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Selective Favoritism and Confirmed «Sovietness» among Kalmyk Special Settlers within the Qazaq SSR

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During World War II, Stalin's Soviet regime implemented a repressive policy targeting entire nationalities through forced resettlement. As one of these 'punished peoples,' the Kalmyks were deported to the eastern parts of the USSR in late 1943, primarily encompassing Siberian oblast and krais, along with one oblast in the Qazaq SSR – Qyzyl-Orda. These regions were designated as their places of exile, subjecting deportees to the special settlement system for the subsequent thirteen years. While other oblasts in the Qazaq SSR were not officially designated for their deportation, Kalmyk special settlers were dispersed across Alma-Ata oblast, constituting the second-largest Kalmyk contingent within the republic, following Qyzyl-Orda. This study delves into Kalmyk special settlers within Alma-Ata oblast of the Qazaq SSR from 1944 to 1953 and posits that it stood out as a self-formed group comprising interconnected individuals. This implies that Kalmyk contingent in the oblast constituted a group of deportees who could choose their preferred location for special settlements and purposefully selected the oblast among places in the USSR. In doing so, they set themselves apart from the usual practice where the system forms contingents forcibly. Moreover, the study argues that the claimed exceptionalism within the regime is supported by the presence of the selective release from the system of certain Kalmyk special settlers, conducted legally. In turn, the existence of the combination of such exclusive treatments from the regime highlights dual standards in the interpretation and execution of officially announced policies toward groups of special settlers categorized as 'exiled in perpetuity.' Furthermore, the examination of each case of distinct treatments within this contingent in the oblast aims to illustrate the correlation between attained privileges and facts of confirmed 'Sovietness.'

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Қазақ ССР аймағындағы күштеп қоныстандыру жүйесіндегі қалмақтар контингенті арасындағы таңдаулы фаворитизм және расталған «советтенгендік» белгісі

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Екінші дүниежүзілік соғыс кезінде сталиндік режим тұтас ұлттарды күштеп қоныс аудару арқылы құдалауға ұшыратты. Бүгінде топтастырыла «жазаланған халықтар» деп қарастырылатын бұл этникалық белгі негізінде орын алған депортациялар қалмақ елін де қамтыған. Оларға қатысты 1943 жылдың аяғында КСРО-ның шығыс аймақтарына ұлттық тұтастықта мәжбүрлі түрде қоныс аударылсын деп шешім қабылданады. Осылайша, негізінен Сібірдің бірқатар өлкелері мен Қазақ ССР-нің Қызылорда облысын қамтыған атаулы шығыс аймақтар қалмақтар үшін күштеп қоныстандыру жүйесінде өмір сүруге міндеттелген тұрақты жерлер деп белгіленеді. Яғни, күштеп қоныстандыру жүйесі (ары қарай – жүйе) Қазақ ССР-нің басқа аймақтарын қалмақтарды орналастыру үшін ар-

найы қарастырмаған. Алайда, бұған қарамастан жүйе кезеңінде атаулы халық контингенті Алматы облысында шоғырланып саны жағынан республика бойынша Қызылорда облысынан кейінгі екінші орынды иеленеді. Мақалада 1944–1953 жылдары Қазақ ССР-нің Алматы облысы аймағындағы күштеп қоныстандырылған контингенттер арасынан қалмақтарды қарастырып, оны өзара байланысты жеке тұлғалардан тұратын өз бетімен қалыптасқан топ ретінде зерттеу керек деп дәлелденеді. Нақтылап айтқанда, осы атаулы облыстағы қалмақ контингентінің өкілдері арнайы қоныстандыру жүйесінде өздерінің мекендерін таңдауға мүмкіндіктер иеленгендерін және олар КСРО бойынша Алматы облысын мақсатты түрде белгілеген деп саралайды. Өз кезегінде, бұл құбылыс сол кездегі репрессиялық жүйесінің күштеп қоныс аударылғандар контингенттерін мәжбүрлі түрде қалыптастыру бойынша қалыпты тәжірибесінен ерекшеленеді. Сонымен қатар, зерттеу сталиндік режимде орын алған кешенді фаворитизмнің болуын кейбір қалмақтарды жүйеден заңды түрде босату фактілерімен негіздейді. Ал бұл жәйт советтік жүйе тарапынан кейбір топтарға қатысты осындай бірегей көзқарас пен қатынастың білдірілуі «мәңгілікке жер аударылғандар» санатына жататын күштеп қоныстандырылғандарға қатысты ресми қабылданған саясаттың жүргізілуінде екі қырлы стандарт болғандығын көрсетеді. Сондай-ақ, жүйе тарапынан ерекше қатынасқа ие болған әрбір жағдайды талдап көрсету арқылы олардың расталған 'советтенгендік' фактілерімен арақатынасын көрсетуге ұмтылыс жасалынады.

Сілтеме жасау үшін: Болатхан Ә. Қазақ ССР аймағындағы күштеп қоныстандыру жүйесіндегі қалмақтар контингенті арасындағы таңдаулы фаворитизм және расталған 'советтенгендік' белгісі. *Qazaq Historical Review*. 2023. № 1 (3). 308–330-бб. (ағылшынша).

Избирательный фаворитизм и подтвержденная «советскость» среди спецпоселенцев-калмыков на территории Казахской ССР

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Во время Второй мировой войны сталинский режим подвергал насильственным переселениям целые национальности. Калмыки, как один из этих «наказанных народов», были депортированы в восточные регионы СССР в конце 1943 года, в основном в отдельные края Сибири и одну область Казахской ССР – Кызыл-Ордынскую. Эти регионы были назначены местами их обязательного и постоянного поселения, где депортированные калмыки жили последние тринадцать лет в статусе спецпоселенцев-выселенцев. Хотя другие области Казахской ССР официально не были обозначены для депортации калмыков, контингент спецпоселенцев-калмыков в Алма-Атинской области был вторым по численности в республике, после Кызыл-Орды. Данная статья рассматривает спецпоселенцев-калмыков в Алма-Атинской области Казахской ССР с 1944 по 1953 год. В ней утверждается, что рассматриваемый контингент выделялся как самостоятельно сформировавшаяся группа, состоящая из взаимосвязанных между собой личностей. Это означает, что калмыки-спецпоселенцы в области представляли собой совокупность лиц, которые могли выбирать предпочитаемые места спецпоселений для собственного пребывания и целенаправленно выбирали Алма-Атинскую область среди других регионов СССР. Тем самым это выделяется от обычной практики, когда система формировала контингенты принудительно, а не наоборот. Более того, статья представляет аргументы в пользу утверждения, что заявленная исключительность в режиме подтверждается наличием выборочного освобождения из системы спецпоселений некоторых калмыков. В свою очередь, существование таких исключительных обращений подчеркивает двойные стандарты в интерпретации и реализации официально объявленной политики относительно групп спецпоселенцев, классифицированных как «высланные навечно». Кроме того, рассматривая отдельные случаи проявления особых обращений среди данного контингента в области, в статье принята попытка проиллюстрировать корреляцию между полученными привилегиями и фактами подтвержденной 'советскости'.

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Introduction

The decision of Stalin's Soviet regime to exile entire nationalities during World War II remains a subject of ongoing debate, particularly regarding whether it should be considered as committed genocide. The most compelling arguments supporting the view of its genocidal intent point out the regime's deliberate targeting of certain ethnic groups for forced resettlements, which often led to fatal outcomes for many deportees. On the other hand, the contrary notion suggests interpreting these actions within the context of the Soviets' policy, which viewed nationality as a key organizing principle and its progress in structure 'national in form, but socialist in content.'

Hence, these deportations and their consequences ought to be comprehended as endeavours to re-educate these ethnic groups through exile. Accordingly, the deportations during World War II, alongside the mass deportation of alleged wealthy farmers beginning in the late 1920s and the ethnic cleansings along the borders in the 1930s, should be primarily regarded within this context as precautionary measures [Hirsch 2005: 5–9; Naimark 2001: 85–89]. In addition, the deportees, who would eventually become special settlers, formed a significant portion of the forced labourers' contingent [Zemskov 2005a: 115, 138; Berdinskikh 2015: 66]. Consequently, it is crucial to emphasize that this process is intricately linked to economic motives as well, which is essential to understanding the broader context of collective punishment of ethnic groups, in their entirety.

Theoretical Framework and Historiography

The official grounds for deporting all Kalmyks to the eastern regions of the USSR were collective accusations of collaborating with the Nazis during the war,¹ like other ethnic groups of 'the punished peoples'² who were stigmatized as collectively disloyal. These deportations were executed with greater efficiency compared to the earlier actions against peasants. This suggests that the regime had learned from its past endeavours, displaying all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing, except for direct and intentional killings [Weitz 2003: 81]. According to Terry Martin, the rationale behind Soviet ethnic cleansing can be attributed to the substantial influence of prevailing ethnic hostility. He highlights that certain ethnic groups, like Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, and Karachays, experienced intense ethnic tensions both in the Soviet and Tsarist eras. However, he suggests that the deportation of the Kalmyks could be considered an exception due to their experience of little ethnic conflict [Martin 1998: 859].

Notwithstanding, we assume that the case of the Kalmyks' exile is not exceptional; on the contrary, it is an intriguing example reflecting ethnic hostility. This instance serves as a thought-provoking example, vividly illustrating deeply ingrained biases, which stem from the long-standing Russian-Kalmyk relationship tracing back to the seventeenth century. According to Michael Khodarkovsky, the relationship between nomadic Kalmyks and Russians was a complex interplay of power dynamics and cultural clashes. From the beginning, differing perspectives periodically led to tensions, resulting in the frequent breaking of agreements between the two sides. For instance, Kalmyk leaders perceived their relationship with Russia as a military and political alliance between equal powers, with expectations of self-governance and protection in return for their military contributions. In turn, the Russian government expected the Kalmyk people to become loyal subjects, offering payments and protection in exchange for their military service. Such differing perspectives led to periodic misunderstandings and misinterpretations between the two sides, resulting in the frequent breaking of agreements. As a result, the Kalmyks gained a reputation as 'infidels,' which persisted over time. Additionally, the exodus of Kalmyks from the Volga region to Jungaria in the late eighteenth century further solidified the notion that they would not be considered trustworthy in the eyes of the imperial authorities. Despite the desperation of this nomadic people resulting from colonization factors, such as the loss of pasturelands and increasing control over their administrative affairs, the Russian Empire perceived this move as an act of disobedience [Khodarkovsky 1992: 58–74, 230–241].

Thus, it can be considered that the historical perception based on the portrayal of the Kalmyks as disloyal people played a role in provoking the decision of the Soviets to exile them during World War II. Furthermore, Stalin, who viewed his own role as 'vozhd' and conflated his Soviet and Russian identity [Naimark 2001: 89], expressed concern in the 1920s where he stated that even a small error with

¹ The Council of People's Commissars of the USSR issued Decree № 1432/425cc on December 28, 1943, 'On the Resettlement of all Kalmyks living in the territory of the Kalmyk ASSR'. Reproduced in: [Carevskaja-Djakina 2004: 478–480].

² In the literature, it refers to a group of nationalities including Germans, Karachays, Kalmyks, Ingush, Chechens, Balkars, and Crimean Tatars, collectively accused of being traitors during World War II and subsequently exiled [Westren 2012: 1].

the Kalmyks, connected to Tibet and China, could have worse consequences for their work than a mistake in relation to Ukraine [Bugai 1992a: 9]. In addition to their transnational connections, the hostility towards the Kalmyks was further intensified by the fact of their resistance to the policies of the socialist offensive, particularly during the collectivization period. Being largely nomadic, the Kalmyks contradicted the attempts to impose a uniform social structure [Weitz 2003: 80].

Hence, the entire Kalmyk population was subjected to exile, as Stalin's regime saw them as a potential threat due to their perceived hostility and a range of interconnected factors. This perception can be analyzed within the context of the Soviet leaders' concerns that the Kalmyks could not be transformed into a national form while maintaining socialist content because other states or class enemies had 'control' over the histories and traditions that shaped their national consciousness [Hirsch 2002: 38]. Alternatively, in Eric Weitz's words, the entire thrust of Soviet policies was to affirm nationality as an organizing principle. In the Soviet view, progress towards socialism could come only in this structure, despite the introduction of a dual principle during its inception [Weitz 2003: 82].

However, while this assumption highlights the role of hostility in the Kalmyks' deportation as a sociohistorical group, it does not negate the fact that each case exemplifies a combination of complex factors that influence the decision-making process. Scholarly studies on the subject, acknowledging the possibility of a multifaceted approach rather than simply punishing the Kalmyks, have suggested various factors as the main cause. One perspective posits that the deportation aimed at shifting responsibility from the Soviets for wartime failures and the resulting significant losses of human and material resources among national minorities [Maksimov 2008: 308]. While some opinions attribute the Kalmyks' exile simply to being part of the mass deportations carried out in pursuit of the acceleration of the assimilation process in Soviet society [Zemskov 2005a: 154, 173] or due to geopolitical strategic agendas [Sarnova 2005: 251]. Furthermore, some authors argue that the special measures taken against the Kalmyks were not seen as repression by the state since the deportees, with some exceptions, were subject to the same rights and obligations as other Soviet citizens [Ivanov 2014: 180]. This raises a contentious issue in comprehending the special settlement system's period. From our perspective, the restrictions implemented by the system were not only marked by a lack of civil rights but also by a deprivation of fundamental human rights, a facet that merits investigation in subsequent research. Additionally, other historians argue that the reasons behind the deportation should be sought in genocidal intent, as it constituted an unprecedented criminal act against an entire people [Ubushaev 2003: 166; Pohl 2000: 289; Naimark 2010: 97, 135]. Supporters of this view assert that the grounds for the decision were utterly far-fetched, and all Kalmyks were deliberately exiled to entirely unsuitable for physical survival regions. As per Kalmyk scholar Kirill Ubushaev, the losses suffered by the Kalmyks during the exile, including the deportation itself and the years in special settlements, were the highest among the repressed peoples [Ubushaev 2019: 71], ranging from twenty to thirty percent of the entire population [Richardson 2002: 446].

Undoubtedly, significant loss occurred among the Kalmyks, and the situation could have been much better if the deportation of them had taken place in a milder climate. However, asserting that they were most adversely affected due to the highest losses among 'repressed peoples' is questionable, in part. Records present specific figures regarding deaths and births among Kalmyk special settlers and highlight comparable dire situations among other groups, such as those from the Crimea, the North Caucasus, and Lithuania.³ Nevertheless, the experiences of Kalmyk

³ According to a report from the MVD of the USSR dated 28 July 1951, the total number of deaths among Kalmyk special settlers between 1945 and 1950 was 15,206 (by 1953, fixed deaths were 16,594), while births numbered 7,843. In turn, among special settlers categorized as 'from the Crimea,' 32,107 deaths and 13,823 births were recorded during the same period from 1945 to 1950. The situation with the group from the North Caucasus was equally dire, with 104,903 recorded deaths and 53,557 births. Additionally, a significant difference was observed among a group of special settlers from Lithuania, showing 4,071 deaths and 689 births for the period 1945–1950 [Bugai 1992b: 140, 142].

deportees in Siberian oblasts and krays, constituting the majority of their collective ordeal, undeniably stand out as profoundly arduous.

The deportation of the Kalmyks took place from the end of December 1943 to May 1944, unfolding in multiple stages and ultimately affecting a total of 102,355 people [Maksimov 2013: 319]. The destinations of the forced exiles were geographically isolated and scattered across the eastern part of the USSR, primarily in Siberian krays and oblasts. Moreover, the campaign occurred in the winter period, resulting in the loss of many Kalmyk lives due to exposure, starvation, and disease during transport, however, these hardships did not end there. After an exhaustingly difficult transport, most of the Kalmyks arrived at designated places for special settlements, where they had to live under the control of the regime for the next thirteen years. The difficulties faced by Kalmyk deportees in Siberian oblasts and krays during the initial period of the special settlement system extended beyond the terrible conditions of limited food, restricted access to medical care, inadequate clothing, and housing in the harsh climate environment. Their distinct anthropological features set them apart from the local population, serving as clear markers of their exiled status and triggering immediate hostility and animosity towards the deportees, labelled as traitors. In addition, the dissemination of rumors about cannibalism further contributed to fear and unease among the locals, intensifying the dehumanization experienced by many Kalmyks in Siberian exile. Regrettably, the years spent in exile have had a profound impact on the stigmatization of their ethnic identity and the Kalmyk language, which is now considered endangered [Ivanov 2014: 182; Zberovskaya 2006: 47, 56; Ubushaev, Ubushaev 2007: 143–314; Guchinova 2007: 194–196; Guchinova 2005: 251; Reckel, Schatz 2020: 6; Grin 2001: 102].

Nonetheless, this study does not delve further into them, as the discussions are based on examinations of Kalmyks' experiences in Siberian exile. Emphasizing the significance of refraining from generalizations, this paper will instead consider the nuanced differences in the experiences of Kalmyk special settlers within a specific oblast of the Qazaq SSR – Alma-Ata.

To conclude, for a comprehensive understanding of the historical context of Kalmyk settlers in Alma-Ata oblast, the historiography section can be categorized into four groups. First, academic publications on general special settlement history within the USSR offer insights into the broader context of deportations.⁴ The second group focuses on the specifics of the deportation of the Kalmyks to Siberian oblasts and krays and their thirteen-year exile experiences.⁵ The third group delves into the aftermath of the deportation and exile years, exploring aspects such as ethnic identity, memory, language, and population trends, rehabilitation and the re-establishment of the national autonomy of the Kalmyk people.⁶ Finally, the fourth category pertains to publications on deportation and the special settlement system within the current borders of Qazaqstan. This category primarily encompasses initial works on the deportation of various peoples to the Qazaq SSR and their experiences in special settlements.⁷ Nevertheless, studies specifically focused on the history of deported to special settlements Kalmyks within the Qazaq SSR have received relatively little attention. This can be attributed to the limited availability of information found in

⁴ Berdinskikh, V. [Berdinskikh 2015], Bugai, N. [Bugai 1992b], Hirsch, F. [Hirsch 2002; Hirsch 2005], Martin, T. [Martin 1998], Naimark, N. [Naimark 2010], Westren, M. [Westren 2012], Weitz, E. [Weitz 2003], Polian, P. [Polian 2001], Zemskov, V. [Zemskov 2205b], et al.

⁵ Goncharov, G. [Goncharov 2006], Gizatullina, L. [Gizatullina 2005], Ignatova, N. [Ignatova 2009], Ivanov, A. [Ivanov 2013], Khunagov, A. [Khunagov 1998], Maksimov, K. [Maksimov 2013], Sarnova, V. [Sarnova 2005], Stepanov, M. [Stepanov 2005], Zberovskaya, E. [Zberovskaya 2006], et al.

⁶ Avliev, V. [Avliev 2004], Bayev, R. [Bayev 2006], Guchinova, E. [Guchinova 2004], Kaznacheev, G. [Kaznacheev 2004], Klimova, G. [Klimova 2004], Lidzhieva, I. [Lidzhieva 2007], Mandzhiev, N. [Mandzhiev 2005], Topalova, D. [Topalova 2014], Ubushaev, K. [Ubushaev 2003], Zapparivanny, R. [Zapparivanny 2006], et al.

⁷ Aldajumanov, K. [Aldajumanov, Aldajumanov 1997], Kalybekova, M. [Kalybekova 2008], Kozybaev, M. [Kozybaev 1990], Suleymenova, M. [Suleymenova 2001], et al.

thematic collections of documents [Anes 1998 ; Karin 2022, vol. 1, 7, 33, et al.] which are mostly statistical in nature, and the comparatively small number of Kalmyk special settlers in this area.⁸

Methods and Sources

The primary method for in-depth analysis involved meticulously scrutinizing one hundred and six personal files⁹ of Kalmyk special settlers, alongside other archival materials. Specifically, the holdings of the 4th Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Qazaq SSR, known as the 'Collection of Control and Surveillance Files Directed at the Special Settlement',¹⁰ were carefully examined.

To contextualize the research within the broader academic discourse and to gain a comprehensive understanding of the history of Kalmyk deportees, insights from scholarly works extensively investigating forced resettlements during the Stalinist era and the challenges experienced by deportees were integrated. Furthermore, the study placed significant emphasis on leveraging published collections of administrative documents of the USSR and the Qazaq SSR.

Self-shaped Kalmyk contingent: deliberately and willfully to Alma-Ata oblast

The Qazaq SSR was one of the few destinations for the Kalmyks' exile, as evidenced by a single echelon sent to Qyzyl-Orda oblast during the period from late December 1943 to January 1944 [Kukanova, Ochirov 2021: 752]. Although other regions of the republic were not officially designated for deportees from the territory of the Kalmyk ASSR, Kalmyk special settlers dispersed across sixteen oblasts of the republic by 1953.¹¹ It is suggested that it was a preferred destination for many Kalmyks, as evidenced by the massive outflow from Siberia to the Qazaq SSR right after 1953, as well as relocation requests before the softening of the regime. For instance, by the second half of the 1950s, the number of Kalmyk contingent in Guryev oblast of the Qazaq SSR had surged significantly, with almost four hundred special settlers documented, in contrast to just fifteen in 1953, and the majority of them relocators from Omsk oblast of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic [Bolatkhan 2023: 138].

In its turn, this makes it essential to consider the Kalmyk contingent in the Qazaq SSR, except Qyzyl-Orda oblast, as a more distinct category within the special settlement system, as deportees who were aware that exceptions were possible within the regime and could take advantage of them. At least, without a doubt, this conjecture refers to Alma-Ata oblast, which housed the

⁸ Out of the total number of 988,373 special settlers in the republic by 1953, only 2,472 were Kalmyks [Zemskov 2005: 284]. Regarding the geographical distribution of special settlements within the USSR, the Qazaq SSR stood out as a prominent deportation zone for 'the punished peoples,' hosting approximately a million special settlers by 1953. In contrast, the Central Asian republics collectively hosted around 380,000 special settlers (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan). Following Qazaqstan, the Western Siberia region emerged as the second most prominent destination for 758,000 special settlers, encompassing krays and oblasts such as Krasnoyarsk, Altai, Novosibirsk, Tomsk, Omsk, Tyumen [Berdinskikh 2015: 87].

⁹ This comprehensive dataset facilitated an exploration into the life journeys of special settlers, spanning from birth to release from the system or passing. It offers valuable data and insights into their lives within the special settlements and prior to deportation, encompassing detailed profiles, mug shots, letters, requests for release, autobiographies, references, personal documents such as passports and diplomas, informant or agent reports, and, in some cases, arrest orders (if applicable).

¹⁰ For accuracy and brevity, the collection housing these files will be abbreviated within the text of this study as QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty) or QR BP QSAEAKA (Astana). This abbreviation refers to the divided location of the collection between two branches of the Archive of the Committee on Legal Statistics and Special Accounts of the General Prosecutor's Office of Qazaqstan, known in Qazaq as Qazaqstan Respwblıkası Bas Prokwratwrasınıñ Quıqıqtıq Statıstıka jäne Arnayı Esepke Alu jöınıdegi Komıtetınıñ Arkhıvi (QR BP QSAEAKA).

¹¹ The number of Kalmyk special settlers in the oblasts of the Qazaq SSR were as follows: Kyzyl-Orda 2,006, Alma-Ata 143, Karaganda 73, Taldy-Kurgan 50, Dzhambul 31, Kustanai 28, Semipalatinsk 27, South Qazaqstan 25, Pavlodar 22, Aktobe 20, Guryev 15, North Qazaqstan 11, Akmola 10, Kokchetav 8, West Qazaqstan 2, East Qazaqstan 1 [Zemskov 2005a: 297–301].

second-largest population of the Kalmyk contingent in the Qazaq SSR by 1953, as reinforced by the results of this study.

What sets the Kalmyk contingent of Alma-Ata Oblast apart?

It is worth noting that although statistical data was considered for Alma-Ata oblast, the analysis of personal files revealed that the majority of Kalmyk special settlers primarily resided in the city. The remaining population was thinly dispersed in comparatively modest numbers across sovkhoses and kolkhozes of four raions, located approximately eighteen to fifty kilometers from Alma-Ata,¹² namely Ili, Kegen, Zhambyl, and Kaskelen.¹³ Consequently, this suggests the concentration of the oblast's Kalmyk contingent in the capital of the Qazaq SSR and its adjacent raions.

Additionally, Kalmyk special settlers in the oblast originated from specific geographical regions. These regions included some border raions of the former Kalmyk ASSR and the city of Elista. However, the majority of them came from neighboring areas, such as Stavropol Kray, Rostov Oblast, Stalingrad Oblast, and Astrakhan within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Moreover, the analysis of biographical information contained in the personal files revealed a correlation with common places of birth among the contingent. Most of them were born in Stanitsas or Khutors,¹⁴ such as Grabbevskaia, Novo-Alekseevskaia, Novo-Nikolaevskaia, Batlaevskaia, Erketinskaia, and Salsk.¹⁵ Additionally, a small number of special settlers from the city of Elista, who had relocated there in the 1920s from bordering areas between Orenburg and Chelyabinsk oblasts, also identified among them. Thus, it appears that the majority of Kalmyk special settlers in Alma-Ata oblast share specific geographical origins, suggesting a relation to the Don Kalmyks and the Orenburg Kalmyks.

In addition to the regional origins of the Kalmyk contingent in the oblast, another noteworthy observation is their widespread adoption of Russian-Orthodox names and surnames. This practice indicates that over the course of three generations, giving their children such names became inherent to them. In turn, it indicates that over the course of three generations, starting from the end of the nineteenth century, they have adhered to giving such names [Bolatkhan 2023: 140–141].

Who constituted the Kalmyk special settlers in the Oblast?

The Kalmyks in the special settlements within Alma-Ata oblast of the Qazaq SSR can be classified into three distinct categories based on their pre-locations, which, in its turn may exhibit characteristics that belong to multiple categories. The first category comprises deportees who were initially exiled to Siberian krays and oblasts but later managed to relocate to Alma-Ata oblast. The reasons, according to official documents attached to their personal files' records, were granted permission to change places of their special settlements, which included *reunification with family members, enrollment in higher education institutions, and seeking suitable job prospects* within the territory administered by the oblast.

The second category consists of Kalmyks who were discharged from the Soviet army and their family members. Most of them preferred to reside in Alma-Ata, indicating their active preference for staying in the city. Notably, approximately all of these former red armies were highly awarded

¹² Alma-Ata served as the capital of the Qazaq SSR and as the administrative centre of the eponymous oblast, which was later renamed Almaty, in 1993.

¹³ Approximately, the city of Alma-Ata had 58.1% of Kalmyk special settlers in the oblast, with Ili raion at 17.1%, Kaskelen raion at 16.2%, Kegen raion at 5.7%, and Zhambyl raion at 2.9%

¹⁴ 'Stanitsa' refers to a Cossack settlement known for its involvement in defense and military activities. 'Khutor,' in its turn, refers to a small rural settlement, smaller in scale than a village, and often serving agricultural purposes.

¹⁵ Until 1884, Salsk was known as the Kalmyk okrug of the Don Host Oblast (since 1887 Rostov Uezd).

for their merits during WW II officers and sergeants,¹⁶ who strived to reunite with their family members exiled to Siberia.

The third category includes deportees from the echelon sent to Qyzyl-Orda oblast but later managed to relocate to Alma-Ata according to enrollments in higher education institutions in the capital city. The cases are of significant interest, similar to Kalmyk special settlers who could get permission to change their special settlements for the same reason from Siberian exile to the Qazaq SSR. Due to strict provisions governing the regime until 1953, representatives of contingents from the category of those exiled 'in perpetuity,' which included the Kalmyks, were officially prohibited from gaining admission to universities in major cities of the USSR republics [Zemskov 2005a: 239]. Consequently, they were compelled to pursue studies only in local educational institutions of oblasts. Nevertheless, despite these circumstances, some Kalmyks from Qyzyl-Orda oblast made diligent efforts to change the location of their special settlements to Alma-Ata. According to the analysis of their personal files, there was a correlation between approvals and cooperation with the commandant's offices as agents. However, this latter category is relatively small in number, and their decision to settle in the city can be attributed to their ambition to seek better life opportunities [Bolatkhan 2023: 141–151]. Considering that all of them had Komsomol membership and graduated from Russian language schools, which together offered advantages in terms of career prospects in the Soviet time realities. The opportunities in Alma-Ata, the capital city, were more favorable compared to other places in the Qazaq SSR.

Overall, Kalmyk special settlers in Alma-Ata oblast from 1944 to 1953 can be characterized by high levels of literacy, a strong adherence to Soviet values, and notable achievements within the regime, highlighting the exceptional nature of this group [Bolatkhan 2023: 155]. This is particularly noteworthy considering that by March 1949, only 201 individuals among adult Kalmyk special settlers across the entire Soviet Union possessed a higher education degree, and the total number with a secondary level of education amounted to 1,367, while 28,020 held a lower educational standing. The remaining portion, which constitutes over thirty-nine percent of the population, stood as illiterate. This was one of the actual issues for the system in the 1950s as well [Zemskov 2005a: 247; Bugai 1992b: 141]. Therefore, such quality composition of the contingent in the oblast is of significant interest.

Why was Alma-Ata oblast the chosen one?

Kalmyk special settlers deliberately chose Alma-Ata oblast due to a combination of factors driven by a survival strategy. Firstly, the fact of anthropological similarities of Kalmyks with the local population, Qazaqs, was crucial. This resemblance allowed them to avoid immediate recognition and further discrimination. Consequently, it reduced the risk of hostility they had to face daily in Siberian exile as it set them apart from the locals, immediately signaling their identity as deportees. Secondly, proficiency in the Russian language was instrumental for those seeking a better life within the constraints of the regime, offering improved career prospects compared to other places. As a result, the oblast, particularly due to the city of Alma-Ata, emerged as an attractive destination for those who prioritized their own well-being [Bolatkhan 2023: 152–154]. It is noteworthy to mention that some scholars, when addressing widespread requests for permission to relocate to the Qazaq SSR from many Kalmyks during the special settlement system, have attributed these attempts to a yearning for a more familiar natural and lifestyle environment, often drawing connections to nomadic culture [Kukanova, Ochirov 2021: 755]. However, it should be clarified that the desire for a more familiar natural and lifestyle environment was a favorable factor but not a decisive one for Kalmyk special settlers within Alma-Ata oblast of the Qazaq

¹⁶ It is important to note that by March 1949 within the USSR among Kalmyk contingent were 6,134 former Red Armies with varying lengths of service, including 383 officers, 1118 sergeants, and 4,633 soldiers, constituting comparatively modest figures [Zemskov 2005a: 244–245].

SSR. As observed in this study, representatives of this contingent did not intend to replicate the lifestyle of their nomadic ancestors in this region, explicitly aspiring to reside in Alma-Ata city.

Hence, the contingent in Alma-Ata oblast from 1944 to 1953 constituted a group of Kalmyks who purposefully selected their preferred locations for special settlements within the USSR. This sets them apart from the usual practice, where the system designs special settlements and forms contingents forcibly. Furthermore, we are well acquainted with the designated purpose of special settlements as a labour force, primarily located in remote agricultural and industrial areas within the country. Moreover, as some scholars have pointed out, Stalin's regime practiced intentionally sending deported groups based on their ethnicity to regions with harsh conditions, such as the Siberian taiga and the barren steppes of Qazaqstan [Pohl 2000: 275].

Furthermore, the exceptional nature of this group is reflected in interconnected factors, such as their strong adherence to informal networks and personal connections based on relative or fictive kin ties, collaboration with the system to obtain privileges, and release from the special settlements.

All Kalmyks need to be re-educated, but some of them are not

Nikita Khrushchev, during his report 'On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences' on 25 February 1956 at the Congress of the CPSU, emphasized the exemplary nature of the USSR as a multinational state while criticizing the deportations that occurred during the Great Patriotic War. He asserted that entire ethnic groups were forcibly exiled en masse, irrespective of their party and Komsomol memberships, without any exceptions [Stalin 1997: 417].

It is worth noting that scholarly inquiries dedicated to the historical examination of the history of 'the punished peoples' exiled in perpetuity and the special settlement regime itself have tended to concur with Khrushchev's assertions regarding the apparent absence of exceptions within the regime, albeit in varying forms. This suggests that the notion of even the most outstanding representatives of the category 'exiled in perpetuity' were not granted freedom from the special settlements [Zemskov 2005a: 178; Westren 2012: 26, et al]. Naturally, it is predictable to conclude that no one from this category could be released as the system appeared exclusively merciless toward them. Especially when compared to the category of 'former kulaks' exiled with uncertain terms, whose children were eligible for release after the age of sixteen,¹⁷ as well as the contingent of 'vlasovites.' In contrast, the children of 'the punished peoples,' including orphanage residents¹⁸ were subjected to special settlements for a lifelong period after reaching the age of sixteen [Zemskov 2005a: 198, 213, 235].

However, the main objective of this study is to present arguments suggesting the presence of exceptions that extended beyond isolated instances but were instead systematic practices applied within specific categories among ethnic groups 'exiled in perpetuity.' This presence of exceptions will be exemplified in the case of the Kalmyks.

Among the Kalmyk contingent in Alma-Ata oblast, some special settlers were released from the system. Two former red armies and both party members successfully challenged their status within the system and were eventually set free from special settlements. The first one is a lawyer named Aduchi,¹⁹ born in 1910 in the family of an impoverished peasant in Krasnoarmeysk raion of Stalingrad Oblast. After graduating from the Military Law Academy in Moscow in 1939, he served as a military prosecutor's assistant in various locations across the USSR. Demobilized from military service in May 1946 and subsequently assumed a position as a senior lecturer at Alma-Ata State Law Institute. According to the personal file records, it appears that he was registered

¹⁷ According to the decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR on October 22, 1938.

¹⁸ According to Special Directive No. of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR dated July 23, 1948.

¹⁹ For ethical reasons, a fictional name with the same ethnic and cultural affiliations is used.

as a special settler in March 1949. Since then, he began tirelessly addressing appeals and letters to authorities, from Joseph Stalin to the Prosecutor of the Qazaq SSR, urging them to examine his case by attaching supporting documents, including references from his previous place of employment, the Military Prosecutor's Office under the General Prosecutor's Office of the USSR, with similar content. It stated that Comrade Aduchi was discharged from the Soviet Army on 15 May 1946 due to health conditions and was granted a pension from the Ministry of the Armed Forces of the USSR. Throughout his service, he displayed moral stability and modesty. He excelled in prosecutorial work and had good relationships with colleagues. Aduchi also demonstrated correct political judgment in both internal situations within the USSR and international affairs, dedicated to the party ideas, honored with the medals 'For Military Merit' and 'For the Victory over Germany in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945.'²⁰

Finally, after three years of persistent efforts, he, along with his wife, one child, and mother as family members,²¹ was eventually set free from the special settlements based on the release order approved by Petr Kondakov, the Deputy Minister of State Security of the USSR, on March 26, 1952. The conclusion stated the argument for their release as follows:

Given that Aduchi and his family did not live in the territory of the former Kalmyk ASSR since 1932, and until 1946 he served in the Soviet Army where he was transferred to the reserve due to health issues in the rank of major of justice.²²

The second case of release from the special settlements pertains to a secondary school employee Petr Vasilievich Khomutnikov, born in Martynovsky raion of Rostov Oblast. He arrived from the Red Army in Alma-Ata oblast and then later received permission to relocate his family from exile in Krasnoyarsk Kray to reunify with him. Furthermore, in appeals written in 1951 he expressed that, for *unknown reasons*, he and his family registered as special settlers in February 1949 and were limited in their movements. From then until their release in July 1954, he tirelessly wrote to various authorities, requesting an exemption, just like his stepmother, Ochki Kolpakovna Khomutnikova, and half-brother, Viktor Vasilyevich Khomutnikov *who were set free* from the special settlements in Moscow for merits of his father to the country.²³

Eventually, based on the release order of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs Petr and his family, which included his wife, four children, and mother were officially set free from the special settlements. *Zaklyucheniyе* stated:

Comrade Petr Khomutnikov was conscripted into the Soviet Army in 1939 and was discharged on national grounds as a Kalmyk in 1945. After his discharge, he relocated to Alma-Ata Oblast of the Qazaq SSR to reunite with his family, who had been residing there since 1945. In February 1949, he was taken into registration in the special settlements.

Considering that Petr Khomutnikov is a member of the Communist Party and has received governmental awards during the war Set free from the special settlements him, and his family members.²⁴

²⁰ QR BP QSАEАKА (Аlmaty), h. (holding/fond) 9, f. (file/delo) 84, fol. (folio/pages) 18, 21, 26, 29–31, 38, 53, 73, 88.

²¹ *Ibid.*, h. 9, h. 83, fol. 11; h. 9, h. 147, fol. 9; h. 9, f. 140, fol. 10.

²² *Ibid.*, h. 9, h. 84, fol. 92.

²³ According to Petr's letters and appeals, sent to the highest executive and administrative organs of the USSR from 1951 to 1954, his father, Vasilii Alekseevich Khomutnikov, was honored with the highest governmental awards during the civil war. At the beginning of the 1920s, he accomplished a special mission in Tibet through a personal appointment by Lenin. In addition, Vasilii Alekseevich was tasked with helping to suppress the counter-revolutionary rebellion led by Baron Ungern in Mongolia and other important state assignments. From 1930, he actively participated in Soviet-party work and served as a deputy of the Supreme Council of the USSR. As World War II began, he promptly returned to the Red Army and passed away in 1945 during the capture of Budapest [QR BP QSАEАKА (Astana), h. 9, f. 21, fol. 31–36].

²⁴ QR BP QSАEАKА (Astana), h. 9, f. 21, fol. 118–120; h. 9, f. 22, fol. 17.

Here, the regime's inclination to grant Petr's request is evident. However, the noteworthy merits of his father in service to the Motherland provided compelling evidence of their «Sovietiness» and influenced the system's favorable disposition. However, it could not be considered verdict grounds *de jure* due to the factor, apparently, Petr's release from the special settlement had been confined by average justifications as depicted in *Zaklyucheniye*. In its turn, this may reflect a deliberate interpretation of the information concerning Petr's family residence in Alma-Ata oblast of the Qazaq SSR. Despite Petr's consistent and explicit indications in his numerous appeals and accompanying documents that he had arrived in Alma-Ata oblast from the army and subsequently received permission²⁵ to relocate his family from Siberian exile to the oblast, official documents²⁶ present a contrasting narrative. These documents suggest that Petr arrived to join his family, who already resided in the Qazaq SSR, in addition to not mentioning their lack of registration in the local commandant offices as relocated special settlers and their unregistered residency in the oblast from 1945 to 1949.

Therefore, this case underscores double standards within the special settlements, as well as the system policy as a whole. The release of Petr and his family appears to be a convergence of both favorable treatment due to his father's merits and a strategic interpretation of facts to align with the official narrative, coupled with a selective presentation of information.

It is worth highlighting that a substantial portion of demobilized Kalmyks in special settlements within Alma-Ata oblast actively sought release or appealed for a reconsideration of their cases. They frequently addressed numerous stresses to governmental and party entities of the USSR, furnishing comprehensive explanations of their circumstances. Given their active participation in the Great Patriotic War and the fact that their arrival in the Qazaq SSR directly followed their wartime service (as they were not initially exiled), each of them harbored the belief that their designation as special settlers was a mistake.²⁷ In certain cases, the context implies that the practice of releasing individuals from the regime among special settlers had already been established, categorized according to specific criteria. For instance, in June 1952, a Reserve Officer of the Soviet Army penned an appeal to the Head of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, requesting the release of himself and his family. The appeal stated:

Узнав теперь о существовании справедливого положения Нашего Правительства о том, что офицера запаса Советской армии – участника Великой Отечественной войны могут быть сняты со спецучета и освобождены, прошу Вас...

(which will translated as: Having discovered the Government's just stance that reserve officers of the Soviet Army – participants in the war can be set free from special settlements and exempted, I kindly request...)²⁸

An important point of phrasing in this text is 'Having discovered the Government's just stance,' as it signifies that the author is explicitly acknowledging his awareness of the established policy regarding the potential for releasing individuals from the special settlements. This context also refers to the possibility of being justified by Stalin's Soviet state, despite his belonging to the category of punished people 'exiled in perpetuity.'

²⁵ № 52/680, dated October 1, 1945, is the permission granted by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the USSR.

²⁶ Certificates and conclusions signed by the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR, as well as the MVD of the Qazaq SSR, the head of Alma-Ata oblast Department of MVD.

²⁷ QR BP QSAEAKA (Astana), h. 9, f. 264, fol. 10–11, 27–30, 61–66; *Ibid.*, f. 86, fol. 9, 32–34; *Ibid.*, f. 1673, fol. 18, 35; *Ibid.*, f. 2951, fol. 2; *Ibid.*, f. 2954, fol. 2; *Ibid.*, f. 3411, fol. 2; *Ibid.*, f. 3470, fol. 4–6; *Ibid.*, f. 5861, fol. 37–38; *Ibid.*, f. 7441, fol. 5–9, 17–19, 42–44, 119–120; *Ibid.*, f. 6957, fol. 2; QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f. 197, fol. 9–11, 20–25, 43; *Ibid.*, f. 213, fol. 7–12, 25–28, 37–43; *Ibid.*, f. 419, fol. 2, *Ibid.*, f. 438, fol. 2; *Ibid.*, f. 596, fol. 2, 14–17; *Ibid.*, f. 615, fol. 33–34, 60–64, 73–74; *Ibid.*, f. 657, fol. 15–24.

²⁸ QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f. 213, fol. 27.

It is noteworthy to mention that such direct and courageous appeals are rarely encountered. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe the differentiation in writing styles and presentation of information within these appeals. These variations depend on various factors such as background, social category, and the level of collaboration with the regime, which determine the extent of their understanding of how the system operates and where and how to address their appeals.

However, regardless of the writing proficiency or number of appeals addressed to Soviet leadership, from Stalin to the Minister of State Security of the USSR, a majority of them were forwarded to the MVD of the Qazaq SSR, where conclusions with refusals for release from the special settlement were composed. These refusals were based on grounds citing their nationality as Kalmyk, which affirmed the rightfulness of their registration in the special settlement, as per a governmental decision. Afterward, conclusions were transmitted to the regional special commandant's offices, which were obligated to personally explain the implications of decisions to each special settler. Perhaps they found some comfort in knowing that their unwavering devotion and invaluable services to the country granted them the opportunity to choose their place of special settlement after demobilization from the Red Army. We can only speculate, but one thing is certain: they chose to end up in Alma-Ata oblast of the Qazaq SSR and endeavored to relocate their family members from Siberian exile to the oblast, and they did.

Furthermore, most of these special settlers in Alma-Ata oblast from the group of demobilized Kalmyks were esteemed recipients of the highest military honors in the USSR, including the Red Star order and the For Courage medal, which were considered no less prestigious than the decorations received by those two who were granted release from special settlements.

Regarding these two cases, they are intriguing not only from the perspective of challenging the conventional view, which posits that individuals from repressed ethnic groups were not granted release from special settlements, regardless of their exceptional merits but also because they offer valuable insights into other interconnected factors that underscore the exceptional nature of the Kalmyk contingent in the oblast. This situation prompts a question: why were certain individuals from this already privileged group deemed Sovietiness enough to be released from the regime, while others were not? Without a doubt, such decisions could not have been made without the personal involvement or permission of Stalin and his deputies.

Upon not only an initial examination but also a more thorough analysis of their personal files, it will seem that Aduchi and Petr are distinctly different, except for the presence of the conclusion 'set free from special settlement.' They were born in different oblasts of the RSFSR and had diverse upbringing experiences. Moreover, their educational backgrounds and individual pursuits differ substantially, with one pursuing a career in education and the other a former military prosecutor. Additionally, during the war, they were deployed to distinct locations and held different positions. Their family circumstances also diverged, as one's family experienced Siberian exile, while the other's did not forcibly send into the eastern parts of the USSR. Furthermore, their places of residence within Alma-Ata oblast were in separate raions, which makes it unlikely for them to be served by the same commandant office. Given these substantial differences, it would be reasonable to adhere to the general assumption, unless tiny and easily overlooked detail in one of the many handwritten reports on asking permission to leave the place of residence.

On 8 August 1950, Aduchi's son Mergen²⁹ had to fill a report requesting permission to visit horse farm No. 50 within Alma-Ata oblast during the summer school holidays to visit his relatives, mentioning only the surname Khomutnikov.³⁰ Considering that, at that moment, only one family with such a surname lived in the oblast, and this aligned with the biography data of Petr Khomutnikov, who during the same period was working as the head of the seven-year school of

²⁹ For ethical reasons, a fictional name with the same ethnic and cultural affiliations is used.

³⁰ QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f. 140, fol. 11; *Ibid.*, h. 9, f. 84, fol. 86.

the state farm named after Stalin (to which the horse farm No. 50 belonged).³¹ Hence, it becomes apparent that Aduchi and Petr were connected through relative or fictive kin ties.

The presence of close personal connections among Kalmyk special settlers in the oblast is also evident in the materials of other personal files, irrespective of their categorization based on their pre-oblast locations. For instance, Tseden³² and his family members were attributed to the ‘from Siberian exile’ category within the group of Kalmyk contingent in the oblast. He was a native-born from Novo-Nikolaevskaya in Kalmyk raion of the Rostov oblast who had worked in various temporary jobs related to industrial device repair in Krasnoyarsk Kray. In the Qazaq SSR, Tseden found himself owing to a guarantee extended by Petr Vasilievich Khomutnikov, who committed to arranging employment for him at the school led by him, while also providing accommodation. In turn, Tseden, in written requests complaining about declining health, mentioned his familiarity with Petr for over two decades and highlighted that their wives are relatives.³³ As a result of a combination of reasons, including the deterioration of Tseden’s health, inability to support his family in Siberian exile, and favorable opportunities in the oblast, he, his wife, and four children aged between fourteen and twenty-three, and one son-in-law were granted permission to relocate their place of special settlements to the Qazaq SSR.³⁴

Another example of informal ties is evident in the case of Alexander’s³⁵ family, originating from Chesmiinsk of Chelyabinsk oblast. They were exiled from Elista to Novosibirsk oblast in 1943 due to his Kalmyk nationality. As a result of his son-in-law’s escape during the war, his family underwent constant surveillance, suspecting possible clandestine connections with the Nazis. Agent reports described them as highly educated and politically literate individuals, holding significant influence within the community of exiled Kalmyks.

Alexander and his wife were not employed due to their advanced age, relying primarily on the income of their fifty-year-old daughter, who worked as an accountant, and two sons. The youngest son had participated in the war but returned due to injuries, while the other served as a naval officer since 1940, which was interrupted in 1944 due to a three-year sentence for alcohol abuse during duty hours and its associated consequences. After the war, the youngest son mastered the profession of an accountant, and in 1950, he relocated to the Qazaq SSR, with other family members subsequently joining him. As a result, they were collectively categorized as part of the ‘from Siberian exile’ within the group of Kalmyk special settlers in the oblast. Upon analyzing their cases, it becomes evident that they were aware of the potential offered in Alma-Ata city, where they could avoid facial discrimination and access better opportunities, including favorable career prospects. Consequently, they systematically pursued relocation there and even guided others in their attempts to obtain permission for relocation.³⁶

Interestingly, despite the seemingly disparate backgrounds of the previously discussed cases, the descendants of the Don Kalmyks and Alexander, who hailed from the Orenburg Kalmyks had a shared connection in the person of Petr’s father, Vasilii Alekseevich Khomutnikov.

It was discovered that the youngest son of Alexander had made frequent visits to Vasilii Khomutnikov and Oka Ivanovich Gorodovikov³⁷ in Moscow. He often shared stories about these

³¹ QR BP QSAEAKA (Astana), h. 9, f. 21, fol. 17–19.

³² For ethical reasons, a fictional name with the same ethnic and cultural affiliations is used.

³³ QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f. 474, fol. 5, 17, 19.

³⁴ Ibid., h. 9, f. 475, fol. 2; Ibid., h. 9, f. 476, fol. 2, 10; Ibid., h. 9, f. 477, fol. 2, 4, 14.

³⁵ For ethical reasons, a fictional name with the same ethnic and cultural affiliations is used.

³⁶ QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f. 550, fol. 13, 14, 46; Ibid., f. 549, fol. 17, 30; Ibid., f. 548, fol. 2; Ibid., f. 551, fol. 57, 63, 104, 106, 112, 117.

³⁷ Oka Ivanovich Gorodovikov was a notable military leader during the Civil and Great Patriotic Wars, Deputy of the Council of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in the first convocation (1937–1946).

with pride among Kalmyk special settlers, as revealed in agent reports.³⁸ The extent and depth of these connections remain uncertain. However, the aspect of the story involving their interactions during visits appears plausible. Considering that at that period, both, Oka Gorodovikov and Vasiliy Khomutnikov were Kalmyks highly esteemed among all Union due to their military accomplishments, as well as for Soviet officials as comrades-in-arms, fighting together for victory during the Civil War. Before the deportation, it was a common scenario for Kalmyks visiting Moscow to have encounters with them, given the limited number of brethren residing in the capital of the USSR at that time. Most interestingly, Oka Gorodovikov led the renowned Initiative Group,³⁹ which considered a core of efforts to re-establish the Kalmyk ASSR, liquidated in 1943. As known, the members of this group of consolidated party leadership and representatives of the creative intelligentsia from the former Kalmyk ASSR, with a remarkable history of participating in various significant events within the USSR [Kokshunova 2020: 23–60, 291, 510]. One of the active supporters of the group's activities was Ochki Kolpakovna Khomutnikova, who was released from the special settlement before the 1950s due to the merits of her husband, Vasiliy Alekseevich Khomutnikov.

Nevertheless, the intension is not to assert that all Kalmyk special settlers in Alma-Ata oblast were exclusively associated with Khomutnikov or gathered around these cases. Rather, it was an attempt to focus on emphasizing the significant role played by informal networks in shaping the Kalmyk contingent in the oblast. These networks served as avenues for individuals to seek and provide support to one another which often expressed the exchange of valuable information and the arrangement of settlement places, aid in job searches, facilitating access to education, and even withholding certain information or the truth. For example, Oleg,⁴⁰ a Kalmyk born in 1927, frequently encountered employment difficulties in Krasnoyarsk Krai due to his disability. After his sole close relative passed away in 1947, Oleg left the designated settlement area without official permission. Followed, he ended up in the Qazaq SSR by 1949, where worked as a herdsman at one state-owned pig farm, svinsovkhoz, in Ili raion of Alma-Ata oblast.

Meanwhile, in 1949, Krasnoyarsk Krai' UMVD discovered Oleg's absence and initiated agent-search proceedings, resulting in his inclusion on the All-Union wanted list, a status that persisted until the summer of 1951. On the other hand, records from the regional department of MVD of the Qazaq SSR indicate that Oleg had arrived in 1944 from 'Metrostroy' in Gudauta raion of the Abkhaz ASSR, which presents a reverse scenario.⁴¹

As we can observe, the case contains numerous questionable nuances and gaps, making it highly improbable for a single nonliterate herdsman to conceal them all without the help and support of others. Considering that some Kalmyks resettled from Gudauta raion of the Abkhaz ASSR were already residing and working in the same svinsovkhoz,⁴² it is reasonable to surmise that they not only aided Oleg in securing employment but also potentially instructed him in constructing a believable storyline.

Selective favoritism and Confirmed «Sovietiness»

In previous parts of the study, we attempted to argue that the Kalmyk contingent in the oblast stood out as a self-formed group consisting of interconnected individuals who received exclusive treatment from the regime. In its turn, the existence of such special consideration highlighted

³⁸ QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f.551, fol. 20.

³⁹ At the end of 1956, members of the Initiative Group for the Restoration of the Kalmyk Autonomous Oblast were invited to the Central Committee of the CPSU in Moscow. From among the invitees, the Organizational Bureau of the Kalmyk Regional Party Organization was established.

⁴⁰ For ethical reasons, a fictional name with the same ethnic and cultural affiliations is used.

⁴¹ QR BP QSAEAKA (Astana), h. 9, f. 3404, fol. 2, 9, 50–51.

⁴² QR BP QSAEAKA (Astana), h. 9, f. 3405, fol. 2; Ibid., f. 3411, fol. 2; Ibid., f. 3412, fol. 2; Ibid., 3413, fol. 2; Ibid., f. 3414, fol. 2; Ibid., f. 3415, fol. 2; Ibid., f. 3416, fol. 2.

dual standards in the interpretation of officially announced policies concerning the ‘punished peoples’ at that time. Furthermore, most of these special settlers shared the experience of actively involvement in significant events during both, the Tsarist and Soviet periods. Their engagements encompassed diverse military and public endeavors, which earned them respect and trust within the system, affirming their loyalty to socialism.

Advancing into our examination of the manifestation of such distinct favoritism, rooted in confirmed Sovietiness, we now shift our focus to Svyatoslav.⁴³ Hailing from the Rostov region, particularly the former Stanitsa Novo-Alekseevskaya, Komsomol member since the age of eighteen. His service in the Soviet army, spanning from 1943 to 1949, concluded due to health-related issues, the point he strongly emphasized.

Following the military service, Svyatoslav arrived in Altai Kray, where his family from another Siberian oblast joined him a year later. Svyatoslav made a particular request for the relocation of his family, underlining his own health conditions as a disabled veteran of the Soviet army classified in the 3rd group with the necessity for dietary arrangements, all of which emphasized his need to have his family nearby.

Notably, this request defied the norm due to the regime’s typical restrictions on relocating entire families, particularly those comprising primarily adults settled and employed by their assigned places of exile. However, Svyatoslav’s family, including his parents, six siblings, and two brothers-in-law, were granted permission to change their previous places of special settlements to Altai Kray. This scenario is uncommon and contrasts with the standard regulations, where the system typically rejects and recommends individuals to join their families in their places of special settlements, considering it a practical and rational approach.

Moreover, in 1953, Svyatoslav gained admission to a medical institute in Alma-Ata, which led to his relocation to the Qazaq SSR.⁴⁴ This transition deviated from the norm is noteworthy, as individuals earmarked for perpetual exile in special settlements were typically barred from pursuing education beyond their designated oblasts, let alone venturing into different republics.

Another individual who holds significance as a prominent figure in this field is Galsan,⁴⁵ who was recognized as one of the initial organizers of the healthcare system in the Kalmyk ASSR. Prior to voluntarily joining the Red Army in 1941 as a ten-year-experienced doctor. During the war decorated with the Orders of the Red Star and the Order of the Patriotic War, Second Degree, in addition to medals for Military Merit and Victory over Germany. Following his demobilization from the Turkestan military district of the Soviet Army arrived in Tomsk in 1945 and then next year to Alma-Ata city with his family. Between 1946 and 1949, he was not subject to registration under a special settlement regime. His wife, like him, was a party member and a prominent medical worker among Kalmyks prior to their deportation.⁴⁶

The next case under consideration involves Nikolai’s,⁴⁷ who with his family, led by his elder brother, was granted permission to relocate from Krasnoyarsk Kray to one of the state farms within Ili raion of the oblast located in 18 kilometers from of Alma-Ata city, in 1947. Information from their personal records suggests that the family cooperated with the commandant’s offices upon their arrival in the Qazaq SSR. However, Nikolai himself persistently endeavored to relocate from the raion to the city of Alma-Ata. His pursuit began by securing a position as an agronomist within one of the city’s collective farms in August 1950. He then attempted to enroll in correspondence courses at the Qazaq State Agricultural Institute for three consecutive years.

⁴³ For ethical reasons, a fictional name with the same ethnic and cultural affiliations is used.

⁴⁴ QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f. 451, fol. 2, 4, 5, 22, 28.

⁴⁵ For ethical reasons, a fictional name with the same ethnic and cultural affiliations is used.

⁴⁶ QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f. 197, fol. 9–11, 39, 55; *Ibid.*, f. 135, fol. 2; *Ibid.*, f. 137, fol. 2, 18.

⁴⁷ For ethical reasons, a fictional name with the same ethnic and cultural affiliations is used.

Despite his determined efforts, he encountered challenges that prevented his enrollment until 1954. Through his appeals, he fervently expressed his unswerving commitment to continuous self-improvement as a Komsomol member. Ultimately, he could change the place of special settlements to the city in August 1954 due to his marriage to a student of the medical institute in Alma-Ata city.⁴⁸

The next case pertains to Sanji Kalyaev, whose personal file indicates that he was a non-party kolkhoznik in a collective farm named after Engels in the Ili raion of Alma-Ata oblast. However, numerous handwritten appeals authored by him to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR reveal an arrest in 1937 by the NKVD in the city of Elista and send to a correctional labor camp in Kolyma. Following his liberation from the labour camp in Irkutsk oblast he arrived in the oblast of the Qazaq SSR by March 1, 1943, which was deliberately chosen as his permanent residence. After taking him into registration to the regime in 1949, he attempted to contest his new status, asserting that by not being deported people cannot be considered as special settlers. Further noted that orphaned from a nomadic family at a young age and managed to receive a solid education due to opportunities that arose with the establishment of Soviet Power. In 1924 became a party member, and upon completing studies at the Saratov Pedagogical Institute, he was directed by the regional committee of the party to engage in aspirantura⁴⁹ at the same institution. During this period, he, along with two other professors, authored 'Grammar of the Kalmyk Language' for elementary schools, among other textbooks. In 1934, as a member of the Union of Soviet Writers, he was granted a leave for creative work, which provided the opportunity to contribute to developing the literature and translations of Russian classics into the Kalmyk language. Following this, the regional committee of the CPSU appointed him to the position of director of an art school. Concurrently, he also taught Kalmyk literature part-time at the Astrakhan Pedagogical Institute. During this period, he received awards for exceptional work and proposed for an assistant professor title on August 30, 1935. In the summer of 1936, the Council of People's Commissars of the Kalmyk ASSR assigned him to establish the Kalmyk State Theater, resulting in the transfer from Astrakhan. As a result, S. Kalyaev led the team who were responsible to organize the creation of the State Theatre, which was inaugurated on 6 November 1936, and for what he was awarded the title of 'Honored Worker of Art of the RSFSR'. In addition to his role as Director of the State Theatre, he concurrently held the position of head of the department for arts under the Council of People's Commissars of the Kalmyk ASSR. Moreover, he was involved in organizing numerous collective farms and leading efforts to combat banditry in the Kalmyk ASSR's steppes as the head of the operational group for anti-bandit operations.

However, in early 1937, he fell seriously ill, spending two months bedridden, during which all his positions were dismissed, expelled from the party in absentia, and subsequently arrested based on a verdict from a special meeting of the NKVD of the USSR. After spending four years and eight months in labor camps, he arrived in Alma-Ata oblast, where had to work as kolkhoznik until 1950. Upon recovering his confiscated diploma during the arrest, he secured a position as a Russian language teacher at a seven-year school where Petr Khomutnikov used to work, prior to his eventual return to Kalmykia in 1957.⁵⁰ In the present day, he is recognized as a People's Poet and a notable representative within the small number of Kalmyk intelligentsia of that era [Eldyshev 2014: 194]. His lasting impact extends to contributions as a foundational figure in modern Kalmyk literature. Furthermore, his association with figures like Harti Kanukov⁵¹ sets the stage for the case of Tseren, which we intend to examine next.

⁴⁸ QR BP QSAAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f. 411, fol. 2, 10, 11, 17, 21–24, 31, 32, 42, 44, 45; *Ibid.*, f. 412, fol. 2, 15–28, 34.

⁴⁹ Postgraduate program involving advanced academic research leading to a research-based thesis.

⁵⁰ QR BP QSAAEAKA (Astana), h. 9, f. 1673, fol. 2, 18, 19, 21–24, 32, 35.

⁵¹ H. Kanukov, a poet, publicist, and revolutionary, emerged as a pivotal figure in the political department of the Kalmyk cavalry unit during the Civil War. He skillfully harnessed his deep comprehension of Kalmyk oral folklore and ancient literature to employ propaganda techniques that resonated profoundly with Kalmyk fighters [Ochirova 2016: 43].

Tseren-Dorzhi Nominkhanov, a scholar specializing in Mongolian studies and Old Turkic script, grew up in Stanitsa Grabbevskaia of Salsk, Don Host Oblast. According to numerous handwritten appeals attached in a personal file, he served in the Soviet Army from 1920 to 1923, during which he deployed to Mongolia in early 1921 among 17 Kalmyk commanders led by Comrade Harti Kanukov. Nominkhanov played a significant role in organizing the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Army, serving as a military commandant in Ulaanbaatar and acting as an instructor for the chief of staff of the first Mongolian cavalry brigade.

In 1923, following a referral from the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the USSR, he enrolled at the Mongolian branch of the Leningrad Oriental Institute and pursued his studies there until 1930. During the last two years of the Institute program, he concurrently held the position of a responsible translator of the Mongolian language at 'Stormong.'⁵² In 1935, after completing aspirantura he was appointed by a school department of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of the Soviet Union to teach Mongolian language at the Central Asian State University in Tashkent. Starting in 1940, he transferred to the Uzbek branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences, where he worked until his reassignment to the city of Elista in April 1943. During this period, he also undertook the composition of a dissertation thesis at the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies, successfully defending it to earn the degree of candidate of sciences on April 16, 1943. Following that, he was appointed as an academic secretary at the Research Institute of Language, Literature, and History of the Kalmyk ASSR. However, this appointment was interrupted by the deportation in late December 1943 to the Khakass Autonomous Oblast in Krasnoyarsk Kray.

In the initial months of the exile, he began his employment as a German language teacher at a secondary school. From October 1944 onward, he obtained a position as a researcher at the Research Institute of Language, Literature, and History of the Khakass Autonomous Oblast. Nominkhanov retained this role until March 1949, during which period he held positions as the head of the language sector and also served as an academic secretary. However, on March 2 of the same year, the Institute declared his dismissal due to his status of the 'special settler.' Additionally, he was expelled from the party, of which he had been a member since the early 1920s. The basis for the expulsion was attributed to his alleged involvement in the production of subpar textbooks still in use within Khakass schools for the subsequent decade.

Afterward, Nominkhanov began to address personal letters and appeals to Stalin and Malenkov. He emphasized the profound significance of the coming year for him, as it marked the 25th anniversary of his scholarly and pedagogical experience and his 30th year as a member of the party. He conveyed his assurance that the expulsion from the party and the ongoing unemployment were a direct result of his status as a special settler. Notably, it was highlighted the fact that his children were born in Ulan Bator and had no proficiency in the Kalmyk language. Furthermore, he mentioned that his wife, Tatyana Inokentievna, of Russian nationality, is free from special settlements. In addition, he underscored his own contributions to Soviet academia and his dedication to the ideals of Lenin and Stalin.

Furthermore, in his appeal for release from exile, Nominkhanov presented the argument that during the period from 1935 to 1943, he resided in the Uzbek SSR, indicating that he was not within the Kalmyk ASSR during the war years. Additionally, he requested permission to relocate to one of the Central Asian republics, with a preference for Kyrgyzstan or Qazaqstan, where substantial research institutions related to his field of study existed. His goal was to continue his in-depth exploration of the subject titled 'Comparative Historical Study of Turkic and Mongolian Languages,' encompassing aspects such as lexicon, phonetics, morphology, and syntax. This

⁵² One of the few joint-stock companies engaged in wholesale trade that operated as a collaborative Soviet-Mongolian enterprise [Dyachenko 2019: 63].

study, which spanned 15 Turkic and Mongolian languages, had been a longstanding pursuit. Nominkhanov conveyed his frustration over his inability to secure employment despite his qualifications, asserting that his skills were not in demand in Khakassia.

Although the request for release from special settlements was dismissed, he was granted permission to relocate to the capital city of the Qazaq SSR. After arriving in Alma-Ata on July 18, 1949, he initially secured a position at a public library, later, transitioned to a role as a senior laboratory assistant in the Department of General Linguistics at the Qazaq State University named after Kirov.

According to Nominkhanov, his appeals to Moscow were acknowledged by the deputy head of the propaganda and agitation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Qazaq SSR. This official summoned him on November 29, 1949, and gave a phone call to the boss of him in his presence. Following this encounter, he was granted the opportunity to conduct classes, involving a special course on Old Turkic script. Further, Nominkhanov noted receiving a response from Moscow via Major Yusupov⁵³ as well. However, in July 1951 he was dismissed from the university due to downsizing. In turn, he attributed this dismissal to the status of being the special settler, expressing dismay that an individual lacking even a secondary education replaced him. Despite these challenges, as he stresses, the scholarly activity is persisting and research on his doctoral thesis, titled 'Historical and Linguistic Research on Turkic-Mongolian Lexical Parallels in Connection with Stalin's Teachings on Language's Basic Vocabulary.'

After filing numerous complaints, he was able to secure future employment and managed to combine lecturing at the university with research fellow responsibilities at the Oriental Studies institution of the Qazaq SSR Academy of Sciences. Similarly, he maintained a persistent pursuit of release from exile, arguing that its relayed limitations have moral effects, as the prevalent societal perception frequently considers special settlers as criminals. For instance, in one of his appeals from 1954, it was underscored that altogether it creates difficulties in life such as stated above, which could not be resolved without the intervention of Comrade Malenkov.⁵⁴ In contemporary times, Nominkhanov is revered as a pioneering Kalmyk scholar who attained the title of Doctor of Science, and his influence led to the emergence of a future generation of linguistic scholars [Alekseyeva 1997: 191–53].

Another pioneering scholar of note is Kermen, about whom Sanji Kalyaev,⁵⁵ mentioned earlier in this study, wrote as the first Kalmyk woman mathematician to successfully defend her dissertation in the early 1960s [Mandjieva et al. 2004: 169; Gasparyan 1972: 19]. Commencing her academic journey with enrollment at the Qazaq State University named after Kirov in Alma-Ata, where her family relocated in 1945, Kermen's move was prompted by her father's professional commitments. Until March 1949, their residence was without formal registration within special settlements. Despite his initial assignment to a raion within Alma-Ata oblast, however, Kermen's father secured a position within the Department of State Archives of the MVD of the Qazaq SSR, located in the city. Beginning in July 1946, he transitioned to the role of a junior researcher at the Institute of History, Archeology, and Ethnology of the Academy of Sciences of the Qazaq SSR. In this capacity, he actively engaged in party-related activities, leading the institute's propaganda team, and fulfilling the role of an agitator during election periods for the Soviet Supremes of the SSR, akin to his wife's involvement. Furthermore, their children, Kermen and her younger brother, both joined the Komsomol in the late 1940s.

Notably, the foundation of the family's commitment to the party traces back to Kermen's grandfather, Sangadji, an unwavering Bolshevik and a dedicated participant in the establishment

⁵³ Head of the special department of the MVD of the Qazaq SSR [Berdinskikh 2015: 105].

⁵⁴ QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f. 444, fol. 2, 5, 6, 10, 12, 13–20, 35–37, 76–79, 84–87, 116, 117, 123.

⁵⁵ QR BP QSAEAKA (Astana), h. 9, f. 1673

of Soviet power in Kalmykia. Significantly, in November 1954, the MVD of the Qazaq SSR recommended Sangadji's release from the regime to the MVD of the USSR. This endorsement emphasized his active participation in the civil war, his role as a red partisan, his membership in the CPSU since 1918, and his unwavering engagement in socially beneficial activities spanning over five decades.⁵⁶

Hence, by presenting these instances, the aim was to illustrate how the exclusive treatment of certain representatives of the Kalmyk contingent within Alma-Ata oblast correlated with their confirmed Sovietness.

Conclusion

In summary, the deportation of the Kalmyks stands as a poignant illustration of the intricate interplay among historical bias, ethnic hostility, and political determinations. Across centuries, the persistent depiction of these people as unreliable nomads ingrained a prejudice that shaped the leadership Soviet's viewpoint of them. This historical backdrop, coupled with the fact of partial resistance to assimilation into the emerging Soviet structure, further exacerbated tensions.

Scholarly works on the history of the Kalmyks' exile highlight that the act of deportation itself and the special settlements in Siberian oblasts and krays brought immense hardship and severe consequences for deportees. However, without disputing these highlights, this study stresses that the experience of Kalmyk special settlers within Alma-Ata oblast of the Qazaq SSR differs significantly from that of those in Siberian exile, constituting the majority of their collective ordeal.

Firstly, it was a self-formed contingent, primarily concentrated in the city of Alma-Ata, administered by the eponymous oblast. It consisted of special settlers who arrived during 1944–1953 due to reasons such as reunification with family members, job prospects, and enrolment in higher education institutions despite the regime's strict provisions. Based on their previous locations, this group of approximately one hundred and fifty Kalmyks comprises demobilized red armies, deportees from Siberian exile and Qyzyl-Orda oblast of the Qazaq SSR, who were granted permission to change their special settlement destinations to Alma-Ata oblast, mainly the city. Consequently, it implies that this group was able to choose preferred locations for their own residence within the USSR during the special settlement system and purposefully arrived in Alma-Ata oblast. As for this oblast's appeal, it is connected to the anthropological resemblances between Kalmyks and local Qazaqs, combined with their proficiency in Russian. The mutual physical resemblance enabled them to escape immediate recognition as deportees and the resulting animosity they faced in Siberia, thus becoming a component of their survival strategy. Proficiency in the Russian language has emerged as a valuable asset, playing a significant role in this context, further facilitating potential opportunities. Collectively, these factors rendered the area more advantageous compared to alternative locations within the USSR during that particular period. In its turn, this contrasts with the established system regulations, where the usual practice involved the forcible relocation of deportees to predefined exile areas. Moreover, according to the designated purpose of special settlers as a labour force, they are primarily required to be situated in remote areas within the Qazaq SSR for use in agriculture and industry. Hence, the Kalmyk contingent in Alma-Ata oblast stood out as a self-formed group, the emergence of which would not have been possible without the presence of exceptionalism within the regime.

Secondly, this contingent's unusual nature becomes more evident through a series of interconnected factors: strong adherence to informal networks and collaboration with the system to obtain privileges. Most significantly, the practice of legally releasing certain Kalmyks

⁵⁶ QR BP QSAEAKA (Almaty), h. 9, f. 215, fol. 2, 11; *Ibid.*, f. 213, fol. 26, 29–30, 37–43; *Ibid.*, f. 138, fol. 2; *Ibid.*, f. 87, fol. 2, 17, 18, 20, 37, 57, 60.

from the special settlements until 1953, which would not have been possible without Stalin's authorization or his deputies, stands out. Furthermore, the practice of releasing certain special settlers from the system was selectively applied within specific segments within the ethnic group, rather than being isolated incidents. In response, it highlights a significant paradox: despite the official decision to subject the entire Kalmyk nation to perpetual exile in special settlements without the right to leave, the practical implementation demonstrated exceptionalism. Certain Kalmyk special settlers were not only privileged within the system to choose their residence and relocate there but also granted release from the system. Consequently, this underscores the dual standards in policy implementation towards the special settlers' category of those exiled «in perpetuity». Additionally, this challenges the perception of deporting the entire nation to special settlements without any exceptions, as well as the conventional understanding of the Kalmyks' repression as an all-encompassing massive scale.

Finally, this selective favoritism demonstrated by the system towards certain Kalmyk special settlers is presumed to be rooted in their affirmed Soviet identity. The validation of 'Sovietiness' was confirmed by their active participation in significant historical events during the early years of the Soviet state and the preceding period.

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