

# “The Time of Ordeal”: a story of the 1916 revolt in Central Asia

For Central Asian history this year marks the hundredth anniversary of the massive revolt in Turkestan and the Steppe Regions (*Krais*),<sup>1</sup> which cost thousands of lives. It consisted of a series of local manifestations and armed attacks against the Russian administration and settlers, whose pressure had been becoming particularly harsh during World War I. In an attempt to escape the massacre several Kazakh and Kyrgyz clans fled as far away as China.

Zifa Auezova

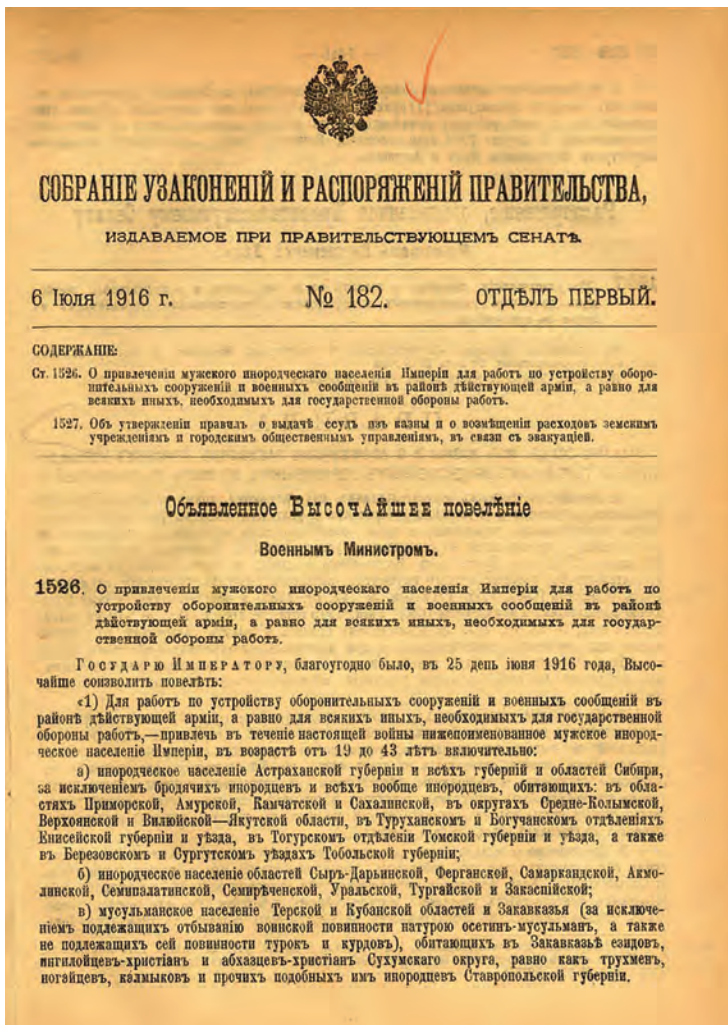
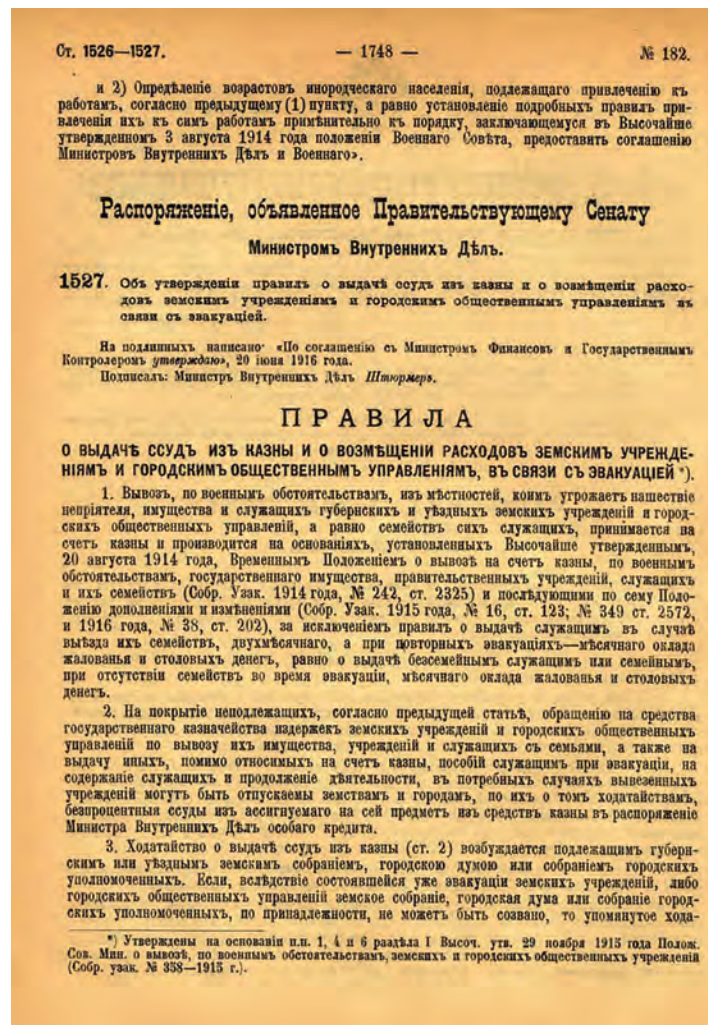


Fig. 1 & 2 (above): “The 1916 Edict”. Source: *Vosstanie 1916 goda v Turkmenii (dokumenty i materialy)*, Ashhabad, 1938, pp. 29-30. [The revolt of 1916 in Turkmenia, documents and materials]

Fig. 3 (below right): Semion Chuikov. *1916 Revolt in Kyrgyzstan*, 1936.

THE REVOLT WAS A REACTION to the tsar’s edict (25 June 1916), ordering males of non-Russian origin aged 19-43 to register for work at military installations of the Russian army. This was the second year of Russia’s participation in the ‘Great War’, which led to a huge loss of human lives and materials. In accordance with the statutes of compulsory military service, by 1916 work at military installations had become one of the regular tasks performed by the home guard, comprising non-military males under the age of forty-four.<sup>2</sup> The population of annexed and colonized peripheries of the Russian Empire, where only a few people could speak Russian, had been exempted from any kind of military service before June 1916. However, the new edict on enlistment also included almost all of the provinces with populations of non-Russian origin: Astrakhan province and the greater part of Siberia; Syr-Darya, Fergana, Samarkand, Akmola, Semipalatinsk, Semirechye, Ural, Turgai and Transcaspian oblasts; the Muslim population of Ter and Kuban oblasts and Transcaucasia; certain groups of Christians in Transcaucasia; Turkmens, Nogais, Kalmyks and “other non-Russians of this sort” from Stavropol province.<sup>3</sup> For the local communities this meant sending the strongest members of their families off on dangerous journeys. Protests and then spontaneous violence against Russians in various parts of the region were suppressed by Russian troops armed with the most modern weapons of the time. The brute oppression led to the deaths of thousands of people and the massive flight of people from the lands of their ancestors.

The first manifestation against the edict took place in Khodjent on 4 July 1916.<sup>4</sup> Three days later the head of the Khodjent garrison, N. Rubakh, sent a telegram to Tsar Nikolai II reporting on the event: “Your Imperial Highness, let me humbly inform you that on July 4 in the city of Khodjent a crowd of the local natives gathered in the office of the police officer and requested him to stop composing the lists of workers who should be sent to the army’s rear, in compliance with the order of Your Imperial Highness of June 25.”<sup>5</sup> Rubakh reported that “the natives” had thrown stones at five armed guards and had tried to disarm them of their guns. A shot was fired, and upon hearing the gunshot the guards began shooting into the crowd. They fired 16 shots, leading to the death of two “natives” and injuring one other. In the course of the following weeks the



protests grew in number and scale, expanding into Kokand, Andijan, Djizak, Semirechye, the Transcaspian region, the Steppe Krai and Siberia.

## The interpretation of the revolt in Soviet historiography

The 1916 revolt was a particularly sensitive issue for the Russian and Central Asian historians who had become Soviet citizens between 1917 and the 1930s and who had to work within ideological frameworks defined by the new authorities. In the 1920s, shortly after the triumph of the Socialist revolution, the mainstream discourse in Soviet historiography was critical of the tsar and the policies of the Russian Empire in the colonized territories. Attempts to collect data on the revolt were supported by the authorities: a special commission for the study of the revolt was formed in this period. Violence perpetrated by the Russian government and army in the suppression of the revolt was condemned as a feature inherent to ‘colonial oppressors’ in general. Considerable attention was also paid to the representatives of local elites, who had provided support to Russian officers, bribed them to stay at home and betrayed their poor fellow-tribesmen. The Soviet discourse of the 1920s was based primarily on polarization of class distinctions: the working class and the ‘exploiters’. From this perspective, looking back to 1916, the Soviet Russian proletariat sympathized with all victims of tsarist Russia, the overthrown imperialist state.

However, in the 1930s Soviet historiography formed a new ideological platform focused on emphasizing the leading and consolidating role of the Russian people for all ethnic groups of the Soviet state. The publications from the 1920s that criticized the Russian colonial administration and exposed the cruelties of the Russian army were reassessed as ideologically harmful. Local historians who criticized the Russian rule in Turkestan and the Steppe Krai were labeled as nationalists and became subjects of political accusations

and repression. Discussing the 1916 revolt became a dangerous issue in the 1930-40s, till the end of Stalin’s rule (1922-1952).

In 1953-54 historians of Soviet Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan, together with their colleagues from Moscow and Leningrad, held a series of conferences – in Frunze, Ashkhabad, and Tashkent – giving special attention to the issue of assessing the 1916 revolt. International contexts featuring decolonization processes all over the world revealed certain similarities between this revolt and anti-colonial movements abroad. The 1916 revolt was characterized as a progressive liberation movement. This formula, which was preserved in the historical discourse until the end of the Soviet period, was explained in detail in the foreword to a special volume on the 1916 revolt, published by the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1960.<sup>6</sup> The volume contains a rich collection of reports, correspondence, and protocols provided by Russian officials and still serves as a main reference volume on the 1916 events in post-Soviet states. The foreword to the volume recognizes the considerable significance of the revolt: “This revolt, which proved to be a link to the February bourgeois-democratic revolution of 1917, reminds us about the need for deep and detailed study of all progressive revolutionary and national liberation movements in our country. They led to the overthrow of the tsarist government, to the great October victory and the triumph of socialism on one-sixth of the globe.”<sup>7</sup>

## A literary consideration of the 1916 revolt

The voices of the local populations of Turkestan and the Steppe Region who lost thousands of countrymen in the revolt, were little heard during the Soviet time, especially if they did not conform to the mainstream ideological concepts. But an important attempt to tell the insiders’ impressions of the revolt was made in literature. In 1928 a short novel “Qily Zaman” (“The Time of Ordeal”), written by the young Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov, was published in Kyzyl-Orda. It is the story of a Kazakh clan, which in 1916 had witnessed the violence of the Russian government to such an extent that fleeing from their land, from the realms of their ancestors, seemed to be the only solution. Two years later in 1930, the author Auezov was accused of spreading anti-Soviet views with his novel, and he was arrested and imprisoned until 1932, at which time his repentance letter apologizing for “The Time of Ordeal”, and several other compositions, were published in the newspapers *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and the *Sotsialdy Kazakhstan*. Auezov’s novel remained prohibited in the Soviet Union until 1972.

## The content of the novel

Auezov tells the story of the revolt from the perspective of the members of the Kazakh clan Alban. The Alban were known for their fertile lands and prosperity: “The fabulous pastures of the Alban clan are like emerald silk curtains, like green silky cradle...The pastures of the Alban are gorgeous and dense, rich in summer rains and thick meadows” (p.10)<sup>8</sup> Life for the Alban used to be rather quiet and peaceful; the subtitle of the novel, “a story of the revolt of the peaceful clan of Alban”, exposes a radical change in its existence.

The greater part of the described events takes place around the Karkara Fair, the famous summer fair in the river valley: “The shining river of Karkara abounds in water and draws zigzags on the surface of vast green plain. It helps thousands of living things to overcome thirst, fatigue and suffering” (p.10). It was a meeting place for merchants from various regions: “The Fair was on the junction of nine roads: those leading to large Russian cities, and the others, leading to Kulja, Kashgar, Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent” (p.10). In 1916 this area was part of the Semirechye district of the Turkestan Krai. Today this place is on the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Auezov describes the Fair as an active independent subject: “The Fair of Karkara was boiling as a life symbol of boundless world of abundance. Unceasing stream pours day and night rows of cattle to the melting pot of the Fair from all four sides, from Kyrgyz living among the snowy mountains, and Kazakhs coming from the foothills” (p.10). The Fair plays a very important role in the life of the Alban clan: “Its wealth





and riches are sustained by Alban, a long-armed kind-hearted and simple-minded people. The Fair is held once in the year's twelve months. Always in full force. Three-four months, as long as this Fair lasts, are the happiest part of the year. In this period the people of Alban shovel up a stock, which will feed them a whole year" (p.11).

One of the central characters of the story is the Russian superintendent Podporkov, nicknamed Akzhelke [White Neck]. His office in the center of the market square stands under the Russian flag. The locals associate the eagle on the flag with a mythological bird from their native folklore: "The white flag fastened to a long wooden pole in the middle of the fair is decorated with a picture of the double-headed bird Simurgh (*Samuryq*). It corresponded clearly to the image of an insatiable and greedy glutton" (p.12). The superintendent's daily tasks are for the most part related to settling quarrels between merchants and inhabitants of the neighborhood of the Fair. With the help of two interpreters he settles the quarrels easily: those who pay most money or give him more sheep win.

One day White Neck receives a large envelope with many stamps. Inside he finds a copy of the tsar's edict on the requisition of non-Russian men for the needs of the Russian army and a letter ordering him to put together a list of the recruits. His first reaction is of joy, as he thinks about the huge amounts of money and cattle that the locals will bring him for keeping their relatives home. However, this happy picture fades when White Neck holds a meeting with the governors, judges and elders of ten local districts. The local leaders, even the most loyal ones, fear that their kinsmen will refuse to obey the order.

The conflict between the superintendent and the Kazakhs escalates when the tribal elders gather the people and reach the decision to not let their kinsmen be taken away. The clan's people follow their representatives *en masse* to White Neck's office at the Fair to declare their refusal to follow the order. As a sign of protest, Kazakhs have already stopped buying goods at the Fair. It has become deserted. As a consequence of the developments, White Neck requests military support from his superiors in the city of Vernyi (today's Almaty) and a couple of days later hundreds of soldiers armed with rifles arrive at Karkara in order to arrest seventeen elders of the Alban tribes. The most influential of them are sent to prison in Kyrgyz Karakol, where the Russian administration has a larger office and its military headquarters.

The conflict reaches its peak when the Alban tribal elders, as well as Kyrgyz prisoners, are shot in their cells by Russian soldiers. Their shocking execution puts an end to any illusion the Kazakhs may still have had about the loyalty of the Russian administration. The Alban clan decides to take revenge and hundreds of households begin to flee.

Kazakhs set fire to numerous houses in the neighboring Russian settlements, then gather to attack the superintendent's office on the market square. Several groups of hundreds of horsemen armed with cudgels, spears, poleaxes and a few guns surround the Karkara valley and advance shouting tribal war-cries. Suddenly the front lines of the horsemen collapse. The horsemen at the rear look on with confusion at the thin threads of fire coming from White Neck's office and try to understand what is happening. A few manage to retreat on time, but about one third of the Kazakh horsemen are killed. Those who survive learn later that the Russians' killing fire device is called a *pulemyot* [machine-gun], and are horrified by its capacity: "It mowed thirty-forty people down at once, like a scythe" (*Otyz-qyryq kysyngdy orghandai byr-aq qyrqyp tusyrdy*; p.147).



Fig 5: Mukhtar Auezov in 1925.



Fig 4: Semion Chuikov. *Escape of rebels to China, 1936.*

That night the superintendent and his staff pack their belongings, papers and the machine-gun onto horse-drawn carts and carriages and leave in convoy in the direction of Zharkent. In the morning, the locals set the whole Fair on fire. The crackling and rumbling can be heard in the surrounding mountains for many hours. The Kazakhs of the Alban clan fold up their yurts, load their horses and camels and leave Karkara not knowing where they will settle: "Obscure days full of uncertainty opened their arms to them" (*Aldynda belgizsiddikke tolghan tumandy kunderi kushaghyn zhaidy*; p.156).

#### The place of the novel in Auezov's oeuvre

"The Time of Ordeal" was one of the earliest literary works by Mukhtar Auezov (1897-1961), who became a prominent Kazakh Soviet writer in the 1940-50s. The most well-known of his compositions is a four-volume biographic novel "Abai Zholy" ("The Path of Abai"), dedicated to the popular 19th century Kazakh thinker and poet, Ibrahim (Abai) Kunanbay-Uly. The Soviet government honored this novel with the highest literary awards (Stalin Prize in 1949 and Lenin Prize in 1959). The success of this novel can be explained certainly by its rich ethnographic and historical material, absorbing style of story-telling and refined lexicon, but also by very accurate censorship, which by the 1940s was profoundly institutionalized in the Soviet literature. As for "The Time of Ordeal", Auezov never saw it appear again during his lifetime. The novel was 'rereleased' only in 1972, nine years after the author's death.

The Russian translation of "The Time of Ordeal", written by Aleksey Pantielev, was first published in the literary journal *Novyi Mir*, in Moscow.<sup>9</sup> Chingiz Aitmatov, who had been a close friend and follower of Auezov, wrote the introduction to the publication.<sup>10</sup> Aitmatov writes about the stories that he heard from Kyrgyz witnesses of the 1916 events: "When whole clans were leaving their lands in an attempt to escape from the chastisers, mothers did everything to save their children. Even falling under machine-gun fire mothers tried to protect children with their bodies. Many of these children bear the names of this time of ordeal: Tenti, 'a wanderer', Kachkyn, 'a fugitive', Urkun, 'exodus'."

In order to legitimize Auezov's story of the revolt, Aitmatov emphasizes its anticolonial content, conform with the ideological discourse of the 1970s: "I can name only a few examples in eastern literature, where the protest against the tsarist rule and its violence are expressed so convincingly. Young Auezov exposed the inhumanity and cynicism of the tsar's colonial policy and showed that its administrative system was alien to the nomad people."<sup>11</sup>

Aitmatov grieves, but at the same time admires the revolt as one of the most significant events of his people's past and calls it "a spontaneous uprising against the tsar's oppression, ... when people revolt, believing that they are right and free; when they challenge the violence and demonstrate a huge potential of human spirit".

Commenting on the fact that Auezov had not had the opportunity to see his novel published after 1930, Aitmatov notes that introducing the novel to a Russian-reading audience after the author's death makes him feel as if he is sending a racehorse on a journey without a rider – a fitting metaphor by a 'post-nomadic' Soviet intellectual!

#### The return of the "Time of Ordeal" in post-Soviet years

In post-Soviet Kazakhstan "The Time of Ordeal" enjoyed much public interest. In 1997 the writer N. Orazalin adapted it for the stage, and the Kazakh Drama Theatre in Almaty introduced

"Qily Zaman" to the public in Kazakh. In 2012 the theatre director A. Rakhimov made a new production of the play. In 2008-2009 the "Time of Ordeal" was selected as the main book for reading and public discussion in the framework of the national campaign 'One country – one book'. Special seminars dedicated to the novel were held in secondary schools and higher education institutions across Kazakhstan.

The 1916 revolt became one of the most revisited issues in the process of rewriting national histories in post-Soviet Central Asia. By the end of the Soviet period, the revolt had still not been given a convincing interpretation. Although the discussions of the 1950-60s had led to the acknowledgement of tremendous losses and trauma, the official interpretation as a case of 'class struggle' of local farmers against their rich tribesmen would not satisfy a critical reader in the 1990s. Since then, however, new chapters dedicated to the revolt have been written for numerous textbooks on the history of the whole region, and "Time of Ordeal" is recognized as a literary portrait of the revolt, almost as if it was painted from life.

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#### References

- 1 Turkestan Krai – the province that the Russian Empire annexed in 1867; it included territories of today's Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Turkestan Krai was governed by general-governors of the Russian army from Tashkent. The Steppe Krai – the province founded by the Russian government in 1882 on territories populated predominantly by Kazakh tribes, which the Russian Empire gradually started to annex in the 18th century. Its administrative centre was Omsk.
- 2 See: S.M. Goryainov. 1913. *Ustavy o voynskoi povinnosti*, St. Petersburg.
- 3 *Vosstanie 1916 goda v Srednei Azii i Kazakhstane, sbornik dokumentov*, Moscow: Academy of Science of the USSR, 1960, p.25.
- 4 Today Khujand, a city in Tajikistan. In 1916 it belonged to the Samarkand district, Turkestan Krai.
- 5 *ibid.* note 3, p.105.
- 6 *ibid.* note 3.
- 7 *ibid.* note 3, p.5.
- 8 Auezov, M. 1979. *Qily Zaman*, Almaty: Zhazushy Publishers.
- 9 Aleksey (Abel) Pantielev (1913-1977) – a Soviet writer, author of the novels "The Flow" and "The White Bird", about the life of working people at big Soviet factories in the 1930-40s and during World War II (referred to as Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet states). Translator of several literary compositions of Mukhtar Auezov and the Uzbek writer Askhad Mukhtar.
- 10 Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008) – a prominent Kyrgyz and Soviet writer, the author of short stories and novels, which were translated and became well-known internationally: "Jamila", "Farewell, Gulsary", "The White Ship", "The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years", "The Scaffold".
- 11 Aitmatov, C. 1972. "Introduction to the 'Time of Ordeal'", *Noviy Mir* N6, Moscow.