On the other hand, they differ significantly in the scope of issues covered and the perspective from which they examine the everyday life of city dwellers during the period under study. In addition to the introduction, conclusion and four chapters, the book M.M. Kozybaeva's contains appendices, a glossary, and a list of abbreviations. It is the author's understanding of the subject area and theoretical aspects of research that determines the structure of the monograph. The first two sections of the first chapter define the starting points of the study: the author describes her methodology, dwells upon

the evolution of the history of everyday life as a relatively new direction in historical research, and traces the main stages and most important milestones in the historiography of the topic. In this chapter, M.M. Kozybaeva demonstrates her scholarship and expertise in both Kazakh and foreign historiography, including the Russian one.

However, the literature review is perplexingly imbalanced. While the collection of foreign and Russian publications referred to is limited to those most helpful in discussing the chosen topic, Kazakh historiography is excessively reviewed or listed, including papers by archaeologists and historians on antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the pre-revolutionary period. On the other hand, Kozybaeva performs a meticulous analysis of Kazakh historiography proper, which is directly related to the subject matter.

The source base of M. Kozybaeva's research is vast and presented in the book in a highly professional manner. Notably, in addition to the archival materials familiar to historians, the author makes extensive use of periodicals and personal sources, without which adequate coverage of everyday history would be hardly possible.

In the main part of her study, M. Kozybaeva seeks to cover the issues that determine people's existence in everyday urban life in the context of the urbanization process in Kazakhstan and the formation of the urban socio-demographic structure. In Chapter Two, the author not only reveals the close connection between these processes and the turning points in the history of the USSR, but also traces certain country-specific features. During this period, the majority of the Kazakh population were leading a nomadic or rural lifestyle; only a small part of the Kazakhs moved to the cities, accounting for about one-sixth of the total urban population. Another characteristic of the demographic structure of the cities studied was the significant proportion of special settlers (5.5%) in the population (pp. 61–62). During the famines of the early 1920s, late 1920s, and early 1930s, some of the starving tried to find salvation by fleeing to the cities. The impact of this process on the development of cities in Northern Kazakhstan was more significant than that in other regions of the USSR.

Notably, the complexities and controversies of the period examined in the book lie in the simulta-

neity of modernization processes (in other words, industrial development and cultural revival) and the accompanying calamities (such as famine, housing shortages, and repression). Classifying Stalin's regime as totalitarian, as is the case in M. Kozybaeva's book, reproduces the obsolete views about the nature of Soviet power, which have been intensively revised by global research community over the past decades. Today, there is a consensus in historiography that Stalinist power never had such total control over society as theorists of totalitarianism claim. This refers to both time and space. The "totalitarian" approach, with its dualistic view of an all-powerful regime and its ever-obedient subjects, not only distorts the historical picture, but also eliminates the need to look for other causes of adverse phenomena. Among those causes are initially inadequate living standards and low culture of the majority of the population in Kazakhstan as well as in the other Soviet republics.

Modern historiography tends to abandon the view of the Soviet Union as a unique "failed" experiment; now, the "Soviet project" is seen as a variation within the global development, an "alternative modernity." Meanwhile, historians in the former Soviet republics, including Kazakh researchers of social history, keep applying the theory of totalitarianism rather extensively. This may be due to the fact that, being an overtly bipolar concept, this theory allows them to demonstrate the so-called "oppression" of the national peripheries in the USSR.

Indeed, it is hardly possible to find a comprehensive formula to characterize the Stalinist period of Soviet history. This could be the reason for the variations in the title of Chapter Two, Section Two. In the text of the monograph, it is called "The Dynamics of the Socio-Demographic Structure of the Urban Population of the Region During the Forced Soviet Forced Modernization," while in the table of contents one can see a more neutral version: "...during the period of Soviet social experiments." When referring to modernization, the epithet "accelerated" seems more appropriate than "forced", while the wording in the table of contents contributes little to the understanding of the period under study.

Chapter Two, Section Three dwells upon the development of urban infrastructure, housing condi-

tions, and urban improvement tasks. This period was marked by a persistent shortage of urban housing all over the USSR; however, in my opinion, the housing crisis in the cities of Northern Kazakhstan was less acute than, for instance, in Siberia. That said, as all over the Soviet Union, the growth of the urban population in Kazakhstan outpaced the commissioning of new housing. Notably, unlike the previous two sections, where statistical data prevail, this one focuses more on distinctive problems of everyday life.

In Chapters Three and Four, M. Kozybaeva attempted to take a closer look at what city dwellers were engaged in at work and at home. Chapter Three identifies social groups according to the nature of their employment and reveals characteristics of those groups. Of particular interest is the account of the exclusive category "lishentsy" (plural for "lishenets", a disenfranchised person) and their circumstances in Kazakhstan.

The standard of living of the urban population is given regrettably little attention. The brief account of nominal wages (pp. 91–92) and the equally compact and vague report of the family budgets of Petropavlovsk residents in 1931 (pp. 98–99) can hardly create a complete picture of everyday survival in the adverse conditions of those days. Nevertheless, the other chapters present ample and conclusive evidence of the dire financial situation the Northern Kazakhstani urban population confronted. For example, this point is also supported in Section Two of Chapter Three, dealing with the development of trade and public catering during the period, which the author, in my opinion, somewhat inaccurately refers to as famine. It is unclear whether this term applies to the entire period discussed or certain segments of that.

In Chapter Three, Section Three, M. Kozybaeva addresses the provision of medical services to the population, and also provides a brief description of the physical culture movement and grassroots sports, which, in my opinion, belong to urban leisure activities.

Chapter Four begins with a section on the transformation of the urban family from the traditional to the partnership-based and nuclear type. The concluding point that the urban population lost its family values due to political repression is hardly plausible. Admittedly, cases where people aban-

doned their elderly parents or spouses were not so widespread. On the contrary, for the vast majority of the population, including in Kazakhstan, amidst enormous external challenges, family values only increased in importance. Overall, as Chapter Four addresses urban cultural environment, this section would seem more appropriate in the chapter on demography.

In my opinion, the section on education (pp. 146–158) does little to complete the picture of everyday life in the city. Rather, the author describes the situation in the education system, the development of schools and other educational institutions, as well as the efforts to supplant religious education. Unfortunately, the monograph almost completely lacks any account of the religiosity of the population and the place of religion in everyday life, which is a significant shortcoming of the study. The struggle of the Communist Party and the state against religion and the policy of persecution of religious organizations are discussed in the following section; however, that passage does not directly relate to specific forms of everyday life.

The concluding section in the main part of the monograph looks at the ways city dwellers spent their leisure time and visit cultural institutions. However, here, as in many previous cases, the author offers a quantitative analysis rather than characterization of everyday urban life. First and foremost, one would expect to find data on the overall distribution of city dwellers' free time, in which case the section would address not only righteous but also unacceptable forms of leisure activities. The latter do not receive any coverage in the monograph.

The conclusion of the book creates a dubious impression, which is due to the somewhat confused and inconsistent rendering. As a result, a reader feels that the material collected and presented was not generalized to an adequate degree. M. Kozybaeva keeps reproducing what has already been said. There are regular, almost verbatim, repetitions from certain section and chapter conclusions, as well as a number of incoherent or illogical pieces. Meanwhile, there are quite a few sound inferences and broad generalizations that could be extracted from the overly extensive text. The picture of everyday urban life in Northern Kazakhstan in the pre-war period is complemented

by statistical tables, photographs, and excerpts from residents' memoirs, compiled in 28 appendices.

Summing up, the weaknesses identified do not, on the whole, prevent one from giving M. Kozybaeva's monograph a positive review. Obviously, a noteworthy monograph on the Stalinist period in the history of the Kazakh people has appeared, opening up various aspects of everyday life to the reader. The book is a well-written, logically structured and readable text; besides, it has an impressive design. We can compliment the author on the release of her work onto the big stage of historical knowledge: the book is an edition of 1,000 copies, which many academic institutions cannot afford these days.

The second book under review was written by a group of scholars in Karaganda led by Professor Zauresh Saktaganova. Over the last decade, this team has been conducting very successful research into everyday history. This synthesizing piece of writing, published in 2024, examines the everyday life of the urban population in Central Kazakhstan from the post-war period to the last years of the Soviet state. Arguably, the monograph can be regarded as a summation on the theme.

The structure of the text is quite similar to that of M. Kozybaeva's monograph. Based on the objective set, the book first examines the living conditions of city dwellers and then moves on to describe their everyday lives. The monograph consists of three parts, demographics, material conditions, and culture, with each particular issue addressed in a separate chapter and each chapter further divided into sections. Each section considers a specific period of time. In all chapters but two, the material is quite logically divided into three stages: the post-war, or Stalinist, period; the Khrushchev period, which also includes the second half of the 1960s; the last two decades of the Soviet state. The authors have meticulously collected factual material, which undoubtedly provides a sound basis for studying a wide range of issues in the history of Kazakhstan. A serious drawback is that the introduction contains no information about the methodology or source base of the study; therefore, readers have to make their own judgements on the completeness of those.

Part One deals with the demographic development of the population of Central Kazakhstan's

cities, their housing conditions and medical care, urban infrastructure development, and urban improvement. The authors have collected and synthesized a vast amount of material from various sources. Notably, the major source is archival materials which have not been employed by researchers before. Overall, the picture of social development in the cities of Central Kazakhstan is painted in considerable detail. Nevertheless, the book is not particularly informative about the people themselves: how they lived, what their thoughts and feelings were, what strategies and practices they devised for everyday life. To shed light on such matters, one needs special, primarily personal, sources. The authors solved this issue to a certain extent by turning to recollections of city residents they gathered. However, these oral testimonies do not cover all aspects of the study; besides, one should be somewhat skeptical about oral history as it is often distorted under the pressure of the contemporary ideological and political situation.

It is Part Two that is more concerned with everyday life, analyzing the financial situation of the urban population based on data on family budgets, as well as the state of public catering and trade in cities. In my opinion, the title of this chapter, "Quality of Life of the Urban Population," is not quite suitable since the situation in healthcare and culture, which are addressed in the previous and subsequent parts, has an equal impact on quality of life. The title of the Section Three in Chapter Five, "Consumer Characteristics of the Population...", also seems misleading; consumption characteristics would be more appropriate. Overall, Part Two enables adequate account of the situation as extensive statistical data here are supplemented by memoirs.

Part Three looks at the cultural environment in the cities, as well as the behavior and traditions of residents relating the perception and consumption of culture. This part includes a separate chapter discussing the status of religious institutions and residents' attitudes toward religion, which is an apparent merit. The concluding chapter, dealing with deviant behavior and crime, is also highly significant. Here, more than in the other chapters, attention is paid to the actual living of city residents, although the authors failed to avoid the excessive focus on the activities of

the state and its institutions, which is the case throughout book.

Overall, due to the high competence of the team, extensive data collected, and their previous research experience in this area, Karaganda scholars created a comprehensive and vivid depiction of everyday urban life in Central Kazakhstan from the end of World War II until the final years of the Soviet Union.

Importantly, not only do the extensive materials collected by the authors cover issues related to the everyday life in Central Kazakhstan, but they also address the socio-economic and, to some extent, political history of the Kazakh SSR and the USSR as a whole. In the introduction to the book, Z. Sakhtaganova explains that the book content goes beyond the scope of the research as an attempt to fill some of the numerous gaps in Kazakh historiography (p. 13). In this regard, the authors have undertaken a valuable and fruitful study, which will be gratefully received by both fellow scholars and anyone interested in Soviet history. Overall, the book is praiseworthy for its thoroughness, versatility, and impressive size, and is undoubtedly an important contribution to the historiography of the Kazakh and other peoples of Kazakhstan.

In conclusion, I would like to make an important point. The two monographs reviewed, like many Russian and Kazakhstani publications claiming to be studies of everyday life, share a major weakness. Most authors, declaring their goal to be the examination of everyday life, which implies, first and foremost, analyzing the forms of living and, ultimately, characterizing the lifestyle, in the course of narration, shift their focus to describing the conditions in which this living took place. As a result, we receive traditional quantitative characteristics of the spheres in which everyday life takes place: primarily, households and communal infrastructure; also, economics, politics, education, and culture; occasionally, the workplace. At the same time, the authors usually supplement their presentation with examples taken from memoirs, or, less frequently, from other personal sources. By and large, such accounts hardly make a significant contribution to existing research on the development of such areas as housing construction, the healthcare system and network of medical institutions, or school and

university education in a particular region. Clearly, without a thorough understanding of a person's environment, it is impossible to conceive and describe his/her lifestyle and activities. However, this study may well be considered a preliminary stage in exploration of everyday life, which should be followed by a comprehensive and detailed examination of the actual living of specific individuals as representatives of different social groups. Many historians simply do not take the latter step; in their view, by merely describing quantitative characteristics of living conditions they characterize people's everyday lives. As a result, an individual as a historical actor disappears from the pages of their writings.

The authors of the publications reviewed, like many other historians, attempt to offset this disadvantage by incorporating memoirs, but this does not solve the problem. In addition to being evidently subjective, memoirs are usually narrow and fragmentary, and do not create a comprehensive, multifaceted picture of everyday life. Essentially, research which is clearly aimed at exploring the history of everyday life necessarily implies a targeted and systematic analysis of the entire range of human activities.

The relevance of this issue is also evidenced by the marked contrast between the content of the writings by foreign scholars, the pioneers of studying everyday history, and that of most papers by Russian and Kazakh historians. The former, do not, as a rule, provide quantitative characteristics of the person's environment. What they typically do is to perform qualitative analysis, which often draws on a specific example of the living of an individual and/or social group. Not sur-

prisingly, in the West, the history of everyday life is quite closely linked to microhistory, mental and local history, and, more broadly, to sociology and social philosophy. In my opinion, this dissimilarity is due to the Soviet historiographical tradition with its focus on quantitative analysis, which is common to historians in Russia and Kazakhstan.

It is not easy to shift the focus from describing living conditions to exploring everyday life itself. The body of sources accessible is virtually insufficient for that, while the available archival data is largely quantitative. As a result, an account of what is claimed to be the history of everyday life, eventuates into the familiar task of counting the number of schools, theaters, and stores in a given region, as well as analyzing the state's efforts to increase their number.

Nonetheless, the very focus of historians on the study of everyday life is beneficial for the progress of historical knowledge in the post-Soviet countries. Importantly, scholars are considering the areas and issues essentially underresearched or ignored by positivist history. The content of historical publications has become multifaceted, making them more engaging not only for scholars but also for the general public.

In this regard, the reviewed books by Kazakhstani historians are illustrative of how this issue has been gradually overcome. Hopefully, academic contacts between Russian and Kazakh historians, discussions in journals, at various forums and conferences, as well as mutual reviews of the most interesting publications, will help the research communities of both countries devise an effective strategy for exploring their shared Soviet past, including the history of everyday life.