

**Тарих ғылымдары:** Тарих. Қазақстан тарихы  
**Исторические науки:** История. История Казахстана  
**Historical sciences:** History. History of Kazakhstan

SRSTI 03.23.07

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62724/202520101>

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## THE NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN AS A UNIFIED HISTORICAL PROCESS

**Abstract.** One of the most pressing issues in the history of the Kazakh nation is the national liberation movements. It is a historical fact that the Kazakh steppe was colonized by the Russian Empire during the 18th and 19th centuries. Colonization was carried out through various methods and strategies. Alongside the Tsarist government's colonial policy, the Kazakh people continuously resisted. A distinctive feature of the national liberation movement in Kazakhstan is that the struggle for independence in the Great Steppe was unrelenting—from the very beginning of Russian colonial encroachment to the fall of the Tsarist regime in 1917.

This history of resistance and armed uprisings has been studied in Tsarist-noble historiography, Soviet class-based history, and over the last three decades since Kazakhstan gained independence. However, the methodological approach to these studies has often been flawed. The Kazakh uprisings have typically been examined in isolation from one another. In reality, the resistance against the Russian Empire's expansionist and colonial policies was a unified and interconnected movement. The leaders of these struggles were aware of one another and often acted in coordination.

The national liberation movement in Kazakhstan should be viewed as a single historical process. This study aims to highlight the interconnectedness and continuity of the uprisings and movements. The article can be regarded as an attempt to create an integrated account of the Kazakh national liberation struggle.

**Key words.** Colonialism, independence, national liberation, resistance, uprising, movement, continuity, heroes, leaders.

**Introduction.** In previous historical periods, the history of national liberation uprisings was often presented as fragmented events, disconnected from one another, with little attention paid to their shared characteristics and continuity. Furthermore, political and ideological pressure during the Soviet era constrained research to follow this disjointed narrative. Nevertheless, several prominent Kazakh scholars emphasized the unified nature of national liberation uprisings in the region. One such scholar, T. Shonanov, insightfully observed: The Kazakh people interpreted the government's smooth language and sweet words in their own way. When the authorities said 'we will bring peace and calm,' they understood it to mean 'we will take away your freedom'; when the authorities promised prosperity by settling cities nearby, the Kazakhs perceived it as another attempt to seize their remaining fertile lands. Thus, they distrusted the government, remained wary, and opposed it. They clearly understood the authorities' deceitful approach—entering with smiles, but leaving with sorrow. The Kazakhs

resisted giving land to the Cossacks, fiercely protecting their settlements like vigilant birds, leading to conflicts and disputes. It was in this context that Eset, Zhanqozha, Syrym, and Kenesary rose in rebellion. The historic letter of Bi Shegen to Sultan Akhmet, and the battles between Kuleke, Malaisary and the Cossacks along the Irtysh River were all rooted in disputes over land” [1, pp. 32–33].

The first known national liberation movement in Kazakh history, which was organized and led by Sultan Dosaly Bulkaiyrov and later gave rise to the famous Syrym Datuly uprising, began as a response to Russian colonial expansion. These uprisings in the western regions of the Great Steppe were deeply interconnected. At the core of these movements was the issue of land. The goals set forth by Syrym Datuly’s uprising were not fully achieved. However, the Tsarist government’s eventual decision in 1801 to allow Kazakh tribes to return to their ancestral pastures on the right bank of the Ural River and graze their livestock was a direct result of the pressure exerted by Syrym’s movement.

Nevertheless, the struggle over the Ural River had begun in the mid-18th century. As T. Shonanov notes: “The year 1759 marked the beginning of intense bloodshed over the Ural River... From that point on, the Kazakh fight for access to the Ural River only intensified with each passing year... Bokei’s eventual acquisition of land near the Ural River was the outcome of nearly sixty years of struggle” [1, pp. 55–57].

Thus, uprisings and unrest over ancestral lands began in the 18th century and continued throughout the 19th century.

**Results and discussion.** The national liberation uprisings that took place across the Kazakh steppe in resistance to imperial-colonial forces display a clear pattern of continuity, interconnectedness, and overarching unity. All of these movements were fundamentally aimed at preserving the Kazakh community, ensuring the stability of Kazakh society and its various institutions.

Historians studying the history of national liberation movements must take into account the following: the migration of Isatay Taimanuly, Makhambet Utemisuly, and a small group of their companions from the Inner Horde to the steppe beyond the Ural coincided with a large-scale popular unrest in the Junior Zhuz, triggered by the uprising led by Sultan Kenesary Kasymuly. In this regard, T. Shonanov aptly states: “Isatay’s uprising was a movement shared by the people of both the Middle and Junior Zhuz. It was an uprising that swept across the entire Kazakh steppe. In 1838, uprisings led by Kenesary and Yeset also took place” [1, p. 65], thus emphasizing the historical continuity of these liberation struggles.

At the beginning of 1838, Sultan Kenesary, along with his kin, migrated from the Middle Zhuz to the regions of Torgay and Yrgyz. By the spring of that year, unrest began to spread among the Kazakhs under the jurisdiction of the Orenburg administration. The wave of rebellion reached the eastern part of the Horde, home to the Argyn and Kypshak tribes, then extended to the Jagalbaily tribe, and eventually encompassed the Tabyn settlements along the Elek River. From there, the warrior Zholaman Tilenishuly, refusing to submit to the tsarist administration, moved with his clan toward the Torgay River to join Kenesary Kasymuly.

This wave of resistance gradually spread from the eastern and central parts of the Junior Zhuz to the western region. At the same time, Sultan Kaipkali Yesimuly, who governed the Mangystau Adais, reignited an anti-Russian uprising. Therefore, by the late 1830s, the Junior Zhuz was engulfed in a large-scale struggle for national liberation. The uprisings led by such historical figures as Isatay, Makhambet, Kenesary, Zholaman, and Yeset represent a continuous and interconnected series of resistance movements.

In examining the connection between these uprisings and the movement led by Yeset Kotybaruly, it is crucial to note that all these efforts—whether led by Isatay and Kaipkali or by Kenesary and Zholaman—took place in the very heartland of the Alim and Zhetiru

confederations, specifically around the Jem, Yrgyz, Elek, Kiyl, Sagyz, and Oiyl rivers, as well as the Mughalzhar mountains and Borsyk sands.

This continuity is particularly evident in the popular unrest that emerged in the eastern part of the Junior Zhuz in 1838. By the end of 1837, the movement of Isatay and Makhambet's detachment across the Ural River breathed new life into local resistance. Prior to their arrival, opposition to the tsarist regime had been sporadic and disjointed. Prominent figures such as Yeset, Zholaman, Kaipkali, Amankeldi, Nausha, Jusip, Asau, and Kaidauyl were leading spontaneous movements in the region. However, Isatay and Makhambet's presence helped unify and coordinate these separate efforts.

Crossing into the Junior Zhuz, Isatay and Makhambet sought to consolidate the fragmented rebel forces and revive the momentum of the uprising against both the tsarist government and local khanate authorities. According to A. Ryazanov, "The courageous and fearless Isatay, with his commanding influence, and Makhambet Utemisov, through his passionate appeals, rapidly inflamed the spirit of resistance. Rallying a significant following, they incited the people to a renewed struggle for national independence" [2, p. 146].

Their arrival was prompted not only by the defeat of the Inner Horde uprising and persecution by punitive detachments, but also by their awareness of the tense political climate in the eastern Junior Zhuz, where various clans were already expressing dissatisfaction with the colonial administration. Despite internal divisions among the local elites, the arrival of the renowned Isatay and the poet-warrior Makhambet spurred many tribal leaders to unite in preparation for collective resistance.

Isatay and Makhambet traveled through the settlements of the Shomishti Tabyn, Tileu, Kabak, Tortkara, Aday, Shomekey, and Nazar clans, meeting with Kaipkali Yesimuly and Yeset Kotybaruly. As a result, in May 1838, representatives of numerous clans came together, putting an end to intertribal disputes and raids in favor of a common cause [3, p. 24].

During this period, Makhambet used his fervent poetry to mobilize different segments of the population against colonial rule. Not only displaced Kazakhs from the Zhaiyk, Elek, Kaldygayty, Oiyl, Olangti, Kiyl, Akbulak, and Or river regions, but also Adaïs from Mangystau and Kazakh clans along the Jem and Sagyz rivers were drawn into the resistance.

Isatay and Makhambet coordinated efforts with Junior Zhuz leaders such as Suyinkara Urganishbayuly, Karatogai Mambetuly, Kulbarak Batyr, and Nausha Karzhauuly, a key figure in the Bokei uprising of 1827–1829 [4, p. 121]. Other leaders like Zholaman Tilenishuly, Jusip Kulanuly, and Asau Barakuly, who had also been persecuted for opposing the colonial regime, expressed their readiness to join the renewed resistance.

Yeset Kotybaruly, in turn, not only expressed support for Isatay's efforts to revive the uprising but also provided material and logistical assistance. Historian I. Kenzhaliev writes in his book *Isatay-Makhambet*: "Isatay arrived in Dongyztay and stayed at the house of Baitore Tokpanuly (Yeset's uncle – S.Q.). He began preparations to renew the struggle against the khan. His comrades were sent to different settlements to conduct propaganda. Makhambet visited villages around Dongyztay, spreading the message of their struggle through storytelling and poetry. His passionate verses inspired the people and strengthened their resolve to fight" [5, p. 92].

The final stage of Isatay's movement, marked by fierce battles with tsarist forces in the eastern Junior Zhuz, clearly demonstrates the convergence of three major uprisings: the Bokei uprising led by Isatay Taimanuly and supported by certain clans of the Junior Zhuz; the resistance led by Sultan Kaipkali Yesimuly in southern Junior Zhuz; and the movement under Yeset Kotybaruly, based on the strength of the Shekti, Tabyn, and other clans. Kaipkali and Yeset joined forces with Isatay's followers, preparing for a decisive confrontation with Russian-Cossack troops. The insurgents gathered at Ushbokenbay and then moved to Kokpekti along

the Temir River, where they intensified recruitment and calls for open resistance.

The uprising attracted mainly Kazakh peasants displaced from the Zhaiyk and Elek rivers, the Aday clan affected by the 1836–1837 raids, and other persecuted groups such as the Baybakty and Alasha clans. Their shared objective was to resist oppression and injustice and to fight for “the black cauldron and yellow child”—a metaphor for communal well-being [5, p. 167].

Thus, it is evident that Yeset Batyr and his allies actively supported the national liberation movement initiated by Isatay Taimanuly. This became especially apparent during the devastating battle against Russian-Cossack forces on the Kiył River in July 1838. In his 1925 publication in Tashkent, Professor Khalel Dosmukhameduly writes: “Isatay’s inclusive approach was correct... The Shekti, Nazar, Shuren, and Keté clans of the Alim tribe became his supporters. During his final campaign to the Ural, most of his 3,000-strong force were Alim warriors. On the day of his death, most of the raiding party that clashed with the government troops consisted of Alim fighters, including heroes like Yeset Kotybaruly. Even the Sholakmola burial site of Isatay is located on Alim land” [6, pp. 57–58].

This clearly illustrates the continuity and unity of purpose in the Kazakh people's resistance against colonial oppression, regardless of the region in which the uprisings occurred. Although the heroic figure of Isatay perished, the banner of freedom that he had raised did not fall. It is evident that the image of Isatay served as a model for Yeset, who sounded the call to arms a decade later. Many warriors who participated in the Isatay-Makhambet movement and were persecuted by the government later became part of the army organized by Yeset Batyr. As the prominent public figure Kh. Dosmukhameduly aptly put it, “Batyr such as Yeset Kotybaruly, Zhanqozha Nurmukhameduly of the Shekti clan, Oten, Narynbay, and Toremurat of te Taz clan, who struggled against the Tsarist regime alongside khans, were the successors who followed in the footsteps of Isatay” [7, p.76].

The uprising of the Syrdarya Kazakhs under the leadership of Zhanqozha Nurmukhameduly holds a special place in the history of national liberation movements in Kazakhstan. Zhanqozha Batyr, who fought all his life against the aggressive policies of the Central Asian Khanates of Kokand and Khiva, also mounted resistance against Russian colonialism. His struggle is closely linked to the national liberation movement led by Yeset Kotybaruly.

The connection between the uprisings of Zhanqozha and Yeset is, in part, due to their shared tribal background; both leaders came from the Shekti clan. While they did not fight for tribal interests, the causes of their respective uprisings were similar. Secondly, Zhanqozha’s armed rebellion against the Tsarist administration coincided with the final phase of Yeset Batyr’s movement. Although the origins, course, and outcomes of Zhanqozha’s uprising are well-documented, its connection to Yeset’s rebellion remains debated. The fact that both uprisings occurred in contiguous regions, that the leaders were from the same tribe, and that their timelines overlapped cannot in itself definitively prove that they joined forces in the struggle for national freedom. Nonetheless, new archival data clearly demonstrate the interrelation between the uprising led by Yeset Kotybaruly and other national liberation movements in Kazakhstan, particularly the one led by Zhanqozha Nurmukhameduly.

At the end of 1856, Yeset provided support to the uprising of the Syr region Kazakhs under Zhanqozha and simultaneously established ties with the Khiva Khanate. As Zhanqozha's revolt began in late 1856, the national liberation movement under Yeset’s leadership expanded across the Aral region and along the Syrdarya.

Not only the settled farmers of the Syrdarya but also the nomadic clans from the Kazaly and Aral Sea regions joined Zhanqozha’s uprising. Hundreds of Kazakhs from the Borsyk sands—mainly from the Shekti clan under Yeset’s command—rallied to the insurgents. The

border administration feared a potential merger between Zhanqozha's and Yeset Kotybaruly's forces. At the time, Yeset was located near the northern shore of the Aral Sea, in the Lesser Borsyk sands.

The Border Commission dispatched several intelligence agents to monitor Yeset's movements and assess his relationship with Zhanqozha. According to intelligence reports from Orenburg, Zhanqozha had sent his son Itzhemes to invite Yeset to join the rebellion. One of the scouts from the Oral garrison reported that at the end of December, Yeset was stationed at a place called Kogalyköl with about 50 armed men and noted that "if a portion of the Tileuqabaq clan, which is inclined to side with Nurmukhamedov, joins him, their numbers could significantly increase" [8, p.21]. Another informant stated that Yeset, along with his entire community and livestock, was preparing to join Zhanqozha but was waiting for the freezing of Saryshyghanak Bay on the Aral Sea to take the shortest route. These accounts confirm that Yeset accepted Zhanqozha's proposal.

Upon receiving these reports, the commandant of the Kazaly Fort, Major Bulatov, dispatched reconnaissance parties to Yeset's location. Their main task was to report immediately if Yeset approached the eastern shore of the Aral Sea. If Yeset moved toward the fort, Bulatov planned to intercept him near Kamystybas Lake or Sanak well with a Cossack detachment and two cannons, preventing a union with Zhanqozha. Bulatov wrote to his superiors in Orenburg: "According to the scouts' information, Yeset Kotybarov and the Shemekei clan's bi Jarılgap are soon expected to join Zhanqozha with their detachments" [8, pp.100–103].

The assumptions of Mikhailov and Bulatov regarding a potential alliance between Yeset and Zhanqozha had a solid foundation. Archival records, including intelligence gathered from spies sent into the steppe, clearly show that Yeset was preparing to assist Zhanqozha Batyr. However, he was unable to do so in time, as Zhanqozha's uprising was suppressed during the period when the Aral Sea was frozen.

Some studies offer alternative interpretations, arguing that the merger of the two Shekti leaders did not materialize due to Yeset's lack of sufficient military strength at the time [9, p.89].

Historians Yakunin and Shakhmatov noted that on the morning of January 19, 1857, around 500 Kazakhs arrived at the fort from Karakum, the region where Yeset had been migrating [9, p.89].

Rebels migrating along the northern shore of the Aral Sea—namely Kazakh clans under Yeset Kotybaruly—provided support to Zhanqozha Batyr's uprising. They disrupted communications between Kazaly and the Oral fort, capturing postal workers and couriers.

According to a report submitted to the Ministry of War by the Commander of the Orenburg Independent Corps on the state of the Syr Darya Line and ongoing military operations: "Since the autumn of 1856, Zhanqozha Nurmukhamedov, a prominent bi of the Shekti clan residing along the Quangdarya, has shown resistance to Russian sovereignty. Beginning in November, Zhanqozha began gathering rebellious Kyrgyz clans around him. His objective was to unite with the rebellious Kyrgyz under Yeset Kotybarov. Together, Kotybarov and Nurmukhamedov launched attacks on Russian transport caravans and military units" [10, p.1].

**Conclusion.** In this article, we have focused on a single facet of the Kazakh people's uprisings against Tsarist colonialism: the issue of their mutual interconnectedness and continuity. Throughout history, our ancestors who inhabited the vast steppe both built formidable empires and endured the hardship of colonial subjugation. Determined to preserve their independence, the common people—and the khans, sultans, biys, and batyrs who led them—waged a protracted and sacred struggle for freedom.

Despite the class-based methodology that dominated Soviet-era historiography, the history of these national liberation movements was studied in isolation. Specifically, Srym

Datuly's movement was labeled "a peasant revolt," the Isatay–Makhambet uprising "a rebellion of Bokei herdsmen against princely rule," Zhanqozha Nurmukhameduly's revolt "an agrarian unrest of Syr Darya farmers," and Yeset Batyr's campaign "the Shekti tribal protest." Moreover, any uprising led by members of the princely line in the nineteenth century was dismissed as a reactionary, feudal-monarchical backlash. Today, however, it is imperative to revisit these movements—and their interrelations—from a fresh methodological perspective that recognizes their shared purpose against Russian imperialism.

Over more than one and a half centuries of resistance, the uprisings led by individual figures in Kazakhstan were not isolated incidents—but rather elements of a continuous, interwoven process. In particular, examining the national liberation movements of the first half of the nineteenth century through the lenses of connectivity and continuity not only enhances the scholarly value of this topic but also imposes significant responsibilities on future researchers.

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## **ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ҰЛТ-АЗАТТЫҚ ҚОЗҒАЛЫС БІРТҰТАС ТАРИХИ ҮРДІС РЕТІНДЕ**

*Аңдатпа.* Отан тарихындағы өзекті мәселелердің бірі қазақ ұлт-азаттық қозғалыстары. Қазақ даласы Ресей империясы тарапынан XVIII-XIX ғасырларда отарланғаны тарихи шындық. Отарлау қазақ елінде әр түрлі әдіс-тәсілдермен жан-жақты жүргізілді. Патша үкіметінің бұл саясатымен бірге қазақ халқының қарсылықтары да жүріп отырды. Қазақ еліндегі азаттық қозғалысының бір ерекшелігі бар. Ол Ресейдің Қазақстандағы алғашқы отаршыл акциясының басталуынан 1917 жылғы патша өкіметінің құлауына дейін ұлы далада тәуелсіздік үшін күрестің үзіліссіз жүруінде, бір сәт те толастамауында.

Осы халық қарсылықтары, қарулы көтерілістер тарихы патшалық-дворяндық тарихнамада да, советтік-таптық тарихта да және Қазақстан тәуелсіздік алған соңғы үш он жылдықта да зерттелді. Бірақ зерттеу методологиясы дұрыс болған жоқ. Қазақ көтерілістері бір-бірінен бөлшектеніп, жеке дара қарастырылды. Ал, шын мәнінде қазақтың Ресей империясының жаулап алушылық, отаршылдық саясатына қарсы күресі бірыңғай да сабақтас еді. Күрес жетекшілері бір-бірін білетін әрі тізе қоса қимылдаған қайраткерлер болатын.

Қазақстандағы ұлт-азаттық қозғалыс – біртұтас тарихи үрдіс. Сондықтан ұлттық көтерілістердің, қозғалыстардың байланыстылығын, сабақтастығын осы еңбекте көре аламыз. Ғылыми мақаланы ұлт-азаттық қозғалыстардың біртұтас очеркін жасауға әрекеттің бір көрінісі деп қабылдауға болады.

*Кілт сөздер.* Отаршылдық, тәуелсіздік, ұлт-азаттық, күрес, көтеріліс, қозғалыс, сабақтастық, батырлар, жетекшілер.

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## **НАЦИОНАЛЬНО-ОСВОБОДИТЕЛЬНОЕ ДВИЖЕНИЕ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ КАК ЕДИНЫЙ ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ ПРОЦЕСС**

*Аннотация.* Одной из актуальных проблем отечественной истории является казахское национально-освободительное движение. Казахстан был колонизирован Российской империей в XVIII-XIX веках, что является исторической истиной. Колонизация в казахской степи проводилась с использованием различных методов и средств. Наряду с этой политикой также происходили протесты со стороны казахского народа. Особенностью освободительных движений в Казахстане является то, что с

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момента начала первых колониальных акций России до падения царского правительства в 1917 году в Великой Степи не прекращалась борьба за независимость, и это продолжалось без перерыва.

Эти народные протесты и вооруженные восстания изучались в царской, дворянской историографии, советской марксистской историографии, а также в течение последних тридцати лет независимости Казахстана. Однако методология исследований была не совсем верной. Казахские восстания рассматривались изолированно, по отдельности. На самом же деле борьба казахского народа против агрессивной колониальной политики Российской империи была единым и последовательным процессом. Лидеры движения были знакомы друг с другом и действовали сообща.

Национально-освободительное движение в Казахстане — это единый исторический процесс. В данной работе мы видим взаимосвязь и преемственность национальных восстаний и движений. Статья может рассматриваться как попытка создания единого очерка национально-освободительных движений.

**Ключевые слова.** Колониализм, независимость, национально-освободительная борьба, восстание, движение, преемственность, герои, лидеры.