Cultural and Social Impacts of State Policies During the 1931–1933 Famine In Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the policies and administrative measures implemented by central and local Soviet authorities during the famine in Kazakhstan in 1931–1933. The study provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Soviet policies, including forced collectivization, grain procurement campaigns, confiscation of property from wealthy households, and restrictions on migration, on Kazakh society.

Particular attention is devoted to the interaction between central and local authorities, as well as to the mechanisms through which political decisions were formulated and implemented. By investigating the relationship between state policies and their practical enforcement at the local level, the article demonstrates that these measures contributed significantly to the emergence and intensification of the humanitarian catastrophe.

The findings contribute to a more objective assessment of this critical period in the history of Kazakhstan and provide new insights into the causes, dynamics, and consequences of the famine. The study further enhances understanding of the role of Soviet governance structures in shaping demographic, social, and economic transformations during the early 1930s.

Keywords: Kazakh Famine; Soviet Kazakhstan; collectivization; central and local authorities; Soviet governance; political repression; grain procurement campaigns; forced migration; demographic catastrophe.

INTRODUCTION

The famine of 1931–1933 in Kazakhstan remains one of the most tragic and consequential episodes in the history of the Kazakh people and one of the most devastating humanitarian catastrophes in twentieth-century Central Asia. The long-term impact of Soviet policies implemented during the 1930s

continues to shape scholarly debates concerning the demographic, social, economic, and political development of Kazakhstan. In particular, the role of central and local authorities in the formulation and implementation of policies that contributed to the famine requires continued scholarly attention and reassessment.

For many decades, research on the famine was constrained by the ideological limitations of Soviet historiography. As a result, the experiences of ordinary people during the years of famine and the policies pursued by Soviet authorities were rarely examined in a comprehensive and critical manner. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes the importance of investigating the administrative practices, political decisions, and institutional mechanisms that contributed to one of the greatest tragedies in Kazakh history.

Although Soviet ideology formally declared the councils (soviets) to be the foundation of state power during the 1920s and 1930s, actual political authority was concentrated in the hands of the Bolshevik Party. Originally established as institutions of proletarian representation, Soviet governing structures gradually evolved into mechanisms for implementing decisions made by party leadership. Legislative and executive functions became increasingly centralized, while local authorities largely served as executors of directives issued by higher levels of government.

Statement of the Problem

The consequences of these policies were particularly severe in Kazakhstan. More broadly, some of the most tragic chapters in modern Kazakh history unfolded following the establishment of Soviet rule. During the first half of the twentieth century, the Kazakh population experienced two major demographic catastrophes: the famine of 1916–1921 and the famine of 1929–1933. These events fundamentally altered the demographic trajectory of the nation and left enduring social and cultural consequences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the cultural and social impacts of state policies implemented during the 1931–1933 famine in Kazakhstan. It aims to analyze how governmental measures affected traditional social structures, cultural practices, and community life, as well as to assess the long-term consequences of these policies on Kazakh society.

Research Objectives

- To analyze the key state policies implemented in Kazakhstan during the 1931–1933 famine.
- To examine the social consequences of these policies on different population groups.
- To investigate the impact of famine-related policies on traditional cultural practices and community structures.
- To identify the mechanisms through which state actions contributed to social transformation.
- To assess the long-term cultural and social effects of the 1931–1933 famine in Kazakhstan.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach grounded in the principles of objectivity, historicism, and critical source analysis. The research examines the famine from the perspective of national history while incorporating broader political, social, and demographic dimensions. Particular attention is devoted to the interaction between state institutions and society during the implementation of Soviet modernization policies.

The study employs a combination of historical-comparative analysis, synthesis, and generalization. These methods facilitate the examination of relationships between central and local authorities, the evaluation of policy implementation, and the identification of broader patterns shaping the development of the famine.

Scientific Novelty

This study provides a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of the cultural and social impacts of state policies during the 1931–1933 famine in Kazakhstan. Unlike previous research that has primarily focused on demographic and economic aspects, this work highlights the transformation of cultural practices, social relations, and community structures under the influence of state actions. The study introduces a socio-cultural perspective to the interpretation of famine policies, offering new insights into their long-term consequences for Kazakh society.

Historiographical and Political Background of the Famine Causes

The causes of the famine in Kazakhstan have generated extensive scholarly debate. From the perspective of many contemporary historians, the origins of the catastrophe can be traced to policies initiated by the Bolshevik leadership and subsequently implemented through Soviet administrative structures. To understand the magnitude of the crisis, it is necessary to examine developments that occurred during the lifetime of Lenin and the formative years of Soviet governance.

According to calculations by the prominent Kazakh political figure and engineer Mukhamedzhan Tynyshpayev, approximately 2.91 million Kazakhs lived in Kazakhstan in 1917. However, according to a census conducted by M. G. Sirius in 1924, the Kazakh population had declined to approximately 1.97 million. Even without accounting for natural population growth, this suggests a dramatic demographic reduction. Professor S. P. Shvetsov estimated that the losses resulting from famine alone exceeded 30 percent of the population. Available statistical evidence broadly supports these conclusions.

The implementation of Soviet policies in Kazakhstan was closely associated with Filipp Goloshchekin, whose leadership profoundly influenced the course of collectivization and social transformation in the republic. Goloshchekin displayed strong confidence in the correctness of his policies and demonstrated little tolerance for alternative viewpoints. His position was reinforced by political support from Joseph Stalin, who endorsed the general direction of policy in Kazakhstan.

Encouraged by such support, Goloshchekin pursued increasingly radical measures aimed at transforming Kazakh society. Possessing considerable rhetorical skill, he frequently interpreted economic and agricultural problems through ideological categories of class struggle and socialist transformation. Political discourse during this period was dominated by accusations of "right" and "left" deviationism, bourgeois nationalism, and insufficient commitment to party policy.

Goloshchekin attempted to justify his policies through ideological arguments. In discussing declining livestock numbers, he argued that animal husbandry exhibited instability during the transition from a traditional economic system to socialism. Although such statements appeared detached from economic realities, they were frequently presented by supporters as evidence of sophisticated Marxist analysis.

The consequences of coercive policies extended far beyond economic decline. Throughout Kazakhstan, growing dissatisfaction produced numerous protests and, in some cases, armed uprisings. Particularly significant unrest occurred in the Semipalatinsk region, where disturbances affected the districts of Zyryanovsk, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Samar, Shemonaikha, and Katon-Karagai during 1930. Additional protests occurred in the Bostandyk district of the Syr-Darya region, the Batpakkara and Nauryzym districts of Kostanay, the Balkhash district of Almaty, and the Irgiz district of Aktobe.

During February and March 1930, uprisings also erupted in the Maktaaral and Sozak districts. Similar disturbances occurred throughout other regions of Kazakhstan. Wealthier households and former local elites occasionally attempted to direct popular dissatisfaction against Soviet authorities. In certain cases, displaced populations joined armed groups that

subsequently carried out attacks against local communities and administrative institutions.

These developments demonstrate that collectivization and confiscation policies generated widespread social resistance. The growing number of protests reflected not only political opposition but also the profound economic disruption and social hardship experienced by rural populations during the early years of Soviet transformation.

Collectivization, Repression, and Social Resistance

An examination of the summary statistical reports of the Political Directorate of the OGPU (Unified State Political Administration) in Kazakhstan demonstrates the extensive scale of public protests and uprisings during these years.

Table 1. Political Violence and Mass Anti-Soviet Uprisings and Mass Anti-Soviet Uprisings [6, p. 267]

Year	Political Violence and Mass Anti-Soviet Uprisings Against Government Officials and Soviet/Party Activists	Mass Uprisings (Excluding Bandit Rebellions and Mass Migrations)	Arson Attacks on Collective and State Farm Property
1929	143	54	17
1930	139	241	42
1931	178	77	68
Total	**460**	**372**	**127**

The data presented in the table allow several important conclusions to be drawn. On 9 September 1932, at the height of the catastrophic famine that engulfed the Kazakh steppe, Filipp Goloshchekin acknowledged the severity of the situation in a detailed memorandum addressed to the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) in Moscow.

As indicated in the table, the population carried out 460 hostile attacks against government representatives, Soviet officials, and party activists within only three years. During the same period, collective and state farm property was set on fire on 127 occasions. While it is difficult to provide unequivocal explanations for these actions, the statistical evidence itself is difficult to dispute.

The policy of coercion, repression, and forced collectivization of peasant households became widespread during the early stages of collectivization. Goloshchekin himself referred to these developments in his speech at the closed session of the Regional Party Committee Bureau on 2 January 1930, discussing uprisings in the Bostandyk and Batpakkara districts and in Karakalpakstan [6, pp. 268–269].

It is well known that during the first famine many Kazakhs fled to China and Mongolia. The Russian scholar S.P. Shvetsov was among the first to employ the term *otkochevka* ("mass nomadic exodus") in his work published in Moscow in 1926. A similar situation emerged in Kazakhstan during 1931–1933. In his widely known letter of 9 March 1933 addressed to J. Stalin, L. Kaganovich, and V. Molotov, Turar Ryskulov described the scale of this forced migration:

"According to the latest approximate reports received from the places where Kazakhs who left Kazakhstan have settled, there are currently about 40,000 Kazakhs in the Middle Volga region, 100,000 in Kyrgyzstan, 50,000 in Western Siberia, 20,000 in Karakalpakstan, and 30,000 in Central Asia. Displaced persons have also migrated to Kalmykia, Tajikistan, the Northern Territory, and other remote regions. Some groups led by wealthy herders have moved to Western China. This migration is not the usual seasonal movement of livestock to summer pastures; rather, it represents starving people wandering in search of food and survival. In some districts, the number of displaced

persons reached 40–50% of the total population." [2, pp. 24–25].

Despite these dramatic developments, the indigenous population within the republic's established borders initially remained relatively stable at approximately 4.12 million people. This figure serves as a baseline for subsequent demographic analysis. During the tragic years of famine, the irrecoverable losses of the indigenous population amounted to approximately 2 million people, or 49% of its original size.

According to demographic records from the 1920s, the natural mortality rate averaged approximately 25 deaths per 1,000 inhabitants annually. Taking this factor into account, natural mortality during 1931–1933 would have amounted to at least 250,000 individuals (approximately 7% of the population). Consequently, direct victims of famine and its associated consequences, particularly typhus epidemics, can be estimated at approximately 1.75 million people, representing 42% of the total Kazakh population.

Other ethnic groups residing in Kazakhstan also experienced significant demographic decline. The number of Ukrainians decreased from 859,400 to 658,100, Uzbeks from 228,200 to 103,600, and Uyghurs from 62,300 to 36,600 individuals. During this period, many were compelled to abandon their homes and relocate to regions with more favorable food conditions, including Siberia and Uzbekistan.

These data clearly demonstrate the catastrophic consequences of mass livestock confiscation and the transfer of private property into collective ownership. Deprived of their herds, nomadic and semi-nomadic populations lost access to their traditional meat- and dairy-based diet. Fishing, hunting, and gathering proved insufficient to compensate for these losses. Grain production collapsed, and whatever harvest was obtained was frequently requisitioned. Leaving the disaster zone was often impossible. Starving nomads who had lost their horses and camels were unable to traverse the hundreds or even thousands of kilometers necessary to reach safer areas. For Kazakh pastoral households deprived of livestock, the vast steppe became a trap.

Population Displacement, Mortality, and State Policies during the 1930–1933 Famine in Kazakhstan

Driven by desperation, large numbers of people flocked to cities, settlements, railway stations, and transport hubs in a struggle for survival. In these overcrowded locations, typhus epidemics spread rapidly. The absence of acquired immunity to the disease, combined with the underdeveloped state of the healthcare system—and in some areas its complete absence—resulted in high mortality among populations already weakened by starvation.

Migration constituted another major factor contributing to the demographic catastrophe experienced by the indigenous population. Approximately one-quarter of the original population, or nearly half of those who survived the famine (about 1.03 million people), left the republic during the years of starvation. Of these, approximately 414,000 eventually returned, while around 200,000 permanently settled abroad, primarily in China, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey.

Compelling evidence of the mass migration of Kazakhs to neighboring regions is provided by the population censuses of 1926 and 1939. While 314,000 Kazakhs resided in neighboring republics in 1926, this figure had increased to 794,000 by 1939, representing a rise of approximately 453,000 people. Between 1926 and 1939, migration contributed to a 2.3-fold increase in the Kazakh population of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), a 1.7-fold increase in Uzbekistan, a sixfold increase in Turkmenistan, a sevenfold increase in Tajikistan, and a tenfold increase in Kyrgyzstan.

However

Following the removal of Goloshchekin from office in early 1933, the republic came under the leadership of Levon I. Mirzoyan, a prominent Bolshevik-Leninist figure whom many Kazakhs

referred to respectfully as "Myrzazhan." Significant efforts were undertaken to facilitate the return of displaced populations and their reintegration into economic life. However, the large-scale political repressions of 1938 directed against alleged "Japanese spies" and "nationalist-fascists" effectively halted these initiatives. The new republican leadership was unwilling to continue policies associated with individuals later denounced as "enemies of the people." Mirzoyan himself was arrested and executed. This episode constitutes yet another tragic chapter in Kazakhstan's history.

Only the substantial demographic growth experienced during the post-war period, which reached its peak around 1962, enabled the Kazakh population to compensate for the devastating losses incurred during the famine years. The population recovered to its pre-crisis level only by 1969, approximately four decades later. Without such sustained demographic growth, overcoming the consequences of the catastrophe might have required an additional 100–120 years.

The famine not only disrupted the natural course of demographic development in Kazakhstan but also left profound distortions in the age structure of the Kazakh population. The cohorts born between 1930 and 1934 were significantly smaller because they experienced the most severe years of hardship. The 1959 census revealed an unusual demographic pattern within this generation: males outnumbered females, with 1,092 men per 1,000 women. This phenomenon may be associated with parental efforts to prioritize the survival of male children during the most difficult period.

For many years, Soviet historiography interpreted these tragic events primarily as the result of "mistakes" and "excesses" in policy implementation. In reality, however, they were a logical consequence of the administrative-command system that prevailed at the time. This raises an important question: how could such a catastrophe have occurred? Furthermore, some interpretations suggest that Stalin and his inner circle were unaware of the true situation in Kazakhstan. Available evidence casts doubt on this assumption.

According to accounts presented at meetings following the return of L.I. Mirzoyan and U. Isayev, Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the Kazakh ASSR, from Moscow, Lazar Kaganovich reportedly reacted with considerable indignation upon learning of the scale of the crisis. He allegedly asked: "How could this happen? Why does the Central Committee learn about this only from newspapers?" At the same time, the Soviet press systematically concealed the true extent of the disaster. Documentary evidence, however, indicates that the central authorities had in fact received detailed information concerning developments in Kazakhstan [3, pp. 67–68].

Soviet historiography was dominated by narratives claiming that, under the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the USSR achieved extraordinary successes in economic development. Policies such as War Communism during the Civil War and the subsequent New Economic Policy (NEP) were particularly glorified. One of the principal components of War Communism was the grain requisitioning system (*prodrazvyorstka*), introduced on 11 January 1919. Under this system, peasants were required to surrender the vast majority of their agricultural produce to the state. They were permitted to retain only a limited number of livestock for daily subsistence and small reserves of grain, while the remainder had to be delivered according to state quotas and under strict governmental supervision.

Grain was not treated as a market commodity; individuals who attempted to exchange or trade it privately were prosecuted and often subjected to mass judicial proceedings. Peasants could be criminally charged for failing to surrender grain produced through their own labor to the state [1, p. 134].

Measures were also implemented to combat famine and reduce the mass displacement of the population in Kazakhstan. The widespread refugee crisis, particularly among Kazakh peasants, compelled the republican leadership to

adopt a more systematic and organized approach to the resettlement of displaced persons. On 31 March 1932, the Bureau of the Regional Party Committee adopted Resolution No. 97, entitled "On the Return of Poor and Middle-Peasant Households Who Had Left Their Settlements and on the Organization of Their Economic Resettlement Within Kazakhstan."

To implement this resolution, a state commission was established. Similar commissions operated at the regional level under the leadership of chairpersons of local executive committees. Their primary objective was to facilitate, within a two-month period (April–May), the return to Kazakhstan of poor and middle-income households that had fled to neighboring regions and wished to return to their homeland. The resolution explicitly stipulated that returnees should be settled primarily in collective farms, state farms, and other established settlements.

The authorities also undertook measures to provide returning refugees with emergency medical assistance, clothing, food supplies, and other material necessities. Special attention was directed toward the care and protection of children. Responsibility for implementing these measures was assigned to local administrative structures throughout the republic [7, p. 282].

According to data from the Regional Executive Committee, between 15 and 20 people died daily in some district centers. In Karaganda alone, approximately 1,500 Kazakhs, including industrial workers, perished from starvation and disease during the spring season. In Sergiopol (located along the Turkestan–Siberian Railway), approximately 300 people died in January. All of these figures originate from official sources. Similar examples can be found across numerous Kazakh districts.

Mortality among children was particularly severe. Many fathers, unable to provide for their families, abandoned their children. Nomadic households migrating to other regions frequently left children behind. As a result, large numbers of homeless children congregated in towns and around railway stations. Cases were reported in which children were abandoned outside public institutions and private homes throughout Kazakhstan. By the end of 1932, Kazakh authorities officially reported the existence of approximately 50,000 homeless Kazakh children.

Orphan Crisis and Coercive State Measures during the 1930–1933 Famine in Kazakhstan

Orphanages throughout the republic were overcrowded, and mortality rates within these institutions remained extremely high. For example, during an inspection in the Semipalatinsk region, the bodies of twenty children were discovered in the basement of an orphanage, having not been removed in time due to the lack of transportation. An excerpt from a report prepared by the Aktobe Red Cross detachment concerning Kazakh children in Turkestan vividly illustrates the situation:

"The children are in an extremely difficult condition. Children under four years of age who have been left without parents are dying in large numbers. In Kyzylorda, up to 450 homeless children were gathered in January alone. At one railway station, approximately 300 children were assembled. There, a Kazakh woman threw her two children under a train, while in Semipalatinsk another woman threw her two children into an ice hole." [3, p. 71].

During the Kazakh famine of 1930–1933, both central and local authorities implemented various measures in response to the crisis. However, many of these actions aggravated rather than alleviated the situation. The principal policies pursued by the central government included the following.

First, the grain procurement campaign imposed excessively high delivery quotas, resulting in the near-total confiscation of food resources from rural communities. Second, forced collectivization dismantled private agricultural households and transferred livestock and property into collective ownership. Third, restrictions on population movement, including the introduction of the passport system, limited the ability of starving populations to seek refuge

in other regions. Fourth, punitive measures were widely employed against individuals accused of "concealing grain" or "failing to fulfill state procurement plans." Fifth, humanitarian assistance was provided only after the famine had already reached catastrophic proportions, and the aid distributed proved insufficient to meet the scale of need.

At the local level, authorities often intensified these policies in an effort to fulfill state directives. Grain and livestock were confiscated from villages down to their final reserves. Communities that failed to meet procurement quotas were frequently blacklisted, resulting in restrictions on trade and access to assistance. Local activists implemented coercive measures, intimidation, and punitive actions to enforce state policies.

Value of Oral History in Understanding the Famine Experience

Oral historical testimonies provide additional insight into the lived experience of the famine. One survivor, Akram Kakharuly, recalled:

"When our people were dying from hunger in 1929–1930, there was an activist named Atabay in Karnak. Later, during the Soviet period, the village was named after him. He was one of the activists who established a collective farm in 1930 and was completely devoted to the new regime. He was a ruthless and cruel man. As head of the local executive committee, he enforced policies with extreme severity. Villagers were not allowed to own more than five goats. Livestock brought back from pasture was checked against official records. Any animals exceeding the permitted number were confiscated. Herds were gathered and enclosed, and owners were denied the return of animals beyond the number listed in official registers." [8].

Such oral testimonies demonstrate the value of oral history as a source for understanding the social realities and human experiences underlying official policies.

Although some local officials attempted to protect the population, they were generally unable to oppose central directives and often lacked the administrative capacity to mitigate the crisis effectively. In certain areas, limited efforts were made to establish public kitchens and provide assistance to orphaned children, but these initiatives remained insufficient in scope.

Overall, the evidence suggests that state policies—particularly forced collectivization and grain procurement campaigns—constituted major factors contributing to the famine. Relief measures were introduced too late and on too limited a scale, while local authorities were largely compelled to implement the strict directives issued by the central government.

The famine of 1930–1933 represents one of the most tragic episodes in the history of Kazakhstan. It was not merely the result of food shortages but also a consequence of political and economic policies that generated mass displacement, social disintegration, and profound demographic losses. During these years, millions of Kazakhs experienced severe hardship, while a substantial number perished from starvation, disease, repression, and related causes.

CONCLUSION

Historical evidence indicates that the catastrophe was closely associated with the policies implemented under the leadership of Filipp Goloshchekin. Contemporary documents suggest that the republican leadership possessed information regarding the deteriorating condition of livestock production, agricultural output, and the broader socioeconomic situation. Nevertheless, the continuation of existing policies contributed significantly to the escalation of the crisis and to one of the most devastating humanitarian disasters in the history of twentieth-century Kazakhstan.

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