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MS211: Background & History of Kazakhstan

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Overview

{kah'-zahk-stan}

The Republic of Kazakhstan occupies a large portion of central and northern Asia, extending from China to the borderlands of Europe; it is bounded on the north by Russia, on the west by Russia and the Caspian Sea, on the south by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and on the east by China. Formerly part of the USSR, Kazakhstan became independent in 1991. Although it is often described as a Central Asian nation, only the southern part of Kazakhstan actually belongs geographically to Central Asia. Culturally and ethnically, however, its people have much in common with the peoples of the other Central Asian countries--Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan--and Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan NAZARBAYEV, emerged as the most prominent of that region's leaders after the breakup of the USSR.

LAND AND RESOURCES

Kazakhstan consists mostly of lowlands and steppe, with mountain chains belonging to the Tian Shan (Tien Shan) range in the southeast, and the ALTAI MOUNTAINS in the northeast. Several types of desert and dry steppe constitute much of its territory. The arable areas are largely confined to the northern part of the country, where wide tracts of semiarid land were brought under irrigation in the Soviet Virgin Lands program of the 1950s and early 1960s. The south also has some irrigated fertile land, mainly near the capital, ALMA-ATA, and along the SYR DARYA, a river system that flows northwest through Kazakhstan into the ARAL SEA (which Kazakhstan shares with Uzbekistan). Diversion of water for irrigation and other uses has reduced the volume of the Aral Sea by 60 percent since 1960. Lake BALKHASH is a large body of water in eastern Kazakhstan. In addition to the Syr Darya, the lowlands are drained by the IRTYSH RIVER, the URAL RIVER, the Tobol, and the Ishim River. The climate is continental, with long, cold winters and short, hot summers. Yearly precipitation ranges from 200 to 500 mm (8 to 20 in). Kazakhstan is rich in minerals. Coal deposits around the city of Karaganda have been exploited since the 1930s; petroleum and natural gas are found around the Caspian Sea, and iron and copper in the Lake Balkhash region. The country also has plentiful supplies of lead, zinc, and phosphates.

PEOPLE

The Kazakhs, for whom the country is named, constitute about 40 percent of the population (compared to 32 percent in 1970). Russians, who came to live in Kazakhstan in large numbers during the Soviet period, constitute 38 percent, ethnic Germans, 6 percent, and Ukrainians, 5 percent; the remaining 11 percent consists of smaller numbers of other European and Asian peoples.

The educational and health-care systems, developed under the USSR, follow the Soviet model, although some changes have been introduced since independence. Restrictions on religious education, for example, have been relaxed. The traditional culture of the Kazakhs was nomadic and pastoral, but today their way of life and cultural expressions show strong Russian influences. Major cities, in addition to Alma-Ata and Karaganda, include Chimkent, Pavlodar, Semipalatinsk, and Ust-Kamenogorsk.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Kazakhstan is an important industrial center, producing steel, textiles, and nonferrous metals. Agriculture and sheepherding also remain major features of the economy; before independence, Kazakhstan accounted for about one-third of the USSR's wheat production. The country was also a major site for Soviet defense installations, and for the Soviet space program. The main Soviet cosmonaut center was located at Baikonur, and extensive nuclear testing took place in the Semipalatinsk region. The Semipalatinsk testing range was closed down in 1991, but the Baikonur station will probably continue in use. An important economic resource for future development is petroleum. The Tengiz oil field on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea is estimated to be one of the largest in the world. In 1992 the government signed an agreement with the Chevron Corporation for its exploitation. Chevron is committed to invest \$10 billion in the project over a 40-year period. Eventual revenues are expected to exceed \$5 billion annually, 80 percent of which will go to Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has also sought foreign help in the difficult process of converting from a planned, centrally controlled economy to a free-market system.

HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT

The Eurasian steppe where Kazakhstan is largely located has served over the centuries as a route for nomadic invaders from the east and south. The Mongols arrived in the 13th century, and various Turkic peoples followed. The Kazakhs, who originated from an intermingling of invaders with

indigenous groups, emerged as a distinct people in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Organized into loose tribal confederations called the Great, Middle, and Little Hordes, they gradually fell under Russian control in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1830 the Russians built a fort at Akmolinsk (Tselinograd) and began to colonize the region. The Kazakhs, led by Kenesary Kasimov, resisted the Russian advance in the 1830s and '40s but were unable to stop it. Soon Russian peasant settlers were moving into the steppes and foothills where for centuries the Kazakh nomads and their Kirghiz neighbors had freely roamed and pastured their cattle. Under the tsarist regime, the territories that were to become Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were administered as part of the Steppe Province. During World War I, Russian authorities sought to mobilize local laborers for the war effort, in effect drafting them for labor brigades. Provoked by these measures, in 1916 the dekkhans (settled peasants) and the nomads rose in a rebellion that was brutally suppressed. Fleeing the tsarist military, the Kazakh and Kirghiz nomads crossed the border into China, returning only after the Russian Revolutions of 1917, when the new government drew them back by promising to listen to their grievances.

.The Soviet Period

In the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, a secular Kazakh intelligentsia emerged, establishing the first Kazakh nationalist movement. They sought some form of autonomy, if not yet full independence, calling their party Alash Orda, after the legendary founder of the Kazakh people. These inexperienced politicians vacillated for a time during the civil war between the Bolsheviks and the Whites but finally cast their lot with the Bolsheviks, trusting in their promise of self-determination for national minorities. Kazakhstan was organized as the Kirghiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920 ("Kirghiz" being an old Russian misnomer for the Kazakhs) and was renamed the Kazakh ASSR in 1925. The Kazakhs were granted a limited degree of internal autonomy but no real independence. The republic was firmly attached to Soviet Russia and directly subordinated to Moscow. Turar Ryskulov (1896-1938) and other early Kazakh converts to Communism had hoped to unite the Kazakhs and other eastern peoples under the banner of Bolshevism's liberating mission against imperialism. By 1920, Ryskulov had given up this dream; nevertheless, he continued to serve the Soviet state obediently until, along with other Kazakh Communist leaders, he perished in the Stalinist GREAT

PURGE of the 1930s.

In 1925 the size of the Kazakh republic was increased by the addition of Kazakh-inhabited parts of TURKISTAN, and in 1936 it was made a union republic of the USSR. Subsequent developments were all in the direction of tighter integration with the Russian economy, closer unity with Moscow, and accelerated Russianization within Kazakhstan itself. During the Stalinist period (1928-53), Kazakhstan suffered huge population losses in the process of the enforced collectivization of agriculture, beginning in the late 1920s, and the liquidation of its national leaders, both Communist and Alash Orda, in the Great Purge of the late 1930s. In addition, successive waves of population transfers and immigration beginning in the 1930s and continuing into the 1950s resulted in the Kazakhs becoming a minority in their own republic. In the 1960s and '70s, on the other hand, the republic enjoyed greater local autonomy under the leadership of the Kazakh Communist chief Dinmukhamed A. Kunayev. In 1983, after the death of the longtime Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, his successors launched an anticorruption campaign in Central Asia, singling out Uzbekistan for special censure. The power network of the local Communist elite that had flourished under Brezhnev was uprooted under orders from Moscow. For a time Kunayev and his organization in Kazakhstan seemed secure, but in December 1986 he was summarily dismissed by the regime of Mikhail Gorbachev. His replacement as first secretary of the Kazakh Communist party was not a Kazakh, as had been customary, but Gennadi V. Kolbin, a Russian and a member of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist party. This shortsighted move outraged Kazakh national sensibilities and, combined with other local grievances, led to riots in Alma-Ata (December 17), the first overt expression of dissent in Kazakhstan for a generation or more. The Alma-Ata riots were also the first in a series of revolts that swept through the Soviet republics in the late 1980s, hampering Gorbachev's reform efforts and hastening the disintegration of the USSR. Violence again occurred in Kazakhstan in 1989, this time in Novi Uzen, a small town in the western part of the republic.

.Independence

In the new atmosphere of freedom that developed in the late 1980s, independent political organization began among the intelligentsia, focusing first around cultural and language issues. Local leaders also took up the cause of environmental protection. Protests against Soviet nuclear testing in Kazakhstan led to the formation of a vigorous antinuclear movement, the Nevada-Palatinsk

group. The same period marked the emergence of Nursultan Nazarbayev as Kazakhstan's new leader.

Nazarbayev, a Communist veteran of the Kunayev years, adapted quickly to the new circumstances, taking the stance of a locally oriented politician sensitive to Kazakh national feeling. With extensive experience in Kunayev's prereform organization as party secretary for the Karaganda region, he had become Kazakhstan's premier under Kunayev in 1984; in 1989, when the Moscow leadership sought to rectify its earlier error by removing Kolbin, Nazarbayev replaced him as party leader. Finally, in 1990, he became president of the republic. In the power struggle that developed in 1991 between Gorbachev and Russian president Boris Yeltsin, Nazarbayev aligned himself with Yeltsin in favor of independence for the union republics. He opposed the attempted Moscow coup of the Communist hard-liners in August 1991; after the coup's failure and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR, he and Yeltsin became the most prominent political figures among the former Soviet republics. Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan were the only republics to have nuclear weapons on their soil, and negotiations on the disposition of the nuclear arsenal gave Nazarbayev an important role to play. Although independent Kazakhstan has begun to exercise its sovereignty in international affairs and has sought foreign economic partners, Nazarbayev still looks to close relations with Russia as the key to his country's future development.

Donald S. Carlisle

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Factbox

Facts about Kazakhstan OFFICIAL NAME

Republic of Kazakhstan

LAND

Area: 2,717,300 sq km (1,049,155 sq mi). Capital and largest city: Alma-Ata (1991 est. pop., 1,156,200).

PEOPLE

Population (1992 est.): 17,008,000; density: 6.3 persons per sq km (16.2 per sq mi). Distribution

(1991): 57.6% urban, 42.4% rural. Official languages: Kazakh, Russian.

Major religions: Islam,

Russian Orthodoxy.

EDUCATION AND HEALTH

Universities (1992): 2. Hospital beds (1990): 227,800. Physicians (1990): 68,900. Life expectancy (1992): women--72; men--73. Infant mortality (1992): 25.9 per 1,000 live births.

ECONOMY

GNP (1990 est.): 62.6 billion; \$3,679 per capita. Labor distribution (1989): agriculture--18.8%; manufacturing and mining--21.4%; public utilities--3.8%; construction--11.8%; transportation and communications--10.7%; trade--8.2%; finance--0.6%; public administration, defense--1.5%; services--23.1%. Foreign trade (1991): imports--\$33.4 billion; exports--\$26.2 billion. Principle trade partners; other former Soviet republics. Currency: 1 ruble = 100 kopeks.

GOVERNMENT

Type: independent republic. Government leader (1994): Nursultan Nazarbayev--president.

Legislature: Supreme Kenges. Political subdivisions: 19 provinces.

COMMUNICATION

Railroads (1990): 14,550 km (9,041 mi). Roads (1990): 164,900 km (102,464 mi).