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## Kazakh-Xinjiang Section of Soviet-Chinese Border in the Second Half of the 1920s – the First Half of the 1930s: Border and Passport Regimes, Illegal Migration, and Economic Practices of the Population

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**Abstract:** The author in their article considers the USSR state policy in the field of protecting the border zone with China in the Kazakh-Xinjiang section of the border in the 1920–1930s. The purpose of the study is to show the migration processes and economic practices of the border territories population during the period of transition, from a period of frequent contact to the erection of a barrier on the border. The research is based on the legal acts regulating the border regime and the departmental records of the OGPU on border protection issues. The author shows the nature of the border during this period, firstly, it existed as a line of state demarcation and a military-political boundary, and secondly, it existed as a border contact territory, with established economic and migration practices. The author comes to the conclusion that even in the context of tightening the border regime, the population of the border territories maintained economic interaction, resorting to illegal practices in order to survive and circumvent government restrictions.

**Keywords:** Soviet-Chinese borderlands, Kazakhstan, migration, smuggling, and banditry

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## Казахско-синьцзянский участок советско-китайской границы: пограничный режим и приграничные практики населения во второй половине 1920-х – первой половине 1930-х годов

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**Аннотация:** Исследуется государственная политика СССР в области охраны пограничной зоны с Китаем на казахско-синьцзянском участке в 1920–1930-е гг. Цель исследования заключается в том, чтобы показать, как протекали миграционные процессы и экономические практики населения приграничья в условиях переход от контактной к барьерной границе. Источниковая база основана на нормативно-правовых актах, регулировавших пограничный режим, и ведомственном делопроизводстве ОГПУ по вопросам охраны границы. В статье показан феномен границы, во-первых, как линии государственного разграничения и военно-политического рубежа, во-вторых, как пограничной контактной территории со сложившимися экономическими и миграционными практиками. Авторы пришли к выводу, что даже в условиях ужесточения пограничного режима население приграничья сохранило экономическое взаимодействие, прибегая к нелегальным практикам с целью выживания и обхода государственных ограничений.

**Ключевые слова:** советско-китайское трансграничье, Казахстан, миграция, контрабанда, бандитизм

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### Introduction

*Relevance.* The issue of borders and border territories is related not only to a state's foreign policy and national security, but also to its domestic policy. Borders not only separate states but also reflect features of the political and economic regimes of neighboring countries. It is common to distinguish between the barrier and contact functions of a border, along with various ways of crossing it, which allows analyzing the specific lifestyles of the population of border regions. The status and functions of a border can also frequently change in various directions and have their own time stages. It is the status of a border territory which is a key factor for analyzing the political, economic, and social environment of border areas and the existing restrictions on the population. In the 1920–1930s, the balance between the barrier and contact functions of the USSR borders with the neighboring countries underwent significant changes. This affected both interstate and regional interactions, as well as the population of the border territories, where specific economic ties developed, and in some cases one could speak of ethnocultural affinity. As a result of the policy of tightening border regime for the local population, there occurred a fairly rapid transition from a contact border regime to a separation and barrier regime.

At that time, just like today, the Sino-Soviet border was one of the longest in the world, and Mongolia divided it into eastern and western sections. The western section was a stretch of approximately 2,000 kilometers, where Xinjiang and the Kazakh, Kirgiz and Tajik SSRs bordered. The history of this section of the Soviet border clearly illustrates not only the nature of interstate and regional relations, but also the strategic importance of Xinjiang for both the USSR and China.

*Elaboration of the problem.* Border issues are most often examined by specialists in the field of modern border interaction; significantly fewer studies are devoted to the history of the border and border areas. The topic of the history of the Soviet border has been developed primarily by departmental historians, which is due to the possibility of access to departmental archives and interest in the history of border and customs services (O.B. Mozokhin<sup>1</sup>, O.Yu. Repukhova<sup>2</sup>, V.A. Korniyakov<sup>3</sup>, etc.). Border issues attract civilian historians, primarily in the context of studying Soviet influence in Xinjiang (V.V. Petrov<sup>4</sup>, V.I. Barmin<sup>5</sup>, E.N. Nazemtseva, A. Kamalov<sup>6</sup> etc.), Basmachi movement (V.I. Barmin<sup>7</sup> etc.), Russian emigration (E.N. Nazemtseva<sup>8</sup> etc.), including military emigration (E.N. Nazemtseva<sup>9</sup>, A.V. Ganin<sup>10</sup>), ethnic migration (N.N. Ablazhey<sup>11</sup>, E.N. Nazemtseva<sup>12</sup>), Central Asian migration (K.N. Abdullaev<sup>13</sup>), and border trade (T.A. Shemetova<sup>14</sup>). In historiography there

<sup>1</sup> O. Mozokhin, *VCHK – OGPU. Karaiushchiy mech proletariata* [VChK – OGPU. The Punishing Sword of the Proletariat] (Moscow: Iauza Publ.; Eksmo Publ., 2004).

<sup>2</sup> O.Yu. Repukhova, *Pogranichnyy rezhim v Karelii v 1920–1930-e gody* [Border regime in Karelia in the 1920s–1930s] (Petrozavodsk: Izdatel'stvo Petrozavodskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta Publ., 2017).

<sup>3</sup> K.A. Korniyakov, *Kontrabanda i bor'ba s nei* [Smuggling and the Fight Against It] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Rossiiskoi Tamozhennoi Akademii Publ., 2010).

<sup>4</sup> V.I. Petrov, *Myatezhnoe serdtse Azii: Sin' tszyan: kratkaia istoriia narodnykh dvizhenii i vospominaniia* [The Rebellious Heart of Asia: Xinjiang: A Brief History of Popular Movements and Memories] (Moscow: Kraft+ Publ., 2003).

<sup>5</sup> V.A. Barmin, *Sovetskii Soiuz i Sin' tszyan, 1918–1941 gg. (regional'nyi faktor vo vneshnei politike Sovetskogo Soiuza)* [The Soviet Union and Xinjiang, 1918–1941 (regional factor in the foreign policy of the Soviet Union)] (Barnaul: Izdatel'stvo BGPU Publ., 1998).

<sup>6</sup> A.K. Kamalov, “Political history of Xinjiang in the 1920s – 1930s,” *History of Central Asia*, no. 3–4 (2024): 82–95.

<sup>7</sup> V.A. Barmin, “Searching for Forms and Methods of Acting on Indigenous Population by Turkestan Soviet and Communist Party Bodies in the Context of Fighting the Basmachi in 1918–1924,” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 22, no. 1 (2023): 97–109, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2023-22-1-97-109>

<sup>8</sup> E.N. Nazemtseva, *Politiko-pravovoe polozhenie rossiiskikh emigrantov v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniakh 1917–1949 godov* [The political and legal status of Russian emigrants in Soviet-Chinese relations in 1917–1949] (Moscow: IV RAN Publ., 2024).

<sup>9</sup> E.N. Nazemtseva, *Russkaia emigratsiia v Sin' tszyane (1920–1930-e gg.)* [Russian emigration in Xinjiang (1920–1930s)] (Barnaul: Altaiskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii universitet Publ., 2010); E.N. Nazemtseva, “Russian Architectural Heritage in the Xinjiang-Uygur Autonomous Region of China as Manifestation of Interethnic and Intercultural Interaction in the 19<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> Centuries,” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 22, no. 1 (2023): 72–84, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2023-22-1-72-84>

<sup>10</sup> A.V. Ganin, *Ataman A.I. Dutov* [Ataman A.I. Dutov] (Moscow: ZAO Tsentropoligraf Publ., 2006).

<sup>11</sup> N.N. Ablazhey *Kazakhskii migratsionnyi maiatnik «Kazakhstan – Sin' tszyan». Emigratsiia. Repatriatsiia. Integratsiia* [Kazakh migration pendulum “Kazakhstan – Xinjiang”. Emigration. Repatriation. Integration] (Novosibirsk: [N.s.], 2015).

<sup>12</sup> N.N. Ablazhey, E.N. Nazemtseva, “Kyrgyz refugees and Russian emigrants in Western China: ways of resolving the refugee question (based on the materials of the people's commissariat for foreign affairs of the Russian SFSR in the summer of 1923),” *Gumilyov Journal of History*, no. 4 (2020): 12–22, <https://doi.org/10.32523/2616-7255-2020-133-4-13-23>

<sup>13</sup> K.N. Abdullaev, *Ot Sin' tszyanya do Khorasana. Iz istorii sredneaziatskoi emigratsii XX veka* [From Xinjiang to Khorasan. From the history of Central Asian emigration in the 20th century] (Dushanbe: «Ирфон» Publ., 2009).

<sup>14</sup> T.A. Shemetova, *Rossiisko-sin' tszyanskiiye torgovo-ekonomicheskie i politicheskie otnosheniia v 1914–1922 gg.* [Russian-Xinjiang trade, economic and political relations in 1914–1922] (Barnaul: Altaiskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii universitet, 2024).

are a few works on the history of the Soviet-Xinjiang border and border regime (V.V. Tereshchenko<sup>15</sup>).

*The purpose of the study* is to demonstrate how changes in border policy influenced the migration processes and economic practices of the population in the Xinjiang borderland of the Kazakh ASSR.

*Source base.* In the study there were used legislative and departmental regulations, including decrees, decisions, and orders of various levels and branches of government regulating border and passport regimes; operational records of the OGPU-NKVD border institutions; investigative cases of border violations. These groups of documents make it possible to reconstruct Soviet border policy as a whole, including on the Soviet-Chinese section of the border between the Kazakh Republic and Xinjiang, in terms of both protection and regulation of border interactions, the suppression of illegal migration and smuggling.

The authors used archival materials from the collections of the Politburo of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (F. 17) of the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History; the Kazakh Regional Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (F. 141) of the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan; orders of the OGPU-NKVD of the USSR (F. 13) and the Secretariat of the OGPU-NKVD (F. 9) of the Special State Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan; documents of the Special State Archive of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan; archival and investigative files (F. 20) of the Special State Archive of the Almaty City Police Department and the Special State Archive of the East Kazakhstan Region Police Department. There were also used thematic documentary publications on the history of the OGPU-NKVD and border troops, documents covering the migration of Kazakhs to Xinjiang, as well as periodicals.

### **Creation of borderland, formation of border and passport regimes**

The formation of the border regime of the young Soviet state began after the decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR of May 28, 1918 on establishing border protection. This decree introduced a special regime in the borderland – 4 and 7.5 kilometers inland from the border<sup>16</sup>. The border regulations were first developed in February 1921, and based on them, on July 10, 1921, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR adopted the first regulation on border protection<sup>17</sup>, determining the special regime in these territories.

The decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of January 24, 1922 on movement within the country's territory prohibited free entry into populated areas within the 7.5-kilometer zone<sup>18</sup>. On March 28, 1923, the GPU of the USSR developed the instruction on border protection by border troops. This instruction introduced additional levels of border strips (4; 7.5; 16 and 22 km), as well as defined the powers of border agencies, access rules, and residence regulations. The border regime rules were codified in the "Regulations on the Protection of the USSR Borders," approved by the Central

<sup>15</sup> V.V. Tereshchenko, "Red Banner Eastern Border District (History of Creation and Development)," *Army and Society*, no. 1 (2014): 1–9.

<sup>16</sup> Sobraniye uzakoneniy i rasporyazheniy Rabochego i Krest'yanskogo pravitel'stva RSFSR (thereafter – SU RSFSR), 1918, no. 44.

<sup>17</sup> E.D. Soloviev, *Pogranichnyye voiska SSSR, 1918–1928. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* [Border Troops of the USSR, 1918–1928. Collection of documents and materials] (Moscow: Nauka Publ., 1978), 170–171.

<sup>18</sup> *Izvestiya VTSIK*, 1922, January 26, no. 19.

Executive Committee of the USSR on September 7, 1923<sup>19</sup>. According to the decree of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR dated March 24, 1924, the OGPU was additionally granted the right to administrative expulsion, including from the state border for a three-year period<sup>20</sup>.

The establishment of a border zone in a region was the prerogative of the USSR government; its status was regulated by relevant decrees, which stipulated both the need to restrict entry and residence in a border zone and the procedure for the expulsion of people not authorized to reside there. In the summer of 1925, the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR transferred the matters of entry and exit from the country, including for residents of border areas to the republican People's Commissariats of Internal Affairs. At the initiative of the GPU, in the summer of 1925 there were revised the demarcation lines of the border strip. There were also introduced movement regulations for the local population within the 4-meter and 500-meter border strip. These changes were approved on June 15, 1927, by the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR in the resolution "On the Protection of the USSR State Border."<sup>21</sup> According to this document, the state security agencies received authority to deny unauthorized persons entry into the border strip and impose restrictions on movement for the local population. The population's entry into 7.5-kilometer and 22-kilometer zones became possible only with the permission of the state security agencies. Entry regulations were administered by a departmental instruction dated June 28, 1927. On December 20 of that year, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR imposed a ban on economic activities within the 4-meter and 500-meter strips and confiscated these lands for state use, allowing for the construction of border outposts. By order of the OGPU of the USSR for the Main Directorate of Border Guards and OGPU Troops dated March 15, 1929, a list of settlements within the 7.5-kilometer border strip was published, the unauthorized entry into which was prohibited<sup>22</sup>.

The border regime imposed restrictions on residence, movement, and economic activity in these territories. As early as 1921, the decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR introduced criminal liability for illegal border crossing, carrying a prison sentence of up to five years. However, the 1922 Criminal Code of the RSFSR significantly mitigated the punishment, establishing six months of forced labor or a fine for this offense, and from 1923 imprisonment for up to six months. Article 84 of the new (1926) Criminal Code of the RSFSR provided for criminal liability and confiscation of property for illegal border crossing. Restrictions on the entry of foreigners into the border zone were introduced in November 1924<sup>23</sup>. Subsequently, the ban was extended to stateless persons and even Soviet citizens who had previously held foreign citizenship.

On November 17, 1927, by its resolution, the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR approved regulations for the imposition of administrative penalties and the procedure for their implementation. Violations were subject to administrative liability under Article 192 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR; decisions on administrative fines or

<sup>19</sup> SU RSFSR, 1922, no. 11.

<sup>20</sup> A.I. Kokurin, N.V. Petrov, *Lubyanka. Organy VCHK–OGPU–NKVD–NKGB–MGB–MVD–KGB. 1917–1991: Spravochnik* [Lubyanka. Bodies of the Cheka – OGPU – NKVD – NKGB – MGB – MVD – KGB. 1917–1991: Directory] (Moscow: MFD Publ., 2003), 179–181.

<sup>21</sup> Spetsial'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Ministerstva vnutrennikh del Respubliki Kazakhstan (thereafter – SGA MVD RK), f. 13, op. 1, d. 2, l. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 8–9.

<sup>23</sup> O.Yu. Repukhova, *Pogranichnyy rezhim*, 48.

forced labor were issued by administrative departments. In 1927–1928, local executive committees in a number of border regions also received the authority to conduct administrative expulsions of smugglers; previously such authority had been received by the OGPU. At the turn of the 1930s, the OGPU again received the authority to conduct “purges” of socially harmful and politically dangerous elements in border areas. The first nationwide expulsion campaign was carried out in the autumn of 1932, which resulted in the resettlement of part of the population from the border zones. In 1935, a similar resettlement was carried out from the 22-kilometer zone<sup>24</sup>. Mass repressions and deportations from the southern, western, and northwestern borders deep into the USSR were carried out in the second half of the 1930s. Those expelled from the border areas lost the right to reside in the area.

In 1932, the USSR began partial passportization of the population. Border areas were given restricted status, and their accelerated passportization took place in 1933<sup>25</sup>. The issuance of passports, their exchange, and registration procedures further tightened the entry and residence regulations<sup>26</sup>. On the western border of the USSR, passport regime was introduced within a 100-kilometer zone; on other borders, the border zone was defined first as 22 kilometers, and then as 50 kilometers. Violating the rules of residence and registration in the border zone resulted in a prison camp sentence increased to three years. There was also imposed a ban on entry into the restricted zone on all those convicted of political offenses<sup>27</sup>. Initially, decisions regarding smugglers and border violators were made primarily by the Special Council of the NKVD of the USSR, as well as by regional courts. Military tribunals of the border guard, OGPU troops, and police established by a decision of April 25, 1932 and reporting to the Military Collegium of the USSR Supreme Court heard cases of military personnel. Mass repressions on passport grounds became possible thanks to the activities of extrajudicial bodies. The so-called police troikas, which functioned from 1935 to 1938, had the authority to sentence violators of passport regulations to imprisonment for up to five years. Passportization became a crucial factor in the formation of a system of registration and supervisory control designed to regulate the territorial mobility of the population as a whole, as well as to monitor groups discriminated against on passport grounds.

### **Kazakh-Xinjiang border and its security. Kazakh borderland**

Kazakhstan and Xinjiang were adjacent territories. The Kirgiz (Kazakh) Soviet Autonomous Socialist Republic (KASSR) was established in August 1920 as part of the RSFSR. Kazakhstan and Kirgizia were divided in 1924–1925. In October 1924, the Kara-Kirgiz Autonomous Oblast was established, renamed the Kazakh ASSR in June 1925. In February 1936, the autonomous republic received a new name – the Kazakh ASSR, which at the end of December of that year became a Soviet socialist republic – the Kazakh SSR. As for Xinjiang, after the formation of the Republic of China in 1911, it remained a province, although it effectively functioned as an autonomous region under the control of local militarists that acted de facto independently of the central government. The region was the

<sup>24</sup> O.Yu. Repukhova, *Pogranichnyy rezhim*, 52, 62.

<sup>25</sup> Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (thereafter – RGASPI), f. 17, op. 3, d. 921, l. 65–66.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, op. 166, d. 576, l. 11–14.

<sup>27</sup> SZ SSSR, 1935, no. 45, 377.

scene of interethnic confrontation, accompanied by mass insurgency, military coups, the proclamation of an Islamic republic, and direct intervention of external forces<sup>28</sup>.

Prior to the revolution, it was the units of the Semerichensk and Siberian Cossack hosts which played a key role in guarding the border from Lake Issyk-Kul to Altai. From 1920, the Xinjiang-Soviet section of the border was under the control of the Turkestan border division. Within the territory of the Kazakh ASSR, the border guard force was formed from the units of the Semipalatinsk provincial border detachment of the GPU, which was subordinate to the Siberian border district of the GPU and primarily responsible for guarding the border with Mongolia. In Zaysan there were stationed a border squad and a squadron; in February 1924, the squadron came under the command of the GPU of the Kirgiz (Kazakh) ASSR and later became known as the Zaysan border detachment. In April 1924, the Jetisu (Alma-Ata) border detachment of the Turkestan ASSR was formed on the basis of two cavalry squadrons of the Red Army and border units<sup>29</sup>. In 1925, with the establishment of the Kazakh ASSR, there were formed border guard units (BGU) of the Kazakh border district of the Plenipotentiary representation of the OGPU of the Kazakh ASSR. In 1929, their command was transferred from Kyzylorda to Alma-Ata, which became the capital of the autonomous republic. In 1932, the Military tribunal of the border guard and OGPU troops of the Kazakh ASSR was established, and in 1939, the Directorate of border and internal troops of the Kazakh SSR was renamed the Directorate of border troops of the Kazakh SSR<sup>30</sup>.

The border guard structure was comprised of border districts consisting of border detachments, commandant's offices, and outposts. It was mobile groups attached to border detachments which played a special role; they were designed to strengthen border security: to prevent violations of the regime and combat banditry and smuggling. The formation of detachments, commandant's offices, and outposts on the Xinjiang section of the Soviet-Chinese border took place in several stages, and their number was constantly increasing. Thus, in 1927, the separate Bakhty commandant's office created from the Zaysan border detachment had four outposts under its control; in 1930 it had eight outposts; and by 1932 it had 14 outposts. This commandant's office was responsible for 526 km of the state border. In the mid-1930s, the border guard personnel numbered nearly 3,400 people, and by the end of the 1930s over 5,600 people. The border district of the Kazakh ASSR was given control over 1,636 km of the border from the town of Khantegri to Altai, that is its area of responsibility included the territories of modern-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In 1934–1935, in the border district of the Kazakh ASSR there appeared two air detachments, and later an air squadron. There were also the 30<sup>th</sup> Bakhty, 49<sup>th</sup> Jarkent/Panfilovsky and 50<sup>th</sup> Zaisan border detachments and the 10<sup>th</sup> Chingistai, 11<sup>th</sup> Lepsinsk and 12<sup>th</sup> Saryzhak border commandants' offices.

According to the list of the USSR border settlements of 1927, in the 7.5-kilometer zone on the territory of the Kazakh ASSR the following were considered as such: in the Jetisu province (former Semirechye): the village of Narynkol, the Dararty tract, the villages of Sumbe and Buduty-Khassan, the Buduty settlement, the villages of Koldzhat and Khorgos, the settlement of Baskunchi, the mountains Arsaly, Chekert and Aity; in the Semipalatinsk

<sup>28</sup> V.A. Barmin, S.V. Dmitriev, V.G. Shmatov, "Sin'tszyan: ocherk istorii regiona [Xinjiang: An Essay on the History of the Region]," in *Obshchestvo i gosudarstvo v Kitae. Seriya: Uchenye zapiski Otdela Kitaiia IV RAN* (Moscow: IFV RAN Publ., 2016), 232–240.

<sup>29</sup> Within the framework of the administrative-territorial division, from 1924 to 1928 Alma-Ata was the administrative center of the Alma-Ata uezd and the Jetisu province, which included the Alma-Ata uezd.

<sup>30</sup> V.V. Tereshchenko, "Red Banner Eastern Border District (History of Creation and Development)," *Army and Society*, no. 1 (2014): 1–3.

province: the fortification of Bakhty, the farmstead of Murza-Artyk, the settlements of Mai-Kapchagay, Tyuyu-Kuyryuk, Nizhny Ashala, the aul of Dandybaeva, the settlements of Alekseyevka, Nikolaevka, Aleksandrovka, Matveyevka<sup>31</sup>. The territory of the Soviet-Chinese border was populated. The largest settlements in the border zone were the towns of Jarkent (11,100 people in 1926; 11,300 people in 1939) and Lepsinsk (7,400 people in 1924), the urban-type settlement of Zaysan (8,200 people in 1926; 8,500 people in 1939), and the settlement of Bakhty. There are no complete data on the border region's population, and it is difficult to estimate due to repeated administrative divisions. According to the 1939 census, almost 43,500 people lived in the Zaysan district, including 22,000 Kazakhs<sup>32</sup>.

According to the 1927 regulations, it was members of the union and republican governments, boards of people's commissariats, prosecutors, and investigators of the republican level who had the right of unimpeded entry into border settlements. Among regional and local officials, the right of unimpeded entry was given to the chairmen of provincial, district, regional, and volost Soviets, heads of administrative departments of Soviets, and operational staff of the police and criminal investigation departments. The ban on staying in the border zone did not apply to permanent residents or to those serving there. Entry permits were issued by border guards, and in places where there were none, they were obtained through provincial and district OGPU departments. In the restricted border zone, residence permits were issued by administrative departments of the executive committees of Soviets or by police departments under the control of the authorized representative of the OGPU. Upon arrival in the restricted border zone, registration was required with the nearest OGPU border guard office (directorate, commandant's office, or outpost). There were introduced authorization documents specifying the purpose of the trip, which gave the right to visit the restricted border zone. These documents required approval from local OGPU or border guard authorities. Legal border crossing was possible through checkpoints, of which there were only three. In the mid-1920s, for the border population there were introduced restrictions on economic activities and access within the 500-meter border zone. In 1927, access became possible only with OGPU approval. In 1935, there was introduced a complete ban on stay.

The border centers of Jarkent, Lepsinsk, Zaysan and Bakhty were included in the first wave of passportization, which began in October 1933<sup>33</sup>. The exchange of passports in the border area had been completed by 1935. The restricted border zone was 22 kilometers deep. In 1940, by secret decisions of the Council of People's Commissars of the Kazakh SSR and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR, the territories of six village councils in the Alma-Ata, one in the Semipalatinsk, and four in the East Kazakhstan regions were classified as forbidden, while 20 village councils in the Alma-Ata region and one in the Semipalatinsk region were given the status of partially adjacent to the border<sup>34</sup>.

During the period under study, the Kazakh-Xinjiang border region was characterized by high population mobility, due to the presence of migrant enclaves and ethnic zones in the adjacent territories. Right near the border, in the Altay District, there were 11 Russian settlements<sup>35</sup>, and in the mid-1930s, land was allocated to Russians for new settlements in

<sup>31</sup> SGA MVD RK, f. 13, op. 1, d. 2, l. 11–12.

<sup>32</sup> *Naselenie Kazakhstana po Vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1937 i 1939 gg.* [Population of Kazakhstan according to the All-Union Population Census of 1937 and 1939] (Almaty: Litera-M Publ., 2024), 253.

<sup>33</sup> RGASPI, f. 17, op. 25, d. 79, l. 42–43.

<sup>34</sup> Arkhiv Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan (thereafter – AP RK), f. 708, op. 1/1, d. 1, l. 281–282.

<sup>35</sup> N.N. Ablazhey, E.N. Nazemtseva, "Russian Enclave in Chinese Altai in 1917: Results of Colonizationolonization of Russian-Chinese Borderland," *Historical Courier*, no. 4 (2020): 67–86, <https://doi.org/10.31518/2618-9100-2020-4-6>

other areas of Xinjiang<sup>36</sup>. On the eve of World War I, the number of Russian-speaking agrarian migrants in the region exceeded 12,000 people<sup>37</sup>. The territories of the Ili, Tarbagatai, and Altay Districts of Xinjiang were areas of compact settlement and migration for Kazakhs. Another large area of Kazakh settlement was Barkul (Barkol) in Zhengxi uezd. A significant increase in the number of Kazakhs and Kirgiz was a consequence of the Central Asian revolt of 1916. In particular, the number of Kazakhs in the Ili District alone reached 150,000–160,000<sup>38</sup>. During the large-scale military clashes of 1920–1921 between White Guard units and the Red Army, there were approximately 50,000 Russian soldiers and refugees in the province<sup>39</sup>. The amnesty and subsequent repatriation from Xinjiang of both ordinary White émigrés and ethnic refugees initiated by the Soviet government in the first half of the 1920s contributed to a significant reduction in their numbers. However, against the backdrop of the famine of the early 1930s, the number of refugees from the USSR in the border districts of Xinjiang increased sharply again, and return migration did not exceed one tenth of the number of those who emigrated. In the late 1930s, the Kazakh population of the province approximately amounted to 350,000 people<sup>40</sup>, while the number of Russian population was 15–20 thousand people, as confirmed by later data<sup>41</sup>. Moreover, in 1931–1934, some Kazakh refugees and Russian émigrés were involved in the military confrontation of various political forces.

### Cross-border migration and crime: points of intersection

The problem of banditry is traditionally viewed in the context of the history of the anti-Soviet resistance, which in the regions of Central Asia is primarily associated with the Basmachi movement and insurgency. “Border banditry” was characterized by the OGPU and NKVD as a purely political phenomenon. According to Soviet law, including the Criminal Code of the RSFSR, banditry was classified as an organized form of crime: counterrevolutionary crimes (Article 58) and crimes against public order, i.e., crimes against the state (Article 76). The distinction between political and criminal banditry was rather arbitrary. In the Xinjiang border strip, such crimes were primarily considered banditry as armed cattle rustling and smuggling, as well as armed support from abroad for collective and individual border crossings. Issues of combating banditry in the autonomous region were a concern for both the OGPU of the KASSR and the party leadership. It was only in 1934 that the NKVD Directorate of the KASSR reported that mass banditry in the republic had been eradicated. When the first wave of awards to border service personnel and border guard units took place in the USSR in 1936, the Bakhty border detachment was among the

<sup>36</sup> E.N. Nazemtseva, *Russkaia emigratsiia v Sin' tsiyane*, 177.

<sup>37</sup> E.N. Nazemtseva, “Chislennost' russkikh poddannyykh v Sin' tsiyane nakanune Pervoi mirovoi voyny: istochniki i problemy opredeleniia [The Number of Russian Subjects in Xinjiang on the Eve of World War I: Sources and Problems of Determination],” in *Rossiia, Sibir' i Tsentral'naia Azii: vzaimodeistvie narodov i kul'tur: materialy VIII Mezhdunarodnoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii «Rossiia, Sibir' i Tsentral'naia Azii: vzaimodeistvie narodov i kul'tur» i kruglogo stola s mezhdunarodnym uchastiem «Strany Tsentral'noi Azii v sisteme regional'nykh i mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii v XIX–XXI vv.»* (Barnaul: Altaiskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii universitet Publ., 2024), 365–366.

<sup>38</sup> N.N. Ablazhey, E.N. Nazemtseva, “Kyrgyz refugees and Russian emigrants,” 13–20; *Materialy Gosudarstvennoi komissii po polnoi reabilitatsii zhertv politicheskikh repressii (20–50 gody XX veka). Tom 5: Vynuzhdennye bezhentsy*, 258, 342.

<sup>39</sup> V.A. Barmin, *Sovetskii Soiuz i Sin' tsiyan*, 42.

<sup>40</sup> N.N. Ablazhey, *Kazakhskii migratsionnyi maiatnik*, 41.

<sup>41</sup> N.N. Ablazhey, *S vostoka na vostok: Rossiiskaia emigratsiia v Kitae* [From East to East: Russian Emigration in China] (Novosibirsk: Izdatel'stvo SO RAN Publ., 2007), 47.

first to be awarded the Order of the Red Banner in February 1936 by decree of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR.

As early as the summer of 1927, border guards noted an increase in the collective migration of Kazakhs to China. It was pointed out that the Chinese favored not only defectors but also White émigrés and Basmachi, and took no action against them despite protests of the Soviet side<sup>42</sup>.

Emergency measures to protect the border and conduct pro-Soviet propaganda among the border population were taken in September 1928, during the campaign to confiscate and deport 1,027 bai farms from the republic to prevent cattle rustling and migration to Xinjiang. However, as early as the summer of 1927, in the zone of responsibility of the 49<sup>th</sup> border detachment there took place a crossing into the Ush-Bulak tract of a Kazakh village. As shown by the investigation, “the family of one of the secretaries of the Zaysan electoral commission participated in the preparation of this crossing: contact was established with the Chinese volost governor of one of the Kazakh volosts and relatives living in the Chinese Altai, who assembled a group of 50 armed men and entered Soviet territory.”<sup>43</sup>

During the crossing, a border patrol was fired upon, and with the assistance of armed Kazakhs, the crossing took place. About 400 people (most of them were armed) assisted with the crossing<sup>44</sup>.

One of OGPU reports of 1927 noted that 23 “bandit gangs” numbering approximately 670 people, including 9 foreign ones, were operating in the territory of the KASSR<sup>45</sup>. The intensity of the violations is illustrated, for example, by the following operational reports of August 1927:

On August 18 this year, outpost No. 9 of the 49<sup>th</sup> border detachment (49<sup>th</sup> Panfilovsky (Jarkent) detachment) detained in the village of Sarkono (Sarkand) and deported 12 border violators to China. During the pursuit, four Chinese citizens escaped, one of them was killed and three escaped.

On August 24, two ambushes of outpost No. 1 of the 49<sup>th</sup> border detachment in the Santos area, 4 km southeast of the village of Narynkol, exchanged fire with six armed smugglers, who were supported, according to intelligence reports, by Chinese soldiers<sup>46</sup>.

Another wave of political banditry occurred in 1928–1932, which was due to resistance to radical socialist reforms. The number of people migrating abroad increased at the turn of the 1930s, amid rising taxation, confiscations, and collectivization. The mass migration of Kazakhs to Xinjiang became a form of resistance and undoubtedly testified to the existence of serious contradictions between the authorities and the majority of the agrarian population. A report of the Directorate of border guard and GPU troops dated February 28, 1930, to Danilovsky, the OGPU plenipotentiary representative for the KASSR indicated that in the context of radicalization of the political line, a small number of border guards, unguarded sections of the border, and the failure to provide timely information on migration, there were created conditions for emigration movement and aggravation of the situation in the border region. At the turn of the 1930s, migration was of mass character,

<sup>42</sup> Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter – GA RF), f. P-3316, op. 64, d. 925, l. 1–6.

<sup>43</sup> Spetsial’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Departamenta politicii Vostochno-Kazakhstanskoi oblasti (hereafter – SGA DP VKO), f. 19, op. 1, d. 905, l. 110.

<sup>44</sup> Spetsial’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Komiteta natsional’noi bezopasnosti Respubliki Kazakhstan (hereafter – SGA KNB RK), f. 9, op. 1, d. 438, l. 76.

<sup>45</sup> SGA KNB RK, f. 9, op. 1, d. 438, l. 119, 135.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., l. 75.

with entire villages fleeing. It was further stated that in the border zone of the Kazakh ASSR there were operating armed detachments to cover Kazakhs migrating to China. They were also supported by Chinese border authorities that practiced free crossing of the border, supplied weapons to armed groups, and allocated land for illegal immigrants. The authors of the document concluded that there was a sharp increase in border violations. A significant number of the border zone population, having relatives in Xinjiang, were liquidating their property or taking it with them and emigrating. In 1930, there were detained as follows: 1,093 people crossing into the USSR; 2,538 people crossing from the USSR; 734 border violators and 24 border guards were killed<sup>47</sup>.

According to a report of the secret political section of the plenipotentiary representative of OGPU of the Kazakh ASSR, submitted in early spring 1934 to J.V. Stalin, mass migration was underway from the autonomous republic to the adjacent regions of Siberia, the Volga region, and Central Asia, as well as to China. It was stated that in 1930–1933, over 400,000 people, including 286,000 households, migrated from the republic. The number of households migrating to Western China was estimated at no less than 40,000<sup>48</sup>. The republican authorities tended to estimate the number of households migrating to China and Mongolia at a much higher figure of 83,000<sup>49</sup>. It follows from the investigative materials that crossings were coordinated at meetings of village elders: there were decided matters, such as a date, a route, and assistance from armed escort groups. Cattle were driven across the border to prevent their confiscation.

According to the operational summary of the 50<sup>th</sup> border detachment of March 13, 1931:

approximately 50 households from the sixth and seventh village councils of the Zaysan district were detained while attempting to cross the border. Available investigative materials reveal the preparation process: the border crossing was planned for the night of February 11–12, 1931. In case of an armed clash with border guards, an armed detachment was called in from the adjacent territory to provide an escort. Border guards were informed in advance of the armed group's crossing into Soviet territory, and an ambush was set up in the Chagan-Abo area. The border guards managed to prevent the crossing and detained the foreign detachment<sup>50</sup>.

The testimonies of people detained at the border in 1931–1933 contain ample evidence that they were border residents who, with the onset of dekulakization, fled with their livestock to the mountains and then across the border. Many subsequently joined armed groups.

The intensity of the confrontation is also evidenced by the reports of border detachments and district commissioners to the Special department of the plenipotentiary representative of the OGPU of the KASSR. According to a report, in the spring of 1932, a White émigré armed group of 200 men broke through and seized the Matveyevka outpost, killing its border guards. It was noted that in the border area there were approximately 500–700 armed White émigrés led by Puchkov<sup>51</sup>. In 1933, the Chingistai border commandant's office made arrests in the village of Uryl among “former White Guards”

<sup>47</sup> AP RK, f. 141, op. 1, d. 5076, l. 14–28.

<sup>48</sup> «*Sovershenno sekretno*» *Lubyanka – Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922–1934 gg.)*. *Sbornik dokumentov v 10 tomakh* [“Top Secret” Lubyanka to Stalin on the situation in the country (1922–1934). Collection of documents in 10 volumes] (Moscow: Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences Publ., 2017), 268.

<sup>49</sup> AP RK, f. 719, op. 4, d. 84, l. 6.

<sup>50</sup> SGA DP VKO, f. 19, op. 1, d. 905, l. 110.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 31–44.

with regard to the case of the so-called Altai Army, who were accused, among other things, of seizing the Matveyevka border outpost<sup>52</sup>.

In October 1932, border guards clashed with a gang of approximately 50 people who had crossed the border in the Kyzyl-Aul-Khabarasu area and had “operated” in the border zone for a month. They were aided by an armed group of cattle herders from the Ayaguz district of the Kazakh ASSR, which did not directly border on Xinjiang. The armed detachment included Kazakhs who had migrated from the border zone in 1930–1931. The goal of the group was collective farm cattle rustling across the border. Although the border guards were aware of the planned crossing, they were unable to prevent it. Barriers were set up at three passes in the Tarbagai Mountains and at three outposts – Kyzyl-Aul, Dzhimanchi, and Chiganak. In the armed clashes, along with border guards, there participated the Ayaguz, Urjar, and Kokpekty detachments of the OGPU district departments. The ambush resulted in the death of the detachment leader and the capture of another, but the remaining violators managed to bypass the barriers 25 versts south of Bakhty<sup>53</sup> and escape to the adjacent territory.

Involving the population in maintaining regime in the border zone was actively practiced to combat smuggling. At the same time, throughout the 1920s the border population was involved in cross-border trade. Official trade was regulated by treaties, and there were restrictions on both sides. As a result, according to experts, smuggling exceeded the official trade turnover<sup>54</sup>. According to GPU directives of 1922, any movement of goods and trade within the 21-verst border zone was considered smuggling. In 1924, by decision of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR, there were permitted border trade and possession of foreign currency by residents living within a 50-km zone<sup>55</sup>. In the late 1920s, approximately 90% of all border crimes were classified as smuggling<sup>56</sup>. The Soviet government began combating smuggling in 1921: the Council of People’s Commissars of the RSFSR adopted two decrees on combating it. In 1923, the fight against smuggling was entrusted to the Border guard department of the GPU. From then on, only this department had the right to conduct searches within the 7.5-km border zone and confiscate contraband, while customs authorities could only inform the GPU.

Smuggling took place in an environment of poorly developed border infrastructure. Customs offices were located in Bakhty and Zaysan, while customs posts were located directly on the border: in Khorgos, Khabarasu, Alkabek, the Kuzeun tract, Mai-Kapchagay, and several other places. The main trade for the local population was cattle drive, above all, horses and sheep. From China there were traditionally imported tea and fabrics. Raw materials, furs, and textiles were in demand. Payment was made in gold, silver, and saiga horns. After the monetary reform, the export of Soviet currency began. The elimination of private trade opened up new opportunities for border residents, who evaded taxes and duties through illegal trade.

Under Article 97 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR of 1922, smuggling was punishable by a large fine, confiscation, and forced labor for up to three months. In cases of qualified smuggling committed under aggravating circumstances, in addition to a fine and

<sup>52</sup> Spetsial’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Departamenta politzii goroda Almaty (thereafter – SGA DP g. Almaty), f. 1, op. 1, d. 3682.

<sup>53</sup> SGA KNB RK, f. 9, op. 1, d. 356, l. 97.

<sup>54</sup> T.A. Shemetova, *Rossiisko-sin’ tazyanskies torgovo-ekonomicheskie i politicheskie otnosheniia*, 241.

<sup>55</sup> O. Mozokhin, *VCHK – OGPU*, 182–185.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 202–203.

confiscation, there could also be criminal liability. The Customs Code of the USSR adopted in 1928 introduced an expanded definition of smuggling (Article 164) and qualified smuggling (Article 166). If qualified smuggling was established, cases were opened against the perpetrators under Article 59-9 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR of 1926. Nevertheless, there were still opportunities to avoid punishment under this article. For example, in the case of Masanov, a resident of a border village who was arrested for smuggling of furs, horns, and currency, the investigation initiated by the Separate Bakhty Commandant's Office in April 1928 was reconsidered in May 1928 due to the fact that several residents of the Emilsk village of the Makanchinsk volost in the Lepsinsk district took the defendant on bail for a property bond of 1,200 rubles<sup>57</sup>.

Prior to 1927, smuggling cases were heard exclusively in court; subsequently, they were primarily handled by extrajudicial bodies (the Special Conference of the OGPU Collegium). In 1929, Article 59-9 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR was amended; it became part of Article 24, and smuggling became a state crime. Within the 100-kilometer zone, the purchase and storage of gold was considered smuggling for all border regions of the Far East, Siberia, and the Asian republics, including the Kazakh ASSR. Archival and investigative files on smugglers contain references to Soviet rubles being used to pay for assistance in Kazakh families' crossing the border. A guide's illegal crossing was often explained by the "need to purchase Chinese goods for subsequent sale in a village."

Thus, in the case of Makulbayev detained in 1929 by the Bakhty commandant's office, he was charged with smuggling under a number of articles of the Customs Code (164-a, 166-zh, 167, 168), but he was only prosecuted under Article 166. By decision of the Special Council of the NKVD of the USSR, Makulbaev was released, but he was deprived of the right to reside in the border zone; a specific place of residence was imposed on him for three years<sup>58</sup>. Investigative files indicate that sentences for similar crimes were subsequently increased in severity. For example, on July 18, 1935, a group of six Kazakhs was detained 500 meters from the border and found to be carrying 216 rubles worth of contraband. During interrogation, the detainees stated that they were permanent residents of Chuguchak, Xinjiang, and had entered Soviet territory to purchase industrial goods in Bakhty for subsequent resale in China. Their cases were transferred to the Alma-Ata court, which sentenced the defendants to three years' imprisonment<sup>59</sup>. On December 13, 1935, 4 kilometers from the state border, the officers of the Bakhty border detachment detained Kaldybaev, while he was attempting to illegally enter China. "One fox skin, 3 fox paws, and 19 rubles 28 kopecks of Soviet currency were found on him."

During the investigation, it was established that in November 1935, Kaldybayev "illegally crossed from China into the USSR with three bars" of tea, which he then sold at the Urjar market and used the proceeds to purchase the goods found on him. Given that the detained goods were intended for illegal export abroad, the tea, furs, and Soviet currency were deemed contraband and confiscated. An aggravating circumstance was that Kaldybayev, who had previously lived in the Urjar district of Kazakhstan, was already a resident of Chuguchak at the time and did not have a Soviet passport<sup>60</sup>.

Another form of smuggling was the cultivation of opium in the border zone, which served as currency at least until the late 1920s. Opium had been cultivated in the region since the 1860s. Every spring, Chinese merchants negotiated with border residents on the

<sup>57</sup> SGA DP g. Almaty, f. 21, op. 2, d. 1186, l. 6, 20, 24–25.

<sup>58</sup> SGA DP VKO, f. 19, op. 1, d. 11102, l. 30–31, 45.

<sup>59</sup> SGA DP g. Almaty, f. 21, op. 3, d. 11171, l. 5, 8, 37.

<sup>60</sup> SGA DP g. Almaty, f. 20, op. 3, d. 11185, l. 5, 8–9.

amount of opium poppy they would plant, and in fall, they would transport the finished product to China. In return, the Russian border residents got profit<sup>61</sup>. Opium was also grown in the adjacent territory by the Chinese.

Here are some examples from reports of August 1927:

On August 15, the patrol of border unit No. 10 in the Chulak area (4 km north of the Selke pass), 4th section, 3rd command, 49th border guard unit), 10 km west of the Lonkol valley, discovered 4 dessiatines of opium poppies planted by a Chinese citizen. The opium field (plantation) was destroyed. <...> In August 1927, at the Tokhty tract, 120 km from the village of Gmenovka, a squad of the 49th border detachment sent to destroy opium plantations illegally planted by Chinese citizens found 16 Chinese citizens. During the arrest one was killed, three were detained, and the rest escaped<sup>62</sup>.

Although cross-border smuggling was not eliminated in the early 1930s, against the backdrop of the monopoly on foreign trade, there was a sharp reduction in the number of customs offices, and their functions changed radically – from fiscal to operational-investigative, which altered the interaction between the customs office and the intelligence services<sup>63</sup>.

## Conclusion

In the second half of the 1920s – first half of the 1930s, the Kazakh-Xinjiang section of the Soviet-Chinese border was characterized by high instability, despite its peripheral status. The regime was steadily tightened: creation of restricted areas, restrictions on access and economic activity, passportization of the population, and an increase in the scale of administrative expulsions. Enforcing a strict border regime was complicated by the considerable length and transparency of the border. Against the backdrop of collectivization, dekulakization, and famine in the early 1930s, there occurred mass migration of Kazakhs to Xinjiang, which became a form of resistance to the policies of the Soviet government. Despite the prohibitions, the local population actively participated in cross-border trade and smuggling, which was the way of survival and circumventing state restrictions.

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<sup>61</sup> T.A. Shemetova, "The influence of the opium problem on Russian-Xinjiang trade, economic and political relations in 1914–1920s," *Tomsk State University Journal*, no. 396 (2015): 108–110.

<sup>62</sup> SGA KNB RK, f. 9, op. 1, d. 438, l. 86.

<sup>63</sup> K.A. Korniyakov, *Kontrabanda i bor'ba s nei* [Smuggling and the Fight Against It] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Rossiiskoi Tamozhennoi Akademii Publ., 2010), 25–30.

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