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Autor(en): **Chokobaeva, Aminat**

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Aminat Chokobaeva\*

# Socialist Promises, Ethnography and the Building of a Kyrgyz Soviet Nation

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**Abstract:** This article attempts to answer the question of how an ethnographic survey transformed into a political question at the heart of the young Soviet Kirghizia. The debate centered on whether a class could be made out of the *manaps*, the tribal chieftains, utterly suspect in Soviet eyes. The article argues that by clothing the Soviet assault on the Central Asian traditional nomadic societies in the developmentalist Marxist rhetoric, the authorities justified the elimination of a social group – *manaps* – that they held accountable for the backwardness and unproductiveness of the nomadic economy. Thus, the “proper” categorization of *manaps* had deep consequences for the theoretical and ideological legitimacy of the Soviet project of socialist construction in the national periphery.

**Keywords:** Kirghizia, ethnography, social construction, *manaps*

The last days of 1924 heralded a new nation-building period for the fledgling Soviet government in Moscow, a year in which a new Soviet constitution was ratified based on the *Treaty of the Creation of the USSR*. “Since the foundation of the Soviet Republics,” it proclaimed, “the states of the world have been divided into two camps: ... the camp of capitalism and the camp of socialism. There, in the camp of capitalism: national hate and inequality, colonial slavery and chauvinism, national oppression and massacres, brutalities and imperialistic wars. Here, in the camp of socialism: reciprocal confidence and peace, national liberty and equality, the pacific co-existence and fraternal collaboration of peoples.”<sup>1</sup>

It was a grand promise of equality to the former colonial peoples of the tsarist empire. Under the dictatorship of the proletariat and the rule of the Soviets, colonial injustices would be redressed: although Marxism-Leninism was first and foremost an ideological statement of equality and freedom from oppression, it would soon prove its practical effect in the field. The former

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1 The 1924 USSR Constitution in Sakwa 1999: 138–139.

colonial periphery of the Tsarist administration would serve as a model of socialist progress and nation-building; freed from colonial exploitation and oppression, national cultures would blossom under socialism.

By that measure, 1925 proved a bitter disappointment in Soviet Kirghizia, where ideological pronouncements did little to mask the economic and political failure of the land and water reforms hailed as the first stage of socialist construction. Short of building bridges of class solidarity in the fractured post-war society, the land and water reforms resulted instead in the ethnic consolidation of the settler and nomadic communities. Conflict over arable land – the most precious resource in the war-ravaged countryside – took many forms and involved many actors. As one of the OGPU (secret police) reports duly noted: “Here [in Kirghizia], the antagonism is manifested in nearly everything.”<sup>2</sup>

Local administrative organs quickly became a main arena of contention between native officials seeking fairer economic distribution and greater involvement in the decision-making process and the central authorities seeking to establish control over the distant and unstable periphery. The first group, headed by the former chairman of the Semirechye cell of the Muslim Bureau (MusBiuro) of the Communist Party,<sup>3</sup> Abdykerim Sydykov (1889–1938), was critical of the reckless application of an ideological template to the management of the political and economic development within the region. The second group of officials, appointed by Moscow to administer the Oblast Committee (hereafter Obkom), the chief executive body of the then province of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, was equally critical. Accusations were rife that Sydykov represented the same powerful local interests, which thrived under the Tsarist administration. The stakes were high for both. The former believed that an indiscriminate application of the party line – and class warfare in a society with no classes – would lead to the further displacement of the native nomadic society already ravaged by the Tsarist colonization and the civil war; the latter knew that the continuing conflict undermined the socialist construction in the region and reflected poorly on the promise of equality and development.

The search for a possible solution to this conundrum involved a small ethnographic expedition led by Pavel Kushner (1889–1968), an influential Bolshevik scholar with impeccable party credentials and military experience in Central Asia. Well regarded for his research into “social forms” Kushner was given a task of studying the social structure of the Kirghiz. The findings of the expedition would be used to determine the scope, the content, and the pace of

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<sup>2</sup> Sovershenno Sekretno: Lubianka Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922–1923 gg., t.1): 243. (“Obzor vnutrennego politicheskogo polozheniia RSFSR po okrugam za iiul’ 1922 goda”).

<sup>3</sup> MusBiuro was dissolved in 1923.

socialist construction in the Kirghiz countryside. Put simply, the task of the expedition was to measure the level of development of the nomadic Kirghiz. Was the native structure kinship-based or feudal? If it was the “primitive democracy” of kinship, then a special case must be established for the Kirghiz and the socialist construction should proceed more slowly so as to bridge the gulf between a kinship-based, tribal society and a class-based, proletarian society. This potential conclusion would fit in well with Sydykov’s calls for a different developmental path for Soviet Kirghizia, but it could hardly satisfy the central authorities, which maintained that a great leap from feudalism to socialist development was not only possible but necessary.

The conclusion that the final draft of the survey (as well as its political interpreters) reached, represented a compromise of sorts since the administration took both views, and reconciled them in a delicate (and typically Soviet) balancing act. The participants were not so even-handedly managed; suffering of ill health worsened by an organized campaign of criticism Kushner left the academy and joined the Soviet diplomatic corps. Sydykov and most of his 29 co-signatories lost their good standing with the party, and, eventually, their lives during the Great Purges of 1936–1938. The stakes – preservation of the native economy against the socialist construction – proved too costly for the native players. As the designated class of exploiters, *manaps* and their families were eliminated in a series of deportations and repressions between the second half of the 1920s and the late 1930s.

This article attempts to answer the question of how an ethnographic survey transformed into political question at the heart of the young Soviet Kirghizia. The debate centered on whether a class could be made out of the *manaps*, the tribal chieftains, utterly suspect in Soviet eyes.<sup>4</sup> The article argues by clothing the Soviet assault on the Central Asian traditional nomadic societies in the developmentalist Marxist rhetoric, the authorities justified the elimination of a social group – *manaps* – that they held accountable for the backwardness and unproductiveness of the nomadic economy. Thus, the “proper” categorization of *manaps* had deep consequences for the theoretical and ideological legitimacy of the Soviet project of socialist construction in the national periphery.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part establishes the historical context for the debate, the second part briefly discusses the biographies of the two main figures of the debate, and the third part examines the theoretic and pragmatic implications of the debate for the implementation of the Soviet nationalities policy in particular and the socialist construction in general in Soviet Kirghizia.

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<sup>4</sup> Prior 2013: 137–158. For a radically different view of *manaps* as Kirghiz aristocracy, see Sneath 2009.

# 1 The civilizing mission and its discontents

The Soviet approach to the nationalities question – a sum of economic, legal, and socio-political relations between nations and ethnic groups in the standard Soviet definition – sought to address two distinct but overlapping tasks: to build national forms filled with socialist content on the basis of existing ethno-linguistic communities; and to enforce the socio-economic development of these groups consistent with the Marxist scale of development. Soviet leadership believed that human societies develop in successive stages and that institutionalized nationhood was the most advanced stage of historical development.<sup>5</sup> By building the institutional trappings of the modern nation-state, the Bolsheviks hoped as well to build modern industrialized economies. To do so was an enormous task in and of itself, but the immediate issue was that the party knew very little about the peoples who inhabited this vast land. Indeed, the rhetoric of class often overshadowed the fact that Russia was an empire, not a nation-state, where less than a half of the total population identified themselves as Russian. How to get your message across if you do not speak the language? How to recruit the support of the native peoples in whose name you claim to act? How to draw borders in areas with mixed population? All of these questions weighed heavily on the Bolsheviks' minds.

To be sure, the Bolsheviks did not come to the task of drawing maps completely empty-handed. They had a relatively comprehensive definition of nation formulated in 1913 by the future Commissar of Nationalities, Joseph Stalin. The set of criteria that aspiring nations had to satisfy included “common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”<sup>6</sup> With this definition at hand, the Soviet administration mobilized professional geographers, economists, statisticians, and ethnographers, and drafted a plan of actions. The plan was simple. To identify potential nations, it was necessary to collect data on the ethnic and linguistic makeup of the subject population. Once this was done, data had to be collected on the social and economic organization of potential nations to facilitate their development along the socialist lines.

While simple in theory, the plan was difficult in execution. First, there were no Bolshevik ethnographers to speak of, and secondly, civil war, famine, and economic dislocation made access to national regions a risky gamble at best. The uneasy alliance of Bolsheviks with the experts of the Commission for the

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5 Martin 2001: 5–6.

6 Stalin 1942: 8.

Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of Russia (KIPS) founded shortly before the February Revolution of 1917<sup>7</sup> provided the Party with the much needed expertise, but the continuing hostilities of the Civil War halted any serious efforts at data collection during the civil war. It is all the more remarkable then that the first list of Turkestan's nationalities was produced by the ethnographer Ivan Zarubin in 1918. The data was fragmentary and would change considerably over the next decade, but it was the first step in the project that spanned more than two decades and represented a herculean joint effort of Soviet academics and administrators. By 1920, a group of ethnographers headed by Zarubin handed in a general, albeit incomplete, ethnographic survey of Turkestan and the Kazakh Steppe.<sup>8</sup> The final list of all Soviet nationalities "granted the form of state" was finalized in 1939 and counted 57 nationalities.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to defining something as nebulous as nations in areas where the primary mode of identification was religious, tribal, occupational, or simply locality based,<sup>10</sup> ethnography had a more mundane, practical application as well; along with population statistics, geographic maps, and topographic surveys, ethnographic data was instrumental in helping Soviet authorities formulate approaches to the socio-economic transformation of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious population of the former empire.<sup>11</sup> There was an unmistakable tint of civilizing mission to the Bolshevik attempts to categorize, catalogue, and explain backwardness. But backwardness was to be overcome and the Soviet administration spared no effort in educating itself about its new subject peoples.

The first broad comprehensive study of Central Asia was the result of cooperation between various branches of Soviet administration and academy, and came in the wake of the first round of national delimitation and land and water reforms. The region was still reeling from violence, but the New Economic Policy reforms, coupled with a well-coordinated military campaign, produced the desired effect of bringing the native guerrilla movement to a halt – the numbers of the so-called basmachi (from Turkic "basmak" – to attack) declined from 46,000 men at the peak of the movement in July 1922 to only 160 men in August 1926.<sup>12</sup> There was however little reason for wholesale optimism. Secret police reports suggest that land and water reforms were met with skepticism or

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7 Hirsch 2005: 7.

8 Zarubin 1925.

9 Hirsch 1997: 276.

10 On pre-revolutionary identities in Central Asia, see John Schoeberlein-Engel 1994.

11 On the role of ethnography in the Soviet nation-building, see Hirsch 2005. On the use of statistics in the Soviet population management, see Holquist 2001: 111–144.

12 For a general overview of the Basmachi movement, see Khalid 2007: 54–55. TsA FSB f. 2, op. 1, d. 794, l. 26, TsA FSB f. 2, op. 4, d. 439, l. 219–257.

general hostility both among the native and settler population. Designed with a lofty goal of redressing the historical injustices and restoring – in a more equitable fashion – lands seized from the native population, the land and water reforms of 1920s inevitably led to numerous incidents of inter-ethnic violence.<sup>13</sup> While some genuine popular support was won (in what is today northern Kyrgyzstan, the number of Koshchi – the union of poor and landless – grew to 23,000 by 1921),<sup>14</sup> violence also targeted Soviet officials and predictably split the local administration along the ethnic lines.

The rhetoric of class and the use of nationality as the criteria and the basis for administrative and territorial organization combined to produce a particularly toxic enmeshment of interests and practices. Local communities proved adept at exploiting the vocabulary of both class and nationality in gaining access to land and other material resources.<sup>15</sup> Competition over resources took many forms: at the regional level, considerations of potential benefit prompted many communities to request the transfer to a neighboring republic, where conditions were deemed more favorable; at the local level, elections into village soviets (councils) became a prime focus of competition for access to resources.<sup>16</sup>

Petitions and requests represented the more acceptable form of bargaining with the Soviet administration, but competition for land often degenerated into outright violence. Fistfights and murders were a common occurrence. Even more worrying for the authorities was the ethnic nature of the hostilities. A typical secret police (OGPU) report dated by May–June 1922 reads that “the national antagonism between the native population and Russian insurgents (sic) is on the rise ... which at times escalates into active resistance.”<sup>17</sup> In one of the more contentious instances, a violent standoff between the Kirghiz and the Russians in the villages of Iur’evka and Baitik-Pavlovka in spring 1923 was not resolved until after Stalin’s personal involvement in 1927.<sup>18</sup> To add insult to the injury, local populace organized itself around local strongmen to advance their agendas. An OGPU report for July 1922 warned that “slogans of struggle with colonial exploitation

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<sup>13</sup> For the typology of ethnic conflicts in the Soviet east, see Martin 2001: 56–72.

<sup>14</sup> Sherstobitov 1964: 101.

<sup>15</sup> Hirsch 2005: 172, Edgar 2004: 51–69, Penati 2014 : 201–213.

<sup>16</sup> Edgar 2004: 190–191.

<sup>17</sup> Sovershenno Sekretno: Lubianka Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922–1923 gg., t.1): 187. (“Obzor vnutrennego politicheskogo polozheniia RSFSR po okrugam za mai-iiun’ 1922 goda”).

<sup>18</sup> Loring 2008: 57–61. A list of Stalin’s visitors for January 1927 reveals that Stalin was visited by certain Semen Rubak, a “peasant” representative of Iur’evka; Prilozhenie. Svodki priema I. V. Stalinym. Retrieved from: <http://istmat.info/node/2812>. The conflict was ultimately settled in favour of Russian villagers who retained their land.

[kolonizatorstvo] are used by native *bai-kulaks* and *manaps* to incite nationalist passions and encourage hatred against Russians.” The report of the Kirghiz Oblast Party Bureau for the period from 1924 to 1925 suggests that three years after the land reforms little had changed and that the native poor lacked class consciousness and remained amenable to the influence of the wealthy – *bais*, the Kirghiz equivalent of Russian kulak – and the influential – *manaps* – who used kinship authority to “seize control of the village.”<sup>19</sup>

How to eliminate this harmful influence was a matter of debate; coercion and repression were the two readily available and frequently used options, but, as a means of waging “revolution in minds,” organized violence was of limited use and provoked more violence in response. Some of the administrative measures introduced by the authorities in an attempt to curtail the “corrupting influence” of the “wealthy and socially alien elements” of the Kirghiz *aul* included disenfranchisement of hostile groups and tighter control over electoral process; holding mock or repeated re-elections to ensure the victory of a properly proletarian candidate; and launching a propaganda campaign against *manaps*.<sup>20</sup> This only proved effective to a limited extent. The poor continued to support their *manap* kin and *manaps* continued to act as intermediaries between the administration and the local populace. It had become increasingly clear that land redistribution and administrative measures did not affect the popular perception of *manaps* as leaders and benefactors of their communities.

To better understand who exactly *manaps* were and how they kept onto their authority and influence even under the assault of socialist modernization, the Central Asia Bureau of the Central Committee pledged support for the study of the Central Asian countryside.<sup>21</sup> The expedition commissioned and funded by the Moscow-based Scientific-Research Association for the Study of National-Colonial Issues dispatched to Kirghizia in summer the same year.<sup>22</sup> The expedition’s stated goal was to examine the social categories and practices, or, to use the preferred term of Soviet ethnographers, the network of productive relations that made Kirghiz – Kirghiz. The second equally important but unspoken task of the expedition was to find classes and, by extension, the class struggle in the Kirghiz countryside.

<sup>19</sup> Sovershenno Sekretno: Lubianka Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922–1923 gg., t.1): 243. (“Obzor vnutrennego politicheskogo polozheniia RSFSR po okrugam za iiul’ 1922 goda”).

<sup>20</sup> Otchet Kir. Oblpartbiuro za period 12.11.1924 – 01.03.1925 gg: TsGA PD KR, f.10, op. 1, d. 16: l. 109–110: Protocol no. 10 Ispolbiuro Kara-Kirgizskogo obkoma RKP(b), 21 April 1925, TsGA PD KR, f.10, op.1, d.17: l.37: Vsem okruzhkomam VKP(b): TsGA PD Kr, f.10, op.1, d.71: l.26–27.

<sup>21</sup> RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 257: l. 12. (Kushner, “Doklad ob ekonomicheskom polozhenie Kirgizskoi Avtonomnoi oblasti”, 20.08.1925).

<sup>22</sup> Alymov 2006: 95.



## 2 Pavel Kushner: A Bolshevik ethnographer in the field

The expedition was led by Pavel Kushner (born Knyshev), a prominent figure in Soviet ethnography with a commendable record of service for the party. By the time of his appointment to the head of the expedition, Kushner had already had experience working in Central Asia, – as the head of the Political Directorate of the Turkestani Front, no less, – and taught the new generations of “builders of communism” at the newly established Sverdlov Communist University.<sup>23</sup> *Kushner’s biography merged scholarly pursuits with political activism and was exemplary of the Bolshevik search for knowledge for the betterment of society.*

Born in 1889 in Grodno to a family of mixed Russo-Jewish background, Kushner was placed with a distant relative of modest means after his father’s death. At the tender age of 16 he joined the party and became active in revolutionary activities. Unable to enter university on the account of his “political disloyalty” Kushner worked at the Riga-Orel railway until 1915, when he moved to Moscow. In Moscow, Kushner was admitted into the privately funded Shaniavskii People’s University, which admitted students of both sexes without regard to nationality, religion, and political views.<sup>24</sup> In 1917 Kushner was a member of Moscow’s Revolutionary Committee (Revkom) and Executive Committee (Ispolkom) and participated in the negotiation for the surrender of the Kremlin. Over the next two years, from 1917 to 1919, Kushner rose to the rank of a deputy head of Moscow Oblast Commissariat of Labor where co-authored the first Soviet labor code.<sup>25</sup>

Kushner’s teaching career began in 1919 with the appointment to lead a group of Bolshevik field lecturers dispatched to Red Army units across the country. A capable and competent manager with an eye for detail and good knowledge of Marxist theory, Kushner was soon transferred to Central Asia, where the civil war did not show any signs of abating and competent staff was as badly needed as ever. He soon rose to the rank of the Head of the Political Directorate of the Turkestani Front, and took part in the military assault against Bukhara. His promising career in Turkestan was cut short by chronic tuberculosis and, a year later, he returned to Moscow. In 1921 Kushner joined the newly established Sverdlov Communist University as a lecturer. With some

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<sup>23</sup> The Sverdlov Communist University was founded in 1919 with the goal educating young Bolshevik cadres.

<sup>24</sup> On Shaniavskii University, see Thurston 1987: 163–166, and Ruble 2001: 196–202.

<sup>25</sup> Alymov 2006: 20.

exposure to the “backward societies” of Central Asia Kushner developed a course on “the development of social forms” with the goal of “familiarizing students with residual pre-capitalist relations in various countries, including the USSR.”<sup>26</sup> The course was heavy on theory and introduced students to “the schematic map of development of social relations in human societies from prehistoric age to the era of industrial capital” by organizing it into an “orderly, comprehensive theory, illustrated by historical examples of development of social forms, such as economy, marriage and family, state, class struggle and certain ideologies (mainly, religion).”<sup>27</sup>

This curriculum informed the methodology of the expedition to “one of the least researched and most backward corners of the Soviet Union.”<sup>28</sup> The expedition consisted of Kushner, two student assistants, Faizi and Saliev, who also acted as interpreters, and a sketch artist. The small size of the expedition may seem surprising given the task, but smaller ethnographic expeditions – often limited to three or four researchers – were not untypical at the time. Financial constraints, as Kushner himself notes, were among the major issues for the first Soviet ethnographers.

The expedition travelled over 1,000 kilometers from Aulie-Ata in Kazakhstan through the Talas valley, Susamyr, and Jalal-Abad, to Andijan in Uzbekistan.<sup>29</sup> The material was collected through surveys, interviews, and participant observation of the population of the villages. The conditions for the expedition were not ideal; firstly, because of the basmachi gangs, the expedition could only travel to the relatively safe northern parts of the country; secondly, a great deal of confusion surrounded the expedition as it moved from village to village. On one occasion, the expedition was mistaken for a travelling group of sheep traders, in many other instances, the members of the expedition were suspected of collecting data for the tax authorities.<sup>30</sup> In a sense, Kushner’s interlocutors were correct to assume that the results of the expedition could and would be used against them in future. On a loftier, rhetorical plane, however, the expedition was interested in learning more about *manaps* – the presumably hostile social group of well-to-do Kirghiz who wielded disproportional power over the native countryside, and that sought to undermine the socialist construction from within by infiltrating the administration of the young Soviet republic.

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26 Kushner 1927: 206.

27 Kushner 1927: 206.

28 Kushner 1927: 41.

29 Kushner 1927: 41.

30 Kushner 1927: 43.

### 3 Abdykerim Sydykov: A *manap* in Soviet service

Indeed, the majority of the native cadres of Soviet Kirghizia came from the privileged *manap* background. The man whose will and political skills drove the creation of Soviet Kirghizia in 1924, Abdykerim Sydykov, was not an exception. His great grand-uncle was Baityk Kanaev (1820–1886), the *manap* of the Solto tribe who aided the Russian conquest of northern Kyrgyzstan, then tributary to the Kokand. Sydykov's grandfather, Ozbek Boshkoev (1826–1912) was the country regent at the colonial administration and passed this position onto his son, Sydyk Ozbekov.<sup>31</sup> Sydyk Ozbekov's son, Abdykerim, was born in 1889, the same year as Kushner, in the village of Bashkara-Su in the Semirechye province of Russian Turkestan. As a boy he attended a local religious school, and in 1904 enrolled in the prestigious Verny gymnasium. After graduating in 1911 he was admitted into the Kazan University but had to quit his studies because of illness. In 1913 he began working as an interpreter at the Pishpek county administration, where he was soon promoted to the rank of deputy county commissioner.<sup>32</sup>

During the February revolution, Sydykov at first joined the provisional administration as the deputy commissar of Pishpek district, but soon resigned when the Provisional Government refused the claims of Kirghiz and Kazakh refugees whose land was seized by settlers during the revolt of 1916.<sup>33</sup> In summer 1917, Sydykov, along with several other representatives of native intelligentsia, founded the Pishpek cell of the Alash-Orda party. Alash-Orda was the first Kazakh political party and the name of the short-lived autonomy organized around the party.<sup>34</sup> The fall of the Provisional Government prompted him to join the Socialist Revolutionary Party [the SRs]. There was of course a healthy dose of political calculation to Sydykov's decision to join the SRs – the party that won the elections to the Russian Constituent Assembly; he saw political activism as an opportunity to become a part of the revolutionary movement in Central Asia, and by so doing, to have a say over its course in Kirghizia.<sup>35</sup>

Sydykov was a relatively latecomer to the Bolshevik cause. He joined the party in 1918 after the SRs split into two factions and the Left SRs joined the Bolshevik coalition government. Sydykov was not a perfect fit with the party – his political views erred on the liberal side and his “socially alien” background would always be viewed with suspicion – but he was one of the very few

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<sup>31</sup> Loring 2008: 33.

<sup>32</sup> Ploskikh 2006: 4–5.

<sup>33</sup> Kurmanov 2002: 14.

<sup>34</sup> For a survey of Alash Orda, see Olcott 1995: 100–157.

<sup>35</sup> Loring 2008: 36.

educated native workers with administrative experience. His rise to power, though marred by frequent accusations of bourgeois nationalism, was rapid. In 1919 Sydykov was appointed the deputy chairman of the Muslim Bureau of the Semirechye branch of the Communist Party of Turkestan, itself an offshoot of the Communist Party. In 1922 he was the only Kirghiz delegate to the first All-Union Congress of Soviets. Like Kushner, Sydykov was also an accomplished scholar and, through his work, combined political activism with scholarly research. His writings, many of which remained unpublished for decades, sought to provide the party with an analysis of social practices and their cultural content and shape the party's policies toward the region.<sup>36</sup>

Unlike Kushner, Sydykov was a statesman first, and a scholar second. He saw himself too as an advocate of the rights of his people. In this, his views were closer to those of national communists like the Tatar Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev who was openly critical of the party's inconsistent decolonization policies and Russian communists' derogatory treatment of non-European national minorities.<sup>37</sup> The party too was often critical of Sydykov, who, it appears, was still indispensable to the regional administration – a fact made obvious by the number of times he was expelled and then reinstated in the party. By 1925, however, his role in the notorious “affair of the thirty” – a scandal caused by the letter criticizing the course and implementation of the party's policies in Kirghizia had pushed the limits of the party's patience. Moscow had had enough and the ground was set for collision.

## 4 A campaign against backwardness and ethnography

The two worlds – of *manaps* and Soviet administrators – collided in 1925. In June 1925, a group of thirty officials from Soviet Kirghizia,<sup>38</sup> led by the then head of the Semirechye Executive Committee, Abdykerim Sydykov, sent a letter to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party demanding Moscow's intervention in what they saw as the unfair treatment of the native cadres by the

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<sup>36</sup> His published works include: “The brief outline of the history of the Kirghiz nation” published in 1926; “The kinship division among the Kirghiz” published the same year; “On zhut and fodder shortage in Central Asia” published in 1928; and “The cattle grazing organization in nomadic groups” published in 1930. Kurmanov 1997: 103–104.

<sup>37</sup> Baker 2014, on national communism in the Soviet East, see Bennigsen/Wimbush 1979.

<sup>38</sup> Until December 1936, Kirghiz Autonomous Oblast was a part of the RSFSR.

Oblast Committee (or simply, Obkom), the chief executive body, and its role in fomenting factionalism among the native officials:

The Party apparatus was built on the principles of kinship and personal connections of a given official with the top brass of the Obkom, which encouraged group infighting within the party and tribal infighting in the masses, and revealed the tendency (of the republican Obkom) to ignore native officials<sup>39</sup> familiar with conditions on the ground and who could therefore be useful to the party and the authorities in implementing the correct line of work, particularly, in relation to land reforms.<sup>40</sup>

The signatories had also accused the oblast leadership of incompetence and “the petty patronizing and interference [...] in [...] the practical implementation of party directives.”<sup>41</sup> All of these, warned the thirty, “undermined the authority of the Soviet and Party apparatus in the eyes of the common working masses.”<sup>42</sup> The proper implementation of socialist construction in the Kirghiz countryside required sensitivity and tact, and, above all, “the first-hand familiarity with [...] and experience in the political pre-emption of clan factionalism.”<sup>43</sup> The letter concluded with an impassioned plea to replace the Obkom leadership and put an end to infighting in the oblast administration, failing which, the signatories threatened to resign from their positions.

In response, the Obkom leadership informed the Central Committee that the letter of the thirty was “an attempt to return to the previous factionalism, with lies and unfounded accusations” by “socially alien” elites, or *manaps*. *Manaps*, the statement continued, were the real driving force of group conflicts and the cause of the failure of socialist construction in the countryside. Given the “seriousness, gravity, and variety of the accusations leveled against the Obkom,” the Central Committee launched an investigation into the conflict.<sup>44</sup> Although the Commission dispatched from the center was in the agreement with the Obkom leadership on the harmful influence of *manaps*, the results of the investigation subjected both sides of the conflict to harsh criticism. The solution of the Central Committee was a half-hearted, if crude, compromise; although the

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<sup>39</sup> Until August 1950 the First Secretaries of the Oblast Committee were of non-titular background. The first ethnic Kirghiz First Secretary of the Oblast Committee, Iskhak Razzakov, was appointed in August 1950.

<sup>40</sup> Kurmanov 1992: 64–67.

<sup>41</sup> Kurmanov 1992: 64–67.

<sup>42</sup> Kurmanov 1992: 64–67.

<sup>43</sup> The demands and complaints of the thirty signatories of the statement were later repeated almost to word in the 1929 letter of Iusup Abdrakhmanov, then the deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers, to Joseph Stalin. See Abdrakhmanov 1991: 190–216.

<sup>44</sup> Abdrakhmanov 1991: 125.

chairman of the Obkom, Mikhail Kamenskii, was summarily dismissed from his position, Sydykov, himself a hereditary *manap*, and one of his co-signatories, Ishenaly Arabaev, a member of the Turkestan People's Commissariat, were expelled from the party, while the remaining twenty eight co-signatories were sacked, demoted, or banished to internal exile outside of Kirghizia.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, Kushner's expedition came to an end, and in late summer 1925 he presented his findings at the Central Asia Bureau of the Central Committee. He declared to an astonished audience that he "found no classes" in Kirghizia. To summarize, Kushner found a degree of social differentiation in the Kirghiz countryside where 25% of the population was hired hands with no property of their own, 30% owned some property, but were generally poor, 40% were middle peasants and 5% – *bais* and *manaps*.<sup>46</sup> The difference however was of degrees, not classes; "while some were wealthier, others were poorer, there were no sharp class cleavages."<sup>47</sup> Kirghiz identified with their kin, not with class: "If the Kolposh tribe is at feuds with the Kushchi or Saiak tribe, then the poor and the wealthy of the entire tribe act together... Everyone is subject to kinship customs and cannot fight them."<sup>48</sup>

As an aspiring Marxist, Kushner sought for the roots of the enduring kinship organization in the backward subsistence economy of the Kirghiz. *Manaps*, those "dangerous vestiges" of the past, built their authority on the unfair conditions of land lease and exchange of agricultural produce for services under the guise of kinship assistance. This made the kinship structures resistant to outside practices but vulnerable to alternative economic forms. The policy recommendations made by Kushner were in the spirit of the NEP and proposed the gradual introduction of the cash-based market economy to divert the extra-produce and resources that the *manaps* accumulated in their hands away from the hired labor. In parallel to the creation of the new markets, a line of cheap credits had to be open to help the poor and middle peasants. Put simply, if *manaps* were given an opportunity to buy and sell in cash, not exchange in kind, they would cease to be *manaps*, because they would no longer have the livestock that they could lease to their poorer kin. A source of alternative state micro-financing would also help to break the dependency of the rural poor on their *manaps*.<sup>49</sup> At the time Kushner's recommendations received a generally

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45 The signatories were aware of potential consequences of their protest and prepared themselves for arrest, Kurmanov 2002: 113.

46 RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 278, l. 60. (Kushner, "Doklad ob ekonomicheskom polozhenie Kirgizskoi Avtonomnoi oblasti", 20.08.1925).

47 RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 278, l. 60.

48 RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 278, l. 59–60.

49 RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 278, l. 59–60.

positive response from the Central Asia Bureau, but very soon this would change.

The first attack on Kushner's report came from an unexpected source. In 1926 a special commission convened at the behest of the Central Committee set out for Kirghizia to investigate "the theoretical confusion in determining the nature of relics of the pre-capitalist social relations among the Kirghiz."<sup>50</sup> The issue at stake was whether the Kirghiz exhibited the essential marker of the Marxist class society – classes – or whether they still continued to identify with kinship groups. The arrival of the group, headed by the then chairman of the Central Control Commission of the Communist Party, Aleksei Mitrofanov, signaled the involvement of the highest levels of party leadership in the debate. Before long, what started as a field study of the distant and underdeveloped countryside turned into a crusade against backwardness and a campaign against ethnography.

The results of the commission's enquiry were discussed at the second plenary session of the Kirghiz Obkom and were later published in "Bolshevik" – the official party mouthpiece published every second week. That the debate was intensely political was clear to all of its participants. To quote a noted Soviet ethnographer of the nomadic peoples and the author of the theory of "feudal nomadism", Sergei Tolstov:

The problem is by no means of academic significance [...] its solution allows us to sharpen our weapon of a correct Marxist understanding [...] and applies to the immediate practice of political struggle, the practice of class war both in the Soviet East and abroad, in the colonial Orient. The correctness of the practical work of the socialist reconstruction of the nomadic and semi-nomadic *aul* of the Soviet East depends on the correct theoretical solution of this problem.<sup>51</sup>

The tone was set by the article's title, which informed its audience "About one theoretical confusion and its harmful consequences." First, Mitrofanov leveled an accusatory finger at Sydykov, the leader of the "chauvinist *bai-manap* intelligentsia," who, as a *manap* himself, refused to see the real class content of kinship forms, and sought to preserve the traditional authority of *manaps* through kinship-based Soviets.<sup>52</sup> Then, Mitrofanov lashed out at Kushner:

We do not know what definition of classes Professor Kushner uses, but it is clear that he thinks that only those who receive their salaries in monetary form can be considered exploited [...] Then, according to Professor Kushner, the worst expression of the "relics of

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<sup>50</sup> Mitrofanov 1926.

<sup>51</sup> Gellner 1988: 99.

<sup>52</sup> Mitrofanov 1926: 76.

the kinship organization” in Kirghizia is *manaps*. These *manaps*, as Kushner himself demonstrates, have their own serfs [...] and servants [...] in fact, *manaps* own all the land in the area of their influence; *manaps* administer and adjudicate [...] Form is not important, but its content and its essence are [important]. Indubitably, social relations in Kirghizia have certain kinship features, but these forms were already being filled with a distinctly feudal content already during the Kokandese rule.<sup>53</sup>

The thrust of Mitrofanov’s argument was clear: *manaps* were no longer tribal leaders, but feudal lords. As for Kushner’s recommendations, not only were they erroneous, they were actively harmful because, as another party functionary summed it up, “Professor Kushner’s “theories” do not only contradict the Leninist thesis that it is possible to skip the capitalist stage of development, but also nurture the ideology of national bourgeoisie.”<sup>54</sup>

This was, of course, the real source of the disagreement. Everyone agreed that the Kirghiz were backward, but just how backward was a point of contention. Were the Kirghiz a society of kin or of serfs? There was no good way to answer the question without casting doubt on the Soviet administration’s ability to deliver on its promise of progress and modernization. To argue that kinship ties in the Kirghiz countryside were stronger than class divisions would imply that the gulf of backwardness separating the Kirghiz from socialism was too great to make the passage to socialism possible in the near future. In this context, Kushner’s proposal to introduce capitalism into the Kirghiz countryside via market made a bad impression on the Commission, which viewed it as an attempt to force “capitalist maturation” on the Kirghiz. A further element of complication arose from Sydykov’s proposal to “pre-empt” kinship struggle by establishing kinship councils. If the economic and social relations among the Kirghiz were organized along the kinship lines, as argued, then kinship councils, not Communist party cells were the true conduits of nation and state-building in the region.

Yet, to argue – despite the available evidence – that the Kirghiz were socially stratified, and thus, modern, could lead to far-reaching conclusions that no one was prepared for. If local communities had indeed classes, then, by the logic of Marxist model of development, they had reached a point when a revolution was impending. What was the use then for the Russian proletariat’s helping hand when the sufficiently class-conscious natives were prepared to stage a properly Marxist revolution of their own? The answer that no one dared to spell was revealing: none. What becomes obvious through reading the trail of documents and articles is that Sydykov, and especially Kushner had inadvertently stepped into a debate that ran deeper than a casual observation would

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53 Mitrofanov 1926: 76.

54 Tabolov 1928: 74.



have suggested; their conclusions about the nature of social organization of a nomadic people of the distant periphery cast a critical eye on the entire premise of the Soviet state to lift the native peoples from backwardness, which smacked suspiciously of the earlier colonial civilizing missions.

To reconcile the two views and avert a potentially disastrous outcome required an act of balancing and streamlining. In a fine example of such compromise, the commission came to the conclusion that the Kirghiz were neither tribal nor feudal, but both at the same time. Rather unsurprisingly, Kushner offered a similar conclusion in his 1929 monograph on “Mountainous Kirghizia.” Kushner made substantial corrections to the original draft. Most notably, Kushner and his assistants “concluded that the kinship organization no longer exists [...] in Kirghizia. Although kinship customs still remain strong, as do the kinship relations, they lack the very basis of the kinship organization – kinship councils, councils of village elders, and “the primitive democracy.” All of these have been replaced by a similarly ancient pattern of social organization whose key feature is the phenomenon of *manaps*.”<sup>55</sup>

For Sydykov and the twenty-nine other native officials the debate had the most serious implications. By the mid-1920s *manaps* came to symbolize everything that was bad about the young Soviet republic of Kirghizia – corruption and factionalism, greed and exploitation, and most of all, backwardness. *Manaps* were the embodiment, metaphor, and the medium of backwardness – backwardness, that transposed onto the Marxist scale of development, served as the measure of success of socialist construction. *Manaps*, thus, real or mythical, defined the pace and direction of the Soviet policies in the Kirghiz countryside. As the NEP drew to closure and collectivization became a distinct reality, war was declared on backwardness and its proxies. Traditional kinship-based societies were seen as hotbeds of militant backwardness, “an obstacle to socialist construction and a tool of the class enemy.”<sup>56</sup> Overnight, thousands of native farmers and herders became a vestige of the past. The forced deportation of *manaps* began in November 1928 and continued throughout the collectivization. The formula for measuring wealth and identifying *manaps* involved, ironically, the appropriation of the native value system to establish the monetary equivalent of the nomads’ chief material wealth – herds. To be considered a *manap* by the Soviet authorities one simply had to own more than 400 head of sheep.<sup>57</sup> The attractiveness of the scheme lay in its simplicity and the presumably solid, quantifiable basis, which provided the authorities with an easily identifiable target.

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<sup>55</sup> Kushner 1929: 4.

<sup>56</sup> Slezkine 1991: 482.

<sup>57</sup> TsGA KR, f. 21, op. 16, d. 98.

The collectivization drive was soon followed by the party purges of 1932–33, which marked the beginning of a concerted effort by the government to rid the apparatus of all the wreckers and “former people” like Sydykov, who infiltrated the local administration. *Manaps* were no longer seen as simply vestiges of the past, but as active wreckers and saboteurs in the service of foreign powers. Purges targeted groups across the social and political strata and, in the period from 1934 to 1937, decimated the ranks of native party members by 67.7%.<sup>58</sup> By 1939, when collectivization, which had claimed the lives of millions of nomads in Central Asia and destroyed the local economy. It was then declared a success that had led to the creation of the truly socialist society. *Manaps* were singled out during the campaign as the cause of all the crises that befell the native population, as well as the major obstruction of the socialist construction. They ceased to exist, both as a social group, and as a bogeyman of Soviet administration in Kirghizia.

## 5 Epilogue

It is likely that Kushner and Sydykov never met in person, which makes their involvement in the political life of early Soviet Kirghizia all the more poignant. Despite the differences in the social background the two men betrayed similar views on the content and the pace of socialist modernization of the Kirghiz countryside. That Sydykov’s works, with a few exceptions, were not published until after the collapse of the Soviet Union, suggests that his position as a statesman, although more influential and powerful than that of Kushner, also made him both more dangerous and more vulnerable in the eyes of the party. In some ways Kushner’s and Sydykov’s hopes of the development and modernization of the Kirghiz countryside were realized, although at a much higher price to the native population than Sydykov envisioned and in a very different way than proposed by Kushner. Ultimately, both Sydykov’s criticisms and Kushner’s policy recommendations proved unacceptable for the administration.

The drama that unfolded over the two decades of the violent transition to socialism claimed millions of lives, including Sydykov’s. Like other victims of the Great Terror, he was shoehorned into that disgraceful and undeserved role of the enemy of the people. In contrast, Kushner’s biography is the story of a man who, true to the Soviet ethos, rose from humble origins and reinvented himself first as a revolutionary, then, as a scholar, and finally, as a diplomat. It would also be true to suggest that he avoided the fate of Sydykov by only a dint of luck

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<sup>58</sup> TsPA RF, f. 62, op. 2, d. 187, l. 19.

and calculation. It is all the more remarkable then that his return to academia was made possible by the Great Patriotic War. Kushner's expertise and ethnographic knowledge were needed to draw an ethnographic map in Eastern Europe with the view to future border delimitation.

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