Research Article

From Tsarist Rule to Independence: The Transformation of Ethnic Identities in Kyrgyzstan

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This paper explores the stability and variability of economic and cultural characteristics among different ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan. It examines historical and social processes shaping distinctions between nomadic and settled populations, indigenous and European settlers, and urban and rural residents. Using a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from censuses and archival materials with qualitative insights from field research and social media analysis, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of these distinctions from the tsarist era to the present. Findings reveal that state policies and historical contexts significantly influence economic and cultural disparities among ethnic groups. Despite historical transformations, certain cultural elements persist, affecting current socio-economic dynamics. The study underscores the need for tailored state policies that respect ethnic specificities and historical contexts to promote social integration and economic development.

1. Introduction

Economic data are typically presented for entire nations or specific sub-national units yet culturally distinct groups often transcend strict geographical boundaries and are linked to ethnicity. Despite vast cultural differences among these groups—rooted in historical conditions language religion and societal values like individualism versus collectivism—economic analyses of these disparities are rare. This paper investigates the impact of state interventions on the specific characteristics of ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan from the Tsarist era to the present.

This study aims to investigate how state interventions have shaped the specific characteristics of ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan from the Tsarist era to the present. By examining historical and

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contemporary policies, the research seeks to understand the adaptation and development of diverse ethnic groups. The hypothesis posits that state policies play a significant role in shaping ethnic group characteristics, influencing their adaptation and socio-economic trajectories. This study will particularly focus on the examples of Koreans, Dungans, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Russians to illustrate how state interventions have influenced their socio-economic development and cultural transformation.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing current social and political challenges in the region, such as ethnic tensions and economic disparities. Researchers across various fields, including ethnography, medicine, criminology, and sociology, have investigated racial and ethnic disparities, uncovering significant differences in health, crime rates, and social outcomes[1].

Existing literature on ethnic disparities in Central Asia often overlooks the nuanced differences in socio-economic behaviours and cultural practices that transcend strict geographical boundaries. For instance, Laruelle[2] highlights the broad socio-economic changes in Central Asia but does not delve into the specific cultural practices of different ethnic groups. Similarly, Reeves[3] discusses the political dynamics but lacks a detailed examination of economic behaviours rooted in historical contexts. This study fills this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of how these distinctions have evolved from the tsarist era through the Soviet period to the present day. For instance, our study demonstrates how Soviet policies of collectivization and industrialization led to economic changes between urban and rural populations in Kyrgyzstan. While urban populations, often composed of ethnic Russians and other European groups, had access to better job opportunities and education, rural populations, primarily composed of Kyrgyz, Dungans, and Koreans, were more engaged in traditional agricultural activities. However, these dynamics began to shift due to state interventions.

Kyrgyzstan is an example of both stability and change in cultural elements within its diverse ethnic groups, highlighting the importance of understanding how history and state policies have shaped the specific lifestyles of ethnic minorities. Recognising these nuances allows for the development of tailored policies addressing the unique educational, economic, and social needs of specific ethnic groups.

2. Materials and Methods

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative data from national censuses and archival materials with qualitative insights from field research and social media analysis. Detailed descriptions of data collection methods, including sampling techniques and interview protocols, are provided to ensure the study's replicability and reproducibility. This approach analyzes how historical and state policies have shaped economic and cultural differences between ethnic groups in what is now Kyrgyzstan from the Tsarist period to the present day.

The findings will contribute to the development of tailored policies that respect ethnic specificities and historical contexts, thereby promoting social integration and economic development in Kyrgyzstan and beyond. Demographic statistics for Kyrgyzstan come from censuses dating back to the Tsarist era in 1897, when 194 ethnic groups were recorded, the most diverse classification in the history of Soviet censuses[4]. These data are crucial for understanding how historical and state policies have influenced the economic and cultural differences between these groups. Results from the unpublished 1937 census, later deemed 'illegal' due to a significant population decline in the USSR, showed more 'believers' than 'non-believers', contradicting Soviet atheist propaganda. Therefore, religious affiliation was omitted in subsequent censuses. The most credible data from this era originate from the 1937 archival materials, not the 1939 census. Subsequent Soviet censuses (1959, 1970, 1979, and 1989) documented ethnic distribution and the urban-rural divide across republics. Although potentially ideologically skewed, these data are valued for their structural resemblance to post-Soviet censuses in independent Kyrgyzstan. Archival evidence highlighting periods of data manipulation further substantiates the reliability, representativeness, and validity of these records.

Field research conducted in Kyrgyzstan from 2008 to 2023 encompassed qualitative studies in regions including Bishkek, Chui, Issyk-Kul, Osh, Dzhalalabad, Batken, Naryn, and Talas Oblasts. This research employed semi-structured interviews with ethnic minorities and the majority, using snowball sampling through ethnic associations to highlight generational differences, acknowledging the method's limitations in representativeness[5]. The research systematically integrates quantitative data with qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and cultural disparities among ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan. The research specifically focused on the socio-economic and cultural disparities affecting individuals within the productive (15-65) and post-productive (over 65) age groups, as these dynamics are particularly pertinent to these demographics.

Respondents were exclusively selected from these two categories to ensure that the data accurately reflected the lived experiences of the adult population, who are most significantly affected by the socio-economic trends under investigation. Although the Kyrgyz statistical office defines the productive age group as beginning at 15, respondents were selected only from those aged 18 and above, in accordance with Kyrgyz law, which recognises 18 as the age of legal adulthood. Consequently, no respondents were included from the 15-18 age group. Nonetheless, the broader national demographic proportions—under 15s at 30%, productive (15-65) at 65%, and post-productive (over 65) at 5%—were mirrored in the study design to maintain a representative demographic structure. The majority of respondents were drawn from the productive age group (65%), as individuals in this category are the most actively engaged in socio-economic activities and are directly influenced by the cultural and economic dynamics explored in the study. This focus ensures that the findings are relevant to the group most affected by labour market fluctuations, economic policies, and cultural changes. The post-productive group (over 65) was also included to account for the distinct socio-economic challenges encountered in retirement. This approach aligns with established research protocols in socio-economic studies that concentrate on workforce and post-workforce populations[6][7], as minors typically do not engage in economic activities or experience the same socio-cultural pressures as adults.

Achieving this balance proved challenging due to traditional family roles fostering male predominance in interviews, a bias mitigated by employing female Kyrgyz students as interviewers to better engage women and younger subjects. These qualitative insights enhanced and clarified the quantitative data. Furthermore, to evaluate current Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations in southern Kyrgyzstan, internet discussion analysis was utilised. This method, examining social media and forum posts, elucidated how ethnic perceptions shape state interventions and historical narratives, complementing field research often constrained by participants' reluctance to voice opinions openly. Discussions on platforms like YouTube, VK, and Telegram about ethnic issues were analysed using keywords such as 'Uzbeks', 'Kyrgyz', and 'South Kyrgyzstan'. The content was pre-processed with tokenisation and stop word removal before applying the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model to identify and quantify dominant themes and sentiments from keyword clusters. Analysis of approximately 9,000 posts, excluding non-informative content, provided insights into online perceptions of ethnic groups, their linguistic and cultural distinctions, and their broader social and political implications. Natural language processing (NLP) and AI-based sentiment analysis algorithms assessed the positive,

negative, and neutral emotions, deepening the understanding of the emotional nuances of the topics discussed.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Ethnic situation in the territory of present-day Kyrgyzstan at the end of the nineteenth century

Central Asia, home to diverse cultures and peoples, has influenced the culture of present-day Kyrgyzstan. The ethnogenesis of the region, completed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries under Russian rule, still showed undefined ethnic identities and ethnonyms at the time of the first general census of the Russian Empire in 1897[8]. This section explores how these historical state interventions laid the groundwork for the transformation of ethnic identities in Kyrgyzstan, particularly focusing on how state-driven policies influenced the economic and cultural characteristics of groups like the Koreans and Kyrgyz. The connection between historical and contemporary populations and their ethnonyms in Kyrgyzstan is ambiguous, making the reconstruction of ethnic compositions complex due to discrepancies between historical and modern administrative boundaries. Ethnic groups in current Kyrgyzstan are categorised into three origins[9]:

1. Indigenous peoples from across Turkestan include modern-day Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and Tajiks; Kalmyks from Chinese Turkestan; and Muslims identified as Uyghurs and Dungans under Soviet rule, predominantly farmers.
2. During late 19th-century tsarist colonisation, Stolypin reforms, and until the onset of World War II, diverse ethnic groups migrated to Central Asia. These included Russians, Malorussians (later Ukrainians), Belarusians, Germans, Jews, and Tatars, generally more educated than the locals and often seeking affordable land for farming.
3. Various ethnicities deported to Central Asia before and during World War II from the Far East, Southern Volga, Caspian, and Caucasus regions included Koreans, Germans, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Karachayevs, Crimean Tatars, Meskhetian Turks, Kurds, and Azerbaijanis, moved to the region primarily in the 1930s and 1940s.

Migration waves brought challenges. Russian immigrants began settling in Turkestan in the mid-nineteenth century, welcomed cautiously by local governments to prevent conflicts. The 1890s

Russian famine increased immigration, leading to intensified land issues after the Stolypin reform[10]. Initially, locals in present-day Kyrgyzstan accepted Russian serfdom, but growing discontent over land seizures and conscription led to a mass uprising against the Russian government in 1916[11].

Today's Kyrgyzstan territory was formed from parts of the Semirechenskaya oblast (Pishpek and Przhevalsk districts), Fergana oblast (Osh, Andijan, Namangan, Margelan, Kokand districts), Syrdarya oblast (Aulieata district), and Samarkand oblast (Khojent district). These districts now stretch into neighbouring countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), causing inaccuracies in ethnic composition calculations. Yet, they offer a wealth of interesting data. In 1897, the combined population of these districts was 2.34 million, with no ethnic group forming a significant majority, as ethnicity was defined solely by language.

Language	Proportion
Sarts	34%
Kyrgyz-Kaisack	23%
Turkic dialects without distinction	11%
Uzbek	9%
Tajik	9%
Kara-Kyrgyz	9%
Velikorussian (Russian)	1%
Kashgars	1%
Malorussian	1%
Chinese	1%
Other	1%

Table 1. Linguistic (ethnic) composition of districts in the territory of present-day Kyrgyzstan in 1897.

Source: Nikolay A. Troynitskiy[8].

The Sarts were the predominant group at 34%, followed by the Kyrgyz-Kaisaks at 23%, and "Turkic dialects without distinction" ranking third. These demographic ratios foreshadowed the establishment of new nations and union republics in the Soviet Union. Notably, the future Kyrgyz nation, forming a union republic in the 1930s, accounted for only 9% of the population (as Kara-Kyrgyz) in the area of the future Kyrgyz SSR four decades earlier. Additionally, the Russian demographic constituted about 1%. Russian colonization focused on present-day Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan. Between 1847-1867, 15,000 Russian settlers relocated to this region (Semirechye), with another 25,000 arriving between 1868-1882. By the early twentieth century, 326 Russian colonies in Turkestan housed a total of 248,500 people, propelled by harsh conditions and widespread famine in Russia[12].

3.2. The Bolshevik Revolution and Stalin's Rule

The formation of new Central Asian nations primarily stems from the period post-Bolshevik Revolution, particularly after 1923 when Soviet leaders began addressing ethnic issues, resulting in substantial ethnic-based administrative reorganisations in 1924. Initially, some groups received autonomy, which was later elevated to union republic status. The Soviet role in the 1920s in shaping Central Asian ethnicities was significant, involving both the establishment of the Turkestan Autonomous Republic with Turkic Tatar as its sole language and ongoing administrative revisions due to concerns about its increasing influence and attempts to forge stronger ties with Turkey. This led to its dissolution in 1936 and the creation of new republics, each with its own titular nation and language. After the USSR's dissolution, these became independent states, significantly transforming regional notions of nationhood. Stalin's policies had a profound impact on various ethnic groups. For example, Koreans were deported from the Far East to Central Asia in the 1930s. This forced migration significantly altered their socio-economic status, transforming them from agrarian communities into skilled agriculturalists who later adapted to urban environments. Similarly, the Kyrgyz, initially a nomadic group with limited education, were transformed by Soviet policies into a titular nation with enhanced educational and economic opportunities.

According to Ingeborg Baldauf[13], these policies in Central Asia created an entirely new understanding of nation - in the pre-Soviet period, the term 'nation' in Central Asia was understood primarily

geographically; in the Soviet period, it became established as a primary cultural definition that included the use of one's own language.

To outside observers, the USSR's approach may have seemed like a generous offer to promote national development through political autonomy. Soviet propaganda portrayed the national plight under the tsarist regime and envisioned historical nations from the outset, although they were not officially created by the Bolshevik government until the 1920s and 1930s. A textbook excerpt from the 1950s illustrates this perspective:

> The tsarist government's administrative divisions overlooked national characteristics and territorial distribution, leading to borders that mixed populations of various nationalities and fragmented cohesive groups. This lack of distinct administrative centres in Central Asia impeded economic and cultural development. In 1924, Central Asian nations collaborated to establish a new political and administrative framework that considered the economic and political interests of each nation, thereby addressing these earlier deficiencies.[14]

One can get an idea of the reality of such an agreement of the Central Asian population from the testimonies of the respondents, who recalled that the population was, on the one hand, largely illiterate and, on the other, had no distinct national idea:

> Many Kyrgyz didn't return from the labour front. They couldn't speak Russian and were illiterate. Even when Kyrgyzstan became an independent unit in 1924, most people had no idea about a single Soviet country or a socialist homeland. (Respondent from Bishkek, 2015, Dungan nation, male, 69 years, historian.)

The reality, however, was more complex than the Bolshevik slogans suggested, as the ethno-demographic processes of the 1920s and 1930s resulted in policies that disproportionately affected different ethnic groups. For example, the Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Azerbaijanis in the 1930s assimilated smaller Muslim peoples on their periphery[15].

Some groups underwent significant classification changes in this process—for example, during the formation of the Uzbek SSR, the Sarts were officially reclassified as Uzbeks, despite previously being recognized as a distinct group. By the 1926 Soviet census, the Sart designation had been entirely removed, and its 1.5 million members were now officially categorized as Uzbeks[16].

> Nowadays, "Sarts" isn't an ethnic group; it's used derogatorily in southern Kyrgyzstan and parts of Kazakhstan. In northern Kyrgyzstan, people use "Sarts" to refer to southerners—Kyrgyz from the south who share cultural and linguistic traits with Uzbeks. (Respondent from Kizyl Kiya, South Kyrgyzstan, 2015, Uzbek nation, male, 88 years, retired, formerly an economist at the kolkhoz.)

After Kyrgyzstan became an autonomous unit, the Kyrgyz population sharply increased, as noted in the 1926 census. Nationality was then recorded on identity cards, and different nationalities gained varying levels of prestige; those corresponding to a Soviet republic were considered more prestigious than those without an autonomous unit.

Soviet statistics reveal significant growth: Uzbeks increased by 5.37 times, Kyrgyz by 3.78 times, and Turkmen by 3.04 times over 30 years, comparing the 1897 and 1927 censuses. However, Kazakhs only grew by 1.01 times during this period, largely due to the Soviet leadership's aggressive policies towards herd owners in present-day Kazakhstan[8].

Under usual circumstances, population growth stems from migration or higher birth rates. However, intra-Soviet migration is improbable for these groups, primarily located in Central Asia. The significant growth rates, such as the annual 53.7‰ increase required for the Uzbeks—a potential world record—are unlikely to arise solely from natural increases. Instead, the actual explanation is rooted in the ethno-demographic and political-administrative dynamics of the 1920s and 1930s in the USSR, which advantaged certain ethnicities while actively assimilating those deemed non-preferred[15][8].

It is significant that in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz nationality has not always been perceived as 'prestigious.' In southern Kyrgyzstan, especially, Uzbek nationality often carried prestige, supported by a large and influential Uzbek minority that was politically and economically important. Contrary to isolation, there was active encouragement and pressure from the Uzbek official apparatus on minority group members (Dungans, Uyghurs) to register as Uzbeks[17].

> In Kyrgyzstan, Uyghurs took advantage of career opportunities by registering as Uzbeks, thanks to language similarities and social benefits. This led many southern Uyghurs, especially those from Kashgar, to adopt Uzbek nationality. Meanwhile, in northern Kyrgyzstan, Uyghurs have kept their language, though some now mainly speak Russian. (Respondents from Bazar Kurgan, South Kyrgyzstan, 2017, Uyghur nation, married couple, approximately 45 years old, farmers.)

The 1926 Soviet census reveals that, unlike during the Tsarist era, state intervention led to the titular population becoming a majority in the Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic, increasing from 9% at the end of the nineteenth century to 66%.

In the future Kyrgyz Union Republic, substantial cultural and educational disparities existed among ethnic groups. The Kyrgyz suffered from a high illiteracy rate of 95%, a challenge also prevalent among other Turkic groups such as Uzbeks and Kashgars (later Uyghurs). Despite their minority status, Tatars were key educators, with over half literate. They significantly shaped the local intelligentsia, founded Kyrgyz schools, and contributed to industrial development.

The Kyrgyz formed a numerical majority in 'their' autonomous republic, yet it was predominantly uneducated, with only 1% residing in cities. Due to the lack of Kyrgyz intellectuals, key positions were often filled by Russians or Moscow-appointed individuals. Additionally, former World War I prisoners from Germany or Austria contributed to Bolshevisation. The appointment of Russians to senior roles decreased significantly in the 1960s. In the 1920s, Kyrgyzstan embarked on communist-style socio-economic reforms, focusing on industrialisation and collectivisation. This led to significant industrial development in the north, particularly in energy, metallurgy, and textiles. By the 1940s, Kyrgyzstan produced 40% of Central Asian coal, excluding Kazakhstan. This industrial growth was complemented by the expansion of social infrastructure, including mass housing, educational institutions through the LIKBEZ campaign to eradicate illiteracy, and major irrigation projects, resulting in a nearly tenfold increase in GDP by 1940 compared to 1913[18].

Slavs, many of whom had resided in Kyrgyzstan since Tsarist times or migrated from the European part of the USSR, predominantly oversaw industrialisation in the region due to their education and skills. While industrialisation generated new job opportunities and prompted population shifts across the USSR, its impact on Kyrgyzstan's ethnic makeup occurred gradually. The 1926 census revealed that around 9% of the Kyrgyz ASSR's permanent residents hailed from outside the republic. Among these intra-Union migrants, Russians (42%), Kazakhs (19%), and Ukrainians (13%) were the most prevalent[16].

In the early stages of Soviet nationality policy there was outward support for national distinctiveness, education and the creation of autonomous units based on ethnicity. From the mid-1920s, however, a significant ideological shift took place in the USSR. From 1927, a strong policy of russification (or sovietisation) was implemented. Newly built schools adopted Russian as the primary language of instruction, with predominantly Russian teachers. Russian became the dominant language of

discourse, relegating native languages to family communication or cultural activities such as theatre and song. By the late 1930s, any mention of national distinctiveness was considered a 'nationalist deviation', leading to the execution of many Soviet leaders who headed autonomous national units between 1937 and 1938[19].

The 1930s undoubtedly stand out as the most horrific period in Soviet history, characterised by Stalin's purges and the highest number of judicial executions. As well as targeting political opponents, the era saw the start of forced deportations of entire ethnic groups deemed untrustworthy by the Bolshevik regime. The first ethnic deportation took place in 1937, with the involuntary mass transfer of Koreans from the Russian Far East to Central Asia. The last mass deportation, in 1944, was of Crimean Tatars. Initially targeted at Kazakhstan and partly at Uzbekistan, these deportations eventually spread to other Central Asian republics, including Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as migration restrictions eased.

The consolidation of Bolshevik power, culminating in Stalinist repression, precipitated substantial ethnic transformations in what is now Kyrgyzstan. This phase started with the creation of a union republic, initially autonomous within Russia and later elevated to full union republic status in 1936. Although officially declared a national republic with the Kyrgyz as the titular nation, census data indicate that Kyrgyz nationality, like other new nationalities in Central Asia, was largely engineered by Moscow, amalgamating diverse ethnic groups. Despite this, the Kyrgyz were not a privileged class, predominantly illiterate and rural. Russians, both established residents and new arrivals, dominated the cultural, political, and economic realms, especially in northern Kyrgyzstan. Conversely, in southern Kyrgyzstan, Uzbeks formed a substantial part of the elite and, following the formation of the Uzbek Union Republic, wielded considerable economic and political influence. Russification affected both regions, impacting linguistic and cultural dimensions.

3.3. The Period After Stalin's Death

After Stalin's death in March 1953, there was some relaxation of central Soviet management. Using Koreans as a case study, we analyse how changes in Soviet policy after Stalin's death affected economic and cultural differences between ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan. Khrushchev's reforms initiated changes in the party apparatus, and some previously persecuted individuals were rehabilitated. The late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed the gradual political and national empowerment of the Kyrgyz elite, albeit initially at a slow pace, mainly within local political

structures. However, leading political and economic positions remained predominantly held by Russians, who accounted for two-thirds of the membership of the Kyrgyz Communist Party in 1970.

The all-Union census of 1959 marked the peak of the Russian population in Central Asia at 27%. Subsequent censuses showed fluctuations: a small decrease of 1% in 1970, followed by an increase to 7.7% in 1989, then a significant decrease after the collapse of the USSR. In the 1959 census, Kazakhstan had the highest proportion of Russians (42.7%), followed by Kyrgyzstan (30.2%), Turkmenistan (17.3%), Uzbekistan (13.5%) and Tajikistan (13.3%). Russians were unevenly distributed, with more than 50% of the population in eastern and northern Kazakhstan and in the capitals of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan[20].

The appointment of Turdakun Usubaliyev as First Secretary of the Communist Party in 1961 marked a significant increase in Russian influence in the Kyrgyz SSR. Although his political stance remained ambiguous, his language policy effectively promoted Russian in the economic, cultural, and educational spheres. By the mid-1980s, only three of the 69 primary schools in the capital, Frunze, taught in Kyrgyz, and the adoption of Russian words into the Kyrgyz language became noticeable during this period[21]. During his tenure, Turdakun Usubaliyev skillfully protected Kyrgyzstan's economic interests by securing significant subsidies from the all-Soviet treasury and promoted ethnic Kyrgyz to local leadership positions, leading to a 150% expansion of the state bureaucratic apparatus. However, this biased leadership composition contributed to ethnic unrest, particularly in the southern region where ethnic Uzbeks, a substantial part of the population, were underrepresented in local government due to Usubaliyev's policies[22]. Usubaliyev's nuanced approach to national culture promoted the emergence of a nascent national identity that emphasized local-geographic social structures, particularly clans, over broader ethnic groups.

3.3.1. Koreans in Kyrgyzstan: From Deportation to Educational Success

The cultural transformation of some ethnic groups, with economic consequences, can be demonstrated by the example of Koreans deported to Central Asia. Initially agrarian and maintaining distinct cultural practices, Koreans were significantly impacted by Stalin's deportations in the 1930s. Despite a long cultural tradition, 78% of adults in Korea were still illiterate after World War II. These relocations forced Koreans to adapt, transforming them into skilled agriculturalists. Over time, they transitioned to urban settings, focusing on education and professional development. By the Soviet era, Koreans had become one of the most educated and urbanised ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan. However,

this came at a cost: significant Russification due to Soviet policies aimed at integrating ethnic minorities, involving the adoption of the Russian language and culture.

After resettling in Russia in the 19th century, Koreans adopted Russian cultural elements for economic benefits, including lower taxes. Citizenship required loyalty, language proficiency, and acceptance of Orthodoxy. Full integration was slow due to cultural differences, with Koreans maintaining distinct housing, hairstyles, cuisine, and mutual solidarity over individualism. By the Bolshevik era, Koreans in the Russian Far East had largely integrated into the socio-political, economic, and cultural life, although they remained concentrated in majority areas[17].

Shortly after their deportation to Central Asia, Koreans established collective farms in often desolate areas, gaining respect from locals for their extraordinary industriousness, notably transforming swamps into fertile fields. Their work ethic and harmonious relations with locals contrasted with their interactions with other nationalities in the Central Asian republics.

> Our parents and grandparents earned their wealth through hard work, and everyone respected that. Sometimes, though, locals would taunt us for eating dogs. It was different for other resettled people who were into trade. For instance, the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs had worse relations with the Meskhetian Turks, whose wealth came from trade, and they had similar issues with the Jewish population. (Respondent from Bishkek, born in Kazakhstan, 2013, Korean nation, male, 58 years, journalist.)

Until Stalin's death in 1953, Koreans, like other deported nationals, were deemed unreliable by the state, a form of collective punishment despite their innocence. During World War II, instead of being conscripted into the army, Koreans were compelled to serve in the so-called labour army, akin to a penal camp across the USSR.

Post-Stalin, the treatment of deported peoples, including Koreans, improved significantly, with some receiving high accolades such as the Hero of Socialist Labour, which had previously been unthinkable. The post-war era marked a significant shift towards the integration of Central Asian Koreans into mainstream society. Although education was still inaccessible for many, it held great value in traditional Korean culture, where historically, passing the civil service exam assured lifelong security. Education was traditionally a privilege of the ruling yangban class, which was subject to change through the necessary civil exams, preventing any hereditary claim to privilege[23]. Over time, various

exceptions emerged and the *yangban* became a de facto aristocracy, but no legislation guaranteed protection of status or property[24].

During the 1960s Soviet period, many Koreans in the USSR urbanised by sending their children to study in cities or moving their families there. This led to significant cultural changes; Korean language use in rural collective farms was replaced by Russian in urban settings. Some Koreans had moved to cities like Tashkent, Uzbekistan, featuring Korean markets and neighbourhoods due to earlier deportations. Despite these urban enclaves, the relevance of the Korean language diminished over time. Urbanisation also led to smaller family units, with large families of 6-8 children reducing to an average of two, reflecting the shift from a rural to a predominantly urban population[25].

While the 1939 census results show a ratio of Korean urban and rural populations throughout the USSR of 25:75, by the 1959 census the proportion of Koreans living in cities and villages was already roughly equal throughout the USSR (48% in cities, 52% in villages; in Kyrgyzstan 40: 60, in Kazakhstan 55:45), while in the following census in 1970 the ratio of Korean urban and rural population was 68:32 (Kyrgyzstan 64:36, Kazakhstan 74:26) on a pan-Union scale and 78:22 (Kyrgyzstan 76:24, Kazakhstan 80:20) on a pan-Union scale nine years later[26]. According to the 2009 census in Kazakhstan, Koreans ranked first among all the peoples of Kazakhstan in the share of urban population: 83.8%. Koreans also ranked first among all the peoples of Kazakhstan in the share of population with higher education, which was achieved by 47.1% of people, and the situation was analogous in Kyrgyzstan[25].

3.4. The Collapse of the USSR

After the USSR collapsed, the new Central Asian states, formed in the 1920s and 1930s, faced challenges due to a weak tradition of statehood. From the 1990s, leaders emphasised these republics' exceptionalism and historical statehood, key to post-Soviet nationalism but challenging for national minorities.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan adopted moderate policies, making Russian the second official language to accommodate large Russian and other Russian-speaking minorities. Both republics highlight their diverse populations of around 100 nationalities. However, leaders ensured the titular nationalities maintained a leading state role, mirroring Soviet practices. The language laws prior to independence didn't make titular languages a prerequisite for citizenship, but they conferred social status[27].

The decline in social status was particularly marked among educated members of national minorities, notably in urban areas. Previously holding significant positions in the USSR, these individuals saw a shift in the newly independent states, which favoured titular nationalities and prioritised nationality over expertise. This contributed to substantial ethnic emigration to Russia and European countries such as Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states. Social status changes also affected ethnic groups predominantly in rural Kyrgyzstan, like the Dungans, where higher education levels were below the national average.

3.4.1. The Dungans: the continuity of an agricultural tradition

The Dungans, a Chinese-speaking Muslim community, migrated to present-day Kyrgyzstan as religious refugees from China during the late 19th century Tsarist period. This group displayed considerable diversity in social status, ranging from poverty to property ownership upon arrival, and included Chinese Muslims from Gansu and Shanxi provinces, as well as Muslims from Xinjiang. Although exact population figures are uncertain, data from northern Kyrgyzstan in the tsarist era indicate strong integration of Dungans into society. In 1911, Russian scientist and politician G. Gins noted their involvement in catering, rice cultivation, horticulture, horse breeding, and carriage driving[28].

After the civil war ended, there was a gradual improvement and steps were taken to establish the Dungans as a Soviet nation. Similarly, the Turkic-speaking population from China was unified under the new ethnonym "Uyghur," relating to an ancient ethnic group. The first Soviet census introduced the Dungan ethnonym, and a new language, Dungan, was codified, aligning with Stalin's concept that a nation must have its own language.

The Dungans gained a reputation as excellent farmers during Soviet rule, to the extent that in Kyrgyzstan, the terms 'Dungan' and 'farmer' are synonymous, recognized by both Dungans and the majority society. They typically sold vegetables directly at markets without intermediaries. However, despite their contributions, Dungans were not among the supported peoples in Soviet times, making it harder for them to access higher education. The situation in the 1960s is described by a Dungan respondent from the Issyk-Kul area:

> All the teachers were Russians, none were Kyrgyz. They treated us differently from Russian kids. Even when we copied each other's work, the Russians got excellent grades while we only got good ones. I realised our nation was, well, without a flag... Later,

> during my apprenticeship, it was the same, but mostly with Kyrgyz. I understood that our nation is small, we can't complain, no one stands up for us. (Respondent from Yrdyk, southern shore of Lake Issyk-Kul, 2015, Dungan nation, male, 69 years, farmer.)

Predominantly rural with lower educational levels, the Dungans had above-average capital accumulation from selling their own agricultural produce. However, following the USSR's collapse, their situation deteriorated significantly. While they previously sold produce directly at markets, in independent Kyrgyzstan, particularly in Bishkek, Kyrgyz traders secured prime market spots. Dungan interviewees reported that this shift towards Kyrgyz control has made it increasingly difficult to sell directly at bazaars, forcing reliance on middlemen. Additionally, the cost of renting land for agriculture in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan has risen sharply.

Although the Dungan population is growing in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where they are unusual among ethnic groups with non-Turkic origins, there is also a rising sentiment for emigration among them. Dungans typically migrate to places with some familiarity, such as Russia, where their shared Soviet history and linguistic similarities make it a popular destination. According to the 2010 census, the number of Dungans in Russia has doubled since 2002[29]. There is still, however, a connection with Central Asia - at harvest time, Dungans in Russia hire workers from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and conversely, in winter some Dungans from Russia go to stay with their relatives in Central Asia.

3.5. The Change in the Ethnic Composition of Kyrgyzstan After the Collapse of the USSR

The collapse of the USSR and the 1990s was a watershed period for the ethnic composition of Kyrgyzstan. Many peoples of Kyrgyzstan almost disappeared due to migration, while others began to grow in numbers (in absolute and relative terms). Among the peoples who ceased to associate their future with Kyrgyzstan were Germans (only 9% of Germans remained in Kyrgyzstan when compared to 1989), Jews (11%) and Belarusians (15%). Comparing the current situation with the 1989 census, the Turkic peoples - Turkmens (228%), Turks (184%), Kyrgyz (171%), Uzbeks (140%) and Uyghurs (132%) - have experienced above-average population growth in Kyrgyzstan. Among other peoples, the Dungans (158%) and Tajiks (138%) show above-average population growth[17]. Notably, the traditionally well-educated Tatars saw their numbers halved. This highlights the significance of education and economic factors in migration decisions, as highly educated and economically advantaged individuals were more likely to migrate, regardless of ethnicity. Consequently, while

migration patterns may appear ethnic, the primary division is actually based on educational attainment and economic strength. Data on Kyrgyzstan's ethnic composition shows that migration was heavily influenced by education levels. Following the USSR's collapse, the most educated individuals from all ethnic backgrounds were the most likely to emigrate, particularly among Russians, Germans, Tatars, and other Slavic groups. Many utilized repatriation programs, such as those offered by Germany, which encouraged the return of ethnic Germans. Approximately nine million people took advantage of these 'national' migration opportunities across the former USSR[30].

Migration waves also involved less skilled individuals, primarily as labour migrants to Russia and Kazakhstan, particularly from the southern part of Kyrgyzstan. According to the governor of the Osh region, citing data from the Kyrgyz Migrants Association, about 300,000 people travel to Russia for work annually, with approximately 70% originating from Kyrgyzstan's southern regions[31].

Educational attainment among different ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan, indicated by the proportion of individuals with higher education, has varied significantly due to migration. According to the 2009 census, the titular Kyrgyz nation's educational level is slightly above the national average, at 103% of the Kyrgyzstan average. Koreans (257% of the average for the whole of Kyrgyzstan), Tatars (187%), Russians (162%) and Ukrainians (159%) top the educational ranking, with Turks (53%), Uzbeks (47%), Dungans (44%) and Kurds (20%) at the bottom of the ranking[32].

3.5.1. Kyrgyz and Russians: collectivism versus individualism in everyday life

Since Tsarist times, today's Kyrgyzstan has been ethnically diverse, yet significant ethnic conflicts have been absent. State policies have shaped the socio-economic behaviours of Kyrgyz and Russians. The collectivist values of the Kyrgyz, rooted in their nomadic heritage, were reinforced by Soviet policies promoting collective farming and communal living. In contrast, Russians, encouraged to settle in urban areas and take administrative roles, developed more individualistic lifestyles. This chapter explores how state interventions have perpetuated these cultural differences, with Kyrgyz families relying on extended social networks for economic support, while Russians prioritise individual autonomy. Despite this collectivist culture, some Kyrgyz have begun adopting the individualistic ways exemplified by Russians. These distinctions support the hypothesis that state policies shape the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of ethnic groups.

While Russians have significantly influenced the culture of this region over the last century, demographic differences are stark: according to the 2019 census, 66% of Kyrgyz live in rural areas, in

contrast to the 65% of Russians residing in urban areas, with only 30% of Kyrgyz living in cities[33]. Even in cities, the differences between Kyrgyz and Russians are noticeable - based on the 2009 census, the average size of urban households was 4.7 persons for Kyrgyz and 2.6 persons for Russians[32].

Russian households exhibit a higher degree of individualism, often showing independence from relatives' opinions. In contrast, Kyrgyz households place greater emphasis on familial ties, viewing relatives as significant social capital in decision-making processes, including financial matters like credit[34].

Research among middle-class households in the Kyrgyz capital, comparing Kyrgyz and Russian families, revealed that middle-aged members—who remember the Soviet era well—of both ethnic groups similarly reject taking bank loans.

> We avoid credit. We've never taken a loan; we prefer borrowing from friends. We've got friends who can lend us money, and we pay it back quietly. Taking loans is against our principles. (Respondent from Bishkek, 2020, Russian nation, female, 43 years, secretary in a private company.)

No, I don't take bank loans. It's a principle thing. I prefer borrowing from relatives. When my parents were alive, we borrowed from them and paid it back quietly. (Respondent from Bishkek, 2020, Kyrgyz nation, female, 51 years, accountant.)

Only for the younger generation (of both ethnic groups) taking out a loan is not a major problem, nor is borrowing money through a pawn shop.

> No, I don't save much. I spend my income straight away. I consider real and personal property as savings too. A car for work, and a second one I can sell quickly. There's no point in letting money sit idle. I don't mind borrowing if needed. (Respondent from Bishkek, 2020, Russian nation, male, 30 years, employee in a transport company.)

Research into how Kyrgyz and Russian households currently manage money, build savings, and use social ties highlights a notable difference in one specific expenditure area, typical of Kyrgyz households.

> Our weddings and funerals are big, usually with 100-250 guests. Because it's pricey, each guest chips in about $100 to share the cost. The host keeps track of these contributions to make sure they can return the favour at future events, creating a system of mutual

> financial support. (Respondent from Bishkek, 2020, Kyrgyz nation, female, 53 years, housewife.)

Social ties based on reciprocal exchange are characteristic of Kyrgyz households but are nearly absent in Russian ones. These ties buffer against sudden financial difficulties, such as illness or a family member's death, and support everyday needs like overnight stays, car repairs, or funding a child's education abroad. However, maintaining these ties is financially and time-intensive for many Kyrgyz families. Compared to the more individualistic Russian approach, some Kyrgyz families attempt to distance themselves from extensive social networks, often leading to challenges in kinship relations. Phrases like "what people say," "what is polite," and "it is pride" frequently emerge in discussions, as highlighted by one Kyrgyz respondent's experience.

> Relatives in agriculture often help with food, so families buy only a bit of meat, usually from parents. It's understood that nephews studying in the capital stay with their city relatives since their parents are in villages. Likewise, visiting relatives or friends stay with family, and there's always the expectation of a warm meal and a welcoming atmosphere. (Respondent from Bishkek, 2020, Kyrgyz nation, female, 35 years, teacher.)

The influence of the market environment tends to weaken social ties, particularly among younger Kyrgyz families in urban areas, who are adopting a more individualistic approach to household management. In a modern, urbanized society, some Kyrgyz respondents view traditional family obligations and mutual responsibilities as burdensome and seek culturally acceptable methods to avoid them, such as geographical distance. Families under 35 from both ethnic groups are increasingly self-reliant, often starting their own businesses and not depending on state assistance.

3.5.2. Uzbeks: From Dominance to Marginalization

As the second largest ethnic group in Kyrgyzstan (comprising 14% of the country's population), the Uzbeks exert a significant influence on the cultural and social life of the country. The contemporary unified ethnic group was historically constituted by various groups, including nomadic and settled farmers (Sarts), which were merged into the newly defined Uzbek nationality as a consequence of Soviet policy. The Soviet decision in the 1930s to eliminate a unified Soviet Turkestan, taking into account fears of undue influence and ties to Turkey, led to its administrative division, resulting in the creation of new union republics and new titular peoples.

The removal of the Sarts from statistical records and the reclassification of various Turkestanese groups as Uzbeks highlight the impact of political decisions on the ethnic landscape of Central Asia, with lasting implications. The settled populations, speaking similar languages, were redefined as Uzbeks, making them a significant minority in the Kazakh SSR and the Tajik SSR, and notably in southern areas of the Kyrgyz SSR, where they often formed a majority. When the Kyrgyz Republic was established in the 1930s, the Uzbeks, including the Sarts, were generally better educated and more literate than the nomadic Kyrgyz[35].

Over time, the situation in Kyrgyzstan has led to several paradoxes, particularly in education. Despite the goal to promote Kyrgyz culture and language, secondary schools primarily taught in Russian, not Kyrgyz. However, Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan successfully advocated for Uzbek-language schools, despite lacking autonomous status—unlike the Kyrgyz, who lacked schools teaching in their native language.

Traditionally successful in commerce, the Uzbeks found themselves politically marginalized as Kyrgyz, historically nomadic and from mountainous regions, came to dominate state administration and security forces. This shift reflected changes in educational structures and the economy, and it reinforced the Uzbeks' economic strength despite their reduced political influence.

Thirty years post-USSR dissolution, Kyrgyz influence over Uzbeks has notably increased in Kyrgyzstan. The educational landscape has also transformed significantly: across the country, women are more educated than men, with 24% of women holding higher education degrees compared to 19% of men. This gender disparity is more pronounced among the Kyrgyz, where 27% of women and 21% of men have higher education. In contrast, among Uzbeks—historically skilled in various fields—only 6% of men and 7% of women have higher education. In Osh Oblast, a hub for the Uzbek minority, 13% of Kyrgyz men have higher education, more than three times the rate of Uzbeks at 4%[36]. Educational attainment among Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan has undergone changes in recent decades, reflecting broader shifts in access to higher education across different ethnic groups. This retreat is indicative of broader social and economic transformations, where the historical advantages of Uzbeks are being overshadowed by the educational advancements of Kyrgyz. These changes suggest shifts in power structures and potential impacts on social cohesion and ethnic integration.

Relations between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan deteriorated significantly towards the end of the Soviet era and worsened after its collapse. Ethnic tensions, exemplified by unrest in 1990 and 2010, were fueled by post-Soviet nationalistic rhetoric, such as claims that “Kyrgyzstan belongs

to the Kyrgyz". The 1990 conflict in Osh, partly due to land disputes, saw Uzbeks accused of illegally occupying land, leading to massive displacement and many deaths. The 2010 conflict, particularly intense in Osh and Jalal-Abad, resulted in thousands of deaths and was marked by exploitation and increased ethnic violence, exacerbated by political instability.

Before the 2010 conflict, field research in southern Kyrgyzstan showed that despite modern lifestyles seemingly diminishing traditional ethnic differences between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, deep-seated cultural traditions still affect their socio-economic behaviour and social patterns. The Kyrgyz's nomadic pastoral heritage and the Uzbeks' historical roots in settled agriculture and trade continue to influence contemporary social structures. In the region, Kyrgyz are generally perceived as more engaged in agriculture, whereas Uzbeks are often regarded as dominant in trade and finance.

> The Kyrgyz stick to agriculture, but the Uzbeks control the finances (businessman from Osh, 52 years old, Uzbek). You see the differences between us and the Uzbeks mostly at weddings and funerals. Kyrgyz spend huge sums, quietly going into debt, while Uzbeks are more cautious. Kyrgyz live for today, Uzbeks plan for the future. Even kids show the differences, like on school trips. Kyrgyz kids play together, but Uzbek kids are strictly separated, boys and girls apart (teacher from Osh, 64 years old, Kyrgyz). Uzbeks are more into religious activities. We go to the mosque regularly, especially the men. It's our tradition. Usually, only Uzbek men gather in restaurants to chat, while the wives stay home. In contrast, Kyrgyz men and women usually go to restaurants together (Uzbek from Osh, 45 years old).

The phenomenon of persistent differences can be explained by cultural persistence theory, which suggests that initial economic strategies and social organisations can have a long-term impact on the development of social norms and economic behaviours[37]. The Uzbeks, historically settled agriculturists and traders, have a penchant for business and gastronomy, often appearing more economically successful than other Central Asian groups. They tend to be financially cautious and uphold traditional and religious values. In contrast, the Kyrgyz, descendants of nomads, prefer lavish celebrations, reflecting their cultural emphasis on social and family ties. In nomadic cultures, wealth was traditionally measured by livestock numbers or group size, rather than tangible property[38]. These differences are not just remnants of the past; they actively shape current social dynamics and economic strategies. Children from both groups are raised with distinct traditions, influencing their

behaviour. The visible expressions of these cultural differences offer valuable insights into how historical customs and norms persist and adapt in modern settings[39].

Following the 2010 Osh conflict, there were significant shifts in the social standing of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan. Before the conflict, Uzbeks were a major economic and cultural presence in Osh and nearby areas. However, the conflict left the Uzbek community in a precarious position, with considerable losses of property and lives leading to a decline in their economic and social status. Following the conflict, there was a shift in economic and social dynamics that led to reduced Uzbek business and social activities in the region.

The situation in southern Kyrgyzstan was exacerbated by the investigation into the 2010 violence, which resulted in significantly more convictions of Uzbeks than Kyrgyz, perceived by many as evidence of ethnic bias and injustice. Conversely, the Kyrgyz community experienced a bolstered national identity, partly due to perceived victory and regained control over the region. This led to expanded social and political influence for the Kyrgyz, but also reinforced ethno-nationalist attitudes, potentially deepening ethnic divisions[40]. The shift towards nationalist attitudes post-Soviet Union, in contrast to Soviet integration policies, marks a significant change in ethnic relations, often fraught with tensions due to new political and social dynamics. Analysis of internet discussions offers insights into these relationships, highlighting user reactions that might be obscured in traditional surveys. Despite limitations like sample selectivity and potential bias, this method provides valuable context for our study. To enhance analysis, machine learning algorithms were used to identify key themes in Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations, such as social and economic issues, education, language, security concerns, and historical disputes, ranked by their frequency in online discussions.

Socio-economic issues. The southern Kyrgyzstan region is experiencing a significant outflow of its population, particularly to Russia and Kazakhstan, as a consequence of the challenging economic circumstances[41]. Discussions on online forums and social media reveal that unemployment and economic inequality are perceived as the main causes of social tensions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. Many posts describe the frustration of young people from both communities who face a lack of employment opportunities. For example, one social network user writes: “It is hard to find good jobs here, and without jobs we have no future. We need more investment and better education for all.” According to discussants, inter-ethnic conflicts occur at an increased rate when an area is not economically prosperous.

Education and language issues. In the field of education, a frequent topic is the integration of the Uzbek language into the education system. Many discussants stress the importance of preserving Uzbek language and culture through school education. A quote from an online forum states, "Our children need education in the Uzbek language so that they do not forget who they are and where they come from. Language is the key to our identity."

Ethnic tensions and political participation. Ethnic tensions and their impact on political participation are widely discussed. Some Uzbeks have expressed concerns about their level of political representation, with discussions highlighting a perceived need for broader political inclusivity. One participant stated, "We feel marginalized in our own country. Our voices are not heard and our problems are not solved." This highlights the urgent need for enhanced political inclusivity and equality. The debate over autonomy for Kyrgyz Uzbeks adds further complexity. While some Uzbeks view autonomy as vital for safeguarding their rights and identity, Kyrgyz perceive it as a potential threat to national unity and stability. Calls for official recognition of the Uzbek language and autonomy in regions where Uzbeks are prominent, despite being in the minority compared to Kyrgyz, are identified as major contributors to conflicts in the area.

Security issues. Security is a constant source of concern in the region, where intermittent ethnic clashes increase tensions between communities, but also on the border with neighbouring Tajikistan. Discussants stress the need for common security strategies. "We need to work together to ensure security for all. Without peace, we cannot expect progress," writes a user on social media.

The historical subtext of ethnic relations. The history of southern Kyrgyzstan is marked by complex ethnic interactions and conflicts that shape current relations between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. Historical events such as mass migrations and political changes during the Soviet era have had a lasting impact on the mutual perceptions and interactions between the two ethnic groups. A quote from the online forum illustrates this perspective: "Our history with the Kyrgyz is full of mutual struggles and cooperation. We cannot forget past conflicts, but we must find a way to a common future." Discussions on this topic often call for the need for historical education and awareness as key tools for overcoming past wounds and building more stable relations in the region. Stories of violence and ethnic conflict, such as those of Fergana in 1989 and Osh in 1990 and 2010, further highlight painful moments in history that still resonate in the collective memory of both communities. These events are recalled as tragic moments when tensions between ethnic groups spiralled out of control and led to serious violence. Discussions of these events not only reflect the pain and lasting effects of these

conflicts on the victims and their families, but also highlight the willingness of affected individuals to forgive and move on.

The legacy of the Soviet division. The impact of Soviet policies on ethnic division and the often unnatural administrative arrangements and management of the republic's borders is still felt today. Discussions on this topic point to how the Soviet era influenced today's ethnic boundaries and socioeconomic divisions. A user on social media comments, "The Soviet division artificially separated us and created barriers that still persist today. We need to work to overcome this unfortunate legacy."

The influence of the Kokand Khanate and its instrumentalization. The Kokand Khanate, whose history dates back to its rule over parts of present-day Kyrgyzstan, is often invoked in online discussions as a symbol of historical Uzbek political and cultural dominance, even though the Uzbek ethnic group was only effectively created by Soviet rule. This khanate significantly influenced the social and economic structures of the region until its annexation by the Russian Empire in the 19th century. A forum user states: "The memory of the Kokand Khanate still influences our relations with each other. It is important to understand how history influences our current position and claims." Related to this, critical voices have also emerged in the discussions, pointing to the potential misuse of history for contemporary political ends. It is often suggested that "everyone talks about history, especially when they want to gain something they don't currently have." This skepticism reflects concerns that historical narratives may be reshaped or simplified to serve the interests of one party at the expense of another.

Sentiment analysis. Internet discussions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan reveal a wide range of emotions and opinions. Discussions often reveal that Uzbeks feel discrimination and exclusion based on their ethnicity. One user describes his experience in Kyrgyzstan where he was confronted with negative attitudes when speaking Uzbek: "I never felt discrimination for speaking Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan. Here I was deeply disappointed and it showed me the prejudice Kyrgyz people have against us Uzbeks." These experiences are often accompanied by accounts of violence and ethnic conflict that reflect the asymmetry in the way ethnic groups are targeted in different countries. "We have witnessed attacks on Uzbeks on the streets of Kyrgyzstan, while in Uzbekistan Kyrgyz people live without fear of being attacked. This shows deep injustice and raises concerns," another post said.

In addition to physical confrontations, many Uzbeks feel social pressure to "return" to their country, despite having long-standing roots and home in the areas. This situation is compounded by other factors such as economic instability and political tensions that increase feelings of insecurity and

exclusion. “We are forced to face the challenges of 'going back' to our own country. But Kyrgyz and Tajiks in Uzbekistan do not feel such pressure,” says another discussant.

Discussions also reveal that many people still believe in the possibility of fraternity between ethnic groups but see political manipulation as a major obstacle. “We should be brothers, but external forces divide our people. Many conflicts between ordinary people are the result of political games and manipulations,” suggesting that many feel that real problems are often overshadowed by political interests that prevent real dialogue and understanding.

The results clearly demonstrate that state policies have significantly influenced the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan. For instance, the shift in educational attainment among Koreans and Uzbeks directly correlates with historical state policies on education and employment. Additionally, the economic activities of Dungans have been shaped by policies that emphasized their agricultural skills, while Kyrgyz and Russians have experienced changes in socio-economic status due to differing levels of access to education and administrative roles. The needs of each ethnic group have evolved over time, reflecting the changing socio-political landscape. These findings highlight the profound impact of state interventions on the socio-economic development and cultural transformation of Koreans, Dungans, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Russians, illustrating the necessity of tailored policies that address the unique and evolving needs of each group.

Further insight into the dynamics between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities was provided by the analysis of online discussions, which allowed us to understand not only the surface manifestations of ethnic tensions, but also the deeper emotional and social subtexts that shape their social dynamics. This insight highlights the need to re-evaluate existing approaches to ethnic equality and justice and encourages more effective ways to promote social cohesion and ethnic diversity.

4. Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of how state interventions have shaped the characteristics of ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan, confirming the central hypothesis that state policies are the primary forces behind these changes. By examining Koreans, Dungans, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Russians, the research has illustrated the profound impact of historical and contemporary state policies on their socio-economic development and cultural transformation.

For Koreans, Stalin's deportations in the 1930s forced a transition from agrarian communities to skilled agriculturalists and later to an urbanised, educated population. This evolution, driven by state policies, also entailed significant Russification, highlighting the dual role of state influence in promoting socio-economic advancement while enforcing cultural assimilation.

The Dungans, who migrated voluntarily, experienced shifts in their socio-economic status due to state policies that initially marginalised their religious identity but later provided some recognition. Despite focusing on agriculture, the Dungans have faced challenges in accessing higher education and market opportunities post-USSR, underscoring the enduring impact of historical state policies.

The comparative analysis of Kyrgyz and Russians reveals how state policies reinforced the collectivist values of the Kyrgyz and the individualistic lifestyles of the Russians. Soviet policies promoted collective farming among the Kyrgyz, while Russians were encouraged to settle in urban areas and take up administrative roles. Some Kyrgyz, however, are beginning to adopt more individualistic ways, reflecting their adaptation to evolving socio-economic conditions.

For the Uzbeks, historical state interventions significantly altered their socio-economic status. Once economically dominant in southern Kyrgyzstan, they have faced marginalisation and political exclusion post-Soviet Union. This study highlights how shifts in power dynamics and educational opportunities have affected their current socio-economic standing, demonstrating the long-term effects of state policies on ethnic relations.

Our research underscores the necessity for tailored state policies that respect ethnic specificities and historical contexts to promote social integration and equitable development. By acknowledging these influences, policymakers can develop more effective strategies that address the unique needs of diverse ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan.

In conclusion, this study has confirmed that state interventions are crucial in shaping the characteristics of ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan. The continuous adaptation to these policies has resulted in distinct ethnic identities and socio-economic dynamics. These findings provide valuable insights into the historical and ongoing role of state policies in influencing ethnic disparities. We hope that this research contributes to a deeper understanding of these dynamics and informs the development of inclusive policies that foster social cohesion and economic development.

Our study also sheds light on the broader context of colonial and postcolonial dynamics, particularly through the lens of the Soviet Union's totalitarian ideology and social engineering. The Bolsheviks'

attempts to invent new nations and present them as historically rooted in the region reflect a form of internal colonialism, where the state imposed artificial identities and structures. This legacy continues to influence post-Soviet realities, where historical narratives emphasise ancient statehood to legitimise current political structures. The colonial encounter, with its violent legacies and enduring inequalities, parallels the ways in which Soviet policies shaped ethnic and national identities in Central Asia.

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