



IRSTI 04.51.35  
Research article

<https://doi.org/10.32523/3080-1702-2025-152-3-64-71>

## HOW THE SOVIET PAST AFFECTS THE NATION-BUILDING OF MODERN KAZAKHSTAN

Sabitov Zh.<sup>1</sup>, Rodionova K.N.\*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute of State History, Astana, Kazakhstan

<sup>2</sup>L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan

(E-mail: [camilarodionova@gmail.com](mailto:camilarodionova@gmail.com))

**Abstract.** This article analyzes the role of monuments in the process of ethnic nation-building in Kazakhstan. The study is based on a database of 226 monuments erected between 1991 and 2019 in the country's regional centers. The main focus is on the question: which historical figures become national symbols that go beyond the native territories of their zhuzes and clans? The results show that the vast majority of such monuments are dedicated to personalities of the Soviet period or those whose symbolic significance was formed during the Soviet era. This indicates the continuing influence of the Soviet nation-building project, which created a single pantheon of heroes contributing to the formation of a national identity. At the same time, the practice of perpetuating representatives of "their" zhuzes and clans, reflecting local identities and the activity of tribal associations, persists in the regions. Thus, monuments act as an arena of symbolic politics, where the interests of the central government and local elites intersect. The findings highlight the dual nature of symbolic politics: on the one hand, monuments can be a tool for integration, while on the other hand, they can contribute to strengthening localism and generic differentiation.

**Keywords:** identity, monuments, primordialist ties, «imagined community», radical constructivists, minimal constructivists, nation and nationalism, process of nation-building

### Introduction

Nationalism can be interpreted as an ideological movement aimed at forming the unity and common identity of a certain social group, including building borders. Thus, nationalism, on the one hand, has the basis for creating unity; on the other hand, it can contribute to division and cause social conflicts. Researchers of nationalism and nation-building issues study various ways and tools that are used by states and/or national movements in the process of forming national identity, among other things, a variety of symbolic artifacts, including monuments. Indeed, one of the ways to promote and implement national construction projects is the construction of

facilities, including such symbolic objects as monuments, which are used to create/consolidate a certain image of history and the formation of ethnic and national identity. Therefore, the study of monuments is an extremely important component in the process of understanding the peculiarities of nation-building.

This study is aimed at understanding how monuments are used in the process of ethnic nation-building. A distinctive feature of this work is the fact that the study is not a case study, but is based on a database that includes information about 226 monuments erected between 1991 and 2019. The research question is as follows:

Monuments to which historical figures become national, going beyond the borders of the Azov territories? What qualities should a historical figure possess to go beyond the boundaries of their Juz territories?

The structure of the article is as follows. First of all, a theoretical review is presented, which presents the key ideas of nation-building research with an emphasis on (ethno) symbolic components, as well as on the processes of integration and disintegration accompanying nation-building. Next, the database and research methods were briefly described. The following section presents the main results and concludes with brief conclusions on the study.

### Literature review

The issues of nationalism and the definition of nation, identity, and national consciousness have been central themes in social and humanities research over the past 50-70 years. Until about the 1960s, the field was dominated by primordialist ideas that nations are natural and stable communities based on "blood," culture, language, and other characteristics. A classic example of primordialist ideas is Hans Kohn and his distinction between "Western" and "Eastern" nationalism (*Kohn, 1944*). E. Shils wrote about primordialist ties based on deep, emotional attachments (kinship, religion, language). These ties are perceived by people as natural, as something given, not constructed (*Shils, 1957*).

However, there is now general agreement among scholars that nations and nationalism are modern phenomena that did not exist in pre-modern times. The formation and maintenance of nations, nation-states, and the entire system of nation-states required mass media and a modern state apparatus with centralized education, bureaucracy, and legislative authority. However, consensus among scholars begins to diverge beyond this point.

Some scholars, adopting a radically constructivist stance, argue that nationalism as an ideology "invents" nations where they do not naturally exist (*Balibar, 1990; Gellner, 2015*). In contrast, "minimal constructivists" contend that nationalism awakens nations to self-awareness (*Anderson, 2020; Hobsbawm, 2012, Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012*). Within this debate, deeper disagreements arise on whether nations possess an ethnic foundation upon which they naturally build (*Hobsbawm, 2012*) or are formed through the efforts of states or elites (*Balibar, 1990*). Our position aligns with moderate (minimal) constructivism, suggesting that nation-building is constructed upon an ethnosymbolic foundation, where architectural monuments play an increasingly important role.

In general, researchers of nation and nationalism in Kazakhstan adhere to the ideas of social constructivism. How the process of nation-building took place in Kazakhstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union is studied by S. Spehr, & N. Kassenova (*Spehr and Kassenova, 2012*); Schatz (*Schatz, 2000*). E. Marlene Laruelle studies the three main types of identity in Kazakhstan:

Kazakhness, Kazakhstaniness, and transnationalism (Laruelle, 2015). Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese study the "imaginary" and "real" identities associated with state policy and the discourse of national identity in the countries of Central Asia (Isaacs and Polese, 2015).

The study of how a nation is constructed using individual elements as an example is the subject of study by many scholars. For example, Rico Isaacs studied the role of cinema and film in the process of constructing an «imagined community» (Isaacs, 2022). S. Insebayeva and N. Insebayeva studied the anthem and national currency as key symbols linking symbolic politics with the formation of national identity (Insebayeva and Insebayeva, 2021). Kaşikçi studies the names of streets in the Soviet past and their names during the period of independence (Kaşikçi, 2019). A. Fauve studies monuments as a key element in the formation of an "imagined community." Using qualitative methods with artists and urban planners, he examines the process of national urban development, emphasizing primarily its erratic nature. A. Fauve argues that nationalist urban development is rather a resource for people involved in patron-client relationships; the results of such activity are rather conditional and are not a planned strategy (Fauve, 2015).

In this article, the author also concentrates on the study of monuments, considering them primarily from a quantitative perspective. Monuments can serve two main functions in relation to national development. First, they can promote ethno-national identity and narratives that foster cohesion and unity. Memorial sites function as zones of symbolic politics, where national governments advance the idea of nation-building. Through monuments, key actors in the nation-building process embody the concept of an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2020). Symbolic politics is a complex process with potentially contradictory outcomes: on one hand, monuments may be organically integrated into the people's symbolic history, while on the other, they may act as tools to impose an artificial collective identity with specific objects of identification (e.g., Soviet-era monuments).

Secondly, commemorative objects can either promote broader unity through inclusivity or contribute to boundaries between ethnic groups. Researchers have shown that memorial sites can play a vital role in fostering integration within an ethnic or social group, as well as between groups, thus becoming national sites.

In this paper, we aim to understand the qualities that enable monuments to become national symbols (representing broad integration). For this purpose, we analyzed a database comprising 226 monuments. More detailed information on the empirical database and methodology is provided in the following section.

## Method and Data

This study is based on a database of 226 commemorative objects from 1991 to 2019, located in all major cities (those with at least regional center status). The list of monuments, organized geographically, is as follows:

- Astana: 18 monuments
- Almaty: 21 monuments
- Shymkent: 32 monuments
- Aktau: 8 monuments
- Aktobe: 21 monuments
- Atyrau: 17 monuments
- Karaganda: 10 monuments

- Kokshetau: 9 monuments
- Kostanay: 10 monuments
- Kyzylorda: 6 monuments
- Pavlodar: 11 monuments
- Petropavlovsk: 6 monuments
- Taldykorgan: 11 monuments
- Taraz: 18 monuments
- Turkestan: 9 monuments
- Uralsk: 15 monuments
- Ust-Kamenogorsk: 4 monuments

Three regional centers (Zhezkazgan, Konaev, and Semey) are not included in the list, as these cities did not have regional center status for most of the historical period covered by the study and in 2019.

A detailed profile was created for each monument, which was then transformed into a statistical dataset. For each monument, various socio-demographic and historical information was collected about the historical figure in whose honor the memorial was erected. The data were subsequently processed using the R software environment.

### **Main results**

The historical figures in whose honor the monuments were erected are divided into the following historical periods: the Golden Horde, the Kazakh Khanate, the Mongolian Empire, the Early Middle Ages, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Period, and independent Kazakhstan. There is a clear dominance of monuments of the Soviet period. So 63.7% of the monuments are dedicated specifically to historical figures from this historical period.

The next step is related to the allocation of only monuments that are not located on the territory of their Juz. In other words, these monuments are dedicated to historical figures who do not belong to the RU and Juz, which prevail on the territory of the monument's construction. For example, the monument to Abai in Almaty will be defined as located not on the ancestral territory.

Thus, only monuments located outside the territories of their Juz were highlighted. There were only 34 of them, while 26 (or 76.5%) of them are dedicated either to historical figures of the Soviet period. However, if we add historical figures to them, whose process of becoming symbols of the Kazakh nation was during the Soviet period (for example, Abai), then their share will approach the 90% mark.

A comparison of the shares (63.7% versus 76.5%) shows a significant increase in historical figures of the Soviet period among those to whom monuments located outside their own territory are dedicated. In our opinion, this is an important result that should be focused on. Why exactly do monuments to historical figures of the Soviet period more often go beyond the borders of the Union? Of course, first of all, we need to check if this is the case by entering control variables. One of the most important control variables is the capital factor. It is clear that there is a disproportionately large number of commemorative objects in the capital, while in the capital, the central government is more likely to be interested in diversifying symbols by attracting various historical figures, it is not necessarily that they lived in the territory where the capital is located. In these conditions, monuments located in regional centers and dedicated to representatives of the Juzes (or clans) that do not prevail in this region are of interest first of all (for example, the monument to Kanysh Saptayev in Atyrau or Shakhmardan Yesenov in Aktau).

Why are historical figures from the Soviet period more likely to "transcend" the traditional borders of their Juzes? In our view, this is a consequence of the Soviet nation-building project, during which the government aimed for a highly centralized and unified national identity. This project was reflected both at the broader Soviet level (e.g., figures like Lenin, Marx) and within individual national republics, where a unique pantheon of national heroes was developed. A technique often used was the "shortening" of history, selecting contemporary figures – rather than historical ones potentially incompatible with communist ideology – as symbols. This approach gradually built a pantheon of Soviet national heroes. In the framework of this forced and often aggressive Soviet nation-building project, alternative sources of identity – irrelevant or even hostile to the Soviet national project – were deliberately ignored. Figures were presented as "sons of the Kazakh people" or, even better, "sons of the Soviet people," while more specific, localized identities were overlooked.

Interestingly, our research shows that this tradition of representing historical figures continues in independent Kazakhstan. Indeed, it is primarily historical figures from the Soviet period who most readily transcend the boundaries of their own Ru and/or Juzes. This phenomenon can be viewed as a positive externality of the Soviet nation-building project, which, through its ideologies, formed a group of national heroes across many Soviet republics – an essential element for strengthening national unity.

It is also worth noting that monuments that remain within their own community or tribe are the most common pattern in any region (with a few exceptions in Astana and Almaty). For example, in the Karaganda region, the majority of the population belongs to the Argyn tribe. Almost all monuments erected in Karaganda (the center of the Karaganda region) between 1991 and 2019 are dedicated to historical figures from the Argyn tribe (with one exception for an ethnic German). In the Zhetisu region, where members of the Naiman and Jalair clans primarily reside, most monuments honor representatives of these tribes. This pattern is evident in many regions of Kazakhstan. Such monuments may be associated with the actions of tribal public associations or with the active involvement of relatives and descendants of the individuals commemorated by these monuments.

## Conclusion

The role of monuments in the process of ethnic nation-building in Kazakhstan is examined in this study. Having analyzed a database of 226 monuments erected between 1991 and 2019, a consistent trend was revealed: most monuments erected outside the zhuzes or clans are dedicated to historical figures of the Soviet period or those whose symbolic meaning was formed during the Soviet era. This is the influence of the Soviet nation-building project, which constructed its own pantheon of heroes who strengthened a single national identity, ignoring local and ethnic identities that were irrelevant to the Soviet project. A different situation is observed in the regions of Kazakhstan, where the practice of perpetuating representatives of "their" zhuzes and clans, reflecting local identities and the activities of tribal associations, is preserved. Thus, monuments become an arena for symbolic politics, in which the interests of the central government, striving for national integration, and local elites supporting narrower forms of identity intersect. The revealed patterns highlight the ambivalence of symbolic politics: on the one hand, monuments can serve as a tool for integration and the formation of a national narrative; on the other hand, they often reinforce locality and generic differences. These

findings are important for further understanding of nation-building processes in a multi-ethnic society and highlight the need to take into account both centralized and local mechanisms for the formation of national identity.

**Funding:** The research in this article was carried out with grant funding from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan within the framework of the AP26104221 «The impact of local collective memory on the development of local communities».

### Authors' contribution

When writing the article "How the Soviet past affects the nation-building of modern Kazakhstan", the first author substantiated the concept of the study, formulated the main idea, and research tasks. The second author also conducted a literature review on this topic. When planning the study, the first author collected and analyzed data on the construction of monuments. The second author (corresponding author) provided all work, depending on the publication, and communicated with the editors of the journal. Authors agree to be responsible for all aspects of the work, proper study, and resolution of issues related to the reliability of the data or the integrity of all parts of the article.

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**Сабитов Ж.<sup>1</sup>, Родионова К.Н.<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Мемлекет тарихы институты, Астана, Қазақстан*

<sup>2</sup>*Л.Н. Гумилев атындағы Еуразия ұлттық университеті, Астана, Қазақстан*

### **КЕҢЕСТІК КЕЗЕҢ ҚАЗІРГІ ҚАЗАҚСТАННЫҢ ҰЛТ ҚАЛЫПТАСТЫРУ ҮДЕРІСІНЕ ҚАЛАЙ ӘСЕР ЕТУДЕ?**

**Андатпа.** Бұл мақала Қазақстандағы этникалық сипаттағы мемлекет құру үдерісінде ескерткіштердің рөлін талдауға арналған. Зерттеу еліміздің облыс орталықтарында 1991–2019 жылдар аралығында орнатылған 226 ескерткішті қамтитын мәліметтер базасына негізделген. Негізгі назар аударылатын мәселе – қандай тарихи тұлғалар өз жүздері мен руларының туған өңірлерінен шығып, ұлттық нышанға айналады? Зерттеу нәтижелері көрсеткендей, ескерткіштердің басым көпшілігі кеңестік кезең тұлғаларына немесе кеңестік дәуірде символдық мәнге ие болған тұлғаларға арналған. Бұл жағдай кеңестік мемлекет құру жобасының – батырлардың бірыңғай пантеонын қалыптастыру арқылы жалпыұлттық бірегейлікті орнықтыруға бағытталған – ықпалының әлі де жалғасып жатқанын көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар, өңірлерде жергілікті ерекшеліктер мен тайпалық бірлестіктерді бейнелейтін, өз жүздері мен руларының өкілдерін мәңгі есте қалдыру тәжірибесі де сақталған. Осылайша, ескерткіштер орталық билік пен жергілікті элиталар мүдделерінің түйісетін символдық саясат аренасына айналады. Қорытындылар символдық саясаттың қосарлы сипатын айғақтайды: бір жағынан, ескерткіштер ұлттық интеграция құралы бола алады, ал екінші жағынан, жершілдік пен тектік жіктелуді күшейтуге де ықпал етуі мүмкін.

**Негізгі ұғымдар:** сәйкестілік, ескерткіштер, примордиалистік байланыстар, «қиялдағы қауымдастық», радикалды конструктивистер, минималды конструктивистер, ұлт және ұлтшылдық, мемлекет құру процесі

**Сабитов Ж.<sup>1</sup>, Родионова К.Н.<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Институт истории государства, Астана, Казахстан*

<sup>2</sup>*Евразийский национальный университет им. Л.Н. Гумилев, Астана, Казахстан*

### **КАК СОВЕТСКОЕ ПРОШЛОЕ ВЛИЯЕТ НА ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЕ СТРОИТЕЛЬСТВО СОВРЕМЕННОГО КАЗАХСТАНА**

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена анализу роли памятников в процессе этнонационального строительства в Казахстане. Исследование основано на базе данных, включающей 226

памятников, установленных в период с 1991 по 2019 год в областных центрах страны. Основное внимание уделено вопросу: какие исторические личности становятся национальными символами, выходящими за пределы родных территорий своих жузов и родов? Результаты показывают, что подавляющее большинство таких памятников посвящено личностям советского периода или тем, чье символическое значение сформировалось в советское время. Это свидетельствует о продолжающемся влиянии советского проекта национального строительства, создавшего единый пантеон героев, способствовавших формированию национальной идентичности. В то же время в регионах сохраняется практика увековечения представителей «своих» семей и родов, отражающая локальную идентичность и деятельность родоплеменных объединений. Таким образом, памятники выступают ареной символической политики, где пересекаются интересы центральной власти и местных элит. Полученные данные подчеркивают двойственную природу символической политики: с одной стороны, памятники могут быть инструментом интеграции, с другой – способствовать укреплению локализма и родовой дифференциации.

**Ключевые слова:** идентичность, памятники, изначальные связи, «воображаемое сообщество», радикальные конструктивисты, минимальные конструктивисты, нация и национализм, процесс строительства нации.

### Information about authors

**Sabitov Zh.** – Ph.D., Leading researcher, State Institution “Institute of State History” of the Science Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

**Rodionova K.N.** – corresponding author, Master of Social Sciences, doctoral student, Department of Sociology, senior lecturer, Department of Sociology, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan.

### Авторлар туралы мәлімет

**Сабитов Ж.** – ҚР БҒМ Ғылым комитетінің «Мемлекет тарихы институты» ММ жетекші ғылыми қызметкері, Ph.D докторы.

**Родионова К.Н.** – хат-хабар авторы, әлеуметтік ғылымдар магистрі, әлеуметтану кафедрасының докторанты, Л.Н. Гумилев атындағы Еуразия ұлттық университеті, әлеуметтану кафедрасының аға оқытушысы. Астана, Қазақстан.

### Сведения об авторах

**Сабитов Ж.** – доктор философии (Ph.D), ведущий научный сотрудник ГУ «Институт истории государства» Комитета науки МОН РК.

**Родионова К.Н.** – автор для корреспонденции, магистр социальных наук, докторант кафедры социологии, старший преподаватель кафедры социологии Евразийского национального университета имени Л.Н. Гумилева, Астана, Казахстан.