

Challenges in teaching and curriculum development for 'History of Kazakhstan' at Nazarbayev University

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At Nazarbayev University, as at all other Universities in Kazakhstan, all undergraduate students are obliged to take a course entitled 'History of Kazakhstan' regardless of their Major. The University currently admits approximately 500 undergraduate students a year, meaning that the History department is expected to provide 250 places for 'History of Kazakhstan' per semester. As we currently have five Faculty members who can teach it, this means that normally we have five sections of fifty students each. Of these four are taught in English, and one is taught in Kazakh. Some of the challenges we face in teaching this course are no doubt similar to those experienced at other universities in Kazakhstan: low motivation among students for whom this is a duty, not a free intellectual choice; low levels of skill in reading and interpreting historical texts and in answering questions on historical topics, especially among students whose Major is in a subject such as Engineering, Mathematics or the Natural Sciences where such skills are little-used; large class sizes, and habits of rote-learning, plagiarism and collusion acquired at school which are inimical to critical thinking and the production of original written work. Other problems are more specific to Nazarbayev University, and in particular to the experience of Foreign Faculty teaching 'History of Kazakhstan' to Kazakhstani students, and it is these I would prefer to concentrate on in this brief paper.

I came to Nazarbayev University after twelve years of teaching at the Universities of Liverpool and Oxford in the United Kingdom. I developed some courses with Central Asian content here, and whilst these were challenging for students they were generally well-received. There were two principal obstacles to teaching them, however. The first was the absence of any good, general introductory textbook on Central Asian History in English; the second was the inability of my British students to read primary sources in Russian. The first of these is also a difficulty we face at Nazarbayev University. We are not obliged to use Ministry of Education approved textbooks to teach the course, and we do not consider these to be pedagogically useful. Instead we use a mixture of monographs, articles and scholarly editions by a variety of western, Russian and Kazakhstani historians (Sergei Abashin, Timur Beisembiev, Alan Bodger, Irina Erofeeva, Allen Frank, Virginia Martin and Uyama Tomohiko to name a few).¹ However the students often ask for a general work they can refer to for background and chronology (of a kind

¹ S. N. Abashin, D. Yu Arapov, & N. E. Bekmakanova, (ed.) *Tsentral'naya Aziya v Sostave Rossiiskoi Imperii* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008); T. K. Beisembiev *The Life of 'Alimqul. A Native History of Nineteenth-century Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2003); Alan Bodger 'Abulkhair, Khan of the Kazakh Little Horde, and His Oath of Allegiance to Russia of October 1731' *The Slavonic and East European Review* 58/1 (Jan. 1980) pp.40 – 57; Irina Erofeeva *Khan Abulkhair. Polkovodets. Pravitel', Politik*. (Almaty: Sanat, 1999); Allen J. Frank: 'Islam and Ethnic Relations in the Kazakh Inner Horde: Muslim Cossacks, Tatar Merchants and Kazakh nomads in a Turkic manuscript 1870-1910" in Anke von Kügelgen *et al* (Eds): *Muslim Culture in Russia and Central Asia from the 18th to the Early 20th Centuries*. (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1998) Vol.II pp.211-242; Allen J. Frank 'The Qazaqs and Russia' in Nicola di Cosmo, Allen J. Frank & Peter Golden (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia. The Chingissid Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) pp.363 – 379; Virginia Martin 'Kazakh oath-taking in Colonial Courtrooms. Legal Culture and Russian Empire-Building' *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Colonial History* Vol.5 No.3 (Summer 2004) pp.483 – 514; Uyama Tomohiko 'The Geography of Civilizations: a Spatial Analysis of the Kazakh Intelligentsia's Activities, from the mid-Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century' in Kimitaka Matsuzato (ed.) *Regions: A Prism to View the Slavic-Eurasian World. Towards a Discipline of "Regionology"* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Centre, 2000) pp.70-99.

that we have in abundance for almost all other courses – such as the textbooks in the Cambridge University Press ‘Concise History’ series), and we cannot offer them this. On the other hand unlike in the UK, our Kazakhstani students are all multilingual, and have no difficulty reading even quite complicated primary sources in Russian, or materials translated from other languages into English. Accordingly our ‘History of Kazakhstan’ syllabus is based primarily on the close reading of primary sources, beginning with Mirza Haidar Dughlat’s *Ta’rikh-i Rashidi* and other texts from the 16th and 17th centuries translated from Persian into Russian and English.² For the 18th century we can give them both Tevkelev’s account of his mission to Abu’l-Khayr Khan, and that of John Castle, recently translated into English,³ and once we reach the 19th century the possible sources become if anything over-abundant, ranging from the original text of the ‘Ustav ob upravlenii Sibirskikh Kirgizov’ in the *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* to General N. I. Grodekov’s semi-ethnographic observations on the ‘Kirgiz’ of the Syr-Darya Valley,⁴ and works relating to *Pereselenie* and the Qazaq intelligentsia’s opposition to it.⁵ For the Soviet period we combine textual sources with documentary films, such as Viktor Turin’s *Turksib* (1929) or Sergei Azimov’s *Interval* (1982).⁶

This source-based approach works well in breaking students of some of the bad habits they bring with them from School, such as the rote-learning of facts. We insist on the use of contemporary terms to describe the region of study (*Dasht-i Qipchaq, Kirgizskaya Step’*) rather than ‘Kazakhstan’, which is an anachronism before 1924. We expose students to the latest scholarship on contentious subjects such as the origins and nature of the Qazaq khanate (which suggests that it was not a state in the modern sense, and that it had multiple centres of power and authority amongst its many Khans and Sultans).⁷ We explore the neglected topic of Qazaq relations with Qing China in the 18th century,⁸ in an attempt to question the teleology which sees the eventual subjection of the Qazaqs to Russia as inevitable. In examining the latter relationship we reject both Soviet narratives of the ‘friendship of peoples’ and modern nationalist assertions

² Mirza Haidar Dughlat *Ta’rikh-i Rashidi* ed. E. Denison Ross & Trans. N. Elias as *A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia* (London: Sampson, Marston & Low, 1895); Muhammad Ibn Wali *Bahr al-Asrar fi Manaqib al-Akhyar* Part II; Mullah ‘Abd al-‘Alim: *Islam-name* in V. P. Iudin (ed.) *Materialy po istorii kazakhskikh khanstv XV – VIII vekov* (Alma-Ata: Nauka, 1969) pp.329 – 354; 425-430; Fazlullah ibn Ruzbehan Isfahani: *Mehman-nama-yi Bukhara* ed. & trans. R. P. Jalilova as *Mikhman-name-ii Bukhara (Zapiski Bukharskogo gostya)* (Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura, 1976)

³ I.V. Erofeeva (ed.) *Istoriya Kazakhstana v Russkikh Istochnikakh XVI – XX vekov* Vol. III *Zhurnaly i Sluzhebnye Zapiski Diplomata A. I. Tevkeleva po Istorii i Etnografii Kazakhstana* (Almaty: “Daik-Press”, 2005); John Castle ‘Journal von der AO 1736 aus Orenburg zu dem Abul Geier Chan der Kirgis-Kaysak Tartarischen Horda’ in *Materialen zu der Russischen Geschichte* (Riga, 1784) trans. Sarah Tolley & ed. Beatrice Teissier as *Into the Kazakh Steppe. John Castle’s Mission to Khan Abulkhayir (1736)* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2014)

⁴ “Ustav ob upravlenii inorodtsev” *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* Vol. XXXVIII No.29126 22 July 1822, pp.394-419; N. I. Grodekov *Kirgizy i Kara-Kirgizy Syr-Dar’inskoi Oblasti* (Tashkent: Tip. S. I. Lakhtina, 1889)

⁵ A. Alimbekov ‘Golos kirgiza o zaselenii stepi (kirgizskoi) pereselentsami’ *Sibirskii Vestnik* (1889) Nos.85, 86; Ali Khan Bukeikhanov ‘Kirgizy’ in A. I. Kastelyanskii (ed.) *Formy Natsional’nogo dvizheniya v sovremennykh gosudarstv. Avstro-Vengriya, Rossiya, Germaniya* (St. Pb.: Tip. “Obschestvennaya Pol’za, 1910) pp.575 - 600 Count K. K. Pahlen *Mission to Turkestan*, trans. N. J. Couriss (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1964); Graf Konstantin Konstantinovich Palen *Otchet po Revizii Turkestanskago Kraya, proizvedennoi po VYSOCHAISHEMU Povelenyu...* (St Pb.: Senatskaya Tipografiya, 1910) Vol.6 *Pereselencheskoe Delo*;

⁶ Matthew J. Payne ‘Viktor Turin’s *Turksib* and Soviet Orientalism.’ *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, Vol. 21, Number 1 (March 2001) pp.37 – 62.

⁷ Thomas Welsford ‘The Disappearing Khanate’ in *Essays in Honour of Istvan Vasary* (forthcoming)

⁸ Noda, Jin & Onuma, Takehiro: *A Collection of Documents from the Kazakh Sultans to the Qing Dynasty* (Tokyo: TIAS, 2010)

of victimhood. We explore the origins of the modern Qazaq state in Soviet nation-building policies, and try to look at sensitive topics such as the 1916 revolt, the famine, the Tselina and the suppression of the Zheltoqsan protests in detail, not shying away from factors such as inter-ethnic conflict where this was important. We insist throughout on the close, critical reading of texts, and a careful assessment of the background and motives of those who wrote them, together with some assessment of the intended and actual audiences and the contemporary impact that they had. Most of us assess the students' work through a combination of written examinations (in which students must write critical commentaries on passages from the sources, together with interpretative essays), longer interpretative essays and group oral presentations in class. Plagiarism and collusion are serious problems – the most common technique is for students to copy online texts in Russian and then run them through google translate – but we are gradually bringing this under control.

The main challenges we face in teaching *History of Kazakhstan* at Nazarbayev University are threefold:

- 1) Students have been taught to dislike History through being forced to memorise a particular narrative at School. They believe that our *History of Kazakhstan* course will be exactly the same, and this lowers their motivation.
- 2) This course, as with all other courses at Nazarbayev University, is taught in English. Some students, especially those from the Sciences and from Engineering, struggle to be able to fulfil all the requirements of the course, particularly when it comes to writing in English.
- 3) We do not have enough Faculty to teach the course as we would like. Currently it is taken by 250 students per semester, and we only have five Faculty who can teach it. This means class sizes of 50 students, which is far too large for effective seminar teaching, and is a significant obstacle to training them in the close reading of texts.

We are attempting the following solutions:

- 1) We do everything we can to differentiate the History we teach from that taught at School, laying particular emphasis on the need to develop critical thinking and question established historical narratives.
- 2) We have a dedicated writing centre to which we refer students who are struggling with written English, though more work is needed at University level in this regard.
- 3) We are trying to hire more Faculty, and will probably move to team-teaching this course. That is, the lectures will be collective, for 100 – 200 students at a time, and we will then divide them into smaller reading groups of 25 for source-reading and discussion.

On a broader level, at Nazarbayev University the main difficulty we face in attracting students towards History as a topic is the perception, at least, that there is no demand for this subject from employers in Kazakhstan. I would be very interested to hear more on this subject from other participants in the conference: what are the possible career paths for students taking a Major in History? Can anyone think of successful examples among the students they have taught in recent years? What are the best ways of enthusing Kazakhstani students in the study of History for its own sake? I would be very grateful for any help or suggestions.