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Nurturing knowledge: The evolution of libraries in Kazakhstan

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Abstract
The article provides a brief history of the development of librarianship in Kazakhstan, starting with Otrar Library, which existed in the Middle Ages, and ending with the stage of creation of library associations and consortia, testifying to the maturity of the library professional community in the country. Since a library is not only an information center with appropriate technologies, but, first of all, a specialized institution of society, designed to collect, store and popularize certain social values and cultural heritage, the article pays considerable attention to the specific culture of Kazakh people, as well as the cultural and historical factors that have had a significant impact on the development of libraries in Kazakhstan.

Keywords
Kazakh culture, Kazakhstani librarianship, library evolution, library associations

Introduction

This introduction is devoted to a very brief overview of the cultural characteristics of the peoples of Kazakhstan, since one of the important purposes of the library is to introduce representatives of one nation to the cultural values of other nations, enriching them intellectually, spiritually and emotionally, and thus it promotes mutual understanding between the peoples of different countries and the sustainable development of humanity.

Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic state inhabited by representatives of 124 ethnic groups, and its total population was more than 20 million people at the beginning of 2025. The largest ethnic groups are Kazakhs (71.3% of the total population of the country), Russians (2,963,938, 14.6%) and Uzbeks (678,487, 3.3%).[1] According to the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, every fifth marriage concluded in Kazakhstan is interethnic.

Kazakhs (self-name *kazak*) are the titular nation and the indigenous population of Kazakhstan. The origins of the ethno genesis of the Kazakhs date back to the Bronze Age (sixteenth to twelfth centuries BC), when Indo-Iranian tribes lived on the territory of Kazakhstan (Firdawsī, 2006). The first written information about these tribes (Sakas and Sarmatians) and their settlement on the territory in the eighth to fourth centuries BC is known thanks to the works of ancient Iranian and Greek authors (Firdawsī, 2006; Herodotus, 2019; Strabo, 1924; Piankov, 2013).

The mass penetration of Turkic tribes into the territory of Kazakhstan and the founding of the Turkic Khaganate (in old Turkic *Mengyu El* (Eternal State)) in the sixth century played a huge role in the formation of the Kazakh ethnic group and statehood (Sarsembayev, 2015). Together with the Turks, the Turkic language came to the Kazakh land, forming the basis for Kazakh. Along with the language, the Turkic culture also spread: epics, oral folklore, customs and elements of material and spiritual culture. One of the important sources on the history of nomadic societies, such as the Turks were during their advance to the West, is oral folklore, usually epics, which, through language and content, reflects both historical realities and a complex of mythological views.

The Turkic tribes not only led a nomadic lifestyle, but also developed elements of agriculture and crafts, and actively participated in international trade.

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Owing to its advantageous geographical position – between the East and the West – the south of modern Kazakhstan became an important link in the development of the Great Silk Road, where the Turkic tribes played the role of trade intermediaries, warriors and rulers. The term *Silk Road* was introduced by the German geographer and geologist Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen into scientific and colloquial use in 1877, although trade caravan routes between Asia and Europe have existed since ancient times. The founding of the Great Silk Road dates back to the second century BC, when the Chinese ambassador Zhang Qian visited the countries of Central Asia (Davan, Kangju, Sogd and Bactria) on a diplomatic mission.[2] In this way, he 'connected' the road leading from the East, from the Han Empire to Central Asia, with the road from the Mediterranean countries to Central Asia, travelled by the Greeks during the campaigns of Alexander the Great. Caravans along the Silk Road passed through such ancient cities on the territory of modern Kazakhstan as Otrar (Farab), Sairam (Ispidzhab), Taraz, Balasagun, Yassy (Turkestan) and others. All these cities owe their appearance to traders who, overcoming the vast Kazakh steppes, arranged stops that turned into caravanserais, and those, in turn, into settlements that eventually grew into cities. The cities of Otrar, Taraz, Sygnak, Kayalyk and Talgar were not only trade centres, but also cultural hubs where ideas, customs, knowledge, languages, writing and religions from China, Persia, India and the Arab world intersected.

The totality of historical, archaeological, ethnographic and linguistic sources provides the basis for asserting that the process of formation of the Kazakh nationality was basically completed in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries (Sarsembayev, 2015). The origin and semantics of the term *Kazak* are the subject of heated debate until today (Aiagan, 2005). Most researchers assume that the term *Kazakh* has evolved from a social term to an ethnonym. In the Arabic–Kipchak dictionary of the thirteenth century, this word means 'free, wanderer', which gives the word a social meaning: it denotes a group of people who are separate from their clan, tribe, state and earn their living by participating in military enterprises. As a result of the completion of the formation of the Kazakh nationality in the fourtheenth to fifteenth centuries, the first large state of *Ak-Orda* was formed on the Kipchak ethnic basis, for the population of which in the second half of the fifteenth century the name *Kazakh* was assigned. Since then, this term has finally acquired an ethnic meaning.

After the formation of the Kazakh Khanate in the fifteenth century, its leaders sought external support in the fight against the Dzungars and other nomadic tribes, who posed a serious threat to the steppe statehood. Internal strife and constant external threats prompted part of the Kazakh nobility to seek patronage from a stronger power – the Russian Empire. In 1731, the khan of the Younger Zhuz Abulkhair swore allegiance to the Russian Empress Anna Ioannovna, and this step marked the beginning of the gradual incorporation of Kazakh lands into the empire. The incorporation into the Russian Empire played a dual role. On the one hand, there was a loss of political independence and sovereignty, a sharp increase in the number of immigrants to Kazakhstan from other regions of Tsarist Russia and a violent displacement of the indigenous population from their inhabited lands, along with the imposition of an education system that would lead to the disappearance of the native language and culture of the Kazakh people. On the other hand, it opened up access to a new education system, writing and legal institutions. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a Kazakh intelligentsia appeared, which held a congress of delegates from five regions of Kazakhstan in the city of Uralsk at the end of 1905. At the congress, a decision was made to organize the *Alash* national public movement.

An attempt to revive a Kazakh national state following the collapse of the Russian Empire failed. The Alash Orda Kyrgyz (Kazakh) national autonomy (parliamentary republic) created in December 1917 existed until December 1919 and was abolished, since the armed struggle against the Soviets was not supported by a significant number of Kazakhs.

Did the Kazakhs have a chance to create their own national state on the ruins of the Russian Empire? Most likely, no. Professor Pavel Tereshkovich, a Belarusian ethnographer, historian and cultural anthropologist, believes that an important factor in the success of a national-state movement is the publication of books and other information materials in its native language and the presence of an audience capable of reading and perceiving the ideas expressed by the leaders of the national movement.[3] For example, at the end of the nineteenth century, about 80% of Estonians and slightly fewer Latvians could read. The share of literate people among Lithuanians was about 40%. However, among Belarusians, the share of literate people was only 13%, that among Ukrainians 11%, that among Moldovans even less. Among the Kazakhs in 1926, the share of literate people was 6.9% (Bakanov and Zhumashev, 2021). After the February Revolution, the national movements in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were

successful, but those in Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and Kazakhstan suffered defeats.

Despite the desire of the Russian empire and then the USSR to introduce Russian-language education and Orthodox culture, the Kazakhs continued to honour their poetry, kuyshi (performers of kui music[4]), traditions of hospitality and steppe dignity. Batyrs[5] and akyns[6] became symbols of the national spirit; their words were passed down from generation to generation, reminding of the glorious past and inspiring struggle. The Kazakh people did not lose their cultural and political essence and, ultimately, gained independence in 1991.

Libraries in Kazakhstan

Historical perspective

The history of libraries in Kazakhstan dates back to ancient times when knowledge was primarily preserved in manuscripts and oral traditions. During the medieval period, cities like Otrar (Farab), Taraz and Syganak, located on the Great Silk Road, housed libraries filled with thousands of manuscripts on medicine, mathematics, astronomy and philosophy.

Otrar was not only a major political and trade centre, but also an important point on the map of the intellectual life of the Muslim East. According to historical sources, there was a rich library in Otrar, which contained the works of Greek, Persian, Indian and Arabic scholars. Some sources equate it in importance with the Library of Alexandria. This collection of books and manuscripts played a key role in the development of scientific thought in the region. Otrar is also the birthplace of many medieval scholars: the outstanding mathematician and philosopher Al-Farabi, the astronomer and mathematician Abbas Zhahari (he took part in compiling astronomical tables together with Al-Khwarizmi) and the linguist and geographer Ishaq Al-Farabi. The famous Sufi Arystan-Bab (Arslan-Bab), according to one legend a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, who carried out the Prophet's instructions (amanat) regarding Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, a philosopher, Islamic preacher and Sufi poet, lived and preached in Otrar.

Abu Nasr al-Farabi, the great thinker and scholar of the East, was called the 'second teacher' after Aristotle. Undoubtedly, his encyclopaedic knowledge and outstanding intellect are inextricably linked with the cultural and scientific environment in which he was formed. From an early age, Al-Farabi showed an extraordinary thirst for knowledge. The presence of the Otrar library next to him gave him unique access to the works of ancient philosophers, works on mathematics, astronomy, medicine, logic and other sciences. Already in his youth, he studied the works of Aristotle, Plato, Galen and Euclid, and it was through the translations that were stored in the Otrar library that he began to comprehend and develop their ideas within the framework of Islamic philosophy. The influence of this intellectual environment was reflected in Al-Farabi's desire to systematize knowledge and create a holistic philosophical picture of the world. He not only commented on and analysed the works of great thinkers of the past, but also proposed his own concepts based on the harmony of reason and faith, ethics and science. His works, such as *Civil Policy*, *The Book of the Views of the Residents of the Virtuous City* and *On the Meaning of Reason*, bear the imprint of the synthesis of the ancient tradition and Islamic culture – a synthesis that was possible thanks to the rich cultural heritage presented in the Otrar Library.

The uniqueness of Kazakh literature is determined, first of all, by the nomadic way of life of the Kazakh people over the centuries. At the initial stage, in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, it developed mainly in the oral form of folklore (epics, legends, fairy tales, proverbs and sayings, as well as *aitys*, reflecting the spiritual, cultural and social realities of Kazakh society). A unique genre of the Kazakh people is *aitys*, the akyns' competition, which is a dialogue form of poetry in which two akyns (poets who accompany their poetic performance by playing national musical instruments, such as the dombyra or kabyz) compete in improvisation, touching on important topics – from love and morality to socio-political issues. This genre stimulated the development of eloquence, critical thinking and creative expression. Aityses, as a rule, took place in public and were an important part of public life.

Oral folklore as a living form of transmitting knowledge, historical memory and ideological attitudes became not only the basis of literature, its collective memory, but also the keeper of the people's self-awareness. The largest epic works, such as *Koblandy-batyr*, *Alpamys-batyr*, *Er Targyn* and *Kyz Zhibek*, reflect the heroic ideals, social ideas and moral values of the Kazakhs. These epics served not only an entertaining but also an educational function, forming ideas about honour, duty, courage and love for the homeland. Along with the epic, there were lyrical and philosophical songs (zhyr, tolgau), reflecting personal experiences, reflections on life, nature and fate. Ritual songs and fairy tales were also composed. In *Zhoktau*, a memorial song of Umbetey zhyrau,[7] dedicated to the death of Bogenbay batyr, the akyn sings of his exploits in battles with the

Dzungars. Oral creativity was represented by improvising poets (akyns) and storytellers (zhyrau). Legends have preserved the names of Asan-Kaigy (fifteenth century), Shalkiiz-zhyrau (fifteenth century), Dospambet-zhyrau (sixteenth century) and Zhiembet (seventeenth century), whose works were filled with patriotism and philosophical depth.

In the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, written literature in the Kazakh language was widespread in the form of books of religious and historical-legendary content. Historical works and genealogies were created. *Zhami at-Tavarikh (Collection of Chronicles)* of Kadyrgali Zhalairi is the most important monument of Kazakh historical literature of the seventeenth century. It describes the events that took place in Kazakhstan and Central Asia in the period of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. *Tarikhi-i Rashidi (Rashidi's Story)* of Muhammad Haidar Dulati, a historian in the sixteenth century, contains invaluable facts from the life of the Kazakh Khanate.

Later, the written culture and, accordingly, the book heritage of the Kazakh people were formed mainly within the framework of the Islamic educational system. Religious schools (madrassas) kept handwritten books in Arabic, Persian and Turkic. These books were mainly of a religious, philosophical and legal nature. Madrassas and mosques served as centres of book culture, where books were copied, studied and passed on to future generations.

With the inclusion of Kazakh territories into the Russian Empire in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, a new stage in the development of libraries in this region began. The tsarist government did not participate in the creation of most public libraries throughout the empire and did not provide them with any financial support. Only libraries of government agencies, as well as higher and secondary educational institutions, were maintained with state funds. Of the *open type* libraries, the government maintained only two: the Imperial Public Library in St Petersburg and the Rumyantsev Museum in Moscow. The most that the central government did in the second half of the nineteenth century was to issue small subsidies to public libraries in Tiflis, Vilno, Tashkent, Kyiv, Zhitomir, Kamenets–Podolsk, Riga and Ashgabat. These libraries were supported by the tsarist government for the purpose of Russification of the population of the national regions of Russia (Matveev, 2012). As for the legal status of public libraries, until 1867 they were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Education, and after that year they were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This happened owing to the transfer of the censorship committee, whose responsibilities included supervision of libraries, to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Matveev, 2012). The 1850s and 1860s were the period of the emergence of people's libraries (unlike public libraries, they were generally accessible, since in the overwhelming majority of cases they did not charge for reading). The very first of them were those established by individual peasants for their fellow villagers. It is also worth noting the public libraries created on the initiative of the intelligentsia and some educational societies, for example, the 'sobriety societies'.

The creation of the first libraries on Kazakh land is closely connected with the Russian educational work and cultural environment, which had its own peculiarities on the outskirts of the Russian Empire. The essence and main provisions of the ethnic policy of the Russian Empire were fixed in the *Code of Laws of the Russian Empire*, the most important legal documents. According to them, qualitative characteristics of the people inhabiting the empire were of primary importance, and therefore they were divided by faith, language and way of life. Russians or Russian organizations belonged to one kind, since their main feature was the Orthodox faith, which, thus, was the source of Russian ethno-national identity. Belonging to a faith meant belonging to a kind; therefore, the non-Orthodox population of the empire were called infidels and those of them who believed, looked and lived differently were called *inorodtsy* (Fadeicheva, 2003). Since they were subjects of the Russian Empire, they differed from foreigners. In 1833, the *Code of National Status of People in the State* identified three groups of the population of Russia: natural inhabitants (urban and national community), inorodtsy (settled and non-settled) and foreigners. According to A.Yu.Konev, 'the peoples of the Russian Empire were divided into "natural", related with the dominant Slavic elites of the original Rus (Russia), and "non-natural" – those who became part of Russian society as a result of the annexation of lands that were not its historical territory' (Konev, 2014). Thus, inorodtsy were added to the ethnic opposition to the rest of the population of the Russian Empire.[8]

In the nineteenth century, in the context of growing nationalism in Europe and unrest in the outlying regions of the empire, the imperial authorities began to resort to harsh Russification. This policy was especially evident after the Polish Uprising of 1830–1831, when Nicholas I strengthened his control over Poland and limited the use of the Polish language and the Catholic Church. State policy in the field of education and, accordingly, library science, was determined by the ideology of 'official nationality', which was briefly expressed in the famous formulation of Sergei Uvarov (1786–1855), Minister of Public

Education (1833–1849): 'Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality'. Imperial policy, in general, sought to integrate the multinational outskirts into the pan-imperial space by gradually eliminating all national and cultural differences in order to form an all-Russian identity. A.A. Kraevsky, an employee of the editorial board of the *Journal of the Ministry of Public Education*, wrote in its first issue: 'We must strive to achieve the honor of being Russian and Russian, European-educated. We have our own mind, our own heart, our own language, our own Faith, our own History. We must not imitate, but reproduce what we receive from our European brothers' (Pleshkevich, 2017). Thus, the content of nationality was linked to the development of Russian national literature and language and the justification of its own path of development. A special role in the development of official nationality was assigned to Russian schools and colleges, as well as missionary organizations. Libraries, which were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Education, were to accumulate everything accumulated in the field of Russian national literature, language and history and thereby ensure the development of Russian national education.

In the nineteenth century, secular educational institutions began to open in Kazakhstan: Russian–Kazakh schools, parish schools and teacher training seminaries. One of the goals of these educational institutions was to form a Kazakh elite loyal to the empire, capable of performing administrative functions locally. Imperial policy sought to replace the traditional system of Muslim education (mektebs and madrassas) with secular institutions with Russian as the language of instruction. Schools limited the teaching of the Kazakh language and the Islamic religion, which caused resistance in society. In such schools, teaching was conducted in Russian, with special attention paid to the study of Orthodox culture, Russian geography and the history of the empire. The first collections of school libraries began to form. According to the memoirs of Russian ethnographer Grigory Potanin, libraries offered readers books with biographies of Russian generals and descriptions of wars (Dauletova and Nurakhmetova, 1994).

However, for many Kazakhs, education in Russian schools became the only chance for social advancement, obtaining a profession or the opportunity to continue their studies in other cities of the empire. One such example was the Turgay Teachers' School (opened in 1883), where the outstanding Kazakh educator Akhmet Baitursynov studied. The Kazakh enlightened intelligentsia played a crucial role in preserving and developing the Kazakh identity against the backdrop of the official policy of Russification. Ibrai Altynsarin, Akhmet Baitursynov, Alikhan Bokeikhanov and others not only studied in Russian schools, but also initiated the opening of Kazakh educational institutions, where they sought to combine European teaching methods with their native language and culture. Ibrai Altynsarin, one of the first Kazakh educators, founded dozens of schools, developed textbooks in the Kazakh language and wrote works on the benefits of education. He personally distributed books to libraries, ordering them from publishing houses in Orenburg, Moscow and St Petersburg. In order to replenish the collections of school libraries and use them as textbooks and additional teaching aids in Russian–Kazakh schools, Altynsarin translated the works of Russian writers and teachers such as Krylov, Tolstoy and Ushinsky into Kazakh (Dauletova and Nurakhmetova, 1994). He believed that education was the path to liberating the people from dependence and ignorance, while defending the right of Kazakhs to study in their native language. Akhmet Baitursynov reformed the Kazakh script, adapted the Arabic alphabet to the Kazakh language, wrote teaching aids and advocated for the autonomous development of Kazakh education.

Abai Kunanbayev (1845–1904), Kazakh educator, philosopher and poet, occupies a special place in Kazakh literature. His legacy is an integral part of the national identity and spiritual foundation of modern Kazakhstan. Abai's uniqueness lies not only in his artistic genius, but also in his profound philosophical position, covering a wide range of social and ethical issues relevant both in his era and today. First of all, Abai's work marks the beginning of a new era in Kazakh literature. Before him, the oral poetic tradition, based on the improvisation of akyns and zhyrau, prevailed. Abai, being a well-educated person, combined the oral folk tradition with written literature, enriching it with deep psychologism, philosophical reflections and social criticism. He introduced new genre and stylistic elements, relying on European and Russian literature, which was an innovative step in the conditions of the Kazakh society of that time.

An important feature of Abai is his educational activity. He considered education as the key to progress and renewal of the Kazakh people. In this sense, Abai was a bright representative of humanistic thought, inspired by the ideas of the European Enlightenment and Eastern philosophy. His views are reflected in *Qara Sozder (Words of Edification)*, the famous philosophical work, where he raises questions of religion, morality, self-improvement, free will and social responsibility. These works by their nature

go beyond time and national borders, raising universal problems of existence.

The first public library in what is now Kazakhstan opened as the Military Public Library at the Ural Military School in Uralsk on 24 October 1871. Its collection consisted of 4750 volumes (1560 books in Russian, 1340 in foreign languages and 1820 volumes of journals). Its books were used by teachers, officers, officials, and later students.[9] Today, its building is considered one of the most significant historical cultural, and architectural monuments of the city. According to archival documents, a public library was opened in Semipalatinsk (now Semey) on 3 October 1883. The library was created thanks to the efforts of revolutionary democrats exiled to Semipalatinsk by the tsarist government. Evgeny Michaelis, a student of N.G. Chernyshevsky, as well as a friend and teacher of the Kazakh educator Abay Kunanbayev, took a particularly active part in the creation of the library. The merchants Pleshcheyev and Khabarov from Semipalatinsk, Derov from Pavlodar and Yudin from Krasnoyarsk donated money for the organization of the library and the development of its collection.[10] In the year the library was founded, its collection numbered 274 books and there were 130 readers, who were mainly local officials or members of their families. In the summer of 1885, the American journalist George Kennan visited the library and then wrote in his book *Siberia and Exile* about it: 'a modest wooden building in the middle of the city with a small anthropological museum and a cozy reading room, where you can find all the Russian magazines and newspapers and a very good selection of books. I was surprised to see the works of Spencer, Buckle, Lewis, Mill, Darwin, … novels and stories by Scott, Dickens … Such a selection of books does honor to the intelligentsia and the taste of those who produced it and who used these books. Thanks to books, I have formed a better opinion of Semipalatinsk than from what I have seen and heard so far.'[11] In December 1902, a free reading room was organized, which was named after the Russian writer N.V. Gogol on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his death. In 1906, by decision of the library commission, the free reading room was merged with the public library.

Despite the opening of schools and libraries in Kazakhstan, the illiteracy rate of its population continued to remain high. Only every sixth resident in this territory was literate even in 1926 (Bakanov and Zhumashev, 2021).

Since more than 70% of the population of the Russian Empire were illiterate, after the October Revolution of 1917, the elimination of illiteracy became one of the key tasks of the ruling Communist Party and the Soviets. This task had such a high priority, first of all, because the Soviets began to build the first socialist state on Earth, and according to the Marxist theory of socialism, in such a state labour productivity should be higher than that in a capitalist society, and a new type of citizen – politically active, with a conscious attitude to social labour, possessing a certain cultural level and a convinced bearer of the ideas of Marxism–Leninism, should be educated. Therefore, the programme for building socialism in the USSR, along with industrialization and collectivization, also included a *cultural revolution*.

In 1919, the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR adopted the *Decree on the Elimination of Illiteracy*, according to which all citizens aged 8–50 were required to learn to read and write in their native or Russian language. In order to coordinate the work, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Elimination of Illiteracy (VChK likbez) was created in 1920. One of the most important areas of its activity was the creation of a network of literacy training centres and providing them with the appropriate printed materials. Libraries turned into centres of cultural, educational and ideological work. A new type of library was formed – the *reading hut*, especially common in rural areas. Reading huts were stocked with political, propaganda and educational literature, often supported by posters, wall newspapers and visual aids. Even in the midst of the Civil War, on 3 November 1920, the *Decree of the Soviet Government on the Centralization of Library Work in the Country* was adopted. In accordance with the Decree, all libraries, both those under the jurisdiction of the People's Commissariat of Education and the libraries of all other departments, institutions and public organizations, were declared publicly accessible, linked into a single library network of the RSFSR[12] and transferred to the jurisdiction of the People's Commissariat of Education (Main Political and Educational Directorate). The Central Interdepartmental Library Commission was created under this directorate and its main areas of work were defined, including the expansion of the library network (Abramov, 1987). In Kazakhstan, the Decree on the centralization of library work was duplicated by the 'Decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the Kazakh ASSR[13] on the centralization of library work in the republic' dated 19 April 1921.

In 1925, a programme of mass political and cultural work was adopted, in which libraries were given one of the key roles in the 're-education of the masses'

and the construction of a new socialist society. The Communist Party and the government considered the promotion of books and reading in the villages, as well as assistance in eliminating the backwardness of non-Russian peoples, to be among the main tasks of libraries. By 1930, the number of libraries had grown significantly: thousands of rural and workers' libraries operated throughout the country. The fight against illiteracy in Kazakhstan had its own specifics, owing to the extreme 'scattering' of the population across the territory, the peculiarities of the economic and everyday life, and the high percentage of illiteracy. The *red yurt (kzylotau)*, which performed approximately the same functions as a reading hut, was the main instrument of education in the nomadic aul.[14]

The red yurt differed from the reading hut in that it roamed with the aul and its range of functions was wider: one could go there for medical assistance, and often for the protection of workers' rights, especially women in nomadic regions (Abdullina, 1990). 'The yurt has everything necessary to eliminate technical illiteracy: a library with a sufficient number of reference books and several sets of mobile books, newspapers, posters, if possible a "magic lantern"[15] and a small pharmacy with everything necessary to provide first aid' (Abdullina, 1990). As noted in the circular letter of the Main Political and Educational Directorate of the Kazakh ASSR dated 23 January 1926, 'the main advantages of mobile libraries are that: (1) a mobile library is quickly and easily staffed; (2) it penetrates the most remote and remote corners of the country; (3) it can serve the indigenous population during migration; (4) in the vast majority of cases does not require the maintenance of a special staff; (5) due to the possibility of moving from one region to another, the same set of books serves a larger number of readers than books in stationary libraries' (Abdullina, 1990).

From 1925, special women's red yurts began to be organized in nomadic regions, which 'were the center of work in the struggle for the liberation of Kazakh women from centuries-old barbaric customs and traditions that put them in the position of slaves' (Abdullina, 1990). 'Red teahouses' operated in the south of the country, in regions with a settled population.

Until the early 1930s, cultural and educational work in Kazakhstan was carried out mainly by temporary institutions – nomadic red yurts, red caravans, mobile reading huts, etc. From the early 1930s, permanent institutions – clubs, reading huts and libraries – were created in each industrial centre of the region. In his report on the state of library work for 1932–1934, Bekov, Head of the Library Department of the People's Commissariat of Education of the Kazakh ASSR, wrote:

> If before the revolution on the current territory of the Kazakh ASSR there were only 15 libraries, and only in the main cities, then in 1933 there were already 79 libraries in the region in the system of the People's Commissariat of Education alone, and by the end of 1934 we already had 138 libraries in it, including the State Public Library in Alma-Ata, 5 regional, 14 city libraries, of which 5 in Alma-Ata, 2 in Semipalatinsk, 5 in Uralsk and one each in Petropavlovsk and Chimkent, 3 libraries in industrial production centres – Ridder, Karaganda and Pribalkhashstroy and 115 district central libraries. … All regional libraries and central city libraries in Chimkent, Alma-Ata have children's departments with special collections of children's literature in the amount of 1500 to 3000 copies in each. As of January 1, 1935, we had in our libraries, according to approximate data, a total of 856,901 books, of which 64,970 were in the Kazakh language, 259 library workers, and 56,888 readers. In 1932–1933, 56 people were trained through regional library courses, of which 40 were Kazakh and 16 were Russian… Since November 5, 1934, the Regional Kazakh Library Technical School has been operating in Alma-Ata with a contingent of 90 students, of which 60 people are studying in two preparatory courses and 30 in the main course… In 1934, 11 people were sent to the library department of the Leningrad Communist Political and Educational School named after N.K. Krupskaya, and 12 people to the Moscow Library Institute. (Abdullina, 1990)

Summarizing the above, it can be stated that the creation of a centralized library network in the Soviet state took place under the strict control of the state and the party. On the one hand, this ensured a rapid increase in the number of libraries, standardization of work and the introduction of a unified management system. On the other hand, the library became an instrument of ideological influence, and its collection and activities were strictly regulated. By the mid-1930s, one of the largest library systems in the world was created in the USSR, covering all regions and strata of the population.

During the Soviet period, Kazakhstan showed significant developments in its library system. The establishment of public and academic libraries became a priority and expanded access to books, especially during the literacy campaigns and educational reforms. The State Library of KSSR (now the National Library of Kazakhstan), founded in 1931 in Almaty, became a central hub for knowledge, archiving important national and international literature. It has a unique collection of early printed books and

manuscripts, the most notable of which are medieval manuscripts in Arabic and Turkic languages, dating from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries, books printed in Cyrillic and Arabic script, including the first Kazakh editions, and manuscripts of Akhmed Yasawi, Yusuf Balasaguni and other medieval thinkers. The Central Scientific Library of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Kazakhstan contains the first printed books in the Kazakh language ('Book for the Kyrgyz', Kazan, 1809), letters and works of Abai Kunanbayev, Shokan Valikhanov and other Kazakh educators and archival materials on the history of Kazakhstan.

Transition period

Following Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, the country underwent a period of transition, marked by social, political and economic reform. The highly centralized library system of the USSR ceased to exist, and Kazakhstani libraries gained independence. If during the Soviet Union the best professional qualities of a librarian were considered to be diligence and strict adherence to established rules and instructions, then after the former Soviet republics gained independence, such qualities of a librarian as initiative, openness to new ideas and innovations, and the courage to be self-directed became a priority. For the first time in the history of Kazakhstan, public library associations were created. For the first time, Kazakhstani libraries and their public associations were given the opportunity to become members of international professional associations at the most global level.

The Library Association of the Republic of Kazakhstan (BARK) was created in 1996 and officially registered in 1997. Roza Berdigaliyeva (1945–2015) was the President of BARK from 1997 to 2014. With the support of the Ministry of Culture of Kazakhstan, BARK held the Congress of Library Workers, which adopted the 'Strategy of Libraries for the twenty-first Century' (Amanzholova and Musaeva, 2019). It founded *Kitaphana (Library)* magazine. It regularly held international and national conferences, seminars and trainings on current issues in modern librarianship. At the initiative of BARK, the professional holiday 'Day of Almaty Libraries' has been celebrated since 15 October 1999. Since its foundation, BARK has been a member of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Roza Berdigaliyeva was a member of the IFLA Regional Section Committee for Asia and Oceania, and was elected President of the Library Assembly of Eurasia.

In 2010, on the basis of the South Kazakhstan Regional Universal Scientific Library named after Otrar (Shymkent) and the Central Library of the City Library System of Turkestan, BARK conducted a republican training under the IFLA programme 'Building Strong Library Associations' (IFLA BSLA).

In 2017, at the initiative of the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan, BARK was officially re-registered as the Kazakhstan Library Union (KBS), which continues the activities of the national library association, uniting libraries of all types, in order to develop cooperation and interaction of libraries, improve the status of the library profession and integrate Kazakhstani libraries into the world community. Thanks to the efforts of the KBS, in 2022 the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan decided to include a professional holiday – *Librarian's Day (October 24)* in the calendar of memorable dates of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Since 2008, the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan has been the IFLA/PAK (preservation and conservation) regional centre in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan). The School of Conservation and Restoration of Written Documents was established at the Center in 2023. The main objectives of the school are as follows: teaching a competent and professional approach to preserving universal funds of Kazakhstan; mastering and improving modern technologies and scientific achievements in the conservation of funds; configuring the preservation and conservation system in order to ensure an updated increase in the preservation of written documents and all funds of Kazakhstan for future changes; introducing and promoting best practices and innovations in the field of restoration of written documents, etc.

In 1996, the founding conference of the East Kazakhstan Region Librarians Association was held in Ust–Kamenogorsk, which became a member of IFLA in the same year. Khabiba Akzhigitova was elected President of the Association and has been fulfilling her duties for a number of years. The following tasks of the Association were defined: creation of a regional automated library and information network; protection of the interests of libraries; expansion of their capabilities through cooperation; development of international relations; improvement of the level of training of library personnel, etc. Members of the Association participated in IFLA world congresses in Turkey, the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Sweden, etc. One of the many projects of the Association is the Summer Library Internet School, which started in August 1999 and is held annually. In October 2024, under the auspices of the Association, the republican conference 'Artificial Intelligence in Librarianship' was held at the Oralkhan Bokey Central City Library.[16]

On 14 November 2001, the first library consortium in Kazakhstan, the Association for Cooperation with International, State and Other Organizations of the Information Consortium of Libraries of Kazakhstan, was registered. The Republican Scientific and Technical Library of Kazakhstan (RSTL) and the Central Scientific Library of Kazakhstan became the founders of the consortium. Kama Urmurzina, Director of the RSTL, headed the Consortium, and its members included 50 leading Kazakhstani libraries of various systems and departments from all regions of the country, primarily scientific and university libraries. The main areas of activity of the Consortium were expanding access to electronic information, promoting the practical development of new computer technologies and up-to-date telecommunications by libraries of Kazakhstan, cooperating with international organizations, Kazakhstani government agencies, institutions, public organizations to achieve the set goals, etc. The consortium became a member of the international library consortium 'Electronic Information for Libraries'.

On 22 October 2012, the Association of University Libraries of the Republic of Kazakhstan was officially registered. The Association's headquarters are located at Dulaty University in Taraz and Gulzhan Irzhanova, Director of the Information and Library Center at the university, has been the President of the Association for many years. The purpose of the Association is to unite university libraries to express and defend their professional interests, exchange ideas and develop a joint approach to solving the problems of university libraries. The Association is a member of IFLA and a co-organizer of international conferences conducted in the country every year. In January 2023, a Memorandum between the Association and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan was signed on cooperation in such areas as: (1) the system of professional information and library education, advanced training and retraining of library personnel; (2) updating regulatory documents governing the activities of university libraries; (3) updating the material and technical base of libraries; and (4) ensuring access.

In the late 1990s and the first quarter of the 2000s, Kazakhstani libraries actively automated their business processes, including library services to users, based on the introduction of domestic and foreign (Russian) software (RABIS, KABIS, IRBIS, MARK-SQL and others). Public and university libraries created their websites. A number of libraries have opened access to book collections in their reading rooms for readers thanks to radio frequency identification technologies. The project to create and maintain a union catalog of public libraries was implemented under the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan. In December 2007, the Kazakhstan National Electronic Library[17] was announced, accompanied by the National Academic Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Astana.

More than 10 university libraries have created institutional repositories or are actively involved in their development. Eight universities in Kazakhstan train library specialists at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels. Continuing education courses for librarians have been created at the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev University, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and Kazakh National Women's Teacher Training University.

Future prospects

As Kazakhstan looks towards the future, libraries will continue to play a vital role in shaping the intellectual landscape of the country. Initiatives aimed at promoting reading culture, enhancing information literacy and fostering community engagement will be key priorities for Kazakhstani libraries. Kazakhstani librarians consider the holding of the 89th IFLA Congress in Astana as an important impetus for the development of cooperation between libraries both within the country and at the international level: in Central Asia and globally; the involvement of local librarians in the international agenda of modern librarianship and full participation in international projects and initiatives; and increasing the level of their professional competencies and improving information and library services to the country's population.

Collaboration with international partners, participation in cultural exchange programmes and integration of innovative technologies will further strengthen the country's library system, ensuring that it remains a beacon of knowledge and enlightenment for generations to come.

Conclusion

The evolution of libraries in Kazakhstan reflects the country's enduring commitment to education, enlightenment, and cultural preservation. From their humble beginnings in the Soviet era to their current status as vibrant hubs of learning and discovery, Kazakhstani libraries have been instrumental in shaping the intellectual, spiritual and emotional intelligence landscape of the country. As Kazakhstan continues on its path of modernization and development, libraries will remain at the forefront of fostering knowledge, promoting literacy and nurturing the minds of future generations.

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Notes

1. https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/social-statistics/demography/publications/337150/.
2. https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-roads.
3. https://nashaniva.com/ru/365297.
4. *Kyui* is the name of a traditional Kazakh, Nogai, Tatar, and Kyrgyz instrumental piece. It is performed on komuz (kobyz), dombra, sybyzgy or other folk musical instruments. A kyuishi is a performer of kyui.
5. *Batyr* (from the Turkic 'brave', 'strongman' or the Mongolian batu – 'strong', 'robust') is an honorary title (rank) among the Mongolian and Turkic peoples, which was given for military merit; it was also used in folklore to designate outstanding warriors.
6. *Akyn* is a poet-improviser, poet and singer among the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia, in particular, the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.
7. *Zhyrau* (from Karakalpak, Kazakh and Nogai – song, poem) is a folk poet and singer, who is not only a performer, but also an author of works in Turkic poetry. Zhyrau singers are considered the founders of Karakalpak, Nogai and Kazakh literature.
8. https://milliard.tatar/news/kto-takie-inorodcy-i-kogda-oni-poyavilis-v-rossiiskoi-imperii-1163.
9. https://madeniportal.kz/ru/librarie/zapadno-kazaxstanskaia-oblastnaia-universalnaia-naucnaia-biblioteka-im-zmoldagaliev.
10. https://semeylib.kz/?page_id=172&lang=ru.
11. Ibid.
12. The Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (also the Russian Soviet Republic and Soviet Russia; abbreviated RSFSR) was a socialist Russian state from the October Socialist Revolution of 1917 until the formation of the USSR in 1922.
13. *The Kazakh Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic* was a Kazakh national autonomy, an administrative-territorial unit within the RSFSR on the territory of modern Kazakhstan, as well as parts of Russia and Uzbekistan in 1920–1936.
14. An *aul* is a hamlet in the Caucasus, Central Asia
15. A projection apparatus.
16. https://altainews.kz/ru/rubriki/novosti/58187-iskusstvennyj-intellekt-chto-izmenitsja-v-dejatelnosti-sotrudnikov-bibliotek-vko.html
17. https://kazneb.kz/.

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