

The Legend of Alash Khan and the Genealogy of the Uzbeks

The Legend of Alash Khan and the Origin of the Qazaqs

The Qazaqs have traditionally been divided into three *jüzs*, or hordes: the Ulu Jüz (the Senior Horde) occupying southern and southeastern Kazakhstan; the Orta Jüz (the Middle Horde), which inhabited central and northern Kazakhstan; and the Kishi Jüz (the Lesser or Junior Horde) located in western Kazakhstan.¹ These *jüzs* are made up of a number of tribes, subdivided into clans, to which individual Qazaqs belong. The legend of Alash Khan is a Qazaq oral tradition that narrates the origin of these three Qazaq *jüzs*. According to this oral tradition, which can also be considered a foundation myth, the first leader of the Qazaq people was Alash Khan.²

The importance of Alash Khan to the Qazaqs can be seen in the fact that the Qazaqs have been using the name Alash as a synonym for their nation. For instance, the short-lived independent Qazaq government (1917–20) that was formed after the Bolshevik Revolution and the party that ran it were named the Alash Autonomy (*Alash Autonomiyasy*) and the Alash Horde (*Alash Orda*), respectively. The Qazaqs in their entirety were referred to as “Altı san Alash (six components of Alash)” in the nineteenth-century Khoqand chronicle *Tārīkh-i Shāhrukhī*.³ According to Mukhamedzhan Tynyshpaev, a Qazaq historian of

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- 1 The origin of the three Qazaq *jüzs* is not documented and thus historians are not able to precisely date the formation of this tribal division. Historians have proposed varying dates for the formation of the three Qazaq *jüzs*, ranging from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century. Janabel even argues that the Qazaq tribal division appeared in the second half of the fifteenth century. See Janabel, “From Mongol Empire to Qazaq Jüzder,” 103–6. The term “horde,” originating from the Mongolian *orda* meaning “the royal tent or residence,” is often used to refer to the tripartite Qazaq tribal division. However, *jüz* in Kazakh literally means one hundred. Therefore, the three Qazaq *jüzs* can be rendered as the three Qazaq Hundreds.
 - 2 Furthermore, the Qazaq *shezhires*, or genealogies, trace the descent of the Qazaqs from Alash Khan.
 - 3 See T. K. Beisembiev, “Ethnical Identity in Central Asia and Kazakhstan in the 18th and 19th Centuries: According to the Khokand Chronicles,” *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies* 6 (1991): 60.

the early twentieth century, the expression “Altı Alash (Six Alash)” probably began to be used since the reign of Tauke Khan (r. 1680–1718) to refer to the three Qazaq *jüzs* and other nomadic tribes that submitted to Tauke Khan.⁴

According to most versions of the legend of Alash Khan, the Qazaqs originated from a group of fugitives who selected Alash, an outcast prince, as their first khan. Apparently, such an account of Qazaq origin does not conform to the historical reality, which is that the Qazaqs emerged from the group of Uzbek nomads headed by Jānibeg Khan and Girāy Khan who underwent a period of *qazaqlıq* in the eastern Qipchaq Steppe in the second half of the fifteenth century. This chapter is therefore devoted to an examination of the legend of Alash Khan in relation to the early history of the Qazaqs in an attempt to bridge the gap between Qazaq oral and written history.⁵

Different Versions of the Legend of Alash Khan

One of the most detailed versions of the legend of Alash Khan was recorded by the Qazaq historian Chokan Valikhanov. According to this version, the three Qazaq *jüzs*, or hordes, emerged from the vagrant nomads that had fled from a certain ruler of Turan, named (in Cyrillic spelling) “Abdulla Khan” or “Abdul-Azis Khan.” These *qazaqs* formed a new polity when they chose as their first khan an exiled prince named Alash, who was the abandoned son of “Abdulla Khan”:

Very long, long ago, in Turan there was a king called Abdulla, but according to other [versions] Abdul-Azis-Khan. This king had a leprous son, thus named Alacha—blotchy faced.⁶ His father, following an old tradition

4 See Mukhamedzhan Tynyshpaev, “Proiskhozhdeniye Kirgiz-Kazakov i istoriya obrazovaniya Kazakskogo khanstva,” (1925), reprinted in Mukhamedzhan Tynyshpaev, *Istoriya Kazakhs-kogo naroda*, ed. A. Takenov and B. Baygaliev, 132–88 (Almaty: Sanat, 2009), p. 184.

5 Only a few specialists in Qazaq history, such as Aleksandr P. Chuloshnikov and Mukhamedzhan Tynyshpaev, have attempted to investigate the historical basis of the legend of Alash Khan since several different versions of the legend had been collected in the nineteenth century by Qazaq and Russian ethnographers such as Chokan Valikhanov, N. I. Grodekov, G. N. Potanin, M. Zh. Kupeev, and Aleksei I. Levshin. For a discussion of the legend of Alash Khan, see Aleksandr P. Chuloshnikov, *Ocherki po istorii Kazak-Kirgizskogo naroda v svyazi s obshchimi istoricheskimi sud'bami drugikh tyurkskikh plemen: Lektsii, chitaniye v Orenburgskom otdelenii Moskovskogo arkhologicheskogo instituta v 1921 godu*, pt. 1, *Drevnee vremya i sredniye veka* (Orenburg: Kirgizskoye gosudarstvennoye izdatel'stvo, 1924), pp. 269–80; and see Tynyshpaev, “Proiskhozhdeniye Kirgiz-Kazakov,” pp. 176–85.

6 The word *alacha* is rendered as spotted, blotchy, patchy, motley, variegated, varicolored, among others, by Gerhard Doerfer. See Doerfer, *Türkische und mongolische Elemente*, 2: 102.