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Reframing Kazakhstan's History in European Historiography: Perspectives from French, German, and Italian Traditions

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Abstract. European scholarly research has been instrumental in enhancing our comprehension of Kazakhstan's and Central Asia's historical development. This article analyzes the contributions of contemporary French, German, and Italian scholars to the study of the historiography of Kazakhstan's history while also providing a broader context for the academic activities of European researchers. The focus on French, German, and Italian scholars is due to their strong academic traditions in studying imperial and Soviet history.

The article briefly outlines the development of national historiographical schools in these European countries. Particular attention is given to the second half of the 20th century, when, alongside academic Oriental Studies, a politicized and ideologically driven field known as Sovietology emerged, influencing the study of Kazakhstan's history. Following the collapse of the USSR, regional studies developed, and Kazakhstan ceased to be viewed solely as part of a larger structure, whether imperial or Soviet, and became an independent research subject. This shift significantly impacted both research topics and methodological approaches, shaping contemporary European historical scholarship. The article primarily focuses on the works of contemporary authors who have been particularly active in recent years in publishing on the history of Kazakhstan, frequently conducting extensive research in Kazakhstani archives, teaching at local universities, and engaging in sustained academic collaboration with Kazakhstani colleagues.

The research consists of three main sections, each dedicated to analyzing modern historiography in France, Germany, and Italy. Using historiographical analysis, each section examines the formation of national historiographical schools, disciplinary approaches, key scholars, established narratives, interpretative frameworks, and dominant research themes. French scholars such as Marlène Laruelle and Thierry Zarcone have studied Kazakhstan's religious traditions and socio-cultural evolution, while Isabelle Ohayon has explored its Soviet-era transformations. German scholar Robert Kindler has made a significant contribution to the study of the 1930s famine in Kazakhstan. Additionally, Kindler and Sophie Roche have analyzed migration processes and the personal histories of ethnic Germans, thereby examining Germany's historical ties with Kazakhstan. Italian scholars such as Niccolò Pianciola and Beatrice Penati have significantly contributed to economic and environmental history research in the region. This study also evaluates the role of key academic institutions, such as INALCO in France and Humboldt University in Germany, in shaping European research on Kazakhstan. By

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analyzing recent publications and historiographical trends, the authors highlight the shift from Soviet-centered narratives to interdisciplinary and locally oriented approaches.,
The authors conclude that European historiography offers a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of Kazakhstan's history, contributing to global discussions on imperial and Soviet legacies, as well as regional transformations, ultimately enriching the broader academic discourse.
Keywords: Kazakhstan; Central Asia; European scholarship; academic cooperation; imperial legacy; Sovietology; regional studies

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Переосмысление истории Казахстана в европейской историографии: подходы французской, немецкой и итальянской научных школ

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Аннотация. Европейские научные исследования сыграли важную роль в углублении наших знаний по истории Казахстана и Центральной Азии. В данной статье анализируется вклад современных французских, немецких и итальянских ученых в историографию Казахстана, а также представлен более широкий контекст академической деятельности европейских ученых. Акцент на французских, немецких и итальянских исследователях обусловлен их фундаментальными академическими традициями в изучении имперской и советской истории.
В статье кратко изложено становление национальных историографических школ в данных европейских странах. Во второй половине XX века в рамках академического востоковедения сформировалось политизированное, идеологически заданное направление – советология. С распадом СССР возникли региональные исследования, и Казахстан перестал изучаться исключительно как часть некоего большого целого – будь то империя или СССР, став самостоятельным объектом изучения. Данная ситуация существенно повлияла как на выбор тематики исследований, так и на разнообразие методологических подходов, на которые опираются современные европейские историки. Основной акцент в статье сделан на характеристике трудов современных авторов, кто особенно активно публикуется по истории Казахстана в последние годы, часто и подолгу работает в казахстанских архивах, преподает в университетах, ведет активную совместную академическую деятельность с казахстанскими коллегами.
Статья разделена на три основных блока, каждый из которых посвящен анализу современной историографии во Франции, Германии и Италии. Опираясь на методологию сравнительного историографического анализа, в каждом из них мы проследили формирование национальных

историографических школ, дисциплинарное пространство, выделили основные персоналии, созданные нарративы и интерпретационные рамки, тематику исследований, с краткой характеристикой вклада каждого из ученых. Французские исследователи, такие, как Марлен Ларюэль и Тьерри Заркон, изучали религиозные традиции населения Казахстана и их социокультурную эволюцию, в то время как работы Изабель Огайон позволяют глубже понять трансформацию страны в советский период. Весьма существенным является вклад немецкого ученого Роберта Киндлера в дальнейшую разработку темы голода 30-х годов XX века в Казахстане. Кроме того, Роберт Киндлер и Софи Роше анализировали процессы миграции, изучая личные истории представителей немецкого населения, тем самым анализируя исторические связи Германии с Казахстаном. Итальянские исследователи, такие, как Никколо Пианчола и Беатриче Пенати, внесли значительный вклад в изучение экономической и экологической истории региона. В данном исследовании также дается характеристика роли ключевых академических институтов, таких, как Национальный институт восточных языков и цивилизаций во Франции и Берлинский университет имени Гумбольдта в Германии. Анализируя новейшие публикации и историографические тенденции, авторы подчеркивает эволюцию европейских исследований о Казахстане, акцентируя сдвиг от советоцентричных нарративов к междисциплинарным и локально ориентированным подходам.

Авторы приходят к выводу, что европейская историография предоставляет глубокое и многогранное понимание истории Казахстана, способствуя глобальным дискуссиям об имперском и советском наследии, а также региональных трансформациях, что способствует обогащению академического дискурсивного пространства.

Ключевые слова: Казахстан; Центральная Азия; европейская наука; академическое сотрудничество; имперское наследие; советология; региональные исследования

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Қазақстан тарихын еуропалық тарихнамада қайта пайымдау: француз, неміс және итальян ғылыми мектептерінің көзқарастары

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Аңдатпа. Еуропалық ғылыми зерттеулер Қазақстан мен Орталық Азия тарихын тереңірек түсінуге айтарлықтай үлес қосты. Бұл мақалада қазіргі француз, неміс және итальян ғалымдарының Қазақстан тарихынының тарихнамасын зерттеуге қосқан үлесі талданып, сонымен қатар еуропалық зерттеушілердің академиялық қызметінің кеңірек контексті қарастырылады. Француз, неміс және итальян ғалымдарына ерекше назар аударылуы олардың

империялық және кеңестік тарихты зерттеудегі берік академиялық дәстүрлеріне байланысты.
Мақалада осы еуропалық елдердегі ұлттық тарихнамалық мектептердің қалыптасу үдерісі қысқаша сипатталады. Қазақстан тарихын зерттеуге ықпал еткен кеңестік идеологияға негізделген кеңестану (советология) атты саясиланған бағыт академиялық шығыстану ілімімен қатар XX ғасырдың екінші жартысында ерекше дамыған кезеңге ерекше назар аударылады. КСРО ыдырағаннан кейін өңірлік зерттеулер қарқын алып, Қазақстан тек үлкен біртұтас құрылымның (империя немесе Кеңес Одағы) бөлігі ретінде ғана емес, дербес зерттеу нысаны ретінде қарастырыла бастады. Бұл өзгеріс зерттеу тақырыптарының таңдалуына және қазіргі еуропалық тарихшылар қолданатын әдіснамалық тәсілдердің әртүрлілігіне айтарлықтай әсер етті. Мақалада негізгі назар соңғы жылдары Қазақстан тарихы бойынша белсенді түрде ғылыми еңбектер жариялап жүрген қазіргі заманғы авторлардың зерттеулерін сипаттауға бағытталған. Аталған ғалымдар Қазақстан архивтерінде жиі әрі ұзақ мерзім жұмыс жасап, жоғары оқу орындарында дәріс оқып және қазақстандық әріптестерімен бірлескен академиялық ынтымақтастықты белсенді түрде жүзеге асырып келеді.
Мақала үш негізгі бөлімге бөлінген, олардың әрқайсысы Франция, Германия және Италиядағы қазіргі тарихнаманы талдауға арналған. Салыстырмалы тарихнамалық талдау әдістемесін қолдана отырып, әр бөлімде ұлттық тарихнамалық мектептердің қалыптасуы, олардың пәндік шеңбері, негізгі ғалымдары, жетекші нарративтері мен интерпретациялық тәсілдері, сондай-ақ басты зерттеу тақырыптары қарастырылып, әр ғалымның қосқан үлесі қысқаша сипатталады.
Француз зерттеушілері, атап айтқанда Marlène Laruelle және Thierry Zarcone, Қазақстан халқының діни дәстүрлері мен олардың әлеуметтік-мәдени эволюциясын зерттеген. Ал Isabelle Ohayon-ның еңбектері елдің кеңестік кезеңдегі трансформациясын тереңірек түсінуге мүмкіндік береді. Неміс ғалымы Robert Kindler Қазақстандағы 1930-жылдардағы ашаршылықты зерттеу ісін ілгерілетуге айтарлықтай үлес қосты. Сонымен қатар, Robert Kindler мен Sophie Roche көші-қон үдерістерін зерттеп, неміс диаспорасы өкілдерінің жеке тарихын талдау арқылы Германия мен Қазақстан арасындағы тарихи байланыстарды қарастырды. Итальян зерттеушілері Niccolò Pianciola және Beatrice Penati аймақтың экономикалық және экологиялық тарихын зерттеуге айтарлықтай үлес қосты.
Бұл зерттеу сондай-ақ Франциядағы Шығыс тілдері және өркениеттерінің ұлттық институты (INALCO) мен Германиядағы Берлиннің Гумбольдт университеті сияқты негізгі академиялық институттардың рөлін бағалайды. Жаңа жарияланымдар мен тарихнамалық үрдістерді талдай отырып, авторлар еуропалық зерттеулердің Қазақстан туралы көзқарасының эволюциясын атап көрсетеді, атап айтқанда, кеңес орталықтанған нарративтерден пәнаралық және жергілікті бағытталған тәсілдерге көшу үрдісін айқындайды.
Авторлар еуропалық тарихнаманың Қазақстан тарихын жан-жақты әрі терең түсінуге мүмкіндік беретінін, сонымен қатар империялық және кеңестік мұралар мен өңірлік трансформациялар туралы жаһандық ғылыми талқылауларға үлес қосатынын тұжырымдайды. Бұл өз кезегінде академиялық дискурстың кеңеюіне ықпал етеді.
Түйін сөздер: Қазақстан; Орталық Азия; еуропалық ғылым; академиялық ынтымақтастық; империялық мұра; кеңес беру; аймақтық зерттеулер

Introduction

Throughout the late 20th century and in recent decades, scholars have had a consistent research interest in Central Asia. The region's rich history, relationship with Russia and the

Soviet Union, and its rich cultural landscape have all drawn the attention of scholars from around the world. Due to its important role within the region, Kazakhstan often features within this research, either being mentioned in more general discussions of the region and studies on other Central Asian countries or as the focal point, with particular focus on its dynamic ethno-demography. While much of the research into Kazakh history and culture has, of course, been carried out by Kazakhs and Kazakhstani themselves, it is also important to examine research that has been carried out by those outside of the country as well, whose studies offer special insights, perspectives, and methodologies that might not be found in local research.

Much of the foreign research that touches on Kazakhstan's ethno-demography has been carried out by Western historians from the United States and Europe. The United States, as a result of its position as one of the major powers during the Cold War, has mostly examined Kazakhstan about the Soviet Union, either as a pre-Soviet entity or as a Soviet or post-Soviet republic. Although a similar trend can be found in European research on Kazakhstan as well, the body of research published on Central Asia by European researchers has explored a wider range of historical and cultural topics, and it can be argued that this diversity of topics presents a more authentic and dynamic picture of Kazakhstan and its role in the region.

In the study and classification of foreign historiography, language has traditionally served as the primary criterion for distinguishing between different scholarly traditions. Consequently, historiographical literature is often categorized into English-, French-, German-, and other language-based schools. Among these, the four major English-speaking countries – the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia – are frequently regarded as representing variations of a shared cultural and academic model, commonly referred to as Anglo-American or English-language historiography.

At the same time, a significant body of historiographical work has been produced by scholars residing outside the so-called "Anglo-American world." These authors often write directly in English or have their research translated into English, subsequently gaining recognition within the international academic community.

Many of the scholars whose works are analyzed in this study have earned academic degrees from British or American institutions. A substantial number of researchers from various regions now teach and conduct research at universities and academic centers across Europe, North America, and Asia. Their publications frequently reflect the methodological standards and scholarly traditions of British or American research schools, where their work is often published.

This article also draws upon works by French, German, and Italian scholars that have been published in English.

With this in mind, the present paper seeks to discuss and analyze European research on Central Asia, focusing on those studies that are either specifically focused on Kazakhstan or reference Kazakhstan within broader discussions on the region or specific regional contexts. Given the vast scope of such a historiographical investigation, this article prioritizes modern contributions to provide a more focused analysis. As an examination of the research of every European country would be much too extensive and thus beyond the scope of the present study, this paper focuses on three national contexts that have contributed extensive research in this area: France, Germany, and Italy. In the interest of examining publications that have received greater international attention, this article mainly examines research that was either published in English or translated. In addition to examining some of the foundational publications from the second half of the 20th century, the study places particular interest in more recent research,

which provides fresh perspectives and new lines of inquiry into Kazakhstan and the region in general, as well as its relation to the rest of the world. Supplementary perspectives from journalists and political scientists are also briefly mentioned to provide further context on European interest in Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

The focus on French, German, and Italian scholars' studies of Kazakhstan is rooted in their well-established traditions of exploring imperial histories, a hallmark of their academic approaches. As noted by Svetlana Kovalskaya, Western interest in Kazakhstan's steppes has spanned centuries, leading to a rich historiographical base in European languages. Within this tradition, French, German, and Italian scholars have distinguished themselves through their in-depth examinations of Central Asia's imperial and colonial dimensions. These studies align with the broader historical focus of their respective academic cultures, prioritizing the analysis of empires and their societal, cultural, and political impacts (Kovalskaya 2013).

French scholars have extensively analyzed Kazakhstan's integration into the Russian Empire and its subsequent Soviet experience, particularly concerning religious, cultural, and political dynamics. Drawing from their country's unique historical ties to Kazakhstan, German researchers have contributed significantly to understanding its socio-economic transformations during the imperial and Soviet periods. Though less prolific, Italian scholars have made valuable contributions to studying economic and environmental aspects of Kazakhstan's history, focusing on themes like land reforms and resource management under imperial governance.

By centering the analysis on these three traditions, this study highlights the depth and richness of their contributions, which offer critical perspectives on Kazakhstan's historical trajectory. These academic traditions, emphasizing imperial frameworks, provide a complex understanding of Kazakhstan's role within larger geopolitical and historical contexts, enriching the global discourse on Central Asia.

Methodology, methods, and materials

This study employs a rigorous historiographical approach to examine how Kazakhstan's history has been represented in European scholarship. Drawing on scholarly articles, monographs, and institutional publications, it evaluates thematic continuities, methodological shifts, and historiographical biases in French, German, and Italian works, alongside contributions from Kazakhstani historians.

A comparative historiographical analysis traces evolving narratives, interpretative frameworks, and divergent perspectives on Kazakhstan's political, economic, and cultural transformations. Additionally, textual and discourse analysis critically engage with academic discourse, ideological influences, and interdisciplinary methodologies that shape the field.

The study adopts a historical-comparative and interdisciplinary approach to explore the contributions of contemporary European scholars within the broader context of Central Asian studies. Reviewing primary and secondary sources establishes the historical foundations of European engagement with Kazakhstan, providing a deeper understanding of shifting research paradigms and historiographical trends. Prioritizing contextual interpretation over quantitative analysis, this approach highlights the evolving conceptualization of Kazakhstan's history within European scholarship. To build a comprehensive understanding of their role, the research begins with a review of primary and secondary sources that provide historical context for European engagement with the region.

At the heart of this research is an examination of recent scholarly contributions from Italian, German, and French researchers, each of whom approaches the study of Kazakhstan from different disciplinary perspectives. Studies in historical geography by scholars like Josef Markwart (Markwart 1930) have provided foundational insights into Kazakhstan's spatial and territorial dynamics, establishing a framework that continues to inform contemporary research. Building upon this tradition, archaeological investigations, such as the work of Gian Luca Bonora (Bonora 2020), offer crucial material evidence that enriches our understanding of Kazakhstan's historical landscape. Migration and demographic studies are also significant, with researchers such as and Robert Kindler (Kindler 2018) focusing on population movements and socio-political transformations. Additionally, the scholarship of I. Ohayon (Ohayon 2016) and N. Pianciola (Pianciola 2001; Pianciola 2019) offer crucial insights into Kazakhstan's Soviet past, particularly about forced collectivization, famine, and state policies.

This study also adopts a comparative perspective, examining common themes and methodological trends across these three groups of scholars. A key focus is how French, German, and Italian researchers frame their analyses within imperial, colonial, and post-colonial narratives and how their academic traditions influence their approaches to Central Asian studies. Furthermore, the research explores discussions surrounding Kazakhstan's evolving cultural identity, migration patterns, and international academic collaboration, as reflected in the works of Pianciola and Zharassov (Pianciola et al. 2020).

The materials used in this study reflect a wide range of sources, from historical travel accounts and Soviet-era research to contemporary academic studies and online publications. Alongside historical interpretation, empirical data from sources such as *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* (Pianciola 2001) and *Central Asian Affairs* (Ohayon 2016) offer valuable perspectives on the long-term effects of political and social transformations in Kazakhstan. By synthesizing these diverse materials and integrating historical, thematic, and contemporary academic perspectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how European scholarship on Kazakhstan has evolved. In doing so, it highlights the broader significance of cross-cultural academic exchanges and the role of interdisciplinary approaches in advancing Central Asian studies.

After the collection and analysis of materials, and during the final stages of drafting, Grammarly was employed to support paraphrasing and improve linguistic clarity. It is important to note that the initial version of the manuscript was developed independently, without the use of AI tools.

Literature review

The study of historiography – particularly foreign historiography – has long been an important and established field within historical scholarship. The analysis of how Kazakhstan has been represented in foreign academic traditions is not a new concern; rather, it has developed over several decades and is supported by a significant body of literature, especially in English-language scholarship. This body of work reflects the diversity and specificity of national historiographical schools, each shaped by its intellectual traditions, political context, and cultural frameworks.

As noted earlier, language has often served as a primary marker in the classification of historiographical traditions. In addition to this linguistic dimension, many of the countries central to this study – namely, Italy, Germany, and France – possess long-standing traditions of researching the histories of empires, including their colonial legacies and comparative imperial

experiences. This provides a valuable context for examining how these academic cultures have approached the history of Kazakhstan and Central Asia more broadly.

A substantial body of research by Kazakh scholars has been devoted to analyzing how Kazakhstan is represented in foreign historiography. While it is beyond the scope of this section to cover all contributions exhaustively, it is essential to highlight several foundational works that have significantly shaped the field. The discussion that follows focuses on key scholars whose research has helped clarify how Kazakhstan's past has been interpreted through various external academic traditions and how local researchers have critically responded to these perspectives.

K.L. Esmagambetov, in What Was Written About Us in the West? (Esmagambetov 1992), was among the first to systematically document and analyze how Kazakhstan was depicted in Western scholarship. He underscored the importance of applying rigorous methods when interpreting external narratives, while challenging the lingering colonial assumptions inherited from Soviet historiography.

B.M. Suzhikov was one of the first to reassess Western Sovietology not as an object of ideological rejection, but as a legitimate academic field (Suzhikov 1991; Suzhikov 1993; Suzhikov 1997).

M.T. Laumulin has also made notable contributions by examining how Kazakhstan has been portrayed in Western political science and historical research (Laumulin 1992, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002). The bibliographic guide co-authored with T. Beysembayev (Laumulin et al. 1994) remain important reference points in the field. His later volume Central Asia and Kazakhstan in Foreign Political Science and Global Geopolitics (Laumulin 2005) consolidates a wide range of Western perspectives on the region, spanning geopolitical, economic, and academic contexts.

R.M. Tashtemkhanova has focused on the German academic tradition, a relatively underexplored area within Kazakh historiography. Her doctoral research (Tashtemkhanova 2005) and textbook "The German School of Central Asian Studies and Kazakhstan Studies" (Tashtemkhanova 2005) examine German perspectives on modernization, ethnographic research, and the Ostforschung legacy. Beyond her academic publications, her participation in international programs has fostered stronger institutional links between Kazakh and European scholarship.

Z. Shaimardanova, in her monograph "Two Centuries of French Historiography of Kazakhstan" (Shaimardanova 2015), studies how French Sovietology and post-Soviet scholarship have interpreted themes such as colonization, national movements, and socio-economic development. Her comparative approach highlights the evolving relationship between Kazakh and French academic traditions.

G.B. Byrbayeva, in her monograph Central Asia and Sovietism and related research (Byrbayeva 2005), traces the conceptual shifts in Euro-American Sovietology from totalitarian frameworks toward more historically grounded analyses. Her work addresses identity, political history, and religion in Central Asia, situating these themes within broader theoretical debates.

These scholars have established a foundation for studying how Kazakhstan has been interpreted in Western academic traditions. Their work has opened the way for further inquiry into how these narratives have been received, adapted, and re-evaluated in contemporary European historiography (Kovalskaya 2007).

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate the distinct but complementary contributions of French, German, and Italian scholars to the study of Kazakhstan within the broader context of Central Asia. Each research tradition brings unique perspectives and methodologies, collectively enriching the understanding of Kazakhstan's historical, cultural, religious, and geopolitical evolution.

History, Religion, and Culture: Insights from French Research

France has long held a prominent position in the development of Western scholarship on Kazakhstan and Central Asia, particularly during the Cold War era. Influenced by broader transatlantic academic trends, many French scholars approached the region through the prism of Soviet studies, often emphasizing questions of ideology, governance, and religion. Foundational figures such as Alexandre Bennigsen, René Grousset, and Hélène Carrère d'Encausse played a crucial role in shaping early interpretations of the region. Bennigsen's collaboration with Lemercier-Quelquejay in Islam in the Soviet Union (Bennigsen 1967), though based on valuable Soviet archival material, reflected certain limitations of its time, most notably in its assertion that Kazakh nomads were "only superficially Islamicised." His later works (Bennigsen 1980), however, adopted a more critical lens, addressing both Western misconceptions and the operational realities of Soviet religious institutions.

Carrère d'Encausse's influential book Decline of an Empire (d'Encausse 1979) offered an incisive comparison between Russian imperial expansion and Soviet control, placing particular emphasis on Kazakh resistance under leaders like Kenesary Khan. Her fluency in Russian and access to internal Soviet documents gave her research a strong empirical foundation, although her broader conclusions were still shaped by Cold War-era ideological perspectives. Similarly, Grousset's Empire of the Steppes (Grousset 1970) remains notable for its comprehensive historical sweep and rich archaeological insight, even as it reflects orientalist frameworks typical of its time.

Like their German and Italian counterparts, French scholars have moved beyond Sovietological frameworks and totalitarian theory, increasingly grounding their analyses in post-Soviet scholarship and contemporary historiographical approaches.

While these classic works remain influential, contemporary French scholarship has moved toward more nuanced, interdisciplinary approaches – grounded in fieldwork, new archival discoveries, and local engagement – which now form the core of current academic discourse on Kazakhstan.

Vincent Fourniau, historian and director of studies at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), is a leading scholar on Central Asian history, including Kazakhstan. His research spans the 16th to 20th centuries, focusing on social history and collective identities. In De l'indigénisation à l'indépendance, he examines how Soviet policies shaped national identities, using history, ethnology, and archaeology to construct collective memory (Fourniau 2019). Challenging conventional narratives on Sovietization, he offers a fresh perspective on identity formation in the 18th and 19th centuries. As former director of the French Institute for Central Asian Studies (IFEAC) in Tashkent, his tenure fostered academic collaboration and strengthened global scholarly networks. (Fourniau 2019).

Much of the academic research on Central Asia in France can be linked to the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations. Known for its extensive research on the region, INALCO is important in fostering academic connections and advancing Central Asian studies.

Catherine Poujol, one of the most influential French historians specializing in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, has been key in advancing INALCO's contributions to the field. Her research covers Kazakhstan's nomadic heritage, Soviet-era experiences, and post-Soviet transformation, providing a comprehensive historical perspective. Emphasizing Kazakhstan's role as a cultural and geopolitical crossroads, she highlights its regional and global significance. Through her academic work and efforts to strengthen France-Central Asia scholarly ties, Poujol has significantly contributed to Kazakhstan's historiography and reinforced INALCO's position as a leading center for Central Asian studies (Poujol 2022).

While the previously mentioned French scholars examined religion in their works, none have gone quite as deep into the topic as Thierry Zarcone, who has carried out extensive investigations and fieldwork into the religious landscape of Central Asia, with many of his studies focusing on or mentioning the unique religious traditions and landscape of Kazakhstan, many of which he witnessed first-hand during his time in the region. In the volume that he edited with Alexandre Papas and Thomas Welsford entitled Central Asian Pilgrims, he includes his chapter, which highlights a particularly striking phenomenon of "second Meccas" or "Ka'bas", holy sites that complement or even substitute the originals in the eyes of locals, including in this list the shrine of Ahmad Yasawi in Turkistan. In his chapter, Zarcone highlights how unorthodox practices such as these are at odds with the Spiritual Board of Kazakhstan, underscoring the complicated religious dynamics in the country and the broader region.

While the work of the previously-mentioned modern French scholars in this area aims to explore new frontiers in research into Kazakhstan, the work of Isabelle Ohayon, a critical figure in French historiography on Kazakhstan, revisits some of the more traditional themes, albeit with a fresh set of interpretations and insights drawn from emerging historical documents. This can be seen in one of her articles examining the role of lineage societies in Kazakhstan during the Soviet period. The article examines newly discovered reports highlighting how the authorities viewed Kazakh kinship values at the time while underscoring how these views influenced policy decisions (Ohayon 2016).

Unlike their predecessors, Isabelle Ohayon, Marc Elie, and others were granted a unique opportunity to work in the archives of Kazakhstan. This access enabled the publication of new works that have made a significant contribution to the study of the subject matter. Isabelle Ohayon is a recognized expert on collectivization and famine in Kazakhstan (Ohayon 2009). Marc Elie currently serves as Deputy Director of the Centre for Russian, Caucasian, Central European, and Central Asian Studies in Paris. The two scholars have collaborated productively, and among their joint publications are works dedicated to the Brezhnev era of Soviet history (Ohayon et al. 2013).

Svetlana Kovalskaya highlights that French scholarship offers a multidimensional perspective on Kazakhstan's historical and cultural development. It bridges historical analyses of imperial and Soviet legacies with contemporary migration, geopolitics, and religion studies. Furthermore, it enriches the global academic dialogue by integrating Kazakh history into broader discussions of Central Asia's role in world history. This integration fosters greater understanding and recognition of Kazakhstan's unique trajectory as a cultural, historical, and

geopolitical crossroads. By continuing to build on these scholarly traditions, French researchers contribute significantly to the refined understanding of Kazakhstan both within and beyond the region (Kovalskaya 2013).

French historiography on Kazakhstan demonstrates both historical continuity and methodological evolution. From Cold War-era political readings of Islam and Soviet governance by Bennigsen and d'Encausse to more recent studies by Zarcone, Ohayon, Fourniau, and Poujol, French scholars have offered nuanced, multi-layered analyses that combine archival research, fieldwork, and interdisciplinary approaches. While early works often reflected the geopolitical context of their time, contemporary French research moves toward a deeper understanding of identity, memory, and religious complexity in Kazakhstan. The emphasis on cultural hybridity, localized practices, and historical legacies reveals a clear progression from ideological interpretations to empirically grounded scholarship. This dynamic development not only enhances Kazakhstan's visibility in European historiography but also affirms France's role as a key contributor to Central Asian studies.

Contributions of German Researchers and Institutions

Historical, geopolitical, and scientific factors have shaped German interest in Kazakhstan and Central Asia. As part of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan's strategic significance grew, particularly during the Cold War, when German scholars, like their American counterparts, studied Soviet republics to understand the global superpower better. The Baikonur Cosmodrome, the world's first and largest operational space launch facility, further underscored Kazakhstan's importance, symbolizing Soviet technological advancements and attracting geopolitical interest, including from Germany. Additionally, historical ties, such as the settlement of ethnic Germans in Kazakhstan and strong trade relations, have reinforced Germany's academic engagement with the region.

The interest of German scholars in Kazakhstan and Central Asia significantly increased after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Although earlier studies by German orientalists and ethnographers date back to the 19th century, contemporary research shifted its focus toward political transitions, regional security, and identity formation in the newly independent republics. While German engagement with Central Asia began with classic Orientalist and philological approaches, contemporary German Turkology has evolved into a dynamic, interdisciplinary field that significantly contributes to historiographical scholarship on Kazakhstan. Today, research in this area goes beyond linguistic study to examine identity, cultural transmission, and memory politics within Turkic societies. Institutions such as the University of Göttingen, Freie Universität Berlin, and Tübingen University remain influential centers for Turkological research.

Eminent scholars like Lars Johanson and Jens Peter Laut have contributed to a deeper understanding of Kazakh and broader Turkic linguistic developments, while also linking them to questions of nation-building and post-imperial legacies (Johanson et al. 1998; Laut 2001). Their work explores how Turkic languages serve as carriers of cultural continuity and socio-political meaning, especially in post-Soviet spaces (Johanson 2010).

This modern branch of German Turkology has increasingly intersected with ethnohistorical, religious, and sociolinguistic studies, reflecting broader concerns in historical and cultural

scholarship (Johanson et al. 2006). By tracing the evolution of Kazakh identity through language, oral traditions, and shifting symbolic systems, contemporary German scholars help illuminate how historical narratives are produced, transmitted, and reinterpreted.

As such, Turkology remains a vital component of German historiography on Kazakhstan, reinforcing the country's role not only as a post-Soviet state but as part of the broader Turkic world (Schamiloglu 2004).

Scholars such as Uwe Halbach, Gudrun Wacker, Paul Geiss, Waldemar Schmidt, and Andrea Schmitz have made meaningful contributions in this regard, analyzing Kazakhstan through the lens of post-socialist transformation and geopolitical realignment.

Halbach's writings, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, reflect a critical view of Kazakhstan's economic reforms, social inequality, and the contradictions of foreign investment policies. His assessments of privatization, elite consolidation, and rising public dissatisfaction illustrate the tensions between economic liberalization and political centralization. At the same time, Halbach pays attention to external threats, such as religious extremism and instability in Afghanistan, and how these have shaped Kazakhstan's security strategies (Halbach 2004).

In the broader landscape of German historiography on Kazakhstan and Central Asia, the contribution of Paul Georg Geiss is particularly significant for its analytical engagement with Soviet and post-Soviet political structures. In his project "Communal Commitment and Political Order in Change: The Soviet and Independent Central Asia" (Geiss 2003), Geiss examined how the Soviet system restructured communal and tribal political orders by subordinating ethnic identities to ideological imperatives. His analysis of the Soviet national delimitation of 1924 and the subsequent transformation of Kazakh political life offers a foundational understanding of how institutional mechanisms like collectivization and indigenous cadres served both modernization and control.

Complementing this, Gudrun Wacker has investigated Kazakhstan's international positioning in relation to China and Europe. As a senior fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Wacker's work (Wacker 2010) reflects on Kazakhstan's strategic balance between major powers, with particular attention to security cooperation and regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Together, Geiss and Wacker contribute a comprehensive view that integrates historical, institutional, and geopolitical dimensions of Kazakhstan's development. These studies show that German researchers are interested not only in the formal side of state-building, but also in how everyday political processes unfold in practice. Despite their critical insights, some of their interpretations reflect a distinctly European perspective, which occasionally simplifies the complexity of local realities. Nevertheless, the body of German research provides an important analytical framework for understanding Kazakhstan's position in the region and its evolving role in global affairs.

It is important to emphasize that the study of the deportation of ethnic Germans from the USSR has developed into a distinct and well-established field of historical research, characterized by its methodology, scholarly debates, and extensive body of literature. This specialization reflects the depth and complexity of forced migration as both a historical process and a political tool of the Soviet regime. One of them, J. Otto Pohl's study reveals that the Soviet Union's forced conscription of over 300,000 ethnic Germans – primarily from Kazakhstan and Central Asia – into the labor army from 1941 to 1957 was a politically motivated act of ethnic repression, carried out under inhumane conditions akin to those in the GULAG, and marked by widespread

suffering, gendered injustices, and long-term social consequences for the German minority (Pohl 2017).

One must recognize that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the migration of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union, including from Kazakhstan, increased rapidly. Among those who left were several historians, some of whom continued their academic work in Germany. Waldemar Schmidt was actively engaged in academic work at the Tselinograd Pedagogical Institute named after S. Seifullin (now L.N. Gymilyov Eurasian National University). Following this period, he relocated permanently with his family to Germany, where he continued his scholarly research on the history of ethnic Germans in Kazakhstan. His most recent publications remain focused on the historical presence of Germans in Northern Kazakhstan, particularly in the Akmola region. In one of his notable studies, Schmidt draws on archival materials of the Akmolinsk Regional Government to examine the religious life of German communities in the pre-revolutionary period. His analysis of petitions, correspondence, and administrative reports reveals how imperial and local authorities interacted with non-Orthodox confessions and reflects the broader dynamics of religious, social, and legal frameworks that shaped the everyday experiences of German settlers on the Kazakh steppe (Schmidt 2018). He is also a co-author of the *Memorial Book of Kazakhstan*, which analyzes the scale of state terror during the Stalinist period directed against the German minority in Kazakhstan (Wanner et al. 2023). Similarly, to scholars in the French context, much of the research carried out by German researchers in the second half of the 20th century was focused on examining Kazakhstan about the Soviet Union, often with a Soviet-critical perspective. While this research scope diversified in more recent scholarship, German researchers continue this trend, such as Robert Kindler, whose work, *Stalin's Nomads: Power and Famine in Kazakhstan*, was influential enough to be translated into English. The text provides a fresh look at the demographic and historical dynamics that the country underwent during the Soviet period and pays special attention to the impacts that these dynamics had on the lives of individuals through biographies and personal stories from native Kazakhs and other figures that offer a window into authentic experiences that characterize the period. A vivid example of this is the story of Zeineb Mametova (Kindler 2018: 84). His modern approach to the topic highlights the complexities of the period and the contradictions present in earlier European historiography of the region.

One of the remarkable German scholars in Central Asia from the past decades who expanded her scholarship beyond the scope of the Soviet period is Sophie Roche, who has published a wealth of publications examining the region. Like much of the modern German and French research on Kazakhstan, her research focuses on religion in the region. This theme is present throughout a volume she edited entitled *Central Asian Intellectuals on Islam*, where she and other authors explore the intricate relationships between academia, identity, and politics. Her contribution to the volume uses Kazakhstan as an example of religion's role in the modern Central Asian state, where it is often viewed as a means of self-identification and a solution to local social problems, a conclusion she reaches through examining statements made by contemporary Kazakh officials. Her investigations are not limited to religious studies, as seen in her volume *The Family in Central Asia*, focusing on family dynamics in a number of Central Asian contexts, with Kazakhstan featured in several of the book's chapters. As with many other similar publications, it was funded and supported by the German Ministry of Education, highlighting the importance that German scholars and the German state place on scholarly efforts exploring Kazakhstan and its neighbors in the region (Roche 2014).

Similarly, to France, German academia comprises individuals representing a wide range of national and ethnic backgrounds. This diversity of scholars produces a multitude of rich perspectives, which are reflected in the research taking place in the country's prestigious universities. Among these scholars, one can also find researchers representing different Central Asian nations, whose national backgrounds allow for a synthesis of insider knowledge (both linguistic and cultural) and the historiographical approaches taught and practiced at German universities. Among these is Rano Turaeva, an Uzbek scholar affiliated with the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology. One of her most famous works, *Migration and Identity in Central Asia,* despite focusing mainly on her native country of Uzbekistan, also includes discussions about migration trends that impacted Kazakhstan. She highlights notable cases of migration that occurred during the early Soviet period, such as the settlement of almost 100,000 Koreans to Kazakhstan (Turaeva 2016).

German historiography on Kazakhstan stands out for its multidimensional approach, shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical interests. While early post-Soviet scholarship focused on political transitions, economic reforms, and security concerns, modern German research has evolved to embrace broader socio-cultural themes such as religion, migration, and identity formation. Scholars like Halbach, Wacker, Schmitz, and Geiss have examined institutional development and governance from a realist perspective, while Kindler and Roche contribute complex, human-centered analyses grounded in personal narratives and cultural frameworks. Notably, the increasing presence of scholars with Central Asian backgrounds, such as Turaeva, adds depth through insider perspectives and hybrid methodologies. Although some German works retain Eurocentric framing, the growing emphasis on field-based research, interdisciplinarity, and collaborative initiatives demonstrates a clear shift toward more balanced and context-sensitive interpretations of Kazakhstan's historical trajectory and current challenges.

Italian research on Kazakhstan and Central Asia

While research into Central Asia by Italian scholars and institutions may not be as widespread as in the previous two countries, a significant body of impactful work remains to be explored. The most well-known Italian scholar is Niccoló Pianciola, who has written extensively on Kazakhstan. Pianciola's research represents similar themes explored in mainstream, traditional scholarship on Central Asia, with a particular focus on Kazakhstan during the Soviet period, exploring issues such as the Kazakh Famine (Pianciola 2001), nomadic life (Pianciola 2019), the rebellions during the early Soviet period (Pianciola et al. 2020), as well as the historical developments surrounding the Aral Sea (Pianciola 2019). His works reflect a thorough approach to historiography, including the use of historical documents and in-depth analysis of the accounts from the periods in question. It is worth noting that Niccolò Pianciola's work, The Kazakh Famine, 1931–1933: A History of Soviet Colonialism in Central Asia, provides an in-depth analysis of the devastating famine in Kazakhstan during the early 1930s, framing it as a consequence of Soviet colonial policies. Pianciola examines the forced collectivization of agriculture and the dismantling of traditional lifestyles as central causes of the famine. He contextualizes these events within broader Soviet imperial ambitions, highlighting how state-driven economic and social restructuring disregarded local conditions, leading to widespread

suffering and demographic collapse. The study is a critical contribution to understanding the intersection of Soviet policies and colonial practices, offering a comprehensive perspective on these historical events lasting impacts on Kazakh society. Dr. Niccolò Pianciola, while serving as a faculty member at Nazarbayev University, made significant contributions to the study of Kazakhstan's social and economic history, particularly in the contexts of Soviet agrarian policies, migration, and environmental transformations, enriching the broader field of Central Asian historiography.

While Pianciola's research represents a continuation of previous decades' Soviet-framed research tradition, other research from Italian scholarly institutions has explored new avenues. One researcher who should be noted in this regard is Richard Pomfret, affiliated with the Johns Hopkins Center for International Studies in Bologna. His book entitled *The Economies of Central Asia* (Pomfret 1995) is written based on his personal experiences as a UN regional advisor in Central Asia, which he relied on due to the lack and unreliability of the available secondary sources. His analysis examines Central Asia in its narrower sense, encompassing only the five Central Asian countries that were part of the Soviet Union (i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), and provides a wealth of raw data regarding the economic and demographic landscape of these countries at the time the book was written. He has also published studies that focus specifically on Kazakhstan, with particular interest in the economic aspects of the country. Pomfret has also published studies focusing specifically on Kazakhstan, examining its historical economic transformations. His work provides a valuable context for understanding the region's economic evolution (Pomfret 2009).

One of the key contributors from Italian scholarship to the history of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, is Dr. Beatrice Penati, who is currently teaching in the United Kingdom (University of Liverpool). Her extensive research focuses on the region's economic, environmental, and social transformations during the late Imperial Russian and early Soviet periods. Dr. Penati's works, such as Rural History of Soviet Central Asia: Land Reform and Agricultural Change in Early Soviet Uzbekistan and The Cotton Boom and the Land Tax in Russian Turkestan (1880s–1915), explore critical issues such as land reform, taxation, and the industrialization of agriculture. By examining the impact of colonial and Soviet policies on Central Asian societies and their natural environments, her scholarship provides valuable insights into the historical dynamics of Kazakhstan and its neighboring regions. Dr. Beatrice Penati made significant contributions to studying Kazakhstan's history while serving as a faculty member at Nazarbayev University, highlighting the role of international scholars in advancing Central Asian historiography through institutional collaboration and research.

In contrast to the contemporary topics explored by more recent research, Italian researcher Gian Luca Bonora has focused on exploring ancient Kazakh history. His research analyzes artifacts from various archeological sites in the country to determine how the prehistoric inhabitants of the region lived. An example of these research efforts is his chapter on a stone artifact found in Western Kazakhstan (Bonora 2020).

Beyond research, Bonora spent four years teaching archaeology at the Faculty of History at L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (ENU), where he worked with doctoral, master's, and undergraduate students and contributed to the development of Kazakhstan's archaeological studies.

His expertise is also reflected in the collective monograph, "The Sacred Landscape of Saryarka" (Khabdulina et al. 2020), which explores ancient and medieval sacred sites in

Northern Kazakhstan. Bonora's work has helped bridge Kazakhstani and international archaeology, providing valuable perspectives on the country's early history and enriching the study of Central Asian civilizations.

Contemporary Italian scholars continue the legacy of the earliest pioneers who first laid the foundations for studying Kazakhstan's history as early as the Middle Ages. Their work has deepened the understanding of the region's economic, environmental, and social transformations, shedding light on complex historical processes. They have contributed to a more comprehensive perspective on Kazakhstan's past through dedicated research, reflecting a growing engagement with Central Asian studies within Italian academia. This ongoing scholarly effort builds on historical foundations and embraces modern interdisciplinary approaches, fostering a richer and more dynamic exploration of the region's history.

While not as extensive in scale, Italian scholarship on Kazakhstan is marked by depth, thematic breadth, and academic precision. Niccolò Pianciola's archival work critically reinterprets collectivization, famine, and nomadism as colonial processes. Scholars like Richard Pomfret and Beatrice Penati have expanded the field into economic and environmental history, while Gian Luca Bonora's archaeological research connects ancient Kazakh culture with broader Central Asian narratives. Their active collaboration with Kazakhstani institutions reflects a sustained academic dialogue. Collectively, Italian contributions showcase a rigorous interdisciplinary approach and a nuanced understanding of Kazakhstan's historical development.

Conclusion

European scholarship has helped us understand Kazakhstan's historical, cultural, and political evolution. Scholars across Europe have made a meaningful contribution to how we understand Kazakhstan's history, culture, and political journey, helping to shed light on its rich and complex evolution. By exploring the contributions of French, German, and Italian scholars, we see how different academic traditions have shaped Kazakhstan's place in global historiography, moving beyond Soviet-centric narratives toward more localized and interdisciplinary perspectives.

It's important to note that over time, the field has gradually shifted away from traditional Sovietological approaches – once dominated largely by political scientists – toward a new generation of historians who are free from the ideological legacy or "genre memory" of Sovietology. This transition marked a significant change in research paradigms. The totalitarian theory, which had previously shaped much of the discourse, could no longer adequately address emerging questions. In its place, revisionist scholars introduced new perspectives rooted in the analysis of social history. The focus of research moved from a top-down approach ("history from above") to one that centers on the experiences of ordinary people ("history from below").

Many European scholars, beyond their fluency in Russian, have also dedicated themselves to learning and mastering the languages of Central Asian communities, which they actively use in their academic work. They often spend extended periods living and conducting research in the region. In addition to working in archives, many Western academics have experience teaching at universities in Kazakhstan. They maintain close professional and personal relationships with local scholars and frequently participate in collaborative research projects and academic initiatives.

French scholars have been at the forefront of research on Kazakhstan's cultural identity, religious traditions, and its experience under Soviet rule. Institutions such as INALCO and

researchers like Vincent Fourniau and Catherine Poujol have further contributed to this field by exploring Kazakhstan's shifting social and political landscape. Their work highlights how Soviet policies shaped local identities and how Kazakhstan's history fits into the broader imperial and post-colonial discourse. Historians like Marlène Laruelle, Thierry Zarcone, and Isabelle Ohayon have critically examined national identity formation, collective memory, and the role of state narratives. Beyond history, French scholars have also examined Kazakhstan's geopolitical role in Central Asia, with figures like Sebastien Peyrouse and Hélène Carrère d'Encausse analyzing the country's relationships with Russia, China, and the West in the post-Soviet period.

German researchers have contributed valuable perspectives on Kazakhstan's Soviet past, forced migration, and socio-economic transformations. Scholars like Robert Kindler and Sophie Roche have focused on the human impact of collectivization, famine, and forced resettlements, often using personal narratives and local testimonies to paint a more detailed picture of these historical events. Unlike earlier studies that primarily viewed Kazakhstan through a Soviet-centered lens, contemporary German research emphasizes individual agency and ethnographic studies, making history more relatable and complex. Additionally, interdisciplinary work by researchers such as Rano Turaeva has combined history with anthropology and migration studies, broadening the academic conversation around Kazakhstan's evolving social structures. Institutions like the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and Humboldt University continue to play a major role in fostering Kazakh-German academic collaboration.

Italian research on Kazakhstan has a long-standing historical tradition and has significantly contributed to economic, environmental, and archaeological studies, providing valuable insights into the region's historical development. Niccolò Pianciola and Beatrice Penati have focused on Soviet land reforms, the Kazakh famine, and agrarian policies, framing these events within broader discussions of colonialism and modernization. Their work highlights how economic policies and environmental changes shaped Kazakhstan's historical development. In addition to economic history, Italian scholars have contributed significantly to Kazakhstan's archaeological research. Gian Luca Bonora, who taught archaeology for four years at L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, has played an essential role in studying Kazakhstan's ancient civilizations. His work in the collective monograph "The Sacred Landscape of Saryarka" has helped uncover historical and sacred sites in Northern Kazakhstan, deepening our understanding of the region's early societies.

Across all three European traditions, a major shift has taken place, moving away from Soviet-era frameworks and embracing more localized, interdisciplinary, and comparative approaches. This evolution has been shaped by the increasing availability of archival materials, collaboration with Kazakh scholars, and engagement with broader global debates on empire, identity, and modernization. Moreover, the growing academic partnerships between Kazakh and European institutions, such as INALCO, Humboldt University, the Max Planck Institute, and various Italian research centers, have fostered stronger intellectual exchange.

As European research on Kazakhstan continues to evolve, the integration of new sources, methodologies, and collaborative networks will ensure that Kazakhstan's history remains an essential part of global historical discussions. With its unique position as a geopolitical and cultural crossroads, Kazakhstan's past will continue to offer valuable insights into the broader narratives of empire, migration, and modernization, shaping the future of Central Asian historiography.

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