Genealogy, Class, and “Tribal Policy” in Soviet Turkmenistan, 1924–1934

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In early 1924, the deputy head of the Communist Party’s Central Asian Bureau, O. Ia. Karklin, warned that “tribal conflict” was hindering the spread of Soviet influence among the Turkmen population of Central Asia. Turkmen recruited to work for the regime were seeking to enlist Soviet support in disputes with rival lineages, often by falsely accusing their opponents of anti-Soviet activity. Since entanglement in local conflicts could only discredit Soviet rule, Karklin argued that the authorities should treat rival Turkmen groups with complete even-handedness: “If we promote someone from one tribe into an administrative post, we have to make sure that we give a similar promotion to the others. If we give an award to someone from one tribe, we have to do the same for the others as well. If we form a police force, then it must be with the calculation that we will take an equal number of people from each tribe, and that they all will have equivalent positions, and the same for those who work in the military, in the secret police, and so on.”¹

Karklin’s prescription for a perfectly equitable “tribal policy” may have been utopian, but he had nonetheless put his finger on a problem that was to confound Soviet officials for years to come. In Turkmenistan, the Bolsheviks encountered a population for whom genealogically defined groups—not classes or nations—were the primary units of social organization. The persistence of genealogical identities inhibited the emergence of a broader sense of nationhood within the Turkmen republic, which was created in the 1924 “national delimitation” of Central Asia. Even more seriously, from the Soviet point of view, kinship loyalties complicated the promotion of class consciousness among the Turkmen. Just as class was of overriding importance to the Bolsheviks, so kinship was virtually all-embracing in its significance for many Turkmen. With Soviet authorities and Turkmen villagers each convinced that their conceptual framework provided the only true map of social reality, the stage was set for a clash between two rival discourses of identity.

I am grateful to all the colleagues who have commented on earlier versions of this paper, especially Barbara Keys, D’Ann Penner, Yuri Slezkin, Gağişç Charçev, Francine Hirsch, Shokhrat Kadyrov, the members of the Harvard Central Asia Working Group and the Harvard Russian and East European History Workshop, and the editor of and anonymous referees for Slavic Review. Research for this article was supported in part by a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board, with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the United States Department of State, which administers the Russian, Eurasian and East European Research Program (Title VIII), as well as by a grant from the Social Science Research Council. None of these individuals or organizations is responsible for the views expressed.

¹. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sostial’no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 62, op. 1, d. 20 (protocols of Central Asian Bureau meetings, April–June 1924), ll. 46–48.

Slavic Review 60, no. 2 (Summer 2001)
In recent years, historians have argued convincingly that the Soviet state was a “builder of nations,” fostering national consciousness among non-Russians by creating national-territorial republics and promoting indigenous elites and cultures within them. Considerably less is known, however, about the fate of the smaller components—“tribes” and “clans,” in Soviet parlance—out of which many Soviet nations were constructed.\(^2\) In Turkmenistan, Soviet officials were well aware that the diverse segments of the population had no history of coexistence within a single state. As several founding members of the Turkmen Communist Party noted in 1924, welding the fragmented and fractious Turkmen into a unified nation would require the formulation of a successful Soviet “tribal policy.”\(^3\)

The correct outlines of such a policy were not immediately obvious, however. Should the Soviet regime launch a head-on assault on “tribal-clan structures,” seeking to destroy them along with such other vestiges of prerevolutionary backwardness as the blood feud and child marriage? Or did tribes, like nations, warrant a more sensitive approach to avoid inflaming their particularist feelings? Specifically, should Soviet “tribal policy” be modeled on nationality policy, fostering tribal elites and territories with the aim of diminishing kinship-based conflict and winning support for the Soviet regime?

Although the distinction between “tribe” and “nation” was often arbitrary, Soviet officials soon decided that tribes were not nations and did not deserve to be treated as such. Unlike nations, subnational groups were not expected to have a long-term future as building blocks of the Soviet state, and kinship was not allotted even a circumscribed place in the range of acceptable Soviet identities. Instead, the goal was to eliminate these archaic affiliations as quickly as possible so that the native masses could enter the Soviet mainstream.\(^4\) Nevertheless, elements of a more conciliatory approach to genealogical identities remained in place throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. This essay argues that Soviet officials pursued two essentially contradictory policies in their attempt to eliminate “tribalism” in the Turkmen republic. The first was straightforwardly materialist, seeking to undermine the economic basis of descent group affiliation by dismantling the existing system of collective land tenure and creating a class

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4. The campaign to erode genealogical structures was only one aspect of a broader Soviet assault on “backwardness” in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s. The Soviet regime also sought to “emancipate” women, eradicate religious and customary practices, replace Muslim confessional schools with Soviet secular education, and impose other forms of radical social change. On these efforts in Turkmenistan, see Adrienne Edgar, “The Creation of Soviet Turkmenistan, 1924–38” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1999).
of poor peasants dependent on the Soviet regime. The second was the strategy of political appeasement suggested by Karklin, in which Soviet authorities would attempt to provide equitable treatment to all genealogical groups. The underlying logic of this policy of “tribal parity” closely resembled that of Soviet nationality policy. Just as all Soviet nationalities were to be treated with scrupulous fairness, so that they would have no reason to nurse nationalist grievances, the regime would win support and suppress “tribal-clan conflict” by refusing to favor one group over another.

Neither of these approaches was effective in doing away with kinship-based identities. For a population buffeted by constant, often violent upheaval between 1924 and 1934, genealogical structures remained one of the few sources of stability and continuity. Moreover, as was often the case with the regime’s ambitious efforts at social engineering, Soviet “tribal policy” was in many ways counterproductive. Instead of allowing class consciousness to supplant genealogical loyalties, Soviet rule tended to increase the salience of distinctions based on genealogy and ethnicity. Through land reform and other ambitious programs aimed at transforming Turkmen rural life, the regime broadened the scope for descent group competition and reinforced the rationale for kin-based solidarity. At the same time, “tribal parity” implicitly recognized and sanctioned the very genealogical categories that the regime was determined to eradicate. Finally, because of the close linkage between genealogy and socioeconomic standing in Turkmenistan, Soviet attempts to foment class conflict worked against the policy of “tribal parity,” inadvertently exacerbating descent group conflict. Instead of creating new social fissures in the Turkmen countryside, Soviet policies simply deepened existing ones.

**Genealogy and Social Stratification among the Turkmen**

For the Bolsheviks, it was axiomatic that class struggle was the driving force of human history. The Turkmen masses would never progress toward socialism without developing class consciousness and learning to struggle against their economic exploiters. The most important conflicts and inequalities in Turkmen society, however, were between groups defined by genealogy and history. Rather than identifying with others who shared their economic status, the Turkmen identified primarily with those who shared their ancestry—in a real or imagined sense. Since nomadic mobility made long-term identification with a particular territory impractical, genealogical forms of conceptualizing identity were common among historically pastoral nomadic groups in Central Asia and the Middle East.\(^5\) Although most Turkmen had become settled or semiseddled in the period

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preceding the Russian revolution, their social structure remained heavily influenced by their nomadic history.6

Soviet authorities seeking to undermine “tribal and clan structures” tended to forget that Turkmen identity was itself rooted in genealogy. “Turkmenness” was understood in terms of patrilineal descent, with all those who called themselves Turkmen claiming origin in a single mythical ancestor named Oguz-Khan. Each of the major Turkmen tribes—Tekes, Salirs, Sariks, Yomuts, Chodirs, and Ersaris—was thought to descend from one of Oguz’s grandsons. These tribes were divided into a series of ever smaller sections and subsections, each of which was presumed to descend from a common ancestor. On this tree of lineal descent, only the smallest branches tended to represent “real” or biological kinship; most Turkmen knew their own genealogy and their relationships to other individuals going back five or seven generations.7 Among larger groups, kin relationships were likely to be vague or even mythical, with distant ancestors remembered—or invented—only to the degree necessary to explain current political relationships.8 The identification with one’s lineage was not just sentimental but of vital practical importance. The descent group was the primary economic unit, as well as the ultimate source of political protection for the individual in a stateless society. Among both pastoralists and agriculturalists, land and other natural resources were owned collectively by the lineage. Before the Turkmen came under the effective control of neighboring states, much of political life was regulated genealogically as well. In the event of a murder, for example, Turkmen customary

6. In the Soviet Turkmen republic of the mid-1920s, only about 15 percent of the population was fully nomadic. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 3316, op. 20, d. 392 (report on Sovietization of nomadic regions delivered to the presidium of the Soviet of Nationalities, 13 August 1927), l. 25. It is not entirely clear when the sedentarization of Turkmen nomads took place. Some scholars claim that the Turkmen were semisedentary for centuries, while others argue that the majority of Turkmen settled only in the mid-nineteenth century. See Marat Durdiev, Turkmeny (Ashgabat, 1991), and Yuri Bregel, “Nomadic and Sedentary Elements among the Turkmen,” Central Asiatic Journal 25, no. 1–2 (1981): 5–37. See also Wolfgang König, Die Achal-Teke: Zur Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft einer Turkmenengruppe im XIX Jahrhundert (Berlin, 1962), 41–43.

7. William Irons, The Yomut Turkmen: A Study of Social Organization among a Central Asian Turkic-Speaking Population (Ann Arbor, 1975), 40–44. When I use the term tribe, I mean simply the largest subset of the genealogical category Turkmen (Teke, Yomut, and so forth). In Turkmen, these large groups were called halyq or il, both of which can also be translated as “people.” I will use “lineage” to refer to smaller, local groups and “descent group” as a general term for all genealogically defined groups.

law required the victim’s close relatives through the male line—those who traced their common descent back no more than seven generations—to avenge the crime.9

Presumed patrilineal kinship was not the only foundation for mutual aid; matrilineal ties, residence in the same village or encampment, and patron-client relationships all brought obligations of cooperation and support. Nevertheless, the primacy of patrilineal kinship ideology manifested itself in several ways. In a conflict between commitments to neighbors and to kin, the latter took priority. Moreover, when unrelated individuals or groups maintained a close political relationship over a long period, their genealogies might be rewritten to reflect this link.10 Regardless of the biological reality, in short, genealogy was the most important way of conceptualizing and justifying social relationships among the Turkmen.

Anthropologists have traditionally characterized pastoral nomadic societies as highly egalitarian, noting that they lack social stratification, occupational specialization, or a hereditary aristocracy. Based in part on the self-representations of nomadic groups, most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European ethnographers portrayed pastoral societies as rough-and-ready democracies in which every man (women were seldom included) was simultaneously a herder, warrior, politician, and poet.11 More recently, scholars have argued that genealogy may be used to mark prestige and legitimate inequality among nomads. Some groups have high-status lineages that dominate leadership positions, while many distinguish sharply between insiders and outsiders based on genealogy.12

Although no longer exclusively nomadic in the early twentieth century, Turkmen communities corresponded more closely to the pastoral

9. A. Lomakin, Obychnoe pravo turkmen (Ashgabat, 1897), 52; Irons, Yomut Turkmen, 61, 113–15.

10. A striking illustration of this is the presence of “slave lineages” within some Turkmen tribes; formed by freed slaves of non-Turkmen descent, these lineages were grafted onto the genealogical trees of their former masters. In. E. Bregel, Khorezmskie turkmeny v XIX v. (Moscow, 1961), 161–63; see also Irons, Yomut Turkmen, 46–53, 56–58, 112–13; RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 286 (report of ethnographic brigade studying village life in the Poltoratsk okrug of the Turkmen SSR, 1925), ll. 14–15; König, Die Achal-Teke, 78–79.


egalitarian ideal than did those of many of their Central Asian neighbors. Unlike the Kazakhs, whose rulers were drawn from a stratum of hereditary aristocrats, Turkmen groups chose their leaders by consensus, mainly on the basis of such personal qualities as courage and intelligence. Nevertheless, there were clear hierarchies of status within the Turkmen population. On the individual level, the most obvious distinctions were based on age and sex, with younger people and females deferring to males and older individuals. A distinction was also made between “pure-blooded” Turkmen (ig), who enjoyed considerable prestige, and those of “mixed blood” (yarimcha) or “slaves” (gul), who were descendants of non-Turkmen captives. These “pure-blooded” Turkmen formed an elite that preferred not to intermarry with Turkmen of the other two categories.

In relations between groups, status distinctions were based on real or mythical legacies of history and genealogy. Within each locality one Turkmen lineage claimed predominance, usually because its ancestors had conquered the region from its previous inhabitants. Other Turkmen groups were allowed to settle in the area only with the dominant group’s permission. In some areas, non-Turkmen ethnic groups such as Kurds and Persians were part of the demographic mix, generally occupying the lowest rung on the status ladder. There were also groups that lived among the Turkmen and resembled them in language and way of life but were thought to be genealogically distinct. These included Turkmenized groups of Persian origin as well as “saintly” tribes popularly believed to be of Arab descent. Interaction among the diverse groups within each locality took place according to a complex system of precedence and deference in which the dominant group claimed first right of access to resources. According to one Soviet ethnographer, these social hierarchies were reflected in stark economic terms on the bridal market, where a “pure-blooded” Turkmen woman was worth two to three times as much in bridewealth as one of “mixed blood” and ten times as much as a Kurdish bride.

Distinctions based on descent and historical-political relationships were enduring, but differences in wealth between individual house-
holds were more fluid. Since a pool of adult workers was critical to economic success among both nomads and agriculturalists, a family’s wealth or poverty was most closely related to its stage in the household life cycle. Thus, a large family with many grown sons was more likely to be prosperous than a couple with only small children.19

Russian travelers and military officers who wrote about Central Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to stress the absence of social stratification among the Turkmen. Like their western European counterparts, many Russians were impressed by the independence, rough democracy, and military prowess of nomadic and seminomadic groups. They were also fascinated by the political structure of the stateless Turkmen, in which conflict was regulated without an overarching political authority. Fedor Mikhailov, an officer in the Russian military administration of Transcaspia at the beginning of the twentieth century, argued that “all Turkmen, rich and poor, live almost completely alike” and that the Turkmen “put the principles of brotherhood, equality, and freedom into practice more completely and consistently than any of our contemporary [European] republics.”20

Early Soviet writers on the Turkmen generally agreed that nomadic Turkmen society in its “pure” form—before the tsarist conquest in the 1880s—had been classless and egalitarian.21 Like their imperial predecessors, Soviet ethnographers in the 1920s were well aware of the importance of genealogical consciousness among the Turkmen. Expeditions to Turkmen regions routinely collected information on the “tribes, clans, and lineages” represented in each area. Interviewers for the 1926 census in Turkmenistan were instructed to determine not only the nationality (narodnost’) of each individual but also his or her “tribe, clan, lineage, and sub-lineage.”22 Soviet ethnographers and economists also argued that things had changed under colonial rule, however. The Turkmen were no longer footloose steppe warriors, unbeholden to any authority. A majority had settled and taken up some form of agriculture, with many growing cotton and other crops for the market.23 Some Soviet ethnographers maintained that Russian colonialism had led to the rise of private prop-


property in land and class stratification. This was a positive development, in the view of Bolshevik theorists, since it would allow the Turkmen to move beyond their “tribal-clan structure” and develop class consciousness.

For the Bolsheviks, Soviet society was divided into two antagonistic camps: “class friendly” groups that could be expected to support the Soviet regime, such as factory workers and poor peasants; and “class aliens” such as the capitalist bourgeoisie, feudal landlords, and well-to-do peasants. Since this analysis was of dubious applicability even in Russia, it was far from clear how the party would apply Marxist class categories to “backward” peoples such as the Turkmen. In Turkmenistan, the tiny industrial proletariat and the urban population were almost exclusively composed of Russians and other Europeans. The overwhelming majority of Turkmen lived in the countryside, practicing agriculture or livestock-herding.

In the absence of a native proletariat, party theorists argued that the rural population would provide the main support for the Bolshevik regime. The regime sought to classify the Turkmen population according to categories imported directly from the Russian context. Like the Russian peasantry, Turkmen agriculturalists and nomads would be divided into three groups: poor peasants (bedniaks), middle peasants (seredniaks), and rich peasants (kulaks). The rich peasant was regarded as a class enemy and budding capitalist; the poor peasant was the ally of the proletariat; and the middle peasant was the object of a fluctuating and ambivalent policy, sometimes regarded as a proletarian and sometimes as a petty capitalist. Finally, there was the batrak, or landless agricultural laborer, presumed to be the Soviet regime’s most reliable ally. As in Russia, all members of “non-laboring” classes—those who exploited the labor of others, made a profit from trade or speculation, or practiced other “socially harmful” professions such as the priesthood—would be deprived of the right to vote and subject to discrimination. At the same time, the regime adopted policies designed to foster class consciousness among the poor. “Bedniaks” and “batraks” were recruited into special organizations for the poor and given preferential access to agricultural credit, government jobs, and education.

The Land-Water Reform of 1925–26

The first large-scale effort to promote class conflict and undermine “tribalism” among the Turkmen population was the land-water reform of

28. See Fitzpatrick, “Ascribing Class,” 752–53, for a discussion of these policies in Soviet Russia.
1925–26. In Central Asia as a whole, the reform was intended as an agrarian revolution from above that would remake rural society and render it amenable to socialist transformation. The all-union Communist Party Central Committee ordered Central Asian party organizations to bring an end to “feudal” and “tribal” patterns of land use, distribute the holdings of large landowners among the poor, and confiscate all “kulak” lands above a certain limit. In Turkmenistan, where land was owned communally and large landowners were rare, the primary goal was to eliminate the genealogical basis of land tenure, which reinforced loyalty to the descent group and complicated Soviet efforts to make political inroads into the Turkmen village. The chair of the Turkmen Council of People’s Commissars, Gaigisiz Atabaev, described in frank terms the party’s motives for remaking Turkmen rural society: “The peasant is forced to think and live in the interest of his lineage, which determines his consciousness. This is the source of all our difficulties in organizing the village and educating the peasants in true Soviet principles.”

Soviet officials impatient to carry out land reform assumed that land tenure was the most important economic fact in the Turkmen countryside, as in Russia, and that major social change would follow any redistribution of land. But many regions of Turkmenistan actually had a surplus of land; the problem, in this arid part of the world, was water for irrigation. In the agricultural villages of Transcaspia, the use of land and the water with which to irrigate it was most commonly regulated by a system known as sanashik. Under this system, land and water were owned collectively by the descent group. Every married man within the lineage received an equal share of land and water for the use of his household. Households in each village were divided into groups that took turns diverting the common flow of water from the local arikh, or canal, onto their fields for a specified period of time. Every autumn, lands were redistributed from those who had died or moved away to the newly married. Because there was generally plenty of land, the Turkmen practiced extensive agriculture, moving from plot to plot so as not to exhaust the soil’s fertility.

In areas with elaborate irrigation works, the system for distributing land and water was highly complex. In Mari province, numerous lineages cooperated in building and maintaining large-scale irrigation systems. Land was categorized according to its fertility and degree of irrigation, with every village receiving an equal amount of land and water in each cat-

31. Ves’ Turkmenistan (Ashgabat, 1926), 220.
32. Ibid., 219; Lomakin, Obychnoe pravo turkmen, 108–9. This system was also used by some of the neighboring peoples of Iran and Afghanistan. See Tapper, Conflict of Tribe and State, 48–49.
33. Nemchenko, Dinamika, 8; Lomakin, Obychnoe pravo turkmen, 119; Ves’ Turkmenistan, 219. See also Ch. Iazyev, Turkmenkskaia sel’skaia obschina (Ashgabat, 1992).
egory. Thus, each village, and each household within it, had plots of land in several different locations. Under the sanashik system, the significant inequalities tended to be between groups rather than between individuals. The poor were those who belonged to groups without access to land and water—often members of non-Turkmen ethnic minorities. The tsarist regime, which viewed the tribal collective as a source of stability and a convenient way of collecting tax revenues, encouraged the maintenance of this system.

After the tsarist conquest of Transcaucasia, the rise of cash crops brought about changes in the land-holding system, particularly the expansion of a form of tenure known as mülk. Under mülk, land remained in the hands of a single household and was not subject to annual redistribution. This form of land tenure was more suitable for growing cotton and other intensive crops, which required a greater long-term investment in improving the land. With the rise of mülk, wealth differentials increased in the regions that had been incorporated most rapidly into the capitalist market, especially Ashgabat province. In other regions, sanashik remained the only form of land tenure, and Soviet investigators found little concentration of land in the hands of the well-to-do. The purpose of land reform, therefore, was not primarily to redress inequalities and win the support of the peasantry by redistributing land. Instead, it was to destroy traditional economic and landholding patterns, break the link between genealogy and economic interest, and open the countryside to class struggle and Soviet influence. Through land reform in Turkmenistan and elsewhere in Central Asia, the Soviet regime would create a group of peasants dependent on Soviet patronage instead of on their lineage for land and economic benefits.

In most of their public pronouncements, however, party officials justified the reform by arguing that the existing system of land tenure was “confusing” and “inefficient.” Alloting equal shares of land and water to every village, lineage, and household, regardless of size, was said to be both inefficient and inequitable, since it did not reflect the relative growth and decline of lineages and families over time. Moreover, in an argument that echoed criticisms of the Russian peasant commune, Soviet officials claimed that the yearly redistribution of land under sanashik hindered the development of agriculture, since peasants had no incentive to improve their lands. Finally, they maintained that the scattering of each vil-

34. Ves’ Turkmenistan, 218.
38. Nemchenko, Dinamika, 9; Dövletov, Turkmenskii aul, 156–58; Ves’ Turkmenistan, 219.
lage’s and each household’s plots in a number of different places, often miles apart, prevented peasants from concentrating and maximizing their agricultural efforts.41

On 24 September 1925, the Turkmen republic’s Central Executive Committee decreed that land reform would be conducted in portions of Marí province (Tagtazar, Yolotên, and Bairamalî districts) and Poltoratsk province (Ginzburg, Gźîlarbat, and Poltoratsk districts). Several districts in Poltoratsk province (Krasnovodsk, Gazarjik, and Etrek) were excluded from the reform because they were almost completely nomadic. The Turkmen agricultural areas that had been part of the Bukharan and Khivan republics were also excluded, because little was known about their economies and they were deemed not “politically ready” for such a step.42 The Central Executive Committee’s decree nationalized all land in the republic, banning sanashik and mülk. Land was allotted to individual households—in the preferred terminology of the Soviet regime, “given to those who till it.” Those who owned more land than the established norm saw the surplus confiscated. Land was confiscated entirely from “merchants who earned their living from trade,” from “clergy who did not work the land themselves,” and from “nomads who did not participate in the agricultural economy.” Central, provincial, and village land reform commissions were created to implement the decrees.43

The land-water reform was a massive effort. In Poltoratsk province, the reform was carried out in 121 villages with a total of 24,834 households. In Marí, 22,211 households were affected.44 The redistribution of lands also entailed large-scale population movements, as thousands of peasants were shifted onto sanashik and mülk lands confiscated from their previous owners.45 The Turkmen republic’s leadership painted a rosy picture of the results of land reform in its official accounts. In published articles and in a presentation to the all-Soviet Communist Party Central Committee, Sovnarkom chair Atabaev maintained that local party cells and the Koschchi Union (the Soviet-sponsored organization of poor peasants) had provided strong leadership for the land reform commissions, “bedniaks” had stood united against their exploiters, and the masses had supported the reform. Investigators sent by the all-union Central Committee to the Marí region in April 1926 told a different story,

42. RGASPI, f. 17. op. 69, d. 20 (investigation of the KPT Central Committee by party instructors), l. 102; Ves’ Turkmenistan, 213; Nemchenko, “Agrarnaia reforma,” 137. The Poltoratsk and Marí provinces correspond to the present-day Marí and Ahal vilayets. Among the Turkmens of Khiva, land and water were owned collectively by the lineage and distributed equally among tribal subsections, as in Transcaucasia. In Bukhara, according to Soviet ethnographers, individual land ownership was the rule among the Turkmen population. Bregel, Khorezmskie turkmêni, 96–107; N. V. Briullova-Shaskolskâia, “Na Amû Dâre: Etmograficheskia ekspeditsiia v Kerkinskii okrug TSSR,” Novyi vostok, 1927, no. 16–17:297.
43. Ves’ Turkmenistan, 212, 334–35; RGASPI, f. 17, op. 69, d. 20, l. 102.
44. Ves’ Turkmenistan, 213, 217, 224–25.
45. Ibid., 220–22, 224–25.
however, describing a process that was chaotic, poorly planned, and corrupt. The reform was accomplished in extreme haste, with thousands of households going before the land-water reform commissions in the course of only a few days. Under these circumstances, accuracy and fairness were nearly impossible.  

In the countryside there was considerable opposition to the reform. Villagers argued that the land reform “contravenes Muslim law and custom” and that it was a way for Russians to “register the entire population so that later they can control us.” In direct contradiction to the claims of the Turkmen party leadership, the investigators found that “the party, the Komsomol and especially Koshchi played no role in land reform.” On the contrary, many rural members of Koshchi and the Communist Party faced confiscation of their lands and vigorously opposed the reform.  

People engaged in various forms of subterfuge to prevent the confiscation of their lands. Heads of households divided their property among their sons and other relatives to make themselves less vulnerable to the reform. Meanwhile, those who were subject to confiscation as “merchants,” “clergy,” or “nomads” tried to present themselves as dedicated, full-time agriculturalists.  
The land reform commissions, full as they were of influential people and members of dominant tribes, did their best to undermine land reform and exempt their kin and supporters from dispossession. As one investigator noted: “In the interest of clan ties, people gave imprecise information about land, hiding many lands belonging to wealthy peasants and clan leaders. This was done not only by the ignorant village masses, but even by members of the [land reform] commission.”  

As a result of such maneuvers, the required transfers of land sometimes failed to take place, or took place only fictitiously. In the Yoloten region, for example, dominant Turkmen descent groups were able to resist dispossession and keep more land than the allotted norm, while the poor—mainly members of the Baluchi ethnic minority—remained landless or received less than the standard allotment. In the aftermath of the land-water reform, Soviet institutions reported that “rich peasants” were attempting to undo the reform and “restore old land-water relations.” In 1928 and 1929, the Central Asian Economic Soviet and the secret police (OGPU) noted a number of instances of “restoration” throughout the republic. In some cases, “poor peasants” had voluntarily returned land to the original owners; in others, “rich peasants” had continued to use land that had technically been taken away from them, had bought land cheaply

46. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 69, d. 20, l. 103.
47. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 630 (reports of Leninsk provincial party committee, 1926), ll. 46–47; f. 17, op. 69, d. 20, l. 103; GARF, f. 374, op. 28s, d. 1474a (Central Asian Economic Soviet survey of the results of the 1925–26 land-water reform in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), l. 22.
48. GARF, f. 374, op. 28s, d. 1474a, l. 22; Ves’ Turkmenistan, 214.
49. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 69, d. 20, l. 103. See also GARF, f. 374, op. 28s, d. 1474a, l. 25; RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1811 (OGPU surveys of political conditions in Central Asia, January–December 1929), l. 191.
from the “poor peasants” to whom it had been given, or had pressured “bedniaks” to return land to its original owners.\textsuperscript{50}

Since land was held by the group and divided equally among its members, it was the group, not the individual member, whose economic position was harmed or enhanced by the reform. Those who received land often belonged to different descent groups or ethnicities from those who lost land. In the village of Gökcha, members of the Kuvash lineage kept all their holdings, while members of the Kel lineage saw their lands confiscated.\textsuperscript{51} In the Yoloten and Saragt regions of Mari province, Baluchis were given the land of Turkmen groups. Often with the collusion of village and district authorities, the former owners of the land plotted to reverse this “unnatural” state of affairs. In the village of Ata in the Saragt district in May 1928, the OGPU reported that “the Turkmen who lost their lands are trying to squeeze the Baluchis out of the village, accusing them of theft and smuggling.”\textsuperscript{52}

However mixed its results in practice, the land-water reform was the first major intervention in the Turkmen countryside by the Soviet government. On the basis of information obtained during the reform, individuals were classified as “poor peasants,” “kulaks,” “clergy,” and so forth—classifications that had major political consequences for years to come. At the same time, it is clear from the haste, corruption, and opposition involved in the land reform process that much of the information obtained about land ownership and “class” status was tainted and unreliable. Moreover, the reform hardly produced the desired effect of diminishing descent-based loyalties and solidarities. If anything, the rationale for descent group solidarity was increased by Soviet attempts to dispossess some groups in favor of others.

The Commitment to “Tribal Parity”

The attempt to undermine the economic basis of Turkmen descent group affiliation through land reform was just one aspect of Soviet “tribal policy.” At the same time, Soviet authorities pursued a second, more conciliatory approach, seeking to diminish the importance of kinship through equitable treatment for all tribes and lineages. This policy of “tribal parity” was not explicitly adopted in party declarations or publicized in the party press; since “tribal-clan remnants” were supposed to disappear as the Turkmen socialist nation was built, party officials were unwilling to appear to endorse them through an official system of preferences. Rather, it was carried out without fanfare within the republic as a logical extension of the policy of promoting indigenous elites, known as korenizatsiia (“indigenization”).

\textsuperscript{50} RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1494 (OGPU surveys of conditions in the Turkmen republic, March–July 1928), ll. 5–6, 31; d. 1811, ll. 190, 284–85; and d. 1350 (OGPU surveys of political and economic conditions in Central Asia, April–June 1928), l. 86; GARF, f. 374, op. 28, d. 1474a, l. 23.

\textsuperscript{51} RGASPI, f. 121, op. 1, d. 42 (materials on village party cells in Turkmenistan from the Central Control Commission of the All-Union Communist Party, 1925), l. 30.

\textsuperscript{52} RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1350, l. 86; d. 1494, ll. 5–6, 31.
In Central Asia, korenizatsiia was intended to help “backward” peoples become Soviet nations. In the Bolsheviks’ view, nationhood was an essential stage that all human groups had to pass through before attaining socialism. Thus, the promotion of national territories with their own elites and languages would speed the historical development of the non-Russians, mitigate ethnic conflict, and “clear the arena for class struggle.”

In areas such as Turkmenistan where prenational forms of social structure still prevailed, fair and equal treatment for all descent groups would undercut the basis for “tribalism” and allow the natives to move more quickly to the stage of full Soviet nationhood.

Yet “tribal parity” proved difficult to carry out in practice. Given the hierarchical relations among groups within each locality, it was impossible to guarantee all descent groups equal access to administrative positions and economic benefits. Soviet authorities were unable to prevent stronger groups from dominating weaker ones. More fatally, the attempt to mitigate descent group conflict through “tribal parity” was at odds with the simultaneous campaign to foment class conflict among the Turkmen. Because “poor peasants” and “kulaks” frequently belonged to different descent or ethnic groups, the Soviet attempt to single out certain classes for preferential treatment or persecution resulted in the inadvertent reinforcement of distinctions based on genealogy and history.

The attempt to balance the interests of rival groups was carried out at all levels of the genealogical structure. The primary large-scale division within the republic was between the Turkmen of Transcaspia, Bukhara, and Khiva. These three population groups, which had been exposed to different historical experiences and influences over a period of several centuries, were united for the first time by the 1924 “national delimitation” of Central Asia. The Transcaspian regions of Ahal and Marâ were home predominantly to Teke Turkmen and had been under direct Russian colonial rule since the 1880s. The Tekes, as the largest and most powerful Turkmen tribe, had dominated neighboring Turkmen groups prior to the Russian conquest and had been at the forefront of the military resistance to Persian and Russian incursions in the nineteenth century. More recently, the Tekes’ proximity to the centers of colonial power had given them some familiarity with Russians and the Russian language. The Turkmen regions of the former Khivan republic, home mostly to Yomut Turkmen, and of Bukhara, inhabited by Ersarî and other groups, had not experienced direct Russian rule and were more distant from the centers


54. The concern with tribal parity also extended to the cultural realm, where Turkmen linguists worked to create a standardized Turkmen language that would incorporate elements from all the major Turkmen dialects. See Edgar, “Creation of Soviet Turkmenistan,” chap. 8.
of Soviet power. For all these reasons, Tekes tended to see themselves as “first among Turkmen” and to assume they should dominate the new republic.55

In appointing the leading officials of the new republic, the Central Asian Bureau tried to avoid the impression of Teke or Transcaspian domination and to ensure that government institutions included representatives from each of the three major constituencies. The six appointed members of the Turkmen National Bureau (the committee responsible for drawing the borders of the Turkmen republic during the delimitation) included Turkmen from Transcaspia, Bukhara, and Khiva, as well as a single Russian. The first chair of the republican Central Executive Committee, Nadirbai Aitakov, was a Yomut from western Transcaspia, while his two deputies were from Khiva and Bukhara. The chair of the Council of People’s Commissars, Gaigisiz Atabaev, was a Teke from the Tejen region of the former Transcaspian oblast. His two deputies were Paskutskii, a Russian, and Mamedov, a Khivan.56 Discussions about which city to designate as the capital of the Turkmen republic were also affected by concerns about balancing the interests of the three main population groups. Several leading members of the Turkmen Communist Party strongly opposed the choice of Ashgabat as capital, arguing that Turkmen from the Bukharan and Khivan republics would be hostile toward a government based in a Teke area.57

The authorities went beyond balancing the interests of the three largest population groups, committing themselves to providing equal treatment to rival subsections of a single tribe. Frequently, one party leader recalled, “promotion of people into this or that post was based not on the professional qualifications of a given employee but on whether he was from the Utamish or Togtamish, Atabai or Jafarbai clan.” (The Utamish and Togtamish were subgroups of the Teke tribe; the Atabai and Jafarbai were subgroups of the Yomuts.) At the local level, one Soviet official argued that executive organs of village soviets should include a representative of every lineage in the village; otherwise, local government would be dominated by the strongest descent group. Even the agents of the OGPU became involved, recommending to authorities in Ashgabat that under-represented lineages be given a greater presence in local government.58

56. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 67, d. 206 (Central Asian Bureau materials on Uzbek and Turkmen party congresses and other matters, February 1925–November 1926), l. 11.
With the addition of the “tribal factor,” Soviet-style affirmative-action policies had become extraordinarily complicated. Soviet agencies were now required to employ an adequate number of Turkmen, national minorities, women, workers, poor peasants, and members of underrepresented descent groups. Even when officials made genuine efforts to conform to these demands, the policy was not entirely successful at ameliorating group conflict. Non-Teke continued to complain about “Teke hegemony,” maintaining that members of the Teke tribe held a disproportionate number of responsible jobs at high levels of the state and party bureaucracy. Because figures on recruitment generally did not include information on the individual’s tribal origins, it is difficult to evaluate these claims. Whatever the reality, the impression of Teke dominance caused resentment among non-Teke. Teke officials sent from the capital to work in peripheral regions often faced a chilly reception from the local population. A bitter conflict erupted in 1927 in Chârjev province, a predominantly Erşarî region, after a young Teke named Charî Vellekov was appointed first secretary of the provincial party committee. Erşarî officials launched a petition drive against Vellekov, accusing him of undermining local officials and ignoring local concerns. In Gazanjik, a predominantly Yomut region in western Turkmenistan, a visiting party investigator in April 1932 found bitter mistrust between Teke officials sent from Ashgabat and local Yomut officials. Among the Tekes “there is a kind of fear of appointing local people. They usually hope the center will send someone, therefore there is a real shortage of cadres.” The Tekes claimed that the Yomuts could not be trusted to carry out Soviet policies in a disinterested fashion; lacking sufficient “class vigilance” and linked to the local population through ties of kinship, local Yomut officials were reluctant to unmask “kulaks” in the countryside. Meanwhile, the Yomuts pushed for the promotion of local people, sometimes even saying of a candidate, “he can’t handle the work, but we have to promote him anyway, otherwise they’ll send us a Russian or a Teke.”

Just as it was difficult to maintain “tribal parity” among the largest genealogical subgroups, efforts to ensure equal treatment on the local level were hindered by existing Turkmen social hierarchies. Among the Turkmen, the strongest descent groups had always been able to accumulate more social, political, and economic capital than their rivals. Under Soviet rule, this capital came in the form of Communist Party membership, access to higher education, and control of village election commit-

59. Here I am following Terry Martin, who pioneered the use of the term affirmative action to refer to the Soviet policy of ethnic preferences.

60. While statistics are scarce, an impressionistic survey of the biographies of leading party officials in the 1920s and 1930s indicates that a majority were Teke from the Ashgabat and Marî regions.

61. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 874 (Central Asian Bureau correspondence on disputes and judicial matters, January–December 1927), l. 19–21, 23–24, 31.

62. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 2818 (reports by party instructors and investigatory brigades of the Central Asian Bureau and the KPT Central Committee, February–August 1932), l. 20.
tees. Within specific localities, the influential citizens and elders of high-status Turkmen lineages tended to control Soviet institutions and the best jobs. Local cells of Koshchi were dominated by the influential people of each community, rather than the poor and the dispossessed. The Turkmen elite were often singularly unwilling to allow the poor and landless to participate in local soviet or party organs, regarding them as “foreigners” and interlopers who had no right to make decisions about Turkmen affairs. In the village of Bagir, near Ashgabat, the Koshchi cell consisted entirely of leaders of the “saintly” Mahtum tribe and influential members of the dominant Bekevul lineage, while “the Kurdish residents of the village, who make up the poorest part of the population—hired hands, sharecroppers—are not considered worthy of joining Koshchi and participating in public affairs along with their employers.”

A 1928 investigation of village Communist Party cells in the Poltoratsk and Mari provinces found a similar situation. Turkmen village cells were usually dominated by aksakgals (“white beards,” or elders)—well-off and influential local leaders. These local communists refused to accept “battraks” into party cells despite the urging of party leaders, saying that they are not “our people” and accusing them of being thieves and opium addicts. In one village in the Gokdepe region, the party cell secretary explained the absence of “battraks” thus: “There aren’t any battraks in our village, and if there are, they’re foreigners, and we don’t bothering with them. There aren’t any landless people at all.” In the village of Yarigala, members of the party cell said, “we’re afraid of battraks, they’ll eavesdrop in the cell and then tell their own leaders.” In the village of Keshi, one leading party member reported, “There is no information about the number of battraks in the village. No special meetings of the poor have been called, as the majority of battraks are Persians and Kurds.” The Turkmen republic was not the only place where the “battraks” and “bedniaks” patronized by the Soviet regime were regarded as good-for-nothings by other peasants, but in Turkmenistan this alienation was exacerbated because the poor generally belonged to different ethnic or descent groups.

If poor and landless peasants belonged to certain genealogically defined groups, the same was true of the “class aliens” persecuted by the Soviet regime. The well-off peasants stigmatized as “kulaks” generally belonged to the formerly dominant, most prestigious Turkmen lineage in a region, which had naturally been able to accumulate more resources than other groups. Other “class aliens,” such as the clergy, also tended to belong to specific descent groups. Unlike the settled and urban areas of Central Asia, Turkmen-inhabited regions had little in the way of a professional clergy. Among the indigenous population, the clerical role was

63. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 286, l. 107.
64. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 3, d. 293 (stenographic account of the joint plenum of the KPT Central Committee and Central Control Commission, 12–15 May 1928), ll. 18–20, 26.
most often played by members of the “saintly” tribes, who were believed to be descended from the prophet Muhammad or the first four Muslim caliphs. Because Turkmen feared divine retribution if they harmed a member of a saintly tribe, these groups served as neutral mediators in conflicts between descent groups. The saintly tribes also cared for shrines and cemeteries and served as religious folk healers, or tabibs.66 Because of their historical role, the Soviet assault on the Muslim clergy singled these groups out for persecution. In Dashhovuz, when educational institutions were purged of “class-alien elements” in the late 1920s, boys from the saintly Mahtum tribe were classified as sons of clerics and expelled from school.67

The examples above show the extent to which Soviet class policy served to harden existing divisions along genealogical lines. Historians have argued that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonialism resulted in a reification of the “traditional” in many colonized societies, as European rulers codified and institutionalized their own interpretations of local social structures.68 In similar fashion, Soviet attempts at “tribal parity” and the promotion of class conflict may have inadvertently perpetuated the distinctions they were designed to eliminate.

Against a backdrop of intensifying class rhetoric, the establishment of Soviet institutions offering villagers access to political and economic power likewise provided compelling new reasons for descent group solidarity.69 In Turkmenistan, along with conflicts over land and water that predated the Russian revolution, groups struggled over who would control the village soviet, whose sons would be conscripted into the Red Army, and who would be deported as a “kulak.” Frequently, a single group would gain control of a region’s soviet and party and organs, allowing only its own members to reap the benefits of association with the Soviet regime.

In 1928, in the Tagtabazar region near Mari, the Soviet and party apparatus in the district was completely dominated by the Sughı section of the Sarık tribe. The OGPU reported that whenever there was an attempt to promote a member of a rival group, “you hear endless statements to the


67. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 3, d. 513 (stenogram of the second joint plenum of the KPT Central Committee and Central Control Commission, 10–13 October 1930), l. 121.

68. Some scholars have argued that British colonialism actually created “traditional” Indian society. For an overview of this literature, see Niels Brimmes, Constructing the Colonial Encounter: Right and Left Hand Castes in Early Colonial South India (Richmond, Surrey, 1999), 5–9. See also Nicholas Dirks, “Castes of Mind,” Representations 37 (1992): 56–78. On the consolidation of tribal identities and practices under colonial rule in the Arab world, see Eickelman, The Middle East and Central Asia, 139–40.

69. Studies of ethnicity have shown that incorporation into a modern polity often results in a strengthening of particularistic loyalties, at least in the short term. See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives (London, 1993), 67–68; Milton J. Esman and Itamar Rabinovitch, Ethnicity, Pluralism, and the State in the Middle East (Ithaca, 1988), 14–15.
effect that he’s an opium addict, he has ties with kulaks, and so forth.” Similar cases were reported throughout the republic. Regional governments neglected villages inhabited by people belonging to the “wrong” descent group, refusing to build schools or provide medical and veterinary assistance. Chairs of village soviets exempted their own kin from military training, conscripting only members of opposing groups.70

Village soviets were a prime focus of rural descent group competition. Only by dominating the soviet could one ensure that members of one’s own group were classified as “bedniaks” and freed from taxes, while members of opposing groups were classified as “kulaks” and subjected to discrimination.71 One effective way of achieving this was to dominate the village election committee, which determined who could vote and who would be disenfranchised as a “class alien.” In the process of struggling over the village soviets, Turkmen rural residents learned to use Soviet rhetoric to promote the interests of their own descent groups. In this, they were similar to peasants elsewhere in the Soviet Union, who also used Marxist class categories to pursue animosities based on local history, political affiliation, or personal dislike.72 The difference was that such conflicts in Turkmenistan tended to have a genealogical basis. The Soviet state, by offering political and economic benefits to its “class allies” while meting out punishments to its enemies, had created a strong incentive for Turkmen to express kin conflict in class terms.

Local elections to soviets in 1928 and 1929 featured stepped-up class rhetoric and efforts to recruit more poor and landless peasants as candidates. Beginning in 1928, the end of the New Economic Policy and the acceleration of the Soviet industrialization drive had brought a more radical approach to class. Stalin introduced the idea—which quickly became dogma—that as socialism approached, “class enemies” would escalate their desperate resistance and class struggle would intensify. In Turkmenistan, as in all parts of the Soviet Union, there were new efforts to mobilize “bedniaks” and “batraks” in support of the Soviet regime. At the same time, discrimination against disenfranchised “class aliens” intensified; they were purged from mass organizations, fired from jobs, and expelled from educational institutions.73 However, heightened “class struggle” in Turkmen villages most often manifested itself as heightened descent group struggle.

In 1929, published accounts of the elections in Turkmen villages stressed the growing involvement of the poor, the “sharpening [of] class tensions,” and the increasing efforts of “rich peasants, clergy, and disenfranchised individuals” to influence the election campaigns in their own

70. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1494, ll. 67–68; f. 62, d. 1349 (OGPU surveys of political and economic conditions in Central Asia, January–March 1928), ll. 154, 159.

71. On village soviets, see Lewin, Russian Peasants and Soviet Power, 81–84; Brovkin, Russia after Lenin, 164.

72. On the use of “kulak” allegations in village feuding, see Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants, 260.

interests. Astute communists recognized, however, that class conflict was not the real story in the Turkmen countryside. Secret accounts of the election campaigns submitted by the OGPU and party investigators indicated that the outcome of local elections was determined almost exclusively by the logic of descent group rivalry. In village after village, the same picture emerged: a single descent group would gain control of the local election committee and deprive members of rival groups of their right to vote by declaring them to be “class-alien elements.” Having ensured that its members alone could vote, the dominant group could count on an easy victory for its own candidates. As one OGPU analyst reported: “During the election campaigns, there were many cases in which clans strove to get only their own members onto the election committees and to block representatives of opposing clans. As a result, in a number of districts (Bäherden, Ashgabat, Saragt, Bairamalî, and so on) the election committee was made up of members of only one clan. These clan election committees deprived members of other clans of their voting rights, while restoring the rights of their own rich peasants.”

Weaker and smaller descent groups did not submit quietly to their own disenfranchisement. In the Saragt region, four smaller lineages united against the dominant group, which had the support of the district executive committee. In the Bäherden region, the Bek Mamed lineage threatened to emigrate to Persia if its members’ voting rights were not restored. In the village of Keshi in the Ashgabat district, where the Gule lineage had controlled the soviet for a number of years, disenfranchised descent groups demanded that the soviet include representatives of all groups in proportion to their numbers within the village.

Tensions between lineages frequently erupted when village soviets held meetings (otchetnye sobraniiia) to report on their activities. In a number of mixed-lineage villages in the Ashgabat region, meetings were held separately for each group in order to avert conflict. At these gatherings, one descent group (the one dominating local government) would invariably declare the work of the village soviet to be entirely satisfactory, while the other groups would criticize it with equal vehemence. Rival groups would accuse each other of protecting “kulaks,” consorting with “criminal elements,” and illegally depriving others of their voting rights. In the village of Sünche in the Bäherden region, members of the Hoja and Shikh lineages complained that the chairman of the village soviet had disenfranchised several members of their groups, while leaving intact the voting rights of “opium addicts and kulaks” among the locally dominant Arab lineage. The village election committee, it turned out, was made up exclusively of members of the Arab group. In the village of Mûrche, the

74. “Percyvbor’y sovetov 1929 g. po Turkmenskoi respublike,” Sovetskoe stroitel’stvo, 1929, no. 6: 64–68.
75. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1349, ll. 83, 153; on the misuse of electoral commissions in Russia, see Brovkin, Russia after Lenin, 164.
76. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1349, ll. 83, 153.
77. Ibid., l. 154.
Dekyash lineage accused the village soviet, which consisted solely of members of the Bayakchi-Ýüzbashî lineage, of providing agricultural loans to its own well-off kin and refusing to give credit to the poor.\textsuperscript{78}

The policy of promoting class struggle and exposing “exploiters” reached a climax in 1930 and 1931 with the campaign for the collectivization of agriculture and the “liquidation of kulaks as a class.” In Turkmenistan, as in Russia, the absence of a clear-cut definition of “kulak” meant that the category was applied in an arbitrary manner, often to those perceived as enemies of the Soviet state.\textsuperscript{79} Moreover, the close intertwining of the categories of class and kinship that had taken place in the 1920s meant that many of those repressed as “kulaks” belonged to specific genealogically defined groups.

In the more remote, nomadic areas of the republic, collectivization provoked a violent uprising against the Soviet regime and a massive upsurge in emigration to Iran and Afghanistan. The situation stabilized only in late 1933, after the Soviet regime rescinded its demand that all nomadic livestock be collectivized.\textsuperscript{80} Even after all the upheavals of the early 1930s, kinship showed no sign of disappearing as the main ideology structuring social solidarities and animosities in Turkmenistan. On the contrary, the violent campaign to transform society had only increased the need for the safe harbor of genealogical affinity. Thus, in the “livestock collective farms” established in nomadic regions, conflict along genealogical lines was widespread in the 1930s. Often the kolkhoz administration would be dominated by a single descent group, which would exempt its own kin from the required communalization of livestock. Work would be distributed inequitably, with members of the dominant descent group assigning their relatives the best paid and least arduous tasks. On livestock collectives, as elsewhere in Turkmenistan, class conflict was transformed into kin rivalry.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., ll. 154, 84.


\textsuperscript{80} RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 3290 (Central Asian Bureau report on collective farm construction in the Gazarjik region of the Turkmen SSR, August 1934), ll. 1–4. A KPT Central Committee resolution of 20 April 1932 deplored the forcible collectivization of livestock and the rush to form artel’ collective farms among nomads. Blaming overly zealous regional party organizers for this error, the Central Committee declared that the looser collective form known as the TOZ (Association for Joint Working of the Land) was more appropriate for nomadic and seminomadic areas. The decree is reproduced in \textit{Sotsialisticheskoe khoziaistvo turkmenii}, 1934, no. 1:3–4. On the response to collectivization in Turkmenistan, see Edgar, “Creation of Soviet Turkmenistan,” chap. 5.

At the same time, Soviet theorists were attempting a reverse feat of conceptual alchemy: the transformation of kinship into class. Fired by the cultural revolution's impatience with lingering forms of backwardness, ethnographers did their best in the early 1930s to define the Turkmen kinship problem out of existence. “Tribes” and “clans” were declared relics of an era that had already been left behind by a fully collectivized Central Asia. Fewer articles in the Turkmen press now exhort Turkmen to overcome their anachronistic “tribal-clan” structure, since to do so was to imply that the heroic upheavals associated with the “great turn” had failed to transform the Turkmen. Some scholars concluded that kinship had already ceased to exist as the main principle of Turkmen social structure, even among nomads, where the “tribal order” was thought to be strongest. The ethnographer P. F. Preobrazhenskii argued that tribal solidarity had become largely a fiction among Yomut Turkmen, since kin-based relationships had given way to territorial allegiances. Another scholar, A. Bernshtam, argued that the Turkmen had moved from primitive communism to feudalism, leading to the disintegration of kinship relations and the concentration of wealth in a few hands. Instead of acting in the interests of tribal solidarity, descent group leaders had now become “kulaks” who used slogans about solidarity to exploit their kin.82 With this new view of Turkmen society, Soviet theorists had found a convenient way of reconciling the contradictions between class and kinship. Genealogy and class were no longer competing conceptions of social organization; in reality, class alone existed, and kinship relations were merely a front for class exploitation.

In the rhetoric of Soviet theorists and Turkmen villagers, then, class and kinship had become one and the same thing. What accounts for the striking ease with which each side adopted and manipulated the other’s categories? The explanation may lie in the conceptual similarities between class and kinship ideology. Each followed a rigid, dichotomous logic of exclusion and inclusion, which provided a mechanism for distinguishing “insiders” from “outsiders” and determining who would have access to political and economic power. Turkmen villagers were familiar with the idea that society was divided into mutually exclusive—and often mutually antagonistic—groups. Instead of “class allies” and “class enemies,” however, Turkmen communities were divided between ig and gul, conquerors and conquered, dominant lineages and “aliens,” and these were the distinctions Turkmen villagers had in mind when they employed the Soviet rhetoric of class warfare. Such conceptual affinities help to explain why the promotion of class conflict tended to reinforce genealogically based distinctions. Among the Turkmen, genealogy was to some ex-

tent destiny, playing a significant role in determining one’s social status, choice of marriage partner, and economic opportunities. In a sense, then, kinship was class—or the closest thing to class Turkmen society had to offer—and eliminating the one while promoting the other was next to impossible.