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ABSTRACT

During the 1970s, Soviet authorities began to confront growing dissident demands through a combination of repression and accommodation, what scholar Hanya Shiro describes as the “carrot and stick” approach to general protest activities and especially the nationalities problem. KGB chief Yuri Andropov in particular followed this policy course in the waning days of the Leonid Brezhnev regime. Besides cracking down on dissidents, Andropov oversaw plans for a German autonomous oblast near Tselinograd (now Astana), Kazakhstan, from 1976 to 1980. The regime considered it necessary to respond to the ethnic group’s emerging national protest movement, West Germany’s mounting diplomatic pressures, and the wider international community’s growing demands to protect emigration, human and minority rights. The USSR remained committed to the long-term integration and acculturation of its almost two million Germans, some of its most prized Soviet citizen-workers, with nearly half living in the Kazakh SSR. It sought to address domestic and foreign criticisms about the “German question” by formulating this new, but rather modest, nationality solution. The plan collapsed after June 1979, however, amid public demonstrations in the Kazakh SSR. Kazakh opposition at all levels revealed the complicated and troubling nature of Soviet nationality affairs and the limits of central authority over the periphery. The aborted plan’s legacy was the ethnic Germans’ continued lack of a national-territorial “container” when the USSR disintegrated in 1991. The proposal represented the regime’s first serious consideration of German autonomy since the group lost its remaining national districts and the Volga German ASSR between 1938 and 1941. Though it remains conjectural, the oblast could have established an embryonic national centre for Germans, from which they would have found themselves in a better political bargaining position during the dramatic Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras. It also could have helped reduce the dramatic mass migration of Germans from the former USSR to united Germany after 1990. Viewing circumstances from both “above” and “below,” this study incorporates various English-, German-, and Russian-language sources, including Soviet-era government documents and the handful of available memoirs and updated academic studies.

Keywords: Yuri Andropov, autonomy, Dimash Kunaev, dissidents, ethnic Germans, Kazakhstan
INTRODUCTION

The Soviet Politburo and Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Central Committee during the late 1970s called for an ethnic German autonomous oblast (region) near Tselinograd (now Astana) in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Building upon recent nationality policies toward ethnic Germans in Kazakhstan, the Kremlin proposal resulted from high-level deliberations among various top officials between 1976 and 1980. By June 1979, Kazakh officials in the republic’s capital of Alma-Ata (present-day Almaty) were prepared to establish a new oblast for their ethnic Germans.

The Kremlin architect of the proposed German oblast plan was then KGB chief and Politburo member Yuri Andropov. He ranked as one of the most intelligent, ruthless and powerful Soviet leaders during this period. Significantly, his term as head of the KGB since 1967 had made him highly sensitive to the broader Soviet dissident movement across the USSR, not least of all various national autonomy and emigration demands. In recent consideration of nationalities policies toward deported peoples under Soviet General-Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, Hanya Shiro underscored how such a policy could have arisen in the USSR at the time. By 1977, Brezhnev’s health was in decline, his work hours reduced at his doctors’ behest. Increasingly, individual Politburo members, among them Andropov, began to pursue more independent and decisive action on various economic and political fronts. Though Brezhnev had declared that national problems had been resolved in the USSR, ethnic tensions persisted. In Andropov’s case, he attempted to conduct a “carrot and stick” approach to the nationalities problem, offering autonomy concessions, but at the same time cracking down on internal dissent.1

Several motivations were likely at play behind the ethnic German autonomy discussions at the time. First, the Soviet regime sought further to indoctrinate its Germans with socialism, atheism, and anti-Western (hence anti-emigration) sentiments. As early as 1974, the Kazakh SSR’s Communist Central Committee already had moved to counter what it perceived to be growing

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immigration sentiment from frustrated ethnic Germans who either desired greater cultural autonomy in the USSR or hoped to realise national aspirations by migrating primarily to West Germany. Since the Soviet Union did not recognise the formal right of individuals or groups to immigrate from the “socialist paradise,” as that would have spelled an ideological defeat as well as possibly deplete a vast labour force, the Kremlin by this time had to respond to some degree to the ethnic group’s rising emigration protest movement. Complicating matters further, West Germany’s Ostpolitik (Eastern Policy) and the 1975 Helsinki Accords paved the way for Western governments and human rights observers to make ever-growing demands to protect individual and minority rights in the Soviet Bloc. The USSR continued to seek the long-term integration and acculturation of its almost two million ethnic Germans, some of its most prized Soviet citizen-workers, with nearly half living in the Kazakh SSR. It meanwhile felt obliged to address at least some domestic and foreign criticisms about the “German question” by formulating this new, though rather modest, nationality solution.

The Soviet regime had to make practical considerations in relation to economic and political realities, and, not least of all, nationality affairs. Though proposals from above worked their way down the Communist chain of command in the late 1970s, controversies surrounding Kazakhstan’s ethnic German autonomy plan revealed the overall delicate nature of the Soviet federative system and nationality policy formulations. For example, one of the most influential Kazakh Communist officials at this time was Dimash Kunaev. For more than two decades, he served as the Kazakh Communist Party’s First Secretary, the highest position in the Soviet republic. Wishing to protect the republic’s territorial and political integrity, he and his supporters resisted the German oblast near Tselinograd. The autonomy plan collapsed after mid-1979 amid public demonstrations in the Kazakh SSR.

Kazakh opposition at various levels revealed the often complicated and sometimes troubling nature of Soviet nationality affairs, as well as the limits of central authority in Moscow to enforce its will at regional and local levels in the so-called periphery. Moscow’s eventual failure to attain even a limited autonomy status for this significant national minority group might also have produced a more long-lasting, negative regional impact than is generally appreciated. The
aborted autonomy plan’s legacy was the ethnic Germans’ continued lack of autonomy when the USSR disintegrated in 1991. Under Andropov, the Politburo proposal represented the regime’s first serious consideration of ethnic German autonomy since the group lost its remaining national districts in 1938 and the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in 1941. Though it remains conjectural, the oblast could have established an embryonic national centre for this group, from which it would have found itself in a better political bargaining position during the dramatic Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras. It also could have helped reduce the dramatic mass migration of Germans from the former USSR to united Germany after 1990.

Besides acknowledging the Soviet regime’s practical considerations at the time, this study recognises broader autonomy issues in the USSR from the perspective of Marxist-Leninist nationality policies known as *korenizatsiya*, i.e., indigenization or nativization programmes already formulated in the early to mid-1920s. Many ethnic Germans and other nationalities in the country understood their place in Soviet society in this ideological light.² Deported peoples like the ethnic Germans had lost their national rights during the repressive Stalinist period of the 1930s and 1940s, facing exile and deprivation in remote Siberian and Central Asian “special settlements,” including Kazakhstan. After Stalin’s death in 1953, these exiled groups wished to reclaim their full legal and political rights within the Soviet federative system. The ethnic Germans represented at the time the largest of the Soviet deported peoples and the fourteenth largest nationality group out of more than one hundred formally recognised Soviet peoples. Though released from exile in December 1955 and receiving official political “rehabilitation” in August 1964, they continued to hold the distinction as the largest nationality group that did not possess any form of political autonomy in the USSR.³ Increasingly, during the post-1960s era, the complex phenomenon of ethnic nationalism in general posed problems for the Soviet central government and its far-flung territories. The ethnic Germans’ guilt by association with Nazi Germany and fascism during the Second World War (known as the “Great Patriotic War” in the

USSR) proved so devastating that the post-Stalinist regime, even as it tried to bury old animosities, discovered the immense obstacles to erasing virulent anti-German sentiment from public consciousness. The Tselinograd incident of 1979 taught them this sobering political lesson.

To date, only limited research or attention has been devoted to this topic at any length in English. Only in the past generation has more information come to light about the fate of ethnic Germans in Kazakhstan and elsewhere in the USSR, including the last half of the 1970s when the Soviet leadership briefly considered granting a limited degree of autonomy to Kazakhstan’s ethnic Germans. Viewing circumstances from both “above” and “below,” this study incorporates various English-, German- and Russian-language sources, including Soviet-era government documents and the handful of available memoirs and updated academic studies.

KAZAKHSTAN’S “POLITICAL-EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES” FOR SOVIET CITIZENS OF GERMAN NATIONALITY, 1974-1977

The Andropov plan for an ethnic Germans autonomous region near Tselinograd grew out of several years of deliberation and study, starting in Almaty as early as April 1974. It appears that Andropov later expanded upon the Kazakh SSR’s “politico-educational” policies toward the ethnic Germans at the time. The Politburo and CPSU Central Committee thus eventually took the helm when advocating an actual oblast in northern Kazakhstan. After the late 1970s, Kazakh SSR officials were instructed from above to provide necessary assistance to realise such policy goals. Soviet government policies at the highest levels represented a calculated response to the ethnic Germans’ emerging protest movement and West Germany’s mounting diplomatic pressures during Ostpolitik.

On 16 April 1974, the Bureau of the Central Committee of Kazakhstan’s Communist Party set matters into motion when it formulated the decree “Concerning the Strengthening of Ideological-Educational Activities among Citizens of German Nationality.”¹

more intensive government effort to integrate Kazakhstan’s ethnic Germans. About one week later, a second decree supplemented and enforced many of the Kazakh Central Committee’s initial recommendations. The 16 April 1974 decree called on the authorities to engage ethnic German workers more actively at all levels of the republic. Noting the socio-economic advances made since August 1964, when the ethnic group received formal “rehabilitation,” officials viewed as positive the recent increase of German deputies in the local Soviets, the publication of the new German newspaper *Freundschaft* (*Friendship*)—which was based in Tselinograd until 1986, then relocated to Almaty (now Alma-Ata)—the presence of the German ensemble in the Kazakh philharmonic orchestra, and the more than 2,000 groups constituting 35,600 German youths who were studying their native language (still a fraction of the more than 900,000 ethnic Germans in Kazakhstan). Authorities also observed that in the republic the ethnic group could now claim German-language radio and television programmes, public addresses and speeches, Communist agitation, newspapers, books, and other literature. With such resources at the regime’s disposal, these organs of mass propaganda and information could provide further “cultural enlightenment” for this sizeable national minority.

Despite these recent strides, Kazakh SSR officials expressed particular concerns about segments of the ethnic German population who practiced religion or had relatives living in West Germany, especially former Black Sea Germans who had fled west with the Nazis near the end of the Second World War and who as Soviet citizens subsequently faced forced repatriation and exile in Central Asia. Specifically, there arose the serious problem of those who desired to migrate to West Germany and even disseminated “slanderous documents and fabrications.” Accordingly, authorities resolved to combat “anti-Soviet ideological centres and organisations”—namely, emigration dissidents, political protestors and reformers, and ethnic autonomy activists. The regime also advocated the implementation of “socio-political literature” and “scientific-atheistic propaganda” in schools and seminars to help prepare a “vanguard of

Anti-religious policies (i.e., policies opposed to aspects of traditional culture) corresponded with the Soviet regime’s limited religious concessions to various Christian denominations, including Orthodox, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Mennonite, Reformed, Baptist and others. The regime’s dual approach of cultural concessions and socialist agitation was not coincidental, as it behaved in such a way in order to augment Communist efforts towards atheism, while at the same time trying to placate Soviet dissidents as well as Western human rights observers. In this cultural war of attrition, the Soviets had to walk a fine line between flagrant religious persecution and relative tolerance, but it still strived for the ultimate ideological conditioning of its populace.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the USSR agreed to register two hundred German Lutheran congregations in Siberia. Lutherans represented a particularly large group of ethnic German religious adherents in the region. Moreover, the regime permitted some German Mennonite and Baptist churches in Kazakhstan to register with officials and resume operations. When congregations and their members were registered and permitted to practice more openly, the secret police thus found it easier to target, harass, and infiltrate religious communities. The state could also persecute more zealously those believers who refused to belong to the officially registered churches.

The Soviet regime’s atheist policy sometimes had the unintended effect of mobilising both religious and non-religious dissidents even further in defense of religious faith. Part of the ethnic German population held a strong national identity that was rooted in religious traditions. These ethnic Germans, especially Lutherans, associated religion with traditional culture, folkways, and even the native language. An official attack on religion could thus become an assault on ethnicity itself. Despite that only about 20 per cent of ethnic Germans could be considered “religious” by the late Soviet period, even many secularised group members continued to value traditional

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6 Ibid., pp. 182-183.
8 For more details on registered churches and ethnic German religious life in the USSR during this period, see J. Otto Pohl, *Catherine’s Grandchildren: A Short History of the Russian-Germans under Soviet Rule* (Lincoln, Nebraska: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 2009), pp. 76-77.
religion’s importance to their ethnicity. On 20 June 1977, the Bureau of the Central Committee of Kazakhstan’s Communist Party issued an important report “Concerning the Further Strengthening of Politico-Educational Activity among the Citizens of German Nationality.” By this time, Andropov in Moscow had already taken a more assertive approach to nationality affairs, including ethnic Germans. According to this 1977 report, the various Party committees at all levels had fulfilled a previous Kazakh SSR’s decree of 26 June 1974, working out “measures for the realisation of the passed resolutions.” It also reported that the Party “began to investigate more deeply the structure of the German population, the sentiments and social processes which are taking place among them.”

The 1977 Kazakh Central Committee report presented a glowing and optimistic account of recent Party efforts to promote the “polito-educational” activity among citizens of German nationality. The report also offered a glimpse into extensive state efforts designed to instill in the ethnic group beliefs in internationalism as a counter to anti-Soviet sentiments. It noted that, over the previous three years, various levels of Party committees performed numerous ideological activities for this purpose. For instance, the Taldy-Kurgansk regional committee in 1976 and 1977 carried out more than one hundred “scientific-practical” conferences on the “international upbringing of workers” and “seminar conferences” of workers of both Party and Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth) organisations. Such gatherings occurred at “cultural-enlightenment institutes,” with the support of the press, television, and radio.

During the mid-1970s, these committees in the Kazakh SSR oversaw about 600 lectures, more than 1,500 political speakers, and about 8,000 political “informers and agitators” from the body of citizens of German nationality. In addition, a total of 4,179 clubs of “internationalist education” were created, along with 119 “universities of friendship,” “cultural-enlightenment institutes,” lecture-readers conferences, thematic meetings, surveys, discussions, and lectures in

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9 Swiss scholar Gerd Stricker calculated the 20 per cent estimate for “religious” ethnic Germans in the USSR as of the 1980s. For information on the assimilation breakdown of ethnic Germans during this period, see also Benjamin Pinkus, “From the October Revolution to the Second World War” and “The Germans in the Soviet Union Since 1945,” in Edith Rogovin Frankel, ed., The Soviet Germans: Past and Present (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), pp. 53, 148-150.

the German language. Not least of all, the previous two years witnessed the establishment of amateur performance groups in the German language, doubling to 279 by 1976, with 4,000 ethnic Germans participating. Seventy-five German performing groups accepted participation in the All-Union festival of peoples.\(^\text{11}\)

For all these cultural concessions, the regime’s actual motives remained stark in the 1977 report. This policy offered one means of stripping ethnic Germans of what remained of their traditional culture that still hindered pro-socialist and atheist attitudes necessary for their complete integration into Soviet society. More importantly, it sought to discourage any cultural and political affiliation with West Germany and the troublesome illegal national autonomy and emigration movements arising since the late 1960s. Indeed, though only two years after the Helsinki Accords, the year of 1977 stood out as the most repressive for all national protest movements in the USSR. The Kazakh Central Committee report stated:

> The Party organs are directing permanent attention to questions of organized activity concerning emigration among segments of the German population, active exposure of the mendacity of imperialist [Western capitalist] propaganda, which is inciting the Soviet Germans to depart for the FRG [West Germany].\(^\text{12}\)

To combat dissent, the regular circulation of the republic- and local-level press provided readers with positive and upbeat materials about the life and work of Kazakhstan’s ethnic Germans. In addition, during the previous two years, a number of films appeared in this vein, including *Surrender Your Heart to the People*, *Gifts of the Land*, *Flourishing Land* and others. This visual medium concentrated on Soviet “heroes” who came from the ethnic group’s ranks.

The Kazakh Central Committee memorandum concluded with a strong acknowledgment of the need to continue the ethnic Germans’ “ideological-political” and “international education.” Above all, it called for “perseverance” and “consistency,” “on account of the fact that some

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 184.
\(^{12}\) Ibid.
segments of this category [the German population] continue to harbor emigration sentiments.”

It also referred to the 6 April 1977 KGB report given to the Council of Soviet Ministers of the Kazakh SSR, which commissioned a series of practical measures to prepare for “the strengthening of the struggle with the hostile activities of German extremists.”

Pervading these various decrees and documents between 1974 and 1977 were the phrases “national development,” “politico-educational activity,” and “ideological-educational activity,” i.e., loaded official references to Soviet nationalities policy formulations. They suggested, in pragmatic Marxist-Leninist historical terms, the ultimate integration of a particular Soviet nationality group into a new “Soviet People” or “Soviet Man” (Homo Sovieticus). In Soviet circles, the terms “politico-educational activity,” “ideological-educational activity” and “organisational activity” implied the regime’s effort in the short term to placate and, over the duration, to absorb its significant number of ethnic Germans and others into the international socialist community. The Soviet central government and the Communist Party had long reasoned that regional autonomy or other cultural accommodations provided the necessary structural, political, and educational resources in order to “Sovietise” and “propagandise” further a given ethnic population—the concept which the West has recognised as “national in form, socialist in content.”

The Russian language had also become a convenient international mode of communication inside the Soviet Union, but Russian linguistic assimilation or “Russification” did not necessarily represent the ultimate goal of such Soviet nationality policy formulations. In fact, the Kazakh SSR used German language and ethnic associations within the Party and state to “re-educate” this ethnic population. The linguistic “Russification” of certain nationalities could certainly be the logical result, but in theory, any language could transmit Soviet ideology. In theoretical and practical terms, these conceptions lay at the heart of Soviet nationalities policies, despite frequent efforts by various ethnic activists, dissidents and reformers to turn Lenin’s nationality formulations against the regime itself.

Ibid.
Ibid., p. 185.
In the mid- to late 1970s, the Soviet regime indeed pushed harder to imbue ethnic Germans with socialism, atheism, and anti-Western attitudes. For years, besides the usual state-directed persecution and repression, the limited circulation of the German-language press and the transmission of a number of radio and television programmes in the USSR had practiced this general policy, but now more was required in light of external pressures and internal protests. As Soviet documents from the Kremlin and Almaty demonstrated at the time, the proposal for an autonomous region near Tselinograd provided additional political and ideological tools to advance the regime’s goals, and thus other deep-seated motives resided at the heart of such “cultural concessions.” Until the late 1980s, these official policies of course permeated all regions, districts, ASSRs, or SSRs inside the Soviet Union, as the effective means of communicating such ideas came via the respective national languages and the creation of a Communist cadre of whatever nationality background. Though assimilation into the Russian-language mainstream was often advanced throughout the country, envisioned as it was to be the practical cultural glue besides socialism that could help bind all the many Soviet peoples together, the regime still had to enact various cultural concessions, even if they were sometimes intended only to be temporary or intermediate-term. After the late 1980s, however, the regime’s compromises with nationality groups came back to haunt the Soviet Union, ultimately contributing to its breakup into independent nation-states and ethnic enclaves.

In 1977, the Kazakh plan “For the Further Strengthening of Politico-Educational Activity among the Citizens of German Nationality” also appeared. The Department of Propaganda and Agitation of Kazakhstan’s Communist Party Central Committee, the Kazakh SSR’s State Publishing House, the Kazakh Cooperative Society Union, the editorial boards of republic-level newspapers and journals, and the Kazakh SSR’s State Television and Radio drew up this plan. The purpose was to advance socialist democracy, internationalism, and secular humanism within the USSR:

With the goal of strengthening the ideological-political activity among citizens of German nationality more fully, it is to utilize various forms and methods of ideological influence,
the means of verbal agitation, mass information, and propaganda. In its framework, it is to depend on a deep interpretation of economic and socio-political tasks.\textsuperscript{15}

The Kazakh Communist Central Committee envisioned a pivotal role for the still ascending younger generation of German Communist elite in the USSR’s ongoing ideological war against the West abroad and problems of ethnic nationalism at home. Its plan noted that, in June and August of 1977, the regional Party committees of Taldy-Kurgansk and Almaty had studied scenarios for the realisation of the resolution of the 16 April 1974 decree by the Kazakh Communist Central Committee on the issue of strengthening “ideological-educational activity” among ethnic Germans. At all levels, the SSR was enlisting the support of the Party as well as various educational and professional organisations in this task, “to involve more actively in socio-political activity the representatives of the technical, scientific, and creative intelligentsia of German nationality.”\textsuperscript{16} They could assist further with the national and ideological struggle against the “subversion” of West Germany and the emigration protest movement inside the USSR:

It is to work into the monthly period scientific-argumentative materials for speeches and lectures for the exposure of subversive activity of foreign anti-Soviet ideological centres, but also the politically harmful activities of German extremists. It is to reverse basic attention to the exposure of the instigation of activities of West German subversive centres and, related to them, the ideological organs of the FRG [West Germany], which were directed towards inflaming nationalist and emigration sentiments among segments of the German population of the republic [Kazakhstan]. It is to adopt measures in a detached spirit for the suppression of illegal and anti-social activities of separate elements of

\textsuperscript{15} “Plan dopolnitel’nykh meropriyatiy TsK Kompartii Kazakhstana: po dal’neyshemu usileniyu politico-vospitatel’noy raboty sredi grazhdan nemetskoy natsional’nosti [ca. 1977],” in Aumann and Chebotareva, eds., p. 186.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
For this struggle, the Kazakh plan called for the reinforcement by 15 August 1977 of the composition of the “ideological cadre from the members of the most experienced and authoritative persons of German nationality.” The ethnic elite included those from Party committees and collectives. Moreover, Kazakh officials stated that

. . . groups of [Party] political informers and agitators are present, who are stepping forward in the German language. In the populated places with a predominance of Germans, it is to provide for the selection of propagandists for the system of Party and economic training from the Communist members of this nationality.18

Later on, during the Gorbachev era, a source of resentment between some ethnic activists and former ethnic German Communist elites arose over this and other previous “ideological” divisions.19 As the events of 1977 indicated, the most integrated and high-ranking ethnic Germans were expected to combat the ethnic autonomy and emigration movements, as well as reduce West German influence from abroad. With the goal of promoting socialist democracy and secular humanism, the Soviet government at all levels found the weapons to carry out this approach—by means of an ethnic vanguard, literature, the press and media, education and the arts, the farm collectives, and above all, the German language. For the purpose of exposing, fighting, and weeding out “anti-Soviet” and “anti-Communist” beliefs, the regime’s cultural “concessions” in areas of language and print materials at this time contained underlying motives.

At first glance to Westerners, official Soviet intentions remained somewhat obscure in the midst of various policy compromises, but the Soviet archival record made it quite clear. As if to reinforce the plan’s purpose to all officials involved, the 1977 Kazakh plan concluded with the

17 Ibid., p. 187.
18 Ibid.
It is to demonstrate urgently the lack of legal rights for workers in West Germany and in other capitalist countries, to give a decisive rebuff to the slanderous fabrications of the bourgeois press and radio about the condition of citizens of German nationality in the USSR, and specifically in Kazakhstan. With these goals, to continue in the newspapers . . . 

*Kazakhstan Pravda, Leninist Change, Freundschaft*, in several regional, district and city newspapers, the publication of counter-propagandist materials which relate the fate in recent years of returning emigrants from West Germany [of which, there were very few cases]. It is to prepare for this a series of televised broadcasts “Behind the Round Table” and “Only One Homeland” with a partnership of noted people of German nationality, and also persons who returned from the FRG [West Germany].

For the vast majority of immigrants allowed into the West, a return to the Soviet Union seemed unthinkable. Such cases were extremely rare, but the Soviets took care to amplify capitalism’s real problems in order to discourage “illusions” about living in the West as Germans and anti-Communists.

**MOSCOW’S PLANS FOR THE GERMAN AUTONOMOUS OBLAST, 1976-1979**

The Kazakh SSR’s actions were a prelude to Moscow’s more concerted efforts regarding the ethnic Germans. After nearly two years of deliberation, the Kremlin produced concrete plans for the formation of a German autonomous oblast in Kazakhstan in an August 1978 CPSU Central Committee report. Brezhnev’s associate Mikhail Georgadze signed it, but another key author was KGB chief and Politburo member Andropov, the mentor of a rising young Soviet official named Mikhail Gorbachev. Interestingly, Andropov also at this time was the boss of a young associate, Viktor Gusev, who later handled the controversial autonomy question for ethnic Germans in the

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Volga Region under Gorbachev between late 1989 and mid-1991.\textsuperscript{21} In any case, this report confirmed the Soviet desire to combat the emigration protestors and other ethnic activists, despite this seeming politico-cultural concession.

The call for an autonomous region represented the culmination of more than four years of “politico-educational” efforts directed at Kazakhstan’s nearly one million ethnic Germans, or at least certain segments of this population. According to the Andropov report, a governmental commission involving both Party and state had been involved since August 1976 with addressing the issue of creating German autonomy. After gathering information and materials on the nationality group concerning aspects of this problem, the Central Committee’s work group now offered its conclusion.\textsuperscript{22} In January and June-July 1965, the ethnic German exiles in Siberia and Central Asia had sent their own representatives in two delegations to Moscow to provide the regime with a demonstration of the minority group’s desire for the restoration of national autonomy that had been lost under Stalin in 1941.\textsuperscript{23} The Kremlin, however, chose its own constructive route to comprehend and address the “German question” in the USSR:

\ldots In the opinion of the Commission, at the present time on the question about the idea of national-territorial autonomy for the German populace, it may be possible to treat it affirmatively.

We are supposing that such a resolution in the political plan would possess a positive meaning, since the formation of autonomy would contribute to a more successful, practicable end. Resulting from the decision of the Central Committee concerning the work among the citizens of German nationality, it would answer the natural aspiration of the German populace to preserve their own national peculiarities, but also definitely would eliminate the negative consequences of the abolition in 1941 of the ASSR of Germans in

the Volga Region. It would be a significant argument in the struggle against emigration sentiments, nationalism and other unhealthy displays among separate segments of the Soviet German population, and also against subversive activities of ideological centres of the West.  

In the report, the Soviet authorities recognised and appreciated the ethnic Germans’ demographic size and importance in the eastern regions, as well as their many contributions to the country’s economy, particularly in agriculture and industry. The Andropov report stated that as of 1978, about 1.8 million Germans lived across the USSR, mostly in Central Asia and Siberia. More than half, or around 936,000, lived in Kazakhstan alone, constituting 6.6 per cent of its population. In such oblasts as Karaganda, Kokchetavsk, Pavlodarsk, and Tselinograd, 10 to 13 per cent of the population was German. “In the republic,” it observed, “there are around 230 places populated by Germans with a numerical predominance.”

Kazakhstan’s Party and state agencies had amassed information on the group, providing the Kremlin report’s authors with a compelling socio-economic and political portrait of this productive ethnic minority people. The group’s economic value was a well-known fact throughout the Soviet government, but the idea here received further confirmation. Noting the group’s growing socio-economic and political integration into Soviet society, the report stated that the “Germans work well in all economic spheres and culture, are actively participating in socio-political life.”

For instance, Party officials observed in the 1978 report that the local and regional growth of German Communist organisations in the Kazakh SSR had become evident. By this time, a cadre of German Communists appeared active in Soviet life, including about 500 who entered into the nomenklatura (the privileged Party and government elite) of Kazakhstan’s Communist Central Committee and regional committees. More than 3,000 also participated in the nomenklatura of the Kazakh Communist Party’s city-town (local) and rayon (district) committees. Eight Germans

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25 Ibid., p. 191.
26 Ibid.
served as city-town and rayon committee Party secretaries as well. More than 400 even worked as secretaries of the primary Party organisation, with another 7,000 serving as deputies in the republic’s regional soviets (councils).27

The 1978 Andropov report also highlighted some of the ethnic group’s cultural programmes in Kazakhstan. Of course, despite this report’s positive assessment of such concessions, it is important to note that these accommodations were often circumscribed at best. For example, about five times a week, the Kazakh-SSR radio broadcasted a German-language programme. In Tselinograd, a rather small circulation of the German-language newspaper *Freundschaft* appeared in 1966, and a German ensemble functioned with the Kazakh philharmonic orchestra. About 30,000 ethnic German students used German in the schools as well.28

In view of the ethnic Germans’ overall importance to the region’s economic health, the Central Committee Commission endorsed the idea of establishing an autonomous oblast for them. The Commission contended that the administrative unit had to be established on the territory of five rayons (districts) inside the republic, composed of Karaganda, Kokchetavsk, Pavlodarsk, and Tselinograd Oblasts, together with its centre in the city of Ermentau. The area contained a population of over 202,000, of whom about 30,000 were ethnic Germans. Andropov and his associates envisioned a modest territorial unit for the ethnic Germans encompassing about 46,000 square kilometres, or almost 18,000 square miles. In fact, it would have compared in geographical extent with the former Volga German ASSR (1924-1941), i.e., a region nearly the same size as Denmark or approximately half the size of Portugal.29

Out of nearly one million Germans, however, only 30,000 at the time were designated to live in the proposed oblast. If they had decided it, the Soviet authorities might have been able to combine districts in Kazakhstan with much larger ethnic German populations. Perhaps for the time being the regime was taking a more cautious approach. Whatever the reasons, the Central Committee Commission again pointed to the autonomous oblast’s combined political,

27 Ibid. Interestingly, a decade later when Soviet Communism’s political monopoly evaporated, many of these same ethnic German elite transferred their organisational skills to the legalized Rebirth (*Wiedergeburt/Vozrozhdenie*) Society autonomy movement.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p. 192.
ideological, and economic purposes for the region as a whole: “The creation of the new oblast would also permit the execution of a fuller utilization of economic resources in the development of the economy of northern Kazakhstan, especially in rural agriculture.”

According to the 1978 Andropov report, specific proposals were now necessary in order to entrust the Kazakh Communist Central Committee with the expedient implementation of the German oblast plan. But Andropov and his associates also inserted a brief conclusion why this region was chosen over the group’s traditional “homelands,” above all the former Volga German ASSR’s territory, despite repeated demands of ethnic delegations to speak on this matter of territorial restoration with Kremlin officials in the mid-1960s. The regime argued here that “[w]e consider it inexpedient to create German autonomy in the Volga Region, since the German populace is not really living there and does not have historical roots in this region.” This conclusion thus implied the impracticality of the cost and effort necessary to relocate the population back to the Volga, even if it would be just a small fraction of the group’s total population. The regime’s decision to permit only a small number to reside in the new oblast seemed to underscore its intention to keep most ethnic Germans dispersed across the USSR where they were prized as a labour force and to facilitate further social integration. The Politburo’s and CPSU Central Committee’s claim, however, that the ethnic group did not claim historical roots along the Volga appeared questionable, as ethnic Germans had lived there for almost two centuries. Nonetheless, in the era of Ostpolitik, the regime could still theoretically later point to the Tselinograd “concession” as a positive measure toward promoting the ethnic group’s human and minority rights across the USSR.

During May and June 1979, a flurry of legislative activity culminated in Moscow with Andropov’s proposal to establish a German autonomous region near Tselinograd. Around May 1979, perhaps earlier, Chairman of the USSR Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Brezhnev, and his secretary, Georgadze, signed the decree “Concerning the Formation of a German Autonomous Region within the Framework of the Kazakh SSR,” with “the goal of creating the

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
necessary conditions for the national development of the German population."³² Then on 31 May 1979, the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee, in reality the highest political body in the USSR, accepted the resolution on the oblast’s formation. As a protocol of the meeting, it charged the Central Committee of Kazakhstan’s Communist Party with “proposing concrete suggestions to the questions” associated with the new territory.³³

Following the Kremlin’s directive at this time, the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh SSR enacted the “Law of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic Concerning the Formation of the German Autonomous Region within the Framework of the Kazakh SSR.” It announced the “goal of creating the necessary conditions for the development of the German population’s national culture, and also for the better development of the economy and the opening up of the natural resources of the rayons.” The law also provided for the oblast’s administrative centre in the city of Ermentau. Upon altering the following oblasts’ boundaries, it now included within the framework of the German autonomous region certain rayons (or country soviets) of the Karaganda, Kokchetav, Pavlodar, and Tselinograd Oblasts. Under this plan, however, the German autonomous region was not to be contiguous. The law’s final article entrusted the Presidium of the Kazakh SSR Supreme Soviet

... to set up an organizing committee for the German autonomous region, for the purpose of carrying out the creation of organs [departments] of governmental authority and the operation of the autonomous region with essential measures, which are connected with state formation.³⁴

Responding quickly to the various directives at the start of June 1979, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh SSR passed the decree concerning the formation of the German

autonomous region, signed by both the Presidium Chairman and Secretary. The expressed goal was the creation of “the necessary conditions for the national development of the German population.” SSR authorities confirmed the final specific territorial and administrative structure, encompassing about 30,000 ethnic Germans within the Kazakh SSR’s political framework, with the administrative centre located in the city of Ermentau. The oblast included the Ermentau and Seletin Rayons of the Tselinograd Oblast, Irtysh Rayon of the Pavlodar Oblast, Velikhanov Rayon of the Kokchetav Oblast, Molodezh Soviet, and the Dal’nen, Proletar, Rodnikov, Tel’manov, and Sidertin village soviets of the Karaganda Oblast. Amid all the preparations, it was decided that Andrei Braun, a ranking Party official of German nationality in the Tselinograd area, was to be installed as the new German oblast’s Party Secretary.35

THE DEATH OF THE GERMAN OBLAST PLAN, JUNE 1979-FEBRUARY 1980

Despite extensive deliberating and legislating, the Soviet regime’s execution of the autonomy plan immediately ran afoul. Between 16 and 19 June 1979, political circumstances in the Kazakh republic prevented any further governmental action. Supported by various local officials, over 5,000 Kazakh students and teachers, young and old alike, upon learning of the decrees, protested the oblast plan in the city of Tselinograd. They carried signs reading “Kazakhstan for Kazakhs” and “Kazakhstan one and inseparable.” Armed resistance by more militant students was barely avoided.36

Complete surprise over the oblast decision, as well as lingering national problems, prompted these sudden angry demonstrations. Until June 1979, the Soviet authorities kept ordinary ethnic Germans and Kazakhs in the dark about the preparations, instituting instead autonomy “from above.” Many ethnic Germans, willing to stay where they were if necessary, suddenly found themselves caught in the middle of a political firestorm. The international community apparently had no knowledge of the plans. In 1988 during Gorbachev’s perestroika, journalist and scholar

Konstantin Ehrlich, then the editor-in-chief of Almaty’s German-language newspaper *Freundschaft*, discovered in the archives that the Soviet government had earlier attempted to establish an autonomous region for Kazakhstan’s ethnic Germans. The plan, therefore, received little publicity inside or outside the USSR for nearly a decade, despite the Kazakhs’ public outcry in June 1979.37

Adolf Bersch was one of the early organisers of the ethnic German autonomy movement in the USSR during the late 1950s and most of the 1960s, including his efforts as a member of three German delegations sent to the Kremlin between 1964 and 1967 seeking the Volga German republic’s restoration. Years later he reflected on the protests against the oblast near Tselinograd. For years, he and his colleagues were convinced that the authorities actually had wanted this plan to fail from its inception. According to them, the oblast’s failure supposedly gave the Soviets an excellent excuse to tell the West that autonomy was “impossible” for the Germans in the USSR. In his memoirs, he shared his bitter feelings on the matter:

At the instruction of Brezhnev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan was supposed to put through a Party resolution, according to which a German autonomous republic [actually, an oblast] was supposed to be founded on fresh soil in northern Kazakhstan. . . . As it had always been [in 1955 and 1964], this decree was also kept a secret from the populace [Germans, Kazakhs, and others]. Kunaev sent his representative Korkin, one of the Secretaries of Kazakhstan’s Communist Party, to those regions in order to realise, allegedly, this decree. But it actually came down to the performance of a spectacle, whose authors were Brezhnev and Kunaev and whose “stage” director was Korkin. . . .

It came to no announcement [in 1980] of German autonomy in northern Kazakhstan. The spectacle succeeded, and its organizers could be content. For what did the Communist Party and the Soviet government need this theater?:

In order to show the federal government of Germany and the entire world audience that the Soviet government wanted to decide the national question of the Soviet Germans positively;

2. In order to strike a hard blow against the movement for German autonomy in the interior [of the USSR]. And this succeeded for them, too.\(^{38}\)

Bersch, an autonomy movement insider, recalled that shortly after the ethnic riots—the “gala event” \(^{(Bunt)}\), as he called them—ethnic Germans in northern Kazakhstan received the news from Tselinograd when Soviet official D. A. Korkin gathered members of the local ethnic German community. It is not clear, but Bersch either had received first-hand reports of Korkin’s address to the group, or he had attended the meeting himself. Though no verification of it has yet appeared, Bersch, to the best of his ability, tried to reconstruct the statement purportedly attributed to Korkin:

I regret very much the tragic events yesterday. We have met the demands of the activists of the German movement and wanted to found here, in north Kazakhstan, German autonomy. Yet what came out of it you certainly have seen for yourselves. The local populace does not at all approve of that. Do you still need other evidence? I hope you draw from yesterday’s events the proper lesson.\(^{39}\)

The aforementioned statement appears a bit harsh, however. The few available Soviet documents show that Korkin in the late 1970s helped develop and promote the autonomy plan. Bersch later proposed that the Kazakh policy failure had the effect of reinforcing Soviet opinion that no territory was now available to the group. Perhaps Korkin spoke to ethnic representatives about this political “lesson,” but he might have tried to conceal the regime’s own failure to carry out a more prudent policy course. Indeed, the government’s formal decision to repeal the plan


\(^{39}\) Ibid., p. 218.
did not even appear until 19 February 1980, more than half a year after the riots. Thus Soviet records contradicted Bersch’s claim that the Kremlin’s Central Committee had entirely given up on the autonomy idea immediately following the protests.40

To be fair, Bersch’s and others’ deep cynicism about the Tselinograd episode must be judged in light of subsequent experiences in the ethnic autonomy movement. Writing in the mid-1990s, they found later local outbursts against ethnic Germans along the Volga reminiscent of what had happened in Kazakhstan, although the Russian protests did not exhibit the same potential for violence. Bersch described (and it has been verified) the various obstacles presented by the KGB and local Soviet officials during the heyday of the ethnic German Rebirth (Wiedergeburt/ Vozrozhdenie) Society (i.e., the autonomy movement) under Gorbachev and Yeltsin: “Ten years later, the Communists repeated, with the support of KGB-people, this theater on the Lower Volga. But previously [in Kazakhstan], we did not let ourselves get discouraged and fought further for the restoration of the Volga German Republic.”41

Longtime activist Ida Bender also recalled the various rumors that subsequently swept across the ethnic German community about the Soviet government’s supposed efforts to undermine the autonomy plan for Germans in Kazakhstan. Again, a pronounced sense of bitterness underscored a long series of disappointments with the ethnic group’s post-Stalinist “rehabilitation” after 1955 and 1964. She wrote in her autobiography that

In 1979 we heard a rumor that Brezhnev had suggested a Republic [oblast] be established, but in Kazakhstan, because the Germans there were good farmers and the government did not want them to leave the area. But the idea apparently backfired because the natives in Kazakhstan demonstrated against the idea of having to give up some of their land for a German Republic. Children were taken out of school and people dressed in their traditional

native clothing for the massive demonstration, carrying banners that proclaimed “Kazakhstan for Kazakhs.” Then seven years later in 1985 [this article’s details remain obscure, but perhaps in referring to Ehrlich’s 1988 piece] we learned through an article in our Freundschaft that Brezhnev and high officials in the Party actually had orchestrated the demonstration. The article was written by a young Russian journalist who earlier had shown sympathy for the German cause. If true, Brezhnev and Soviet officials diabolically wanted to create this conflict in order to solidify their position against a Republic. It was becoming increasingly clear we could not win, regardless of how hard we tried.42

Bender, though dismayed at the events in Kazakhstan at the time, sympathized with the native Kazakhs about upholding their own national identity. Perhaps with a tone of regret, she later wrote that

. . . they were demonstrating for the very thing we wanted: preservation of their homeland, where they had put their sweat and blood into the soil and had established a home. The only difference was that we could not demonstrate so boldly, for we would be arrested in the blink of an eye.43

Conspiracy or not, the Soviet archival record told a somewhat different story, that in fact segments of the local population and certain regional officials resisted governmental policy, contrary to the central and SSR governments’ expressed orders. A little over a week after the protests, on 28 June 1979, the CPSU Central Committee in Moscow reported in detail on the facts surrounding the Tselinograd episode. It noted that various protesters held placards with messages such as Kazakhstan was one and indivisible, that there was no place for German autonomy in Kazakhstan. More specifically, Kazakh youths expressed fears over the possible

43 Ibid.
compulsory move of Germans to the territory of the newly established oblast, resulting in the supposed expulsion of Kazakhs. Soviet officials reported on some of the “insulting expressions” for the German populace: “‘We will not surrender the soil of our fathers to fascists,’ ‘Banish all Germans to Siberia,’ ‘Take away their homes and cars,’ ‘Restore the Special Commandant’s Office [of the Special Settlements],’ and so forth.”

According to Soviet investigators, Party committees in the area soon began to receive group letters from angry Kazakhs opposed to autonomy. The Kazakh Central Committee assured the Kremlin that local Party and Soviet organs were now enforcing measures toward the “localization” or containment of “anti-social displays” by instigators and other active participants in the crowd of demonstrators in Tselinograd, as well as their “prevention [of incidents] in other places.”

Bersch was correct to point out that Kazakhstan, as most other regions outside of the Volga, did not represent, for historical and political reasons, the ethnic German homeland’s ideal location. His memoirs stated that a cohort of ethnic German activists continued to uphold a strong “pro-Volga” sentiment in the weeks following the ethnic riots. Soviet archival records confirmed this general attitude as well. In July 1979, for example, the self-described “Action Committee of Soviet Germans” (Initiativnaya gruppa sovetskikh nemtsev) presented to the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet a scathing letter about the incident. This group formed one of the dissident cells in the national movement before Gorbachev. Its members, however, remain anonymous, though Bersch might have participated in view of his intimate familiarity with the course of events in Kazakhstan. In a secret KGB memorandum from that summer, Semen Tsvigun, the first deputy chairman of the USSR KGB and a close Brezhnev associate, reported on the letter’s receipt for the purpose of official discussion. With the letter as an attachment, he wrote:

Information has entered the offices of the state security organs, noting the fact that among

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45 Ibid.
the Soviet citizenry of German nationality, there are determined activists supporting the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Germans in the Volga Region. The so-called “Action Committee of Soviet Germans” prepared the following “Reference/Information” and “Appeal to the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet,” which they try to disseminate to places settled by the German population, with the goal of drawing attention to the question over autonomy and the mass collection of citizen signatures under these documents. The prescribed measures taken by the security agencies against the authors of the specified documents are the prevention and localisation [isolation] of negative developments, which can arise on this basis.46

Most of the information in the dissident letter substantiated the official Soviet account of the Kazakh demonstrations. Other details, such as the four reported dead Germans, have thus far remained unconfirmed, though additional ethnic German sources have also cited this figure. At any rate, the document expressed “pro-Volga” sentiments and an emotional attachment to the lost traditional Heimat (homeland) so often articulated by ethnic German activists after the 1960s and 1970s:

According to the available facts, on 6 June 1979 in the Politburo, the Central Committee of the CPSU accepted the resolution concerning the creation of autonomy for the Soviet Germans, with the aim of stopping the Germans’ migration to (departure for) the FRG [West Germany]. But it is not explained where it will be established. For the time being, this question is open.

The most likely place for future autonomy appears to be Kazakhstan, since the Party-administrative organs of the Kazakh SSR already examined all the necessary fundamental questions. . . . Territorial autonomy will include up to one or two rayons from the Petropavlov, Tselinograd, Karaganda, and Pavlodar Oblasts, its boundary being in such a

46 “Zapiska S. Tsviguna v TsK KPSS o rasprostranenii sredi sovetskikh nemtsev avtonomitskih materialov [July 1979],” in Aumann and Chebotareva, eds., p. 198.
way as to receive a new oblast with the centre in Ermentau.

In late June, the ukaz of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh SSR concerning the creation of autonomy was already expected [the Kazakh SSR’s affirmative response to the Politburo’s decision in Moscow]; however, an event took place, which influenced the acceptance of this decision. There, on 17-19 and 22 June, mass speeches [protests] occurred in Tselinograd, demonstrations on the part of the local inhabitants—Kazakhs, on the whole, who spoke harshly and negatively toward the creation of [German] autonomy on Kazakh soil. According to reliable information, on 22 June German blood was actually shed (wounding and killing four persons). These Kazakhs, in a harshly nationalist and chauvinist manner, expressed their own indignation at the Germans, saying that, in the difficult war period, we together shared bread crumbs, and, at present, these damned Germans want to take us and our land! And you really forgot about the twenty million lost in the Second World War? Etc., etc.

The brothers in blood [the Kazaks] are behind the course of events! Inasmuch as the creation of autonomy is already decided upon in principle in their Party, then its creation is naturally a question of time.

The Germans, however, are not indifferent to where autonomy will be established. The only proper and historical basis will be the restoration of the former Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the Volga Germans, and, precisely for this reason, all activists should now step forward, particularly the Germans, who are already living in the Volga Region. They live on the land, which was stained with the blood of their elders. In the struggle for the establishment of Soviet power in this land, their predecessors mastered this land [along the Volga]. It [the Volga Region] reveals itself to be the native soil, the homeland. Only its own kind can always contemplate it. In it, its own people need to be reborn and to build up their joyous future.

Autonomy for the Germans is only in the Volga Region! Lenin gave it to us! The Volga Region is our homeland, our cradle! We, the Soviet Germans, are an integral constituent part of the Soviet people. Our rights must be not restricted! Our autonomy in the Volga
Based on the dissident letter, certain ethnic German activists thus already appeared to be informed about the autonomy plan’s host of problems. The letter might support Bersch’s contention that members of the German community in northern Kazakhstan met with Comrade Korkin about the protests, or perhaps they even came into contact with ethnic German Communists privy to sensitive information. Subsequent to Korkin’s meeting, knowledge of the event would have spread among the dissidents themselves, compelling them to address the central authorities only a month later.

The archival record of high-level Soviet deliberations shortly after mid-June 1979 also indicated that anti-German sentiment remained a pressing problem. No conspiracy appeared to have taken place at the highest Soviet levels to subvert the oblast plan. If anything, the original plan was to integrate the group further in Soviet society and the economy, while at the same time offer a limited degree of ethnic autonomy.

On 28 June 1979, the Party Central Committee in Moscow also issued a memorandum concerning the negative demonstrations taking place in Tselinograd Oblast. Officials had gathered to discuss the events surrounding the preparation for and formation of German autonomy in the area, done in accordance with the CPSU Central Committee, the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, and the KGB. Not made public until the early 1990s, official Soviet records have now substantiated various eyewitness accounts, agreeing on many of the incident’s details. The memorandum noted:

On 16-19 June of this year in Tselinograd, circulated leaflets appeared. On the streets of the city, groups of youths assembled at the central square passed by with anti-autonomy slogans. In particular, there were students and school youths of Kazakh nationality.48

47 “Spravka [Initiativnaya gruppa sovetskikh nemtsev, July 1979],” in Aumann and Chebotareva, eds., pp. 198-199.
48 Petrovichev, Georgadze, and Chebrikov, in Aumann and Chebotareva, eds., p. 196.
It is prudent for scholars not always to take at face value the CPSU Central Committee’s undiluted criticism of local officials. Traditionally, when Soviet policies turned out badly, the central leadership assigned the blame to locals for improper policy implementation. The report, however, revealed the most damning evidence about the inadequate preparations for the autonomous region. The Central Committee concluded from its investigation that local political organs had approached the German oblast’s formation as “an ordinary measure, did not duly study its political character, did not spend time on the necessary clarification of activity with cadres and the most active members, overestimated the degree of international [socialist, anti-nationalist] upbringing of the population.” Moreover, it stated in no uncertain terms that some local officials acted “counter” to the proper introduction of German autonomy.\(^4^9\) As later happened under Gorbachev and Yeltsin, the political centre’s will toward the Germans was not properly enforced in the provinces, and some measure of consultation with local Germans and Kazakhs might also have eased the policy into place. The Kremlin memorandum stated that

As it turned out, many leaders themselves very vaguely presented [to the public] the substance of national autonomy, its political and practical meaning. Thus individual comrades by way of evidence pushed forward arguments against autonomy, the fact that the assimilation of Germans already became a reality, that the German populace joined Kazakh culture and customs and knows its native [German] language poorly, has mixed marriages, and therefore does not need autonomy. Such judgments were also expressed that the formation of German autonomy would intensify autonomy sentiments among the Uigarian [Uigur] population.\(^5^0\)

Indeed, Kazakhstan’s own ethnic diversity posed a special problem at this point. Some Kazakh officials feared—and with good reason—that ethnic German autonomy could arouse similar aspirations among the republic’s other minorities. In 1979, only 36 per cent of the republic’s

\(^{4^9}\) Ibid., pp. 196-197.
\(^{5^0}\) Ibid., p. 197.
population was Kazakh. Since the 1930s and 1940s, the Kazakh SSR had become the repository of many deported peoples as well as other migrations by different nationalities.\textsuperscript{51}

The 28 June 1979 Kremlin report included the results of an exchange of opinions in the Central Committee of Kazakhstan’s Communist Party concerning the riots. Kazakh officials were displeased with the course of developments. During one discussion, Kunaev, one of the autonomy plan’s central directors, expressed anxiety for a region that displayed “unhealthy national manifestations.” Kazakh officials also stated that the Central Committee in Kazakhstan, in executing the 31 May 1979 decree of the Politburo of the CPSU’s Central Committee, had done everything in order to develop the formation of German autonomy. Kunaev, however, said that for the implementation of preliminary projects and the creation of positive public opinion, the government needed yet more time to deliberate on the issue. There came the proposal to draw up with Party organisations a solution to the problem of “anti-social displays.” Similar to what the Kremlin later stated about local anti-German demonstrations along the Volga in 1990 and 1991, when the issue of autonomy appeared again, Kazakh regional officials in this case concluded that it was necessary “to intensify the clarification and propaganda of the principles of Soviet national-state establishment, Leninist nationality policies, educational activity with the different categories of the population.”\textsuperscript{52} For the next several months, the Soviet authorities discussed various proposals, thus still leaving open the possibility of erecting the German oblast.

The 28 June 1979 Central Committee report acknowledged, moreover, the ethnic Germans’ positive reception to the idea of an autonomous oblast in the Kazakh SSR. Of course, the group had little input in the decision “from above,” but it seemed that even critical, “pro-Volga” individuals at least would have been receptive to the idea. The report suggested that for the ethnic Germans, an oblast, if it were possible, was better than nothing—in fact, it might even represent an initial step toward greater autonomy, such as an ASSR. Thus the Soviet strategy as formulated between 1976 and 1979 would have garnered some support and success from


\textsuperscript{52} Petrovichev, Georgadze, and Chebrikov in Aumann and Chebotareva, eds., p. 197.
segments of the ethnic group, if the regime could have guaranteed ethnic Germans legal and physical protection in the region. Emphasizing the group’s concerns about the recent uproar and even violence, the CPSU Central Committee observed that

Citizens of German nationality are favorably disposed to the idea of forming an autonomous oblast. However, the occurrence of events in Tselinograd evokes in them a definite anxiety. Some fear that in the presence of a negative reaction by the native [Kazakh] population to the creation of autonomy, perhaps the idea itself is compromised, and relations between Kazakhs and Germans are deteriorating. In view of these events, there are also pronouncements [among some Germans] that German autonomy would be restored in the Volga Region, or in the form of an ASSR at another location.  

Kazakh SSR officials took Comrade Kunaev’s advice to investigate further into the autonomy matter, but in view of the previous year’s events, an official affirmation of the oblast’s formation was ultimately not forthcoming. In Moscow, the CPSU Central Committee also determined to rescind all resolutions concerning the formation of German autonomy in Tselinograd. As a result, on 19 February 1980 Deputy Chief A. Perun of the Organizing Section of the CPSU’s Central Committee reported that all government proposals for the oblast were withdrawn at that time.  

It is crucial to observe that the decision to terminate the oblast plan also occurred shortly following the Soviets’ mid-December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. This military move marked the end of détente, thus reviving Cold War tensions to the high levels not seen since the late 1960s. A shift in Soviet foreign policy might have therefore influenced final deliberations at this time, especially Soviet concerns to maintain stability among Muslim populations in Soviet Kazakhstan because of its proximity to Afghanistan.  

Other complicating political factors probably played a hand in defeating the oblast plan as well.

53 Ibid.
In recent years, different scholarly opinions have indeed arisen over why leading Soviet officials in Kazakhstan blocked ethnic German autonomy at the time. According to some observers, Kunaev, the First General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Kazakhstan, remained ardent in his desire to preserve his SSR’s territorial and political integrity. His well-known protectiveness of the republic, despite pressure from Kremlin and Almaty officials, led him to oppose the autonomous oblast’s creation. He was also apparently concerned with the potential political threat posed by Andrei Braun, who seemed to be the Party’s likely choice to administer the new oblast. Unlike the pro-Kazakh Kunaev, Braun tended to favor certain ethnic minority sentiments in the republic, including support for the various ethnic groups’ territorial ambitions in the region. Several years later, however, Braun claimed that he was opposed to autonomy demands in the region. At any rate, Kunaev feared that one day Braun would assume his high political post, and this apparent power-struggle in the Party’s upper echelons might have proved to be a most significant factor in dooming the oblast almost from the beginning.

Later on, Kunaev explained his own reasons for opposing the German autonomous region by claiming that the ethnic Germans themselves had flooded the Kremlin with letters opposing the creation of this autonomous unit in north Kazakhstan. Instead, he argued, they supported autonomy along the Volga or in other traditional homelands in the USSR and that Kazakhstan would not have resolved the broader German autonomy question. There was truth behind Kunaev’s assertion, though the CPSU Central Committee’s report in June 1979 on the whole seemed to point out that many ethnic Germans would still have gone along with the oblast plan, assuming legal and physical protections were implemented there. In addition, despite what had happened to ethnic Germans during the Stalinist period and even shortly after their release from confinement, Kunaev still maintained that the ethnic Germans had always maintained good relations with their fellow Kazakhs, that this minority had been fully integrated into society, and that no ethnic discrimination had taken place.56

Whatever the motivations in the Party leadership, it appeared that indeed several critical factors

56 Ibid., pp. 157-159.
worked together to produce the events of 1979-1980. The Tselinograd plan was dead. For the remainder of the 1980s, the Soviet Union continued to do battle with the dissident emigration movement and international human rights observers. Both the Kremlin and the ethnic Germans lost a vital opportunity, the first serious proposal since the mid-1920s, to establish a federative autonomy arrangement for this nationality group.

CONCLUSION
This Soviet initiative for Tselinograd oblast arrived at the pinnacle of Ostpolitik in the late 1970s and thus represented a measured political and ideological response to various domestic and foreign pressures. The plan, however, failed to achieve the desired results and demonstrated the complicated nature of Soviet nationality affairs. The political and demographic consequences of this failure became more apparent following the eras of Gorbachev and Yeltsin in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Moscow’s brief loss of absolute control in the periphery of Kazakhstan anticipated future problems with nationality affairs during the crucial Gorbachev and Yeltsin years. The government found it increasingly difficult to quell anti-German sentiment and give assurances to all parties involved about the autonomy plan’s actual intentions. At the highest levels, Soviet officials soon realised that they had their work cut out for them. In the 1940s, the Stalinist regime, with state resources at its full disposal, had directed vicious anti-German activities and propaganda. The Tselinograd episode exposed for the first time the limits to which the post-Stalinist regime could enforce a top-down policy of ethnic German “full rehabilitation.” Moscow and Almaty now learned that even more “national re-education” was required to reconcile stubborn national differences. The regime’s earlier postwar failures to publicise the group’s exoneration in December 1955 and again in August 1964 did not help resolve this public relations problem either.

After Tselinograd, the illegal emigration movement of ethnic Germans struggled on, Soviet repression held steady, and international calls for human rights continued to resound. Soviet countermeasures now simply tried to hold the line and prevent the Communist police-state’s
steady erosion. In the mid-1980s, during another cycle of rising Cold War tensions, international problems posed by the USSR’s unresolved “German question” only persisted.

Meanwhile, the ethnic Germans went without their own national-territorial “container(s)” at a most critical juncture when the USSR splintered only several years later. In the late 1970s, for a brief moment, the Soviet regime at least had contemplated the implementation of an ethnic German territorial-administrative unit for the first time since the abolition of the group’s remaining autonomy in 1941. In the post-Soviet Communist era, the oblast could have helped the ethnic group secure what would have become a more comprehensive autonomy arrangement, which in turn might have even helped avert the group’s rapid and dramatic exodus to the West.

Only a few short years after the Tselinograd incident, Andropov succeeded Brezhnev as the CPSU General Secretary, serving in that capacity from 1982 until his death in 1984. In October 1983, an already ailing Andropov gave a speech marking the sixty-sixth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, when he acknowledged the ethnic Germans’ economic contributions to Kazakhstan and the Soviet Union. His prescient public remarks led to a gradual, piecemeal improvement in cultural and educational rights for Soviet citizens of German nationality. By the late 1980s, however, even the Kremlin had concluded that fundamental reform was essential in all spheres of Soviet society, including nationality affairs. Gorbachev was thrust into this turbulent, but promising, period of change. Significantly, he had risen to power as Andropov’s protégé. Like his driven mentor, he exhibited a keen awareness of the country’s basic socio-economic problems, though he still underestimated the region’s festering national problems.

One of Gorbachev’s earliest reforms included the right of Soviet citizens to immigrate. In 1987, ethnic Germans began to leave the USSR for West (later united) Germany in significant numbers, becoming a flood a few short years later, a phenomenon that bore striking resemblance to Russian Jews who departed for Israel. The 1989 Soviet census registered 957,518 Germans in Kazakhstan and 841,295 in Russia. The West German government viewed these figures with

58 In the late 1980s, new Soviet leader Gorbachev even accused Kunaev of political corruption on an array of issues, though these were apparently unrelated to the Tselinograd affair.
astonishment at the time, believing that only 50,000 to 100,000 were living in Kazakhstan. Based on the “right of return” policy, more than two million ethnic Germans from the former USSR have immigrated to Germany since the early 1990s. Most of them did so in the first half of that decade, as the German government gradually tightened up immigration restrictions on ethnic German “settlers from abroad” (*Aussiedler*).

Growing ethnic tensions and economic decline prompted the mass migration of ethnic Germans in the years after Gorbachev. As a result, Kazakhstan can today claim only about 180,000 ethnic Germans, down from nearly one million in 1989. In the Russian Federation, only about 400,000-600,000 ethnic Germans remain, some having fled the Central Asian states in recent years. After 1989, other former Soviet republics in Central Asia have witnessed an equally significant depletion of their ethnic German citizens, many of whom were among their most celebrated labourers.59

In the last several years, both Russia and Kazakhstan have scrambled to preserve and perhaps somehow even to add to their dwindling ethnic German populations. For example, Russian leader Vladimir Putin has appealed to “homesick” émigrés in the West to return to the Motherland. Because of its potential demographic implosion, Russia has tried to entice its former citizens to come home. Thanks to oil and natural gas revenues, Putin and his supporters have become convinced that distributing cash and social benefits over the next several years will lure at least some of these former citizens back to Russia. In 2007, Moscow implemented a programme worth more than 2.8 billion rubles ($109 million) to improve housing, health care, and education and perhaps in this way help to convince ethnic Germans to immigrate eastward.60

59 J. Otto Pohl, history lecturer at the University of Ghana (Legon), has observed the rise of “ethnocracies” in the Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union, whereby the concept of minority rights remains negligible, despite the region’s strong multinational character. See Dec. 2007 email correspondence. Pohl gained first-hand experience in the region after spending a few years teaching at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. See also “Berlin Helps Ethnic Germans in Eastern Europe,” in *Spiegel Online*, 11 Nov. 2013, at http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/berlin-pays-20-million-euros-a-year-for-ethnic-germans-in-eastern-europe-a-934159.html [last visited 18 Nov. 2013].

Similarly, Germany and Kazakhstan for the past decade have tried to build diplomatic bridges and mutual economic incentives by keeping productive citizens of German ancestry in Central Asia. Both governments have hoped that the ethnic Germans in Kazakhstan might one day establish a geopolitical “bridge” to permit united Germany and the Soviet successor states various opportunities to advance a mutually beneficial relationship. Recently, for instance, Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev has issued state citizenship to more than 2,000 German returnees.\(^{61}\)

General skepticism, nevertheless, has continued to plague notions that significant numbers of former Soviet citizens would leave the West for the ex-Soviet empire. Critics have included ethnic German activist Adolf Braun, who remarked that “Russia has missed the boat.... People here are no longer prepared to integrate Germans from Russia [into society] as they did in the 1970s and ’80s.” In Stuttgart, Germany, the National Association of Germans from Russia has also opined that current Russian plans to encourage large populations to settle back in Siberia and Central Asia would have worked had such measures been approved a few decades ago. Even the Kremlin acknowledges the immense difficulties they encounter in convincing former countrymen to return home.\(^ {62}\) Perhaps the Tselinograd episode of June 1979 had marked the point where the former USSR “missed the boat.” In the near future, scholars might find it possible to answer this question with any certainty.

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62 See Twickel.