

Jeltoqsan 1986 in the Politics of Memory of Kazakhstan

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Introduction

The narrative of the Jeltoqsan 1986 (December in Kazakh), is contested territory in the post-1991 period. The Jeltoqsan 1986 protest erupted amidst the period of *perestroika* (a restructuring of Soviet economic and political system), and owes its genesis to the dismissal of Dinmuhamed Qonaev, the First Secretary (FS) of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (CP) of the KSSR (Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic), and the appointment of an outsider Gennady Kolbin who was the FS of the *obkom* (oblast level committee) in the Russian city of Ulyanovsk. The protests started on December 17 after the news on dismissal and lasted until December 19. The officials dispersed the protests through use of unrestricted force. There are contrasting numbers on death, injuries and participants. The Soviet officials did not allow foreign journalists to enter Kazakhstan to report about the unrest. New York Times on December 20 in 1986 described the protests as “anti-Russian rioting” that involved “several hundred students,” and it was locals who arranged these planned “violent demonstrations”. The article continued that “riots” began after the appointment of “Russian from Siberia” Kolbin to the position of Qonaev, who was the chief of Kazakh CP for forty years.¹ Based on the Washington Post from December 23, local Kazakhstani officials did not support this decision. It included that on December 18, two trucks distributed vodka and local, not harsh types of marijuana were disseminated among students who protested in Brezhnev Square (now Republic Square) in Almaty. Thus Western reporters based on the Soviet sources viewed the protests as a reaction to the old custodian shift to a new authority.² However, after the meeting with the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR Nursultan Nazarbayev³ in February 1987, reporters included the “nationalist disturbance” about the protests.⁴ Reporters detailed demonstrations reached up to 3,000 people with two deaths and 200 injuries. Nazarbayev stated the protesting youth expressed the insufficient food and housing issues in Almaty.⁵ Finally, the report of Human Rights Watch (HRW) then-Helsinki Watch from October 1990 offered the first in-depth description of Jeltoqsan 1986. HRW staff members conducted a field trip to Almaty and Qaragandy earlier that year to produce the report. Authors attempted to provide multiple voices on Jeltoqsan 1986, who have contested for their words in the post-1991 period.⁶

¹ Bill Keller, Soviet Says Hundreds were Involved in Riot, New York Times, December 20, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/20/world/soviet-says-hundreds-were-involved-in-riot.html>

² Garry Lee, “Soviet Rioters Got Vodka, Drugs, Witnesses Report,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 1986, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1986/12/23/soviet-rioters-got-vodka-drugs-witnesses-report/41bf9a61-1dcc-40e9-912b-db3d8f30177a/>.

³ Premier is the non-Soviet equivalent of his position. The official post of Nazarbayev was Chairman of the Council of Ministries of Kazakh SSR.

⁴ Celastine Bohlen, “Soviet Press Details Kazakhstan Riot,” *Washington Post*, January 11, 1987 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/01/11/soviet-press-details-kazakhstan-riot/5cb75e71-9e68-45d9-99f2-60371f0b38d9/>.

⁵ “Kazakh Riots Widespread, Premier Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 1987.

⁶ A Helsinki Watch Report, 1990. *Conflict in the Soviet Union: The Unfold Story of the Clashes in Kazakhstan*. New York and Washington DC.

Academicians studying the post-1991 nation-making of Kazakhstan affirm the central character of Jeltoqsan 1986 to the collective remembrance yet note the ongoing contentions and later omission in the discursive field of the state-sponsored nation-building.⁷ Yet these studies failed to visit the central point of the production of the institutional memory⁸ of Jeltoqsan 1986 in post-1991 Kazakhstan's period of independence. My research shows that while the testimonials of victims are sufficient and available, the official narrative overshadowed their remembrance. Furthermore my research demonstrated that the official narrative used Jeltoqsan 1986 to commemorate the heroism of its participants in gaining independence in 1991. However, it omitted the personal tragedy and sorrow of the Jeltoqsanshylar (the participants of Jeltoqsan 1986 in Kazakh). Furthermore, due to this exclusion in the official narrative, the Kazakh nationalist related groups have contested the reading of Jeltoqsan 1986 inside their discursive realm.

Official narrative

This section examines how the ruling elite composed the narratives on Jeltoqsan 1986 in the post-1991 nation-building of Kazakhstan. I contend that Nazarbayev's narrative borrowed only unquestionable narratives from the conclusions of the official investigations on the Jeltoqsan 1986, whereas it neglected the remainder.⁹ Although Nazarbayev's narrative overshadowed the Jeltoqsanshylar' (eyewitnesses and survivors) narratives in the nation-building, it did not occur due to the kazakhness advocates, senior bureaucrats within the political circles of Nazarbayev. These kazakhness advocates argued for a prominent role for Jeltoqsan 1986 to earn political capital among the sympathizers of Kazakh nationalism. Concurrently, the kazakhness advocates filled the gaps of the official remembrance by prominently arguing for the usage of term uprising in description of Jeltoqsan 1986. Nazarbayev used movement and event terms in reference to Jeltoqsan 1986.

Totalitarian and democratic struggle

In early 1990s, Nazarbayev selectively borrowed the commissions' elucidation on Jeltoqsan 1986 for consolidation of the official remembrance on Jeltoqsan 1986 in the Kazakhphone and Russophone discourses. It borrowed the all-encompassing guiltiness of Moscow through the use of totalitarian and democratic struggle narratives. To consolidate his power within the Kazakhphone and Russophone populations, the Nazarbayev government started co-optation and later marginalization of the Jeltoqsanshylar and their narrative to illustrate an effort for a

⁷ For example, see: Diana T. Kudaibergenova, *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature: Elites and Narratives* (Lanham, MD & London: Lexington Books, 2017), 176, 178. Shirin Akiner, *The Formation of Kazakh Identity: From Tribe to Nation-State* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995). Azamat Sarsembayev, "Imagined Communities: Kazak Nationalism and Kazakification in the 1990s," *Central Asian Survey* 18, no. 3 (1999): 324-25. Joanna Lillis, *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), Chapter 16. Michael G. Stefany, "Ethnic Battleground: The December 1986 Alma-Ata Events and the Developing Kazakh Idea" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2004), 235-37. Bhavna Dave, *Kazakhstan Ethnicity, Language and Power* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 89.

⁸ As the theoretical suggests, the dissertation uses Assmann's definition of institutions: "Institutions and larger social groups, such as nations, governments, the church, or firms do not "have" a memory – they "make" one for themselves with the aid of memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments. Together with such as memory, these groups and institutions "construct" an identity. See: Assmann, *Memory, Individual and Collective*, 216.

⁹ The two commissions were established due to the advocacy of public figures and Jeltoqsanshylar

unification of the nation in post-1991 nation-building of Kazakhstan. This neutral non-ethnic rendition of the protests granted Nazarbayev discursive inclusiveness for consolidation of his presidential power.

Specifically, Nazarbayev's narrative only emphasized Moscow officials and downplayed those in Almaty who involved in the dispersal of Jeltoqsan 1986. On October 12 1990, Nazarbayev characterized Jeltoqsan 1986 as "a vivid example of the clash, a sharp struggle between old and new thinking" in his address to the Communist Party of Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (CP KSSR).¹⁰ Similarly, in November 1990 – January 1991, Muhtar Shahanov, chairman of the commission on Jeltoqsan 1986 addressed Jeltoqsan 1986 as the clash of two forces – a young, fragile democracy and an administrative-command system during his lectures at Swedish and UK universities.¹¹ In comparison with Nazarbayev, he emphasized that both the officials in Moscow and Almaty should be responsible for the suppression of demonstrators and the repressions afterwards. Shahanov, singled out officials in Almaty for their passive agreement with the decisions of Moscow without an expression of discontent.¹² However, Nazarbayev's narrative did not incorporate the discussion on the responsibility of officials in Almaty. The commission's report stated local complicity who were accountable for their involvement in dispersal of the protests.

Nazarbayev's narrative overshadowed the Jeltoqsanshylyar's narrative to demonstrate a unification of Kazakhstan before his presidency. Similar to the examples of Union republics, on December 1 in 1991, Nazarbayev consolidated his presidential mandate through running a formal popular election.¹³ There were two other candidates against him, Olzhas Suleymenov, prominent public figure who withdrew his candidacy by supporting Nazarbayev.¹⁴ The other was Hasen Qoja-Ahmet, pro-Kazakh activist who was jailed for participation at Jeltoqsan 1986. After his release from prison, Qoja-Ahmet was a director of a Jeltoqsan organization which advocated for a just investigation of Jeltoqsan 1986 and acquittal of those who jailed for their participation at this protests. Nazarbayev intended to demonstrate that he had the support of all parts of the Kazakhstani, including Russophone through the exclusion of Qoja-Ahmet from the presidential election at the registration stage of the campaign.¹⁵ The official reason for the non-inclusion of Qoja-Ahmet in the presidential race was the non-collection of a requested 100,000 signatures. Nazarbayev's electoral program stated his promise to advocate for the revival of Kazakh culture, language, and history.¹⁶ The exclusion of Qoja-Ahmet before the presidential campaign illustrated an eagerness to demonstrate the unification of the nation and a super-majority support for Nazarbayev.¹⁷

Concurrently, the introduction of a democratic narrative helped to associate Nazarbayev's presidential power with democratic governance at the beginning of his leadership. Jonathan Aitken argues that Nazarbayev's handling of the commission enabled him to earn "the

¹⁰ Nazarbayev, *Izbrannyye rechi. Volume 1. 1989-1990*, 310.

¹¹ *Alma-ata. Deceber 1986*, 18.

¹² *Ibid*, 23.

¹³ The Kazakh SSR's Supreme Soviet elected Nazarbayev to the President of Kazakh SSR on April 24, 1990. According to the declaration on "State Sovereignty of Kazakh SSR" adopted on October 25, 1990, there were three branches of power legislative, executive, and judiciary, that gave the right to Supreme Soviet elect the President.

¹⁴ Mahmut Kasymbekov, *Istoricheskiy vybor* [Historical Choice] (Astana: Delovoi Mir, 2013), 5.

¹⁵ Pal Kolstø, "The Price of Stability. Kazakhstani Control Mechanisms in a Bipolar Cultural and Demographic Situation," University of Oslo, Accessed December 12, 2019, <http://folk.uio.no/palk/stability.htm>.

¹⁶ Kasymbekov, *Istoricheskiy*, 8.

¹⁷ Olcott, *Kazakhs*, 270.

reputation of being “a democrat.”¹⁸ Nazarbayev’s government followed the commission’s recommendations in order to present his political power as being democratic and progressive. Four days before the declaration of independence on December 12 in 1991, Nazarbayev signed a decree for the rehabilitation of those people who had been held accountable for their participation in Jeltoqsan unrest. This decree included rehabilitation of those citizens who had been convicted of criminal, administrative, and disciplinary charges in the aftermath of the Jeltoqsan demonstrations except for those who were convicted for premeditated murder, intrusion on the life of militia officers, and druzhinniki (vigilantes). Based on this decree, Nazarbayev ordered the Supreme Council to cancel the decree of the Presidium of Supreme Soviet (PSS) of the KSSR which had granted state awards to members of the internal troops, law enforcement officers, and all other officials of Kazakhstan in connection with the Jeltoqsan 1986. Under this rehabilitation decree, Nazarbayev announced December 17 as the Day of Democratic Renewal.¹⁹ The democratic narrative became the central theme for remembrance of Jeltoqsan 1986 in Nazarbayev’s nation-building efforts.

However, Jeltoqsanshylar contested this remembrance by arguing for the accountability of political and security officials who used unlimited force to disperse the protests. The commissioners were not entirely satisfied with these decrees. The commission suggested commemorating Remembrance Day on December 17, as it was their initiative to memorialize the protestors’ sorrow and tragedy. In the fifth commemoration of the protests in 1992, Jasaral Qyanyshalin, one of the leaders of Azat movement, criticized this rehabilitation decree because it omitted to hold responsible the officials who dispersed the demonstrations. According to him, the government just reshuffled these officials to different positions in Kazakhstan.²⁰ It should be noted that according to lawyer and public figure Salyk Zimanov, the courts were not prompt in implementing these decrees due to their support of the Soviet interpretation of Jeltoqsan 1986.²¹

Nevertheless, the official narrative concentrated on the core responsibility of the so-called “center,” (Moscow) who used force against the protests. Doing so, it singled out Qonaev for being part of this “center.” Describing the start of Jeltoqsan 1986, Nazarbayev unpacked the “center.” According to him, Kazakhstan was a fiefdom for the center. The center changed the leadership of the country at their discretion without any advice from the locals. Nazarbayev described the acceptance of Qonaev’s replacement at the meeting of the Central CP in Almaty on December 16, 1986, as “the syndrome of thoughtless obedience to the center and the syndrome of barracks psychology.”²² Later, Nazarbayev underscored the total compliance of Qonaev to decisions from the center. He repeated Qonaev’s description of himself as a Communist and one who remained as the Communist.²³ A non-existent any longer, the ambiguous “center” became the perpetrator instead of those officials whom the commission found responsible for the dispersal of the protests. Concurrently, the Nazarbayev government dissociated itself from Qonaev, who was part of the center-peripheral relationship.

¹⁸ Aitken, *Nazarbayev*, 92.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 92-93.

²⁰ Zhasaral Kuanyshalin “Jartikeş Jarlıq Jaraspas,” [Partial Decree Incompatible] in *Jeltoqsan köterilisi. Köp tomдық ayǵaqtar kitabı 1 tom*, [December Uprising. A multi-volume Testimony Book 1 Volume] ed. Talgat Aitbaliuly (Almaty: Daur, 2016), 475-76.

²¹ Zimanov, *Parlament Kazakhstana*, 24.

²² Nazarbayev, *Bez pravyykh i levyykh*, 179.

²³ Nazarbayev, *Selected speeches*, 27-28.

Furthermore, to cement the democracy versus totalitarianism narrative, the officials sidestepped the inter-ethnic angle of the Jeltoqsan demonstrations. In 1996, Marat Tazhin, then-Deputy Chief of Staff of President and Altynbek Särsenbaev, then-Chair of the National Agency for Press and Mass Media, prepared a brief for the national media on how to frame the Jeltoqsan 1986 in publications. This followed a conference call from the Presidential Administration with the heads of leading Kazakhstani media which was held before the tenth anniversary of these demonstrations in 1996. They addressed the contents of the brief to Nazarbayev. It highlighted that the media materials should adhere to “maintaining, and further enhancing stability and inter-ethnic accord in the society.” The recommendation to the Kazakh-speaking media was not to seek any revision of negative assessments voiced by the Slavic population during the Jeltoqsan 1986. The suggestion for the Russian-speaking media was to provide a robust rebuff to any slight attempt to recover the Soviet explanation of the Jeltoqsan demonstrations as “makhrovyy (hardcore orthodox) nationalism”. Preferably the national media ought to spotlight a genuine reason for Jeltoqsan 1986.²⁴ Based on that brief it was a conflict between administrative-party systems, that was extremely unadapted to changes and democratization. Simply put, the national media should de-emphasize the inter-ethnic aspect. This inter-ethnic angle included so-called “pseudo-patriot” representatives of Kazakh nationalism and lobbyists for the perpetrators of the protests.²⁵ In other words, the narrative of Jeltoqsanshylar which advocated for the greater remembrance was marginalized from nation-building on Jeltoqsan 1986.

Therefore, during the consolidation of presidential power before 1995, the Nazarbayev spotlighted the democratic nature of Jeltoqsan 1986 to build continuity with his presidency. Thanks to the Constitutional changes in 1995, Nazarbayev enhanced presidential power. Since then, the democratic narrative of Jeltoqsan 1986 was no longer needed or demanded. Concurrently, the opposition’s criticisms of the “democratic present” during the late 1990s and early 2000s expedited the official narrative to connect Jeltoqsan 1986 with the independence. However, the narrative of Jeltoqsanshylar was not part of the official commemoration except for the temporary borrowing of democracy versus totalitarianism elucidation of the protests discussed earlier.

Fight for independence

After 1995, Nazarbayev concentrated on connection of Jeltoqsan 1986 with the declaration of independence but without giving prominence to the Jeltoqsanshylar narratives. This has not meant that Nazarbayev stopped referencing totalitarianism and democracy struggle narrative rather it was present in the background. According to Nazarbayev, during Jeltoqsan 1986, the youth fought for the independence of Kazakhstan and they were “harbingers of independence.” The Kazakh youth, who were the heirs of their freedom-loving ancestors shed their blood for an independent Kazakhstan at Jeltoqsan 1986. At his addresses during the anniversary of independence held each year, Nazarbayev underscored that these demonstrations were the outcome of more than 200 national-liberation uprisings since the Tsarist Russia period in Kazakhstan’s history. Nazarbayev used the words movement, event and in rare instances uprising in reference to Jeltoqsan 1986.²⁶ According to Nazarbayev, the period since 1980, including Jeltoqsan 1986, was the final twelfth stage of the origins of the spiritual development

²⁴ Letter of Marat Tazhin and Altynbek Särsenbaev to Nazarbayev, December 23, 1996, 5H-1-6666, Archive the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Presidential addresses in 1995, 1996, 2006, 2008, 2011.

of Kazakhs that lasted 6000 years.²⁷ The independence narrative overshadowed the abrupt discontinuation from the Soviet Union, where Kazakhstan was the last former Soviet republic to declare its independence on December 16 in 1991. Repeatedly, this was the non-ethnic and neutral interpretation of Jeltoqsan 1986, which articulated inclusiveness of the official narrative. However, it did not contain the Jeltoqsanshylar narrative on holding the political and security officials accountable for their use of violence against the demonstrators.

The hero-making of these harbingers of independence occurred only through the remembrance of Qairat Rysqulbekov, participant of Jeltoqsan unrest who posthumously received the Hero of People by a decree from Nazarbayev in 1996.²⁸ Rysqulbekov was initially awarded a death sentence for the murder of the *druzhinniki* member Savitskiy as well as for the organization of mass disorder and the incitement of ethnic hatred during the protests. But following public pressure this was changed to twenty years of imprisonment. An independent investigation found him innocent for the death of Savitskiy.²⁹ According to official reports, Ryskulbekov committed suicide in Semei prison during his escort to prison in Sverdlovsk oblast prison in Russia.³⁰ However, Jeltoqsanshylar did not trust the official report.³¹

However, the officials did not authorize the martyrdom of multiple protesters. Based on Zımanov, during Kazakhstan's independence, the theme of Jeltoqsan 1986 and the heroism of protestors, evaporated into the background, and only occasional remembrance took place because the primary focus was upholding and strengthening independence.³² The Soviet-minded authorities did everything to omit the names of the heroes and heroines of Jeltoqsan 1986. Both in 1997 and 2000, Zımanov via a request to then-President Nazarbayev unsuccessfully initiated conferring the title of to Lázat Asanova, a sixteen years old girl who protested at Jeltoqsan 1986 and found dead after few days since the demonstrations. The year 1997 was the tenth year of commemoration of Jeltoqsan 1986 and the year of all-national accord and remembrance of the victims of political repression at the Great Purges. A number of prominent public figures supported this initiative, and newspapers published numerous articles about Asanova. There was no response from the Presidential Administration to this initiative in 1997. Ermuhamet Ertisbaev, then-head of the social and political department of the Presidential Administration responded to the second initiative letter in 2000, that private individuals could not recommend candidates for the conferring of state titles. According to Zımanov, it was a solely formal issue. In the case of Ertisbaev's interest, he could request materials on Asanova, which were in the archives of Presidential Administration and at the mayor office of Almaty oblast. An assistant of Zımanov, Muhaı Jumahanov, found advice in the of Almaty oblast that, based on the decision of Panfilov's district Máslıhat (local representative body), it was suggested conferring the title of Heroine of People to Assanova but, the Presidential Administration did not approve it.³³ Although, Asanova was not conferred

²⁷ Nazarbayev, *V potoke istorii*, 291.

²⁸ Qayrat Rısqulbekovtiń "Xalıq Qaharmanı" ataǵınıń belgisi Almatı mwzeyine berildi, [The title of "People's Hero" by Kairat Ryskulbekov was awarded to the Almaty Museum] Tengrinews, accessed August 23, 2020, https://kaz.tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/kayrat-ryiskulbekovtn-halyik-kaharmanyi-atagyinyin-belgs-289396/.

²⁹ Berik Abdigali and Kayım-Munar Täbeev, *Qazaq ult-azattıq qozǵalı*, 85.

³⁰ Ibid, 30.

³¹ Mäñşük Asawtay, Rısqulbekovtiń qazasın birli-jarım mamandar ğana zerttep jür, [Ryskulbekov's death is being investigated by only a handful of specialists], Azattyk, accessed September 23, 2020, https://www.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan_kairat_ryskulbekov_sentenced_after_december_riots_died_in_mysterious_circumstances/24424051.html.

³² Zımanov, *Parlament Kazakhstana*, 26.

³³ Ibid, 27-29.

posthumously, she was remembered along with Rysqulbekov as prominent participants of Jeltoqsan 1986.

Based on the earlier brief for the national media on Jeltoqsan 1986, from 1996, the reporters should emphasize the role of Nazarbayev, who marched with the participants of Jeltoqsan 1986. This emphasis highlighted Nazarbayev as one of the core preservers of Jeltoqsanshylyar. Therefore, in compliance with the interests of the independence period, the current interpretation should avoid witch-hunt (perpetrators) and an explanation of “pseudo-patriots” of the Kazakh people who venture to earn a political gain. Having said that, national media should focus on reminiscences and assessments of politicians who live in Kazakhstan and abroad. These include Nazarbayev, who did everything to drop offensive charges of “Kazakh nationalism,” that being the Soviet interpretation of Jeltoqsan 1986. Heads of the national media must authorize such materials to avoid negative consequences of potential mistakes and distortion of facts.³⁴ Conversely, the national media should focus to the democratic frame of the events and the role of Nazarbayev, who has been against the Soviet explanation of Jeltoqsan 1986. According to Nazarbayev, he faced the tough decision to return to the building of the CP or to follow the demonstrators on the day of protests. If he chose the first option, it would be cheating on the people so he went with them at the head of the column.³⁵ Therefore, the official narrative underscores one of the consolidating roles of Nazarbayev and lacks attention to the heroic imagination of Jeltoqsanshylyar which has the potential for acquiring the central position within the official remembrance of Jeltoqsan 1986.

The remembrance of Jeltoqsan 1986 discounted the sorrow and tragedy of Jeltoqsanshylyar by highlighting achievement of independence that enabled development of Kazakhstan. In 2006 the officials set up memorial of remembrance for the forthcoming twentieth anniversary of Jeltoqsan 1986. An architect of the monument, *Táyelsizdik tány* (Dawn of Independence in Kazakh Timur Suleimenov proposed to the mayor) of Almaty Imanǵali Tasmaǵambetov a design program for the landscape of Almaty. Tasmaǵambetov then the chair of the city planning council, and its members discussed the design of the *Táuelsizdik tangy* in 2005.³⁶ The authorities placed the monument at the intersection of Sätpaev and Jeltoqsan streets (former Mir Avenue in the Soviet period). During Jeltoqsan 1986, participants moved along this intersection from Republic Square. Specifically, the monument represented the past as the collapse of the Soviet ideological canons. Simultaneously, it depicted the future as the awakening of the peoples’ self-consciousness and the triumph for freedom and sovereignty. The sculpture consisted of three parts made from granite. The first two parts had two pylons with red and white colors. The red color expressed flame, sacrifice, aspiration, bloodshed, while the white color depicted purity of thought, youthful drive, and hope. The third part of The *Táyelsizdik tány* included a forward-looking statue of a mother to enhance the effect of the monument. She fluttered a handkerchief in the wind with her right hand as the sign of reconciliation, while a ready to fly bird in her left hand was a symbol for the pursuit of freedom.³⁷ At the opening of the statue on September 19 in 2006, Nazarbayev said that he had been thinking of erecting *Táyelsizdik tány* for a long time. According to his address, he gave a special

³⁴ Ibid, 30-33.

³⁵ Nazarbayev, *Bez pravyykh i levyykh*, 180.

³⁶ Svetlana Romashkina, “Timur Suleimenov, arhitektor: “Utverzhdaysya to, chto nravitsya akimu,” [Timur Suleimenov, architect: “What the akim likes is approved”] Vlast.kz, accessed August 23, 2020, <https://vlast.kz/gorod/21601-timur-sulejmenov-arhitektor-utverzdaetsa-to-cto-nravitsa-akimu.html>.

³⁷ “Glava Gosudarstva Prinyal Uchastiye v Tseremonii Otkrytiya Pamyatnika Tauyelsizdik Tany Posvyashchenogo Dekabr'skim sobytyam,” [Head of State Took Part in the Opening Ceremony of the Tauelsizdik Tangy Monument dedicated to the December events] *Egemen Kazakhstan*, March 12, 2010, <https://old.egemen.kz/?act=readarticle&id=2552>

task in 2005 to execute this project. The architects developed the design of the monument. The Fund of the First President of Kazakhstan, set up in 2000, sponsored the arrangement of the *Táýelsizdik tańy*. This sponsorship was not from the state budget. This highlights the individual interest of Nazarbayev in the erection of this monument and its meaning independence. Nazarbayev described this independence through its achievements that linked directly to his contribution:

“...We refuted the notion that Kazakhs cannot govern themselves at these years... Everything that is done today is focused on the future. Education, healthcare, economics, and political reforms are all about the future of our youth... As our economy grows, so does the well-being of our people.”

Uprising

Despite the domination of a non-ethnic and neutral interpretation of Jeltoqsan 1986, the politicians with a kazakhness agenda within the Nazarbayev government advocated giving a greater prominence to these demonstrations. Of course, they did not contradict the independence framework of the official remembrance. They supported titling of Jeltoqsan 1986 not as events, the Soviet-era term, but as an uprising. In December 1996, Ábish Kekilbaev, a famous writer then-the State Secretary, placed Jeltoqsan 1986 as an uprising, during his address at a conference dedicated to the tenth anniversary of protests. Based on his address, Jeltoqsan 1986 was not an ordinary event and although these demonstrations was spontaneous, it had a greater social impact on everyone.³⁸

Following Kekilbaev, the small circle of kazakhness supporters within the Nazarbayev government articulated for a larger focus on Jeltoqsan 1986 in the nation-building. When Tasmaǵambetov vice-premier in 1995, was assisted film director Kaldybay Abenov to premiere the *Allajar* (Blessings of Allah) movie on Jeltoqsan 1986 in Almaty cinemas.³⁹ Later, in 2004, when Tasmaǵambetov was mayor in Almaty, the state distributed houses to the former protestors.⁴⁰ In 2005, Tasmaǵambetov met Jeltoqsanshylar on the eve of the anniversary of demonstrations. They emphasized the insufficient evaluation and assessment of Jeltoqsan 1986 in contemporary Kazakhstan. He agreed to finance the publication of a book on Jeltoqsan 1986 and to promote this book for secondary schools of Kazakhstan.⁴¹

The officials under the Nazarbayev government supported the term “uprising” during the conference on Jeltoqsan 1986 in 2011, which give prominence to Jeltoqsan 1986.⁴² It should be noted that my content analysis of Nazarbayev speeches demonstrated the use of “event,” “movement” and in rare cases “uprising” in his speeches. For example, Nurtaı Sabılianov, participant of Jeltoqsan 1986, then-member of the Bureau of the Political Council of Nur-Otan Political Party, recommended for secondary schools to have a week of Jeltoqsan 1986 remembrance and a minute of silence on December 16 and to dedicate a special chapter on this

³⁸ Ibid, 88-89.

³⁹ “Pochemu v Kazakhstane ne snimayut fil'my o dekabr'skikh sobyitiyakh 1986 goda,” [Why Kazakhstan does not make films about the events of December 1986] Forbes kz, accessed September 1, 2020, https://forbes.kz/life/hero/pochemu_v_kazahstane_ne_snimayut_filmyi_o_dekabrskih_sobyitiyah_1986_goda/?utm_source=forbes&utm_medium=themes.

⁴⁰ Nurbol Ğabdılxamıt, “1986 jılǵı jeltoqsan kóterilisine tıısti sayası baǵası berilgen joq” deydi jeltoqsansılar,” [“The December 1986 uprising has not been given a proper political assessment,” the Decemberists said] Azattyk, September 12, 2020, <https://www.azattyq.org/a/1156056.html>.

⁴¹ Qaydasıńdar jeltoqsan kóterilisiniń ardagerleri, *Kók Bairaǵ*, March 2-15, 2005, 2.

⁴² Bolatbek Tolepbergen, Ainur Toleu, and Dinara Kasymayeva, *Jeltoqsan jańǵırıtı* [Echo of December] (Almaty: Tau-Samal 2011), 65.

uprising in history textbooks. Erlan Qarin, at his time as Secretary of the Nur-Otan Party, highlighted the dichotomy of history textbook authors in assessing Jeltoqsan 1986 as an uprising and event.⁴³

In comparison to the Jeltoqsanshylar narrative, these officials did not include the anti-colonial character of the uprising and did not highlight the need for political assessment of Jeltoqsan 1986. In their case, this an attempt to earn political capital among the sympathizers of Kazakh nationalism for whom Jeltoqsan 1986 is a key turning point of history. Concurrently, they filled the gap with the official narrative delivered by Nazarbayev.

Shortly, Nazarbayev narrative used Jeltoqsan 1986 to consolidate his presidential power through non-ethnic renditions such as democratic struggle and fight for independence which did not give prominence to Jeltoqsanshylar narrative. But the advocates of kazakhness within Nazarbayev's government supported the greater prominence of Jeltoqsan 1986 in post-1991 nation construction, which preserved it from official blindness. Subsequently, the representatives of Kazakh nationalism referred to advocates of kazakhness to signify the salience of Jeltoqsan 1986.

Zheltoksahnilar narrative

Notwithstanding the organizational compartmentalization of Jeltoqsanshylar, their counter-narratives have retained a “joint front” in the post-1991 discursive field of Kazakhstan. Currently, Jeltoqsanshylar have split into eight organizations; each contends for a similar purpose – to restrain the state-sponsored control over Jeltoqsan 1986 narrative.⁴⁴ The division began from the tensions between Shakhanov and Qoja-Ahmet. Later, the official discourse welcomed the foundation of the twin organization to halt Jeltoqsan 1986 from becoming the central theme in the nation-building of Kazakhstan.

However, downplay of the Jeltoqsanshylar narrative from state-sponsored nation-building has influenced them publicize their testimonies. Jeltoqsanshylar concedes the embodiment of “the harbingers of independence” into the official narrative. However, official narrative dismissed their remembrance of tragedy and sorrow from the state-sponsored nation construction. In comparison to the official narrative, Jeltoqsanshylar advances these protests, one of the central historical tropes for knowledge construction on post-1991 Kazakhstan. The following section offers a discursive analysis of the first-hand witnesses and survivors of Jeltoqsan 1986.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid, 69-71.

⁴⁴ The obtainment of names under the process.

⁴⁵ Quttibek Aymaxan, *Tävelsizdik jeltoqsannan bastaladı* [Independence Begins from December] (Almaty: Kazygurt, 2012). Mäken Waqtegi, *Qayrat jäne Jeltoqsanshylar* [Kairat and Zheltoksanshylar] (Almaty: Orkeniet, 2001). Talğat Aytayulı, *Jeltoqsan köterilisi. Köp tomdıq ayğaq-kitaptar 2 tom* [December Uprising. Multi-volume testimonials, 2 Volume] (Almaty: Daur, 2016). Kölbay Adırbekulı, *XX ғasırdın soñğı repressiyasy (1986 jeltoqsan – 1989 şilde)* [The Latest Repression of the Twentieth Century (December 1986 – July 1989)] (Almaty: Alash, 2006). Ğanı Qarasaev, *Almatıdağı 1986 jılğı jeltoqsan oқиғası jäne Şiğis Qazaqstan (qozğalstıñ 20 jıldıǵına)* [The events of December 1986 in Almaty and East Kazakhstan (on the 20th anniversary of the movement)] (Öskemen: Öskemen, 2006). Tursınbek Jalğasbay, *Asıl adam aynumas* [The Unchanged Noble Man] (Almaty: Abzal-Ay, 2009). Beybit Qoyşıbaev, *Jeltoqsan-sın* [December-review] (Almaty: Ruh BG, 2016). Kölbay Adırbek, *Tävelsizdikke talpınıs* [Strive for the Independence] (Almaty: Aiganym, 2016). Bolatbek Tölebergen, *Qasiyttim - Jeltoqsan!* [My saint - December!] (Almaty: Keremet Media, 2016). Amanğazı Käripjanulı, *Jeltoqsan sürgini* [December Repression] (Almaty: KAZinform, 2011). Qayım-Munar Tabeev, *Qazaqtıñ Jeltoqsanı* [The Zheltoksan of Kazakhs] (Almaty: Dyke Press, 2006), Bolatbek Tölebergen, *Jeltoqsan Qarılğastarı* [Zheltoksan Karylgashtary] (Almaty: Kie Linguistics Innovation Center, 2010). Talğat Aytbayulı, *Almatı. 1986. Jeltoqsan 10 tomdıq* [Almaty. 1986. December 10 volumes] (Almaty: Tolganai, 2011). Maqsat Qarğabay, *Erlikke uran* [Motto

Jeltoqsanshylar classify these demonstrations as a national-liberation uprising against the colonial hegemony of the Soviet Union in Kazakhstan. The term Jeltoqsan uprising substantiates the struggle against the political power (Kolbin and Soviet Union) who without any dialogue forcefully contained these protests. According to them, the identification of the national-liberation uprising to Jeltoqsan 1986 ascertains the connection with the anti-colonial struggle of Kazakhstan during the Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union period. Jeltoqsanshylar has advocated for the usage of the uprising term, followed by Kekilbaev, then-State Secretary and leading Kazakh writer. Advocates of Jeltoqsanshylar contends that Kekilbaev is among the first officials who have argued for the term of the “uprising” in 1992. Since then, Jeltoqsanshylar has used the uprising title when referring to Jeltoqsan 1986. According to them, the Nazarbayev government identification of Jeltoqsan 1986 as “the events,” a Soviet coined title, intentionally minimize the salience of these demonstrations in Kazakhstani nation-building. The usage of “events” is the Soviet term, which resembles the connotation from that period.

According to Jeltoqsanshylar, the official narrative downplays the distinction of the protests not only because of its ethnic codification. Equivalently, it downplays because Jeltoqsan 1986 also interrogate the demand for freedom of expression in the post-1991 period. Jeltoqsan 1986 could become a tenacious discourse to confront the restrictions on peaceful protests and gatherings in Kazakhstan because of its immediate recollections in people’s consciousness and resistance against political power. In other words, the prominence of Jeltoqsan 1986 could become the uniting symbol of resistance for change among kazakhness supporters. Based on Jeltoqsanshylar, therefore, the official narrative has not given renown to Jeltoqsan 1986 in the contemporary period by clouding its remembrance with a narrative of the struggle between totalitarianism and democracy.

The Jeltoqsanshylar narrative asserts the anti-colonial interpretation of these demonstrations. In comparison to the official narrative, they explicitly emphasize the struggle against the Soviet Union at the time of Jeltoqsan 1986. According to their narrative, the protests went against the Russification and restraint on culture and Kazakh language in the Soviet Union, which affected the Kazakh consciousness. However, identically to Tsarist periods, the violence of the Soviet Union repressed Jeltoqsan 1986. The methods of repression were similar to Stalin’s Great Purge (1936-1939). Despite this, thanks to Zhelokshanhylar's effort the collapse of the Soviet Union was accelerated. These enabled the declaration of independence for Kazakhstan in 1991. According to Jeltoqsanshylar, these protests were the result of about 300 uprisings in the struggle for independence since the Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union periods. The anti-colonial struggle was a continuation of the 1916 national liberation uprising in Tsarist Russia and revolts against Stalin’s collectivization in the Soviet period. The non-occurrence of decolonization due to the remaining power of Communists was a reason that this continuation of anti-colonial resistance at Zheltokan 1986 has not reached the substantive symbol of independence in the present-day Kazakhstan.

This the retention of power by former Communist leaders after 1991 restrained possible transitional justice (violations against protestors) on Jeltoqsan 1986. The officials who were responsible for the dispersal of Jeltoqsan 1986 remained in their positions. Given these, there is a lack of trust in these officials, including the current government, because they are appointees of Moscow who continue their political power to the present-day. In contrast to

for Courage] (Shymkent: Altyn Shanyrak, 2016). Amanğazı Kärıpjanäwleti, *Jeltoqsan jırı* [Zheltoksan zhyry] (Almaty: KAZinform, 2011). Şolpan Jumädilova, *Nayzağay namıs* [Lightning honor] (Almaty: Tolganai T, 2013).

these critiques of present officials, some Jeltoqsanshylar expressed their nostalgia about order and economic security in the Soviet Union that was not present in the chaotic days of Kazakhstan's construction. Due to the continuation of Communist rule in Kazakhstan, According to Jeltoqsanshylar, Jeltoqsan 1986 has not reached its deserved political and legal status in contemporary Kazakhstan. Jeltoqsanshylar maintain their struggle for the recognition of their voices of tragedy and sorrow to be included in the national remembrance.

The state-sponsored commemoration marks December 17, the first day of protests, as the Day of Democratic Renewal, which is a public holiday along with the December 16, Independence Day in Kazakhstan. Shakhanov and Jeltoqsanshylar favored honoring Remembrance Day on December 17. However, Nazarbayev declared this day as the Democratic Renewal of the signing of the decree on rehabilitation of Jeltoqsanshylar in 1991. According to Jeltoqsanshylar, valuing the democratic renewal revokes the Jeltoqsanshylar's collective suffering on the day of protests and later. They maintain reconciliation as the embodiment of their mourning and grief to commemoration. A grandiose celebration of Independence Day on December 16 overshadows these recollections of Jeltoqsanshylar, the celebration of state-sponsored Independence Day happens as a summary of the country's present-day achievements but not remembrance of Jeltoqsanshylar. The commemoration of Jeltoqsanshylar occurs in the background of grandiose celebration of Independence Day through a public wreath-laying ceremony and minute of silence to the monument of Táýelsizdik Tańy near Republic Square in Almaty.

Based on recollections of Jeltoqsanshylar the officials deliberately located the monument amidst the intersection of streets so that visitors cannot assemble at Táýelsizdik Tańy. The renaming of the former Brezhnev Square to Republic Square (which is neutral and not associated with the Jeltoqsan 1986 name) where the protests gathered at Jeltoqsan 1986 dislocates the memory of Jeltoqsanshylar. The Jeltoqsanshylar and few activists attend these ceremonies in the mourning and express their sorrow for Jeltoqsan 1986.

Jeltoqsanshylar has campaigned the hero-making of the protestors. The recollections of Rysqulbekov, an imprisoned protestor who was found dead in jail, take place through the renaming in his honor of streets and schools and the opening of monuments. The hero-making of Rysqulbekov, is based on the sacrifice made against the oppressors to obtain freedom for Kazakhstan. By lobbying, the mayor of Jambul oblast reconstructed a park in Rysqulbekov,'s Taraz hometown (the central city in Jambul oblast) which now includes a monument and museum under the name Rysqulbekov.⁴⁶

Therefore Jeltoqsanshylar still battles for comprehensive truth-seeking. According to them, the government should give a political assessment to Jeltoqsan 1986. Unfortunately, the commissioners could not reach the truth and the justice of Jeltoqsan 1986 from the government. For example, the Parliament can adopt a law on the status of the Zhetloksan 1986 and its participants. True truth-seeking should include holding the officials responsible for their use of violence and their formal apology to the Zheltoksnanshylar. Sabyr Qasymov, a member of the Constitutional Court on the investigation of Zhetoksan 1986 and former deputy of Parliament, introduced the adoption of a law on the special status of the Jeltoqsanshylar and victims of political repressions who were the freedom fighters of an independent Kazakhstan. According to Qasymov, the officials did not allow the Constitutional Court to make decisions that could

⁴⁶ Mäken Waqtegi and Maqulbek Rısdäwlet, *Qaharman Qayrat pen Jeltoqsanshylar* [the Hero Kairat and Zheltoksnanshylar], (Almaty: Ush Kiyan, 2019), 7-10. Mäken Waq, "Qayrat tanıtqan qayratkerler," [Statesmen Who Made Kairat Popular], *Jas Türkistan*, July-August 4, 2002, 14-16.

satisfy the public during its official commission.⁴⁷ Similarly, Sabılianov, then Deputy of the Parliament, lobbied for the adoption of the law on Jeltoqsanshylar.⁴⁸

According to the Jeltoqsanshylar, the history of the 1986 uprising remains hidden in an independent Kazakhstan. In the post-1991 history of Kazakhstan, Jeltoqsan 1986 should take the central position. Yet, according to the Jeltoqsanshylar, the self-censorship of historians and unwritten laws from the government do not sanction the re-writing the Jeltoqsan 1986 through emphasizing its centrality in Kazakhstan's history. Concurrently, the Communist legacy of historians excludes Jeltoqsan 1986 to be listed among the salient parts of Kazakhstan's history. For example, Talgat Aıtbauly, a participant of these demonstrations and journalist, recalls his visit to the Institute of State History in Astana. At the meeting, Búrkitbai Aıaǵan director of this institute, advised there was no need to repeatedly raise Jeltoqsan 1986 since the government had already given their political assessment.⁴⁹ This hinders historians from producing academic knowledge on Jeltoqsan 1986 and problematizes the results among the public discourse.

The opinion-shapers of Kazakh nationalism make these Jeltoqsanshylar narratives available to the wider public in Kazakhstan. In my interviews with representatives of Kazakh nationalism validate their agreement with the national-liberation uprising term in reference to Jeltoqsan 1986.⁵⁰ The representatives of Kazakh nationalism use Jeltoqsan 1986 to question the use of unrestricted force by the current government. For example, Rasyl Jumaly and Dos Kóshim underscore that history repeats itself in present-day Kazakhstan because the truth-seeking of Zhetoksan 1986 did happen. According to these interviews, in particular, the officials were not held responsible for the use of violence against the participants at Jeltoqsan 1986. The same occurred at the Jańaózen riots in 2011 and the land protests in 2016.⁵¹ The current government has repeatedly used violence against its citizens, and non-one has been held responsible in the aftermath.

Nowadays, the oppositional movements such as Oyan Qazaqstan [Wake Up Kazakhstan] and Zhanbolat Mamay's movement the independence generation, born and raised during Nazarbayev, question the meaning of independence day on December 16. They contest the meaning of this day through the organization of protests at the Republican Square in Almaty. At their protests they raise the connection between Jeltoqsan 1986 and the Jańaózen riots, both of them starting on December 16, and where the state used violence against its citizens at both of these events.⁵²

⁴⁷ Tolepbergen, *Jeltoqsan jańǵırığı*, 48-49.

⁴⁸ Nurtay Sabılianov, "Meniń Qazaqstanım" ǵanı alańǵa ǵıqqan 15 mińǵa jwiq jastardiń rwxin kóterip turdı," [The Song "My Kazakhstan" Raised The Spirit of about 15 Thousand Young People] The Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, accessed October 1, 2020, <http://www.parlam.kz/a/blogs/sabilianov/Details/4/564>

⁴⁹ Bolat Şarxımbay, "Almatı. 1986 Jeltoqsan. Ayǵaq-kitap 7 tom" [Almaty.December 1986. Testimonies book 7] (Almatı: Toǵanay T, 2019), 398.

⁵⁰ Rasyl Jumaly, Dos Kóshim, Ámirjan Qosanov, Ázimbai Ǵalı, Muhtar Taijan, interviews, August-October, 2019. Ayjan Jeńisqızı, "Aydos Sarım: Másele ǵırşada emes..." [Aidos Sarym: The problem is not in the Christmas tree ...] Abai.kz, accessed September 21, 2020, <https://abai.kz/post/18389>.

⁵¹ On December 16 in 2011, at the celebration of Independence Day, at least fourteen people were killed, during the clash with the police in Jańaózen, a small town in Mańǵystay oblast (western Kazakhstan). The oil workers of Jańaózen went to strike for unpaid salaries and better working conditions, which left without an official response in 2011. In 2016 a large number of Kazakhstani protested against the changes to the law to rent agricultural land to foreigner. In both cases, the police and army forces suppressed the discontent.

⁵² "Ne zabudem, ne prostim." Vystupleniya i zaderzhaniya 16 dekabrya, ["We Will not Forget, We Will not Forgive." Performances and Detentions on December 16] Azattyk, September 20, 2020, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-almaty-nur-sultan-rallies/30327926.html>

Conclusion

This article confirmed how the official narrative of the Nazarbayev government and counter-narratives from Jeltoqsanshylar including, the representatives of Kazakh nationalism, have contended to produce the usable narratives on Jeltoqsan 1986 for Kazakhstan's nation-building during the almost thirty years of independence period. The ruling elite narratives of Jeltoqsan 1986, to some extent, overshadowed the Jeltoqsanshylar personal sorrow and tragedy narratives with its democracy and "harbingers of independence" narratives. However, thanks to the truth-commissions on Jeltoqsan 1986 and advocates of kazakhness within the ruling elite who lobbied the remembrance of Jeltoqsanshylar was preserved within the discursive environment of post-1991 nation-building.