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## KAZAKH REFUGEES FROM XINJIANG IN THE 1930S AND THE SOCIAL PROBLEM OF ABANDONED CHILDREN

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**Abstract.** *Introduction.* Since gaining independence, a new stage has begun in the study of the history of the Kazakh diaspora abroad as part of Kazakhstan’s national history. In researching the history of ethnic Kazakhs living abroad, greater attention has traditionally been paid to the formation of Kazakh communities in those regions. However, the history of forced migrations in search of freedom, their settlement in foreign lands, and the political and social inequalities they encountered – along with their struggle to preserve their national identity – have often been overlooked. While the formation of Kazakh communities abroad remains a relevant topic, there is a lack of research on their migration to foreign territories and the associated social hardships. Orphaned and abandoned children, in particular, became victims of disease, famine, and assimilation into foreign cultures. As the research progressed, it became increasingly clear that the topic contains many unexplored political and social dimensions. *Goals and objectives.* To examine the situation of Kazakhs who were forced to migrate from China’s Xinjiang region to the provinces of Gansu and Qinghai in the 1930s based on archival data and memoirs; to identify the causes of their migration to foreign lands; to analyze the policies implemented by Xinjiang Governor Sheng Shicai; to uncover the horrific conditions faced by abandoned children in exile; and to highlight the struggle of Kazakh refugees to preserve their identity. *Results.* The article investigates the condition of Kazakh refugees who were forced to migrate from the Xinjiang region to inner China, as well as the plight of orphaned and abandoned children, based on various sources and memoirs. The reasons behind the Kazakhs’ flight to foreign lands in pursuit of freedom were identified. A significant number of children were among those who migrated, and many of them became victims of hunger and various hardships along the way. The study clearly demonstrates the crucial social and spiritual role of the family institution in preserving Kazakh identity in a foreign environment. *Conclusion.* In the 1930s, the Kazakhs of China were forced to flee their ancestral homeland and migrate to foreign lands in pursuit of freedom. As a result, Kazakh diaspora communities emerged not only in Xinjiang, but also in inner China



(Gansu and Qinghai) and abroad (Turkey, Europe). Orphaned and homeless children became a part of society. Some of them later grew into skilled professionals and public figures.


**Keywords:** Xinjiang, Kazakhs, migration, refugees, orphaned children, social issues, hardships


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## 1930 ЖЫЛДАРЫ ШЫҢЖАҢНАН КӨШКЕН ҚАЗАҚ БОСҚЫНДАРЫ ЖӘНЕ ҚАРАУСЫЗ ҚАЛҒАН БАЛАЛАРДЫҢ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК МӘСЕЛЕСІ

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**Аңдатпа.** *Kipicne.* Тәуелсіздік алғаннан кейін Қазақстан тарихы қатарында шетелдегі қазақ диаспорасының тарихын зерттеудің жаңа кезеңі басталды. Шетелдегі этникалық қазақтардың тарихын зерттеуде қазақтардың сол аймақтағы қалыптасу тарихына көбірек мән беріледі. Шетелдегі қазақтардың әртүрлі себептерге байланысты еркіндік жолындағы көші, жат жұртқа қоныстану тарихы және дөп келген саяси, әлеуметтік теңсіздіктері мен ұлт ретінде өзін сақтау күресі назардан тыс қалып қойды. Шетелдегі қазақтардың қалыптасу тарихы өзекті болғанымен олардың жат жұртқа ірге тебу тарихы мен әлеуметтік келеңсіздік турасындағы зерттеу сирек жүргізілді. Қараусыз қалған жетім балалар әртүрлі аурулар мен аштықтың және өзге жұртқа сіңіп кетудің құрбанына айналды. Аталған тақырыпты зерттеген сайын оның ашылмаған саяси, әлеуметтік аспектілерінің көп екендігі байқалды. *Зерттеудің мақсаты мен міндеттері* – 1930 жылдары Қытайдың Шыңжаң өлкесінен Гансу, Цинхай провинциясына көшуге мәжбүр болған қазақтардың жағдайын деректер мен естеліктерге сүйене отырып зерделеу; жат жұртқа көшудің себептерін анықтау; Шыңжаң губернаторы Шэн Шицайдың жүргізген саясатын талдау; жат жұртта қараусыз қалған балалардың жантүршігерлік ахуалын анықтау; босқын қазақтардың өзін сақтау жолындағы күресін көрсету. *Нәтижелер.* Мақалада Шыңжаң өлкесінен ішкі Қытайға көшуге мәжбүр болған қазақ босқындары мен қараусыз қалған жетім балалардың жағдайы әртүрлі деректер мен естеліктерге сүйене отырып зерттелді. Қазақтардың бостандық жолында жат жұртқа босып көшуінің себептері анықталды. Ауа көшкен қазақтардың ішінде балалар да көп болды. Көш жолындағы балалар көбінде аштық пен түрлі қиындықтың құрбанына айналды. Қазақтардың жат елде өзін сақтауда отбасы институтының маңызды әлеуметтік, рухани рөлі анық байқалды. *Қорытынды.* 1930 жылдары Қытай қазақтары бостандық жолында атамекенінен жат жұртқа көшуге мәжбүр болды. Нәтижесінде Шыңжаңнан бөлек ішкі Қытайда (Гансу, Цинхай) және шетелде (Түркия, Еуропа) қазақ диаспорасы қалыптасты. Қараусыз, панасыз қалған балалар қоғам санатына қосылды. Олардың арасынан білікті мамандар мен қоғам қайраткерлері өсіп шықты.

**Түйін сөздер:** Шыңжаң, қазақ, көш, босқын, қараусыз балалар, әлеуметтік мәселелер, қиындықтар

**Алғыс.** Мақала Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігінің «1920–1930 жылдардағы Қазақстан аумағындағы және іргелес елдердегі балалар панасыздығы мәселесі» тақырыбындағы гранттық қаржыландыру жобасын жүзеге асыру аясында орындалды (жеке тіркеу нөмірі: АР 23488331).

**Дәйексөз үшін:** Сауырқан Е., Қаипбаева А.Т. 1930 жылдары Шыңжаңнан көшкен қазақ босқындары және қараусыз қалған балалардың әлеуметтік мәселесі // Asian Journal “Steppe Panorama”. 2025. Т. 12. № 4. 1163–1176 бб. (Ағылш.).

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## КАЗАХСКИЕ БЕЖЕНЦЫ ИЗ СИНЬЦЗЯНА В 1930-Х ГОДАХ И СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ПРОБЛЕМА БЕСПРИЗОРНЫХ ДЕТЕЙ

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**Аннотация.** *Введение.* После обретения независимости начался новый этап в изучении истории казахской диаспоры за рубежом как составной части истории Казахстана. При исследовании истории этнических казахов за пределами страны большее внимание традиционно уделялось процессу формирования казахских общин в тех регионах. В то же время история вынужденных переселений в поисках свободы, обоснование на чужбине, а также столкновение с политическим и социальным неравенством и борьба за сохранение национальной идентичности зачастую оставались вне поля зрения. Несмотря на актуальность темы формирования казахов за рубежом, вопросы их миграции и социальных трудностей исследовались крайне ограниченно. Особое беспокойство вызывает судьба осиротевших и брошенных детей, ставших жертвами болезней, голода и ассимиляции в инокультурной орта. По мере углубления исследования стало очевидным, что тема имеет множество нераскрытых политических и социальных аспектов. *Цель и задачи исследования.* Изучить положение казахов, вынужденно переселившихся в 1930-х годах из Синьцзян-Уйгурского автономного района Китая в провинции Ганьсу и Цинхай, на основе архивных материалов и воспоминаний; выявить причины переселения на чужбину; проанализировать политику, проводимую губернатором Синьцзяна Шэн Шицаем; раскрыть ужасающие условия, в которых оказались брошенные дети; и показать борьбу казахских беженцев за сохранение своей идентичности. *Результаты.* В статье исследуется положение казахских беженцев, вынужденно переселившихся из Синьцзяна во внутренние районы Китая, а также судьба осиротевших и оставшихся без присмотра детей на основе различных источников и воспоминаний. Выявлены причины бегства казахов на чужбину в поисках свободы. Среди переселенцев было много детей, и большинство из них стали жертвами голода и различных лишений на пути переселения. Исследование наглядно показывает важную социальную и духовную роль

института семьи в сохранении казахской идентичности в чужой среде. *Выводы.* В 1930-х годах китайские казахи были вынуждены покинуть свою историческую родину и переселиться на чужбину в поисках свободы. В результате казахская диаспора сформировалась не только в Синьцзяне, но и во внутреннем Китае (Ганьсу, Цинхай), а также за рубежом (Турция, Европа). Брошенные и бездомные дети стали частью общества. Среди них впоследствии выросли квалифицированные специалисты и общественные деятели.

**Ключевые слова:** Синьцзян, казахи, переселение, беженцы, дети-сироты, социальные проблемы, трудности

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## Introduction

In the 1930s, the political, military, and social upheavals that took place in China's Xinjiang region had a profound impact on the fate of the indigenous population—the ethnic Kazakhs. Colonial-style oppression, interethnic and religious persecutions, as well as the repressive policies of the regime led by Sheng Shicai, forced thousands of Kazakh families to abandon their homeland and flee to the inner provinces of China such as Gansu and Qinghai, and further abroad. This migration was not merely a geographical movement, but rather a desperate step aimed at preserving their very existence as a nation.

Historical records and oral testimonies reveal that Kazakh refugees encountered numerous social hardships during their migration. In particular, the fate of children who were separated from their families and left without care remains one of the most tragic and least studied aspects of this history. Hunger, disease, homelessness, and the threat of assimilation into foreign environments claimed the lives of many orphans. This issue is of great significance in terms of preserving ethnic identity, preventing the rupture of national upbringing, and safeguarding historical memory.

Research on the migration of Xinjiang Kazakhs has only been actively undertaken in the decades following independence. Although fragments of this history can be found in the works of scholars from China, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and the West, the social structure of Kazakh refugees and, more specifically, the problem of orphaned and abandoned children has never been systematically studied. In this regard, the tragic fate of homeless orphans must be examined as a direct consequence of both Soviet and Chinese repressive policies.

The subject of displacement and orphanhood is important not only as a historical fact but also as a humanitarian issue that profoundly influences the collective memory of the nation. Today, in the pursuit of restoring generational continuity, national identity, and historical justice, it is essential to analyze the causes and consequences of such tragedies. This study carries scholarly and social value in understanding the collapse of family structures, the erosion of national values, and the fate of vulnerable social groups.

The research focuses on the political circumstances that compelled Kazakhs to migrate from Xinjiang to inner China and abroad under the rule of Governor Sheng Shicai. It further provides a comprehensive analysis of the social challenges faced by Kazakh refugees in their struggle for freedom, with particular emphasis on the plight of abandoned children.

## Materials and Methods

The primary sources of this study consist of both foreign and domestic scholarly works related to Kazakh refugees who migrated from Xinjiang to inner China in the 1930s. In particular, the research of Abdulijian Sayiti, which analyzed interethnic relations in Xinjiang, the interactions between central authorities and local ethnic groups, as well as the political influence of Islam, was

utilized to demonstrate that the migration of Kazakhs during the Republican era was shaped not only by external factors but also by tribal-economic, ecological, and political causes. Articles authored by Xu Rongmin and Sene, which examined the socio-economic adaptation of Kazakhs who settled in Qinghai Province, their processes of cultural transformation, and their adjustment to state policies, also played a significant role in this research. In addition, the work of Karim Akirami served as a key reference in analyzing the political preconditions of the migration.

Furthermore, the studies of Jin Noda and Ryosuke Ono, which investigated ethnic migration processes in Xinjiang-particularly the movements of Kazakh and Uyghur refugees who reached Turkey via Pakistan and India-were incorporated within an international migration context. The research of Abduvahap Kara, which approached migration issues through family narratives and archival documents in a multidisciplinary framework, alongside the memoirs of Hasan Oraltay, Halifa Altay, and Abdurrahman Çetin concerning refugee history, further enriched the source base of this study.

In addition, oral history methodology was employed, drawing on the recollections and interviews presented in the work of Äbetai Muqarap, which contained material on the history, causes of migration, and the individual destinies of Kazakhs who fled Xinjiang in the 1930s.

Several theoretical and methodological approaches were applied to ensure a comprehensive examination of historical processes. First and foremost, perspectives grounded in migration theories and diaspora studies were employed. Moreover, the historical-anthropological method and the core principles of social exclusion theories were applied to analyze the social adaptation processes of refugee children.

The historical-comparative method and content analysis were widely used throughout the research. A chronological approach enabled the step-by-step study of Kazakh migration processes, highlighting the particularities of each historical stage. In-depth content analysis of the sources was conducted to reveal the contextual interconnections of historical facts.

Special attention was also given, from a historical-anthropological perspective, to the social conditions of abandoned children and their adaptation to new environments. This approach allowed for linking the destinies of individuals with broader historical events, thereby assessing the significance of social structures and the family institution of that era.

The study primarily focused on Xinjiang, Gansu, and Qinghai regions. These areas were chosen because they represented the initial settlement zones of Kazakh refugees, where the tragic fate of orphaned children became especially severe. Although geographically limited, the data from these regions provide insight into the broader character of the historical phenomenon.

Both written and oral sources were subjected to content analysis. An interpretative (hermeneutic) method was employed to identify internal contradictions within memoirs and testimonies, as well as to examine the interplay between emotional and factual dimensions. Comparative analysis was conducted between official data found in scholarly works and oral recollections, with an emphasis on drawing objective conclusions.

Great attention was devoted to verifying the authenticity and reliability of the sources used. Oral accounts and memoirs were tested through textual-comparative methods, carefully examining the consistency of time, place, and events within the data. In particular, oral testimonies of eyewitnesses and information from foreign publications were cross-referenced, and where they mutually corroborated one another, they were treated as principal evidence in the study.

Additionally, the study adhered strictly to the ethical standards of academic research in the use of personal data. Names mentioned in memoirs and interviews were anonymized where necessary, in order to protect the privacy of informants. A balance between scholarly objectivity and human sensitivity was maintained in the presentation of materials.

Alongside these methods, comparative approaches, scholarly inference, critical evaluation, and analytical interpretation were also employed to determine the significance of the topic and clarify the object of research.



## Discussion

The large-scale migration of Xinjiang Kazakhs in the first half of the twentieth century is examined within the broader framework of colonial policies, geopolitical conflicts, and interethnic tensions. One of the earliest researchers to draw attention to this issue was the British publicist Godfrey Lias, whose 1956 work *Kazakh Exodus* described the causes and routes of migration, as well as the fate of its leaders—Eliskhan Älipuly, Qalibek Hâkim, and Qamza Shömishbaiuly—after reaching foreign lands. Lias interpreted the migration as a direct outcome of China's nationalities policy in Xinjiang and portrayed the Kazakhs as a "nomadic people in search of freedom" (Lias, 2018). This study was the first to introduce the plight of Kazakh refugees to the Western academic community.

Following 1954, several representatives of the Kazakh community who had resettled in Turkey published memoirs and works concerning the migration. Among these, biographical recollections stand out as valuable historical sources. On the one hand, they represent the testimonies of direct participants in the migration process; on the other, they constitute a form of cultural and spiritual memory that shaped the collective historical consciousness. For instance, Halifa Altay's memoirs depict the spiritual and moral dimensions of the migration, highlighting the pressures exerted by the intensifying Chinese communist policies on religious belief and traditional lifestyles in Xinjiang (Altay, 1980). His accounts further emphasize not only the geographical relocation but also the struggle to preserve faith and the bond between homeland and spirituality (Altay, 2014).

The works of Hasan Oraltay, while written in a journalistic style, combine factual historical information with vivid personal testimony. He interprets the complex migration of Xinjiang Kazakhs in the 1930s–1940s as part of the broader struggle for national independence (Oraltay, 1961). Moreover, he highlights the historical roles played by migration leaders such as Eliskhan Älipuly, Qalibek Hâkim, Sultan Sharip Zuqaulıy, Qamza Shömishbaiuly, Dälelhan Janaltay, and Qusayin Taiji in the pursuit of freedom (Oraltay, 2005).

Dälelhan Janaltay's work provides a detailed account of the tragic historical trajectory of the Kazakh people in the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on the East Turkestan liberation movement, its eventual defeat, and the ensuing refugee crisis. His study underscores resistance to the communist system and the struggle to maintain national identity (Canaltay, 2000).

The memoirs of Hızırbk Gayratullah combine ethnographic and socio-political reflections, describing the social structure, tribal divisions, religious beliefs, nomadic lifestyle, and cultural memory of Xinjiang Kazakhs. His works also examine Sino-Kazakh relations and the socio-political conflicts provoked by the repressive communist system (Gayratullah, 1977). Furthermore, his personal recollections address themes such as childhood, the refugee experiences of his family, loss of close relatives, and aspirations for freedom (Gayratullah, 2004).

Similarly, Mansur Taiji's memoirs not only recount the migration but also trace the genealogy of Qusayin Taiji, who led Kazakhs to Turkey. They shed light on the social stratification of Xinjiang Kazakhs in the 1930s–40s and the role of leadership structures during migration (Teyci, 2024).

A memoir-based volume compiled by historian Abduvahap Kara draws on oral history, personal narratives, and community recollections to reconstruct the political events of the 1930s preceding the settlement of Xinjiang Kazakhs in Turkey (Kara, 2016). In addition, the memoirs of Abdurahman Çetin, a member of the Kazakh diaspora in Vienna, frame the broader migration history through personal experience, recounting the social, political, and spiritual ordeals of the community that crossed the Himalayas and passed through India and Pakistan before reaching Turkey (Çetin, 2022).

Quddus Sholpan's publicistic research presents an ethnographic and sociological account of the Kazakh settlement in Atayköy, in Turkey's Niğde province, providing insights into both the historical trajectory and contemporary life of this ethnic community (Sholpan, 2024).

Furthermore, a 1996 collective study combined archival sources with personal testimonies, family histories, and oral history materials to provide a multidimensional perspective on the migration. It analyzed the political pressures and social upheavals of the 1930–40s that drove the Kazakhs to migrate through Pakistan and India to Turkey, examining both the causes and consequences of this displacement. The work also provided a multidisciplinary interpretation of

migration as both a historical process and a formative moment in the construction of diasporic identity (Selvi, et al., 1996).

Japanese researchers Jin Noda and Ryosuke Ono edited a scholarly collection examining ethnic migration in Xinjiang, particularly focusing on Kazakh and Uyghur refugees' routes through Pakistan and India to Turkey. Several articles in this volume situate the Kazakh case within the broader framework of international migration studies, analyzing displacement not merely as ethnic relocation but as political exile and the outcome of religious persecution (Noda & Ono, 2019). This work thus situates the migration of Xinjiang Kazakhs within global migration history, refugee studies, and transnational humanitarian movements.

Meanwhile, Chinese scholar Abdulijian Sayiti analyzed interethnic relations in Xinjiang, the interactions between central authorities and local populations, and the political role of Islam. He linked Kazakh migration during the Republican period not only to external pressures but also to clan-based economic, ecological, and political factors. Saiti argued that the early 1930s resettlement of some Kazakh clans into Gansu and Qinghai was driven by political instability, armed conflict, and pasture crises in Xinjiang (Sayiti, 2006). Similarly, Xu Ruming and Senge studied the socio-economic adaptation, cultural transformation, and integration of Kazakhs in Qinghai province from the 1940s to the present. Their research illustrates the gradual transition from nomadic pastoralism to sedentary life under the influence of state policies, including national integration programs, pasture reforms, and sedentarization efforts. Using ethnographic methods such as field interviews, observations, and surveys, they documented Kazakhs' strategies for preserving ethnic identity, sustaining traditional livelihoods, and negotiating relations with the state (Xu, Senge, 2010). Wang Zhitong (2023) further situated the internal migration (内迁) of Kazakhs to Gansu and Qinghai within the broader processes of interethnic interaction and integration, linking displacement to the dynamics of Xinjiang's multiethnic relations.

Taken together, the above-mentioned memoirs and scholarly works constitute unique sources for understanding the historical migration of Kazakh refugees from Xinjiang to China's interior provinces, and eventually to Pakistan, India, and Turkey. They identify political repression, religious persecution, economic hardship, and colonial governance as the primary drivers of migration. Importantly, they highlight the intertwining of individual destinies with collective memory, demonstrating the political, social, religious, and spiritual dimensions of the migration process.

However, despite their richness, most of these works give limited or episodic attention to the plight of children—whether orphaned, abandoned, or perished during the migration. While memoirs by Hasan Oraltay, Halifa Altay, and Abdurahman Çetin contain brief accounts of such tragedies, systematic analysis of the issue remains absent. This gap underscores the need for further socio-demographic research on refugee history.

International studies, such as the collection edited by Noda and Ono, have more extensively addressed challenges faced by Kazakh refugees, including statelessness, lack of access to citizenship, healthcare, and education, as well as dependence on humanitarian aid. Nevertheless, the specific vulnerabilities of children and the absence of institutional protection have not been adequately examined. Similarly, while Chinese researchers such as Wang Zhitong, Xu Ruming, Senge, and Abdulijian Sayiti provide systematic accounts of internal migration, interethnic integration, and adaptation, they do not explicitly focus on the condition of children in refugee contexts.

## Results

Before their migration from Xinjiang, the Kazakhs were engaged primarily in nomadic animal husbandry (Rakhimzhanova, 2015). From the 1920s onward, the region's political situation grew increasingly tense. According to historian Äbdiljan Seituly, during the 1930s the Kazakhs of Altay, Barköl, and Qumul suffered most severely under the political repression of Xinjiang's governor Sheng Shicai (Seituly, 2015). The outflow of Kazakh refugees to other regions intensified during the 1930s.

The political situation in the province particularly deteriorated under the rule of Jin Shuren (1928–1933) and Sheng Shicai (1933–1944) (Seituly, 2015). Sheng Shicai is described as one of the

most brutal rulers in Xinjiang’s history. Estimates suggest that between 1934 and 1944, more than 120,000 people were imprisoned under his rule, while 80,000–100,000 fell victim to political repression (Benson, 1990; Rakhimzhanova, 2015). His repressive regime, combined with the influence of the Soviet Union, facilitated the spread of communist ideology in Xinjiang and compelled Kazakhs to rise in defense of their freedom, prompting mass migration to borderlands and foreign territories (Kuşçu, 2016: 383).

However, the flight of Kazakhs from Xinjiang into the interior regions of China did not occur all at once; rather, it unfolded in several stages. Researchers Abduvahap Kara (2019) and Kuşçu (2016) identify two major waves of Kazakh migration out of Xinjiang: the first in the 1930s and the second in the early 1950s. According to Äbduljan Seit, the first wave of the 1930s occurred in four phases: the first group in November 1936 (113 families, 565 people); the second in the summer of 1937 (136 families, 680 people); the third in September 1937 (233 families, more than 3,000 people); and the fourth in early 1939 (about 1,000 families, roughly 7,000 people), all relocating to Gansu and Qinghai (Sayiti, 2006). According to Äbetai Muqarapuly, however, the initial refugee migration began in 1935 (Muqarapuly, 2012: 10). The Collected Historical Materials of Barköl County reports that Kazakh relocations to Gansu province for various reasons date as far back as 1919 (Collected Historical Materials of Barköl, 1998: 49). Nevertheless, it is evident that the first wave directly triggered by political repression began in 1935 (Kara, 2019). The arrests of influential leaders became the principal catalyst of the migration (Rakhimzhanova, 2015).

Analyzing the causes from another perspective, Käräm Äkirami argues that in 1932 the punitive forces of Jin Shuren’s government massacred the entire village of Älip Ükirday along with 107 of its inhabitants. Following the tragedy, Älip’s son, Elishan, resolved to migrate to Gansu under the leadership of the Muslim general Ma Bufang. The primary goal was to establish a defensive base in the borderlands, leveraging Ma Bufang’s political and military strength to resist the dominance of Sheng Shicai (Äkirami, 2009). In response, Sheng Shicai, under Soviet influence, strengthened the military fortifications of Qumul in order to block the Kazakhs’ movement toward Gansu.

Despite armed clashes with Sheng Shicai’s forces, the group led by Elishan Älipuly successfully reached Gansu in 1936. Thereafter, other Kazakhs in Xinjiang resolved to embark on similar journeys. Ultimately, Kazakh groups from Qumul, Barköl, and Altay converged in Gansu. There they lived in relative peace for nearly two years (Gayratullah, 2017; Kara, 2019).

Table 1 – Migration of Kazakhs from Xinjiang to Gansu Province (1934–1938)

Migration Period	Tribal Leaders	Clans	Number of Households	Number of People
February 1934	Aduhai zanggi	Kerei-Tasbike	113 households	565 people
August 1935	Eliskhan Alipuly; Atshybai; Tungyshbai.	Kerei-Tasbike; Kerei-Zhedik; Kerei-Esdaulet.	178 households; 42 households; 112 households.	890 people; 210 people; 605 people.
August 1936	Zayip Tayji; Qasy batyr; Qasym; Ismaq; Quayin Tayji; Nurgali.	Kerei-Bazarqul; Kerei-Merkith; Naiman; Naiman; Naiman; Kerei-Shaqabai.	232 households; 80 households; 70 households; 50 households; 409 households; 178 households.	1165 people; 400 people; 350 people; 250 people; 2040 people; 750 people.
December 1938	Sabyrbai; Ayanbet; Salaqaddin; Soltan Sherip; Abylqaiyr; Meirimkan; Ziydan; Zhanabil; Mukadir-Syban; Mazhan.	Kerei-Zhadik; Uaq; Kerei-Molqy; Kerei-Iteli; Kerei-Molqy; Kerei-Tasbike; Kerei-Qarakas; Kerei-Tasbike; Kerei-Zhantekei/ Kerei-Sarbas; Kerei-Zhantekei.	450 households; 130 households; 170 households; 500 households; 200 households; 140 households; 180 households; 180 households; 330 households; 110 households.	1805 people; 500 people; 700 people; 2000 people; 915 people; 625 people; 850 people; 1500 people; 1480 people; 600 people.
Total	Over 3,700 households, approximately 20,000 people.			

In the 1930s, the Kazakh refugees who had migrated to Gansu and Qinghai provinces initially sought to establish peaceful relations with the local administration (Muqarapuly, 2012). In order to legalize their settlement and secure pastures suitable for livestock breeding, the Kazakhs offered gifts to local authorities and, through negotiations, obtained temporary resettlement areas (Äkrami, 2009). Although this period witnessed relative stability in bilateral relations, over time tensions began to emerge between the needs of the nomadic Kazakhs and the interests of the sedentary local population (Sayiti, 2006).

In particular, the scarcity of pasturelands and ethnic-social divisions led to escalating disputes over land. As the Kazakhs' livestock numbers increased, so too did their demand for land, which local Chinese and Hui elites and military officials perceived as a threat to their authority. Consequently, they adopted repressive measures against the Kazakhs (Migration of the Sanji Kazakhs Eastward, 1989: 79). Lands previously used by Kazakhs were confiscated, while some villages were forcibly relocated or subjected to punitive military raids (Collection of Barköl Historical Materials, 1998: 51). This process is interpreted as a manifestation of the historical socio-political conflict between nomadic and sedentary populations, reflecting the dynamics of marginalization experienced by the resettled group.

Although the local Hui population initially showed hospitality toward the Kazakhs, Muslim general Ma Bufang was unable to provide full protection against Sheng Shicai's persecution. Negotiations between Elishan and Ma Bufang eventually broke down (Äkrami, 2009). Following the growing pressure from Ma Bufang, Kazakh leaders decided to embark on the next stage of migration – crossing through Qinghai and Tibet toward India.

However, this stage of migration was marked by even harsher and more tragic circumstances than the earlier one. The route through Gansu to Qinghai and further into Tibet was characterized by devastating losses inflicted by Ma Bufang's punitive military detachments, villages straying off course, severe shortages of food supplies, and the hardships of disease and starvation. While part of the group managed to advance, many families were left behind or went missing without a trace. The gravest consequences fell upon children who had been abandoned or separated from their parents. Numerous historical testimonies and memoirs recount the plight of children left alone in the open steppe, those who froze to death while attempting to cross snow-covered mountain passes, and orphans who were forced to survive among local populations (Altay, 2014; Gayratullah, 1977).

According to Äbetai Muqarapuly (2012), among the Kazakh refugees, the first to suffer heavy losses was the village of Mülük of the Uaq clan. From Ikiram Shökitaiuly, an 83-year-old resident of Aratürük district, the following oral testimony is recorded about the assault on Mülük's village:

*"At the time when mares were being tethered, the sound of gunfire erupted, as if the enemy was closing in. Panic-stricken, the people scattered into the ravines. Our caravan had just turned into a gorge when we realized it was a dead end, and before we could retreat, the enemy had surrounded us. Gunshots cracked, swords clashed, shouts and cries filled the air. I hardly knew what happened. Along with those struck by bullets or cut down by swords, I too was trapped under a fallen camel. I lost consciousness. When I came to, I found my body unharmed and crawled out from beneath the load. Looking around, there was an eerie silence-no living soul. All around me lay dead horses, camels, and people. A small pool of bright red blood had formed. I began to recognize the martyrs one by one-my father Shökitai, my mother Aniza, my brother Toqytqan-all three lay lifeless in blood. Suddenly, I heard the cry of a baby, and forgetting my fear, I ran toward the sound. In the midst of the corpses and the scattered belongings lay a baby girl in a cradle. I freed her hand and began rocking the cradle. At some point, I must have fallen asleep, and the exhausted child too. How much time had passed? By evening, someone shook me awake. I looked up to see a soldier with a rifle on his shoulder and a dagger in his hand. He made me carry the cradle with the baby and drove me downhill. Rounding a bend, we came upon a large cavalry troop, with some twenty women and children in their midst. The soldiers rode back to the massacre site and looted freely. When they returned, they carried bags, rugs, furs, clothes-laughing and boasting, utterly indifferent to the blood they had shed. That evening, we were forced onto the remaining livestock and driven eastward. After*



*two days' journey, we reached Dunhuang, the district center. My heart still aches for my parents, left unburied, prey to animals in the open steppe. To this day, the memory chills me to the bone. Alas, my parents-abandoned in the wilderness".*

The interviewee cited in the source was only 4–5 years old at the time of the event. Although the massacre was attributed to the 298th Brigade under the command of Ma Bukan, stationed locally (Muqarapuly, 2012), it is evident that the military general Ma Bufang was behind it. The military structures controlled by the Ma family, relying on the local Hui (Dungan) population, perceived the Kazakh refugees as an uncontrollable and potentially threatening socio-political force (Äkirami, 2009). The deterioration of relations between the Kazakhs and the local populations was further exacerbated by the deliberate actions of administrative structures. The Kazakhs' attempts to establish direct contact with authorities aroused suspicion among the Hui military officials (Gayratullah, 1977). Thus, relations between Kazakhs and the Hui community worsened under various provocations.

As a result, a policy of persecution targeting Kazakh villages was initiated by local military officials in Gansu and Qinghai. As reflected in oral testimonies, raids, looting, and punitive attacks against Kazakh villages became increasingly frequent, and systematic military pressure was exerted on civilians. This led to the ethnic and social marginalization of the Kazakhs, as well as the breakdown of family and communal structures. From a historical perspective, this process can be seen as an intersection of interethnic conflict and structural violence. The acts of violence against Kazakh refugees were not only the consequence of resisting administrative control but also part of a broader policy of displacement, intimidation, and assimilation (Oraltay, 2005).

Following the military assaults, captured Kazakh refugees—mostly children, young women, and girls—were deported to the city of Dunhuang in Gansu, where they lived in hardship and deprivation (Muqarapuly, 2012). They remained confined there until 1943, when Kazakh leaders came to retrieve them (Äkirami, 2009).

As an additional example of the psychological hardships endured by refugee women and children, one may refer to the oral testimony of Külbätish Qamitqyzy, a resident of Barköl County, recorded in her memoirs (Muqarapuly, 2012: 337):

*"At the time of tethering mares, as soon as cries of 'The enemy is coming! The enemy!' rang out, people panicked and began fleeing into the thick reeds. Nursadiq, Turdy, Jäule, and Nuriqan seemed to be firing from the hill. My father saddled the gray horse, mounted it, took my sister Shamsia behind him, my brother Qapaqtı in front of him, and tucked my younger sister Zären under his arm before galloping toward the river. My mother was pulling me along when a bullet struck my chest, and I fell flat on my face. My mother dragged me to a patch of thick grass by the riverbank and hid us there. The water was up to our throats. Behind us, Shöken's wife was fleeing with her child. Before they could hide, the soldiers arrived and shot her. The poor woman rolled into the river and shouted, 'Ai, Külända, if you still have life in you, take this girl out of the water, save her!' That unfortunate girl crawled over to us. My chest hurt so badly that I thought I was dying, but I kept clinging to my mother. When the sun went down and we finally emerged from the water, the enemy had gone. As we walked back toward the village, we found bodies of people and livestock everywhere—especially in a sandy hollow at the edge of the settlement, where many had been massacred. My mother wrapped the four of us in the hide of a dead camel and went off to look for survivors. I followed her despite the pain in my chest. Everywhere we stepped lay scattered belongings—cut ropes, broken trunks, burst sacks, and debris so thick it was impossible to walk".*

This tragic episode coincided with the period when the main body of the Kazakh migration began crossing into Tibet via Gansu and Qinghai. Sources indicate that at this time some individual villages were unable to keep pace with the main migration. Notably, these included Turdy's village from the Tasbike lineage of the Kerei tribe, and Nursadiq's village from the Sarbas lineage. According to Ä. Muqarapuly (2012), these forty or so villages had initially planned to replenish their livestock, rest, and then set out after the main group. However, following an unexpected attack, about forty men were massacred, while many young children and women were captured by soldiers (Collected Historical Materials of Barköl, 1998: 58).

By the late 1930s, the social conditions of Kazakh refugees who had resettled in Gansu and Qinghai had sharply deteriorated. During this period, the military structures of Ma Bufang's government intensified surveillance and pressure on the refugee community, particularly targeting Kazakh children with coercive measures. According to data collected by researcher Äbetai Muqarapuly, nearly 800 children from Kazakh villages in Gansu and Qinghai were forcibly rounded up and taken away by unidentified military units (Muqarapuly, 2012: 468). This episode illustrates both the vulnerability of refugee communities and the tragic fate of children separated from their families. It also represents a process of forced assimilation, exploitation, and militarized mobilization.

These orphaned or displaced children were compelled by local authorities to engage in forced labor, being employed in both military and economic tasks (Historical Materials of Qumul, 2013). Regardless of age, their conscription into labor constituted a harshly exploitative practice that violated international humanitarian law and children's rights. This process formed part of Ma Bufang's broader strategy of controlling, exploiting, and informally integrating the refugee community (Sayiti, 2006). Moreover, it underscored the marginalization, vulnerability, and forced social disintegration of the Kazakh minority in interior China.

According to the testimony of Musayip Shayakhmetuly, an 83-year-old resident of Barköl, the tragic events unfolded as follows (Muqarapuly, 2012: 468):

*"I was deeply shaken when the children were taken away by force. We stayed one winter in Ganzhou (甘州), and the following summer 110 Kazakh children were transported to Xining. In Ganzhou, we lived in a barracks called Damanchu. Many children perished from hunger, hepatitis, and lice infestations. In Xining, I personally witnessed how the deceased children were buried at the Gunguan Temple (宫观大寺), four to a grave. I myself helped with the burials. Later, I was forced into heavy labor at a wool-processing factory. From dawn till dusk we spun thread, tanned leather, made saddles, and wove carpets. Discipline was strict, the work was exhausting, and living conditions were extremely poor. At one point, together with Samarkan, Nuqtarkan, and Shoken Amilbayuly, the four of us attempted to escape. After three days, Shoken and I were captured by soldiers. They tied us up, dragged us back, and set us before the entire group of children as an example. We were nearly hanged, beaten mercilessly, and had our joints crushed. Our cries pierced the sky as though reaching God Himself. But there was no pity to be found among the tormentors. Afterward, I could barely crawl to relieve myself. Our meals consisted mostly of a thin soup made from black beans, which was brought by children from the dormitory. Thus, the days went by. After two years, my legs finally healed and I regained the ability to walk. Eventually, I escaped alone, crossing two great mountains, and after a week I reached the people of Sultan Sharip".*



Fig. 1 – Kazakh refugees who arrived in Qinghai in the late 1930s (Gayratullah, 1977: 247)

The forced collection of Kazakh refugee children and their coercion into hard labor is a clear manifestation of violence directed at the most vulnerable segment of a community severed from its family structures. The involvement of young adolescents in physically exhausting labor deprived them of social interaction, education, and upbringing, thereby weakening their prospects for survival as a distinct nation. This reflects the systematic nature of Ma Bufang's policies of control, oppression,

and assimilation directed against the Kazakh refugees (Äkirmi, 2009). Furthermore, this historical example is assessed as evidence of structural violence and legal vulnerability imposed upon the children of ethnic minority groups by colonial-type power structures.



Fig. 2 – Kazakh refugees arriving in Qinghai in 1938 (Gayratullah, 1977: 245)

The journey towards India through Gansu and Qinghai in search of freedom proved to be far more arduous than the earlier stages. In addition to clashes with Chinese and Tibetan troops along the route, the Kazakhs faced severe natural and climatic hardships. In Tibet's high-altitude regions, many perished due to cold and oxygen deprivation. By September 1941, the Kazakh migrants had reached India, where they were placed in refugee camps. The total number of Kazakhs who managed to reach India that year was 3,039 (Altay, 1981; Oraltay, 2005).

However, living conditions in the refugee camps were extremely harsh. The lack of sanitation, widespread hunger, and inability to adapt to the tropical climate led to the deaths of thousands of Kazakhs from various diseases. During this period, Indian Muslims extended assistance, contributing to the fight against the epidemics. After several relocations within India, most Kazakhs eventually settled in the city of Bhopal. Following the partition of British India in 1947, the Kazakhs once again relocated, this time establishing themselves in Pakistan (Gayratullah, 1977; Kara, 2019).

### Conclusion

In the 1930s, the complex political and socio-economic conditions that emerged in Xinjiang, China, brought significant changes to the historical destiny of the Kazakh people. During this period, as a result of Sheng Shicai's repressive rule, interethnic inequality, and political instability, Kazakhs were forced to flee first to Gansu and Qinghai provinces, and later, through Pakistan and India, to Turkey—a fact firmly established in history. This study has shown that the migration process was not merely a demographic phenomenon but also an ethno-social, cultural, and humanitarian crisis.

From a historical perspective, the migration of Kazakh refugees into China's interior during the 1930s was not simply a matter of resettlement, but rather a survival strategy of an ethnic community under conditions of colonial pressure and political instability. The internal power struggles in Xinjiang, Sheng Shicai's repressive policies, and interethnic conflicts triggered the mass refugee movement. This wave of displacement severely disrupted internal social structures, particularly the institution of the family, and undermined the roles of women and children, thereby weakening the fabric of Kazakh society. Refugeedom must therefore be understood not only as a historical episode but also as a period of structural upheaval.



Furthermore, the survival and preservation of ethnic identity among Kazakh refugees in new environments demonstrates their reliance on historical memory and traditional institutions. Evidence shows that in times of hardship, the primary unifying factors for the nation were historical consciousness and social solidarity. The efforts of Kazakhs to maintain spiritual and cultural life in Gansu, Qinghai, and later diasporic settings laid the foundation for diasporic identity. This process should be regarded both as a manifestation of the nation's capacity to respond to historical challenges and as a concrete example of ethnic cohesion being tested by historical trials.

One of the most severe aspects of the refugee experience was the social vulnerability and psychological trauma of women and children. Many abandoned children perished from hunger and disease, while survivors faced profound emotional suffering and the loss of family bonds. The erosion of women's social roles and the restriction of maternal functions further deepened the ethno-social consequences of displacement. This phenomenon calls for a comprehensive historical-anthropological and socio-psychological analysis, which remains an important task for contemporary humanitarian scholarship.

In conclusion, this article, by analyzing the complex fate of Kazakh refugees in China on the basis of primary sources and historiography, has been among the first to focus specifically on the social plight of abandoned children and refugee women. Deeper exploration of such topics can make a significant contribution to understanding the fate of the nation in borderland contexts, the preservation of collective historical memory, and the mechanisms of sustaining ethnic cohesion.

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