

Evidence & history in archival documents: civil war in Semirech'ye



In an era of a global cyberspace, many concepts of social sciences acquire new dimensions, which is also true for the concept of the archive. Yet, irrespective of these new dimensions, the core question in the process of generating new knowledge still concerns the relationship between evidence and history, between data and what really happened.

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ARCHIVES BECAME A VERY IMPORTANT SOURCE for the revision of the past in post-Soviet Central Asian countries, within the framework of the construction of new national narratives. In this process historians take an active part, introducing unknown or previously concealed documents from archives and re-interpreting the 'old' ones. Historians working with materials of the state archives are quite familiar with both advantages and limitations of archival work and successfully use methods of source analysis. One of the challenges of archival work concerns specific 'archival narratives', a 'set' story of the past, to which the existing archival documents are subjugated. The construction of archival narratives is difficult to reveal, because of an absence of alternative stories as well as the specific rhetoric of the narration, excluding a possibility of alternative interpretations. One of these archival stories of the early Soviet period is the tragic event of the massacre of the Taranchi Uyghurs in the Semirech'ye region (modern Southeast Kazakhstan and North Kyrgyzstan) in 1918.

The essence of the historical event in question is a mass shooting, in the summer of 1918, of the Uyghurs living in the villages located between the city of Verny (present Almaty) and the border with China in the east, by the Bolshevik Red Army. According to various estimations, the number of villagers killed amounted to some 20000 to 25000, almost 40-50% of the entire Uyghur population of the Semirech'ye. The tragic event of the 'Atu' (Shooting) was not excluded from collective memory of the local Uyghurs constructed in the Soviet time, but in Soviet historiography it was attributed to counter-revolutionary elements. While Soviet historiography failed to explain the fact that the massacre was carried out by the Red Army regiment led by Communist Commissar Murayev, who arrived with his soldiers in Verny from Tashkent, the crime against the civil population was described as a counter-revolutionary action of Menshevik leaders who falsely represented themselves as Bolsheviks.

The 'Atu' was mentioned for the first time in Soviet historiography by Malik Kabirov in his book *Essays on the History of Soviet Kazakhstan's Uyghurs* (1975), but was limited to just one sentence: "Direct impulse to the exodus [of the

Above:
State Archive of the
Russian Federation.
Courtesy of the
Cultural Heritage
of Russia website;
<http://culture.ru/en/atlas/object/789>.

Uyghurs] to China was the illegal repression of the Uyghur population by alien elements who had penetrated the ranks of the Red army detachment of Murayev, who arrived in Semirech'ye from Tashkent to render assistance in solidifying Soviet power". Although archival documents contain more details on the mass massacre, they hardly add any essential information to formulate alternative interpretations of the events.

Nevertheless, since the massacre followed the anti-Bolshevik uprising of the Russian Cossacks in the city of Verny, which was successfully suppressed by the Bolsheviks, there are some hints in the archival documents that allow considering the massacre as a reaction of the Red Army to the Uyghurs' support of the anti-Bolshevik uprising of the Cossacks. However, the dominating narration in archival documents does not leave room for the representation of the Uyghurs as a serious anti-Bolshevik force in the region; according to the archives, only a small group of the wealthy Uyghurs [bays] and Muslim clerics [mullas] joined the anti-Bolshevik movement in Semirech'ye. The general description in the archival documents of the massacre in 1918, based on a class struggle approach, depicts the majority of the Uyghur population as full supporters of the Bolshevik power in the region and only a small number of wealthy people as reactionary elements who finally had to flee to neighbouring China after the defeat of the Cossack uprising in Verny. Hence, the Bolsheviks could not have carried out the shooting of their allies – the Taranchi Uyghurs, therefore it was organised by reactionary elements who were hiding under the guise of Communists.

A revision of the massacre of the Uyghurs, which started in the *perestroika* period in Uyghur publications, finally accepted it as a Bolshevik act of terror, but without recognition of the role of the Uyghurs in the anti-Bolshevik movement in the Semirech'ye region during the Civil war period in 1918-1920. Although there is still no clear evidence of active involvement of the Taranchi Uyghurs in the anti-Bolshevik movement in Semirech'ye, which could be used as a pretext for the massacre by the Bolsheviks, a recently found document in the State Archive of the Russian Federation, namely a 'Charter to

the Taranchi people' by Admiral Kolchak, allows us to assume that the real involvement of the Taranchi Uyghurs in the anti-Bolshevik movement in Semirech'ye has been misrepresented by the Soviet archival documents. This charter [gramota] to the Taranchi people was written on behalf of a recognised leader of the White movement, Admiral Alexander Vasilyevich Kolchak, who had been proclaimed as the supreme ruler of Russia on 18 November 1918 in Omsk (Siberia) and who headed the White movement until his arrest on 15 January 1920. According to S. Iskhakov, who published this charter in a collection of archival documents on the Civil war, the charter was printed as a leaflet and can be dated to 16 July 1919. The charter presented an official address of Admiral Kolchak to the Taranchi people, praising their contribution to the resistance against the Bolsheviks. He praised the Taranchis as "small in number, but strong in spirit", for not having "gone on the false path of destruction of the Russian state" and "remained faithful to the Fatherland and its laws, and sealed that with the blood of many thousands of the best sons and their possessions in the struggle against the Bolsheviks". Kolchak recognised the loyalty of the Taranchi people to the Russian Fatherland in fighting Bolsheviks and promised to honour their needs.

One should be critical about Kolchak's rhetoric in the charter, for he might have had a clear political aim, namely encouraging various groups of people in the resistance against the Bolsheviks and attracting them to the White movement; the charter might therefore overestimate the real involvement of the Taranchis in the civil war in Semirech'ye. Nevertheless, the "Charter to the Taranchi people" deconstructs the existing archival narrative of the massacre of the Taranchis and allows for an alternative vision on the role of the Taranchi Uyghurs. We can assume that archival documents in the early Soviet period have gone through a special selection: alongside the use of a 'Bolshevik language' in depicting events, they represent only those facts matching the Bolshevik ideology.

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