

Reading in Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the sociology of reading is determining, through the analysis of reading data, the social processes actually at work in society. This article analyses the results of sociological research done by the research staffs of libraries in Kazakhstan between 1991 and 1994. It focuses also on the problems faced by the sociology of reading in Kazakhstan, where such research was previously considered by the authorities as purposeful only in solving the practical problems of libraries. Today, reading in Kazakhstan is characterized by frequent changes in readers' demands caused by the dramatic changes in ideology, politics and economics in the constituent parts of the former Soviet Union. Reading in Kazakhstan is becoming more utilitarian. Pragmatic information needs determine the choice of literature. There is a sharp decline in the demand for fiction compared to the 1980s. Those intellectual spheres in which ideological control was severest, such as history and philosophy, flourish and effect reading. Finally, the decision of independent Kazakhstan to encourage the use of the Kazakh language is having an effect on reading patterns.

SOCIOLOGY OF READING IN KAZAKHSTAN

Sociology of reading is the science which uses data on the population's reading patterns to determine the social and cultural processes actually at work in society. It is based on the idea that reading is a sensitive indicator of political and social change. The researcher needs to be able to "discern the important social processes involved in data concerning reading",¹ who their initiators are and which part of society is involved. These factors will all be discussed in our review of the sociological research in reading done in Kazakhstan during the last 5 years.

Reading research in Kazakhstan is largely done within the framework

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¹Stelmakh, V. D. "Sotsiologii chteniia: Real'noe i zhelaemoe" [Sociology of Reading: Reality and Ideal], in *Kniga i Chtenie v Zerkale Sotsiologii* (Moscow: Knizhnaia Palata, 1990), pp. 110-118.

of libraries. The research department of the National Library has been working for more than 20 years in this area. It is interesting that from the very beginning the research department studied not only the history of librarianship but also the sociology of reading as well. It has studied the level of library service available to the population, readers' needs and interests and their dependence on social and demographic conditions, and the extent to which the needs are met by library collections and current publishing production. Eventually, the general research libraries of cities outside the capital also started studying reading and readers. The libraries of Karaganda, Shymkent, Kostanai and Kzyl-Orda were especially active in this regard. A large amount of data on different social and demographic groups of the population were gathered by these libraries. But most of the data is quantitative and, devoid as it is of further analysis, does not provide much information on the problems addressed.

One of the reasons that the data gathered was not sufficiently analysed is that the staff in Kazakhstan's libraries still do not have enough specialists in reading research. Reading research was marginalized by the authorities as an applied science specializing in solving the practical problems of the library field: correction of library acquisition policies, developing the ways and methods of popularizing books, and increasing the population served by the library.² That is why we still do not have in Kazakhstan our own school of historians, sociologists and psychologists of reading producing large-scale research in this area. The science of reading research was trapped within the limits of one profession—librarianship—which deprived it of the possibility of making an adequate diagnosis of the actual reading situation. But the complexity of the phenomenon "reading" requires research of equal complexity. Modern scholarly literature reflects this complexity. Some scholars consider reading as a social phenomenon,³ others as a specific form of communication,⁴ others as a process of book consumption.⁵ However, this article does not purport to investigate the concept "reading" but will rather emphasize that reading is a complex process the study of which requires a broad and stable theory base—especially when addressing distinct ethnic regions.

Admittedly, however, the publication of the research done by the libraries of Kazakhstan has helped to attract the attention of the public and

² Idem.

³ Chubar'ian, O. S. *Chelovek i Kniga: Sotsial'nye Problemy Chteniia* [Man and the Book: Social Problems of Reading] (Moscow: Nauka, 1978), p. 112.

⁴ Stel'makh, V. D. "Chto Dumaiut Rossiiane o Biblioteke?" [What Do Russians Think of Libraries?], *Nauchnye i Tekhnicheskie Biblioteki* (September 1993, p. 135).

⁵ Slukhovskii, M. I. "Problemy Istorii Chteniia: K Postanovke Voprosa" [Problems in the History of reading: towards a formulation of the question], *Kniga: Issledovaniia i Materialy* (Vol. 33, 1976, p. 198).

experts to the urgent problems facing the nation's library services today. The data was accumulated using sociological methods, and, even though the knowledge derived was fragmentary, there has been nonetheless some absorption of the information by the libraries' administrations. In the past, only library users were the subject of investigation. Under the Soviet Union the structure of the library audience generally coincided with the structure of the whole reading population and we could therefore consider the data gathered about reading in libraries as fairly typical of a much wider group. But more recently many of the most socially active groups of the population have stopped using libraries, turning library users into a much narrower segment of the population. There were several reasons for their leaving the library, including the libraries' financial crisis and their inability to meet changing reader needs with current information; the growth of home libraries; and the loss of interest in reading in favour of television and video. Furthermore, the stratification of society that always existed has sharply increased today and has brought Kazakhstan to the point where it has whole new groups of people who are not part of the library user population. Thus, today it is not possible to derive data about the general reading situation in Kazakhstan purely from data on library users.

Research in reading outside the library must be done by other organizations. For example, the sociology departments at the National Book House, representing publishing houses in Kazakhstan, started investigating at the end of the 1980s what different social and demographic groups of people read and what their preferences and motives were in book choice. Public opinion polls were done in factories, in universities and in bookstores. The main purpose of these polls was to analyse purchasing power and to assist in adjusting supply to demand in the book publishing system. But such canvassing attempts were short-lived and in today's Kazakhstan the libraries have re-emerged as almost the sole sites of reading research. In spite of its limited nature some of the research done by the National Library of the Kazakhstan Republic, the State Library for Youth and some other libraries of the nation do shed light on some tendencies typical for the whole former Soviet Union and particularly for Kazakhstan. This research includes the *Investigation of Reader Demand for Kazakh Fiction* (1991), *Juvenile and Young Adult Reading of Kazakh-language Literature* (1993), and *Man, Culture, Book* (1994).

THE CURRENT READING SITUATION

Reading is a very sensitive indicator of changes in the political and social processes occurring in a society. For example, reading demands during the Cold War were relatively stable: year by year for decades the most

popular kind of literature was light entertainment (sentimental novels, soap operas, detective stories, science fiction), western literature, childrens' books, psychology books, practical books like those on untraditional medicine or cookbooks, and also the bestsellers of the time, such as *Plaha* [Executioner's Block] by Chingiz Aitmatoff, *Az ee Ja* by Oljas Suleimenoff, and different books by Kazakh and Russian writers. At that time there was a lack of literature in the Kazakh language—in fiction, professional and educational literature and practical books.

However during glasnost and after the break-up of the Soviet Union the situation changed abruptly and with this came a corresponding change in reading preferences. For example, the demand for Russian magazines like *Novy Mir* [New World], *Oktiabr'* [October], *Druzhiba Narodov* [Peoples' Friendship] and others sharply increased between 1986 and 1988 due to the sweeping changes in the ideological, political and economic life of the Soviet Union. The "perestroika" kind of literature published in those magazines appealed to the majority of the people in Kazakhstan as well as in the other republics in the USSR and in some way prepared the people for the subsequent reforms. A great demand for the books of the formerly persecuted Kazakh writers and scientists such as A. Baitursynoff, A. Buketkhanoff, J. Aimautoff, Sh. Kudaiberdieff, M. Djumabaeff, and M. Duletoff was noted in 1989–90, as well as increased interest in religious literature, mainly Islamic. Fundamental to the rise of these new interests was the demise of Soviet ideas about the relation of national cultures to the culture of Soviet state socialism.

In 1990–91, when the free market began to be introduced in Kazakhstan and many new commercial enterprises and banks were formed, there arose a new interest in literature about finance, marketing and business.

When Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, reading patterns were greatly influenced by the revival of nationalist ideas. Books, newspapers and magazine articles focused on the history of Kazakhstan, the origin of the Kazakh nation, old intertribal relationships, on historical persons (such as Ablai-khan, Abulhair and Kenesary, who played important roles in forming the Kazakh state) and on the forgotten traditions and rites of the ancient Kazakhs. After ideological restrictions on library acquisitions were removed, journals from the early decades of the twentieth century like *Ak zhol*, *Kazakh*, and *Ai kap*, were greatly in demand.

In Soviet times, almost all international relations conducted by the libraries of Kazakhstan were dependent on Moscow. After independence, Kazakh organizations established direct relations with foreign partners. International contacts in the area of science, industry, business, culture and social life have multiplied and knowledge of foreign languages has become a prime necessity of life. Readers' needs have changed as well: first, there is a great demand for current information, which can be

obtained only from foreign literature and through contacts with foreigners (consequently interpreters are in unprecedented demand). Second, many people now have the opportunity to study and work in other countries and this has created a huge demand for foreign-language textbooks and dictionaries.

RESULTS OF RECENT READING RESEARCH

The main method used in the investigation of reading in Kazakhstan in 1993–94 was the comparison of the results of questionnaire surveys of public opinion, informal interviews by experts, and the analysis of the statistics gathered by libraries and publishing houses. Two thousand people from different groups ranging from 15 to 60 years old were questioned: intellectuals, white collar workers, businessmen, labourers, students and schoolboys. Of these, 54% were ethnic Kazakhs, 28% Russians, and 18% of them were of other nationalities (Uigurs, Koreans, Tartars, Germans, Ukrainians). The questionnaires were administered in libraries, state factories, institutes of the National Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan, commercial companies, universities, colleges and schools.

The years 1992 and 1994 saw high social tension caused by the collapse of the national economy; there was a high level of inflation and a sharp decrease in the population's standard of living. So it was not surprising that 48% of the people queried felt that life had gotten worse, 23% considered it to have remained the same and only 16% of them said that life was better, 13% had no answer.

The questionnaire also asked: "What is your feeling about life today?" Of those who replied 68% answered that life had become too complicated and that they were not able to cope with the changes, though they were trying. Among those queried were scientific workers, clerks, teachers and library workers, in other words, people with a fixed income. Interestingly, the same results were obtained from businessmen. Despite their responses that they had "financial sufficiency", businessmen complained of uncertainty about the future. This may have been caused by the absence of a policy for small and medium-sized business development in Kazakhstan, by the imperfections of the current legal system and by the oppressive tax system. These are also factors behind the fact that the hordes of new companies begun every year subsequently quickly collapse. According to the Cabinet of Ministers' memorandum of 1994, there were 15 764 companies in Kazakhstan in 1993 but only 11 177 in 1994.⁶

Of those queried 18% answered that "For me it's too hard to understand

⁶ Syleimenov, O. "Byt!" [Let it Be Thus!], *Narodny Kongress* (Vol. 29, (13) 1994, p. 2).

the ups and downs of politics and the economy, and I feel lost". Most of these were workers, and certainly a factor in their depression is their low salaries, which, for workers in state-run operations is sometimes not actually paid out for months. On top of this is their constant fear of losing jobs as the state cuts back. Moreover, the low educational level of these workers and the decline in the prestige of their work deprive them of the chance to improve their financial position.

Of those queried 21% thought that "life is going strong, there are many important changes and I'm satisfied with my life". This was mostly the viewpoint of young people from 16 to 24 years of age, whose values were formed during the years of glasnost and the collapse of the old communist ideology. This group is already somewhat adjusted to the market economy and accepts its after-effects both in the financial and spiritual spheres.

Social tension has had a direct impact on reading. According to the official statistics, the quantitative data in the libraries has not essentially changed recently: the number of readers in the libraries administered by the Kazakhstan Ministry of Culture (which administers all the public libraries and a large number of regional research libraries as well) totalled 63 847 in 1989 and 62 792 in 1993. Circulation was 1 384 815 in 1989 and 1 367 390 in 1993, but the content of the materials circulated had undergone noticeable changes. Reading is becoming more utilitarian: the majority of readers use literature only to get some special information. The motives behind readers' choices are increasingly pragmatic: of those questioned, 38% were motivated by professional needs and 45% by educational needs.

Today, the people of Kazakhstan face a social and economic crisis and are struggling to survive. Thousands of citizens are preoccupied with the need to supplement their incomes or to find a well-paid job. There is a massive drain of experts away from government-financed activities to private business. The change in job environments and increased competitiveness in the workplace have created stressful conditions for almost everyone. One of the men queried confessed that "Moral and physical weariness doesn't leave any chance for one to have a spiritual life." Of those queried, 44% did not have enough time for a hobby, 38% did not have time for reading and 26% did not have time to visit the cinema, theatre or concerts. Maybe this is the reason that detective stories and entertainment literature remain so popular, preferred by 26% of those queried.

Most of the people involved with books are characterized by their high reading activity, indicated by their possession of large personal libraries.⁷

⁷ Smorodinskaia, M. D. "Domashnaia biblioteka 80-kh godov" [Home Libraries in the '80s]. *Kniga i chtenie v zerkale sotsiologii* (Moscow: Knizhnaia Palata, 1990, pp. 50-79).

For instance 32% of those queried had personal libraries of up to 500 volumes, 22% libraries of up to 1000 volumes and 16% libraries of more than 1000 volumes.

Another trait characterizing the altered political and social situation is the sharp decline in the demand for fiction. In the 1980's, 70-80% of all library users read fiction, but in 1993 only 21%. And it is interesting that, among all the readers of fiction, students and schoolboys represented the largest groups (30% and 18% respectively), with scientific workers and library workers with 15% apiece, white collar workers, 13% and businessmen only 9%. And from interviews with library workers, it became clear that the fiction they read was mainly that which was required by the curricula of their training institutes. The same is true of children's reading: the children request from libraries only those books of fiction which are required by their school curricula. Reading is no longer a constant activity among children, having been mostly replaced by television and video viewing.

All this, firstly shows the utilitarian tendency of reading, and secondly, probably validates the supposition of several Russian scholars of reading that in a society like Russia, where writings on economics, sociology, philosophy and history were long suppressed, literature became the only means for philosophizing and analysing economic and social historical situations.⁸ When the suppression ended, society becomes less literature-centred.⁹ For generations Kazakhstan has been economically and culturally very close to Russia; hence it is very possible that these recent Russian findings about reading activity apply to the situation in Kazakhstan as well.

Currently scholarship in history, philosophy and economics are flourishing as these subjects emerge from state ideological control. There is great interest especially in the history of Kazakhstan. The great demand for historical literature emerging in 1989 and 1990 has already been met; now the need is for deeper and more comprehensive studies of the past. There were several historical reasons why so many important collections of books on Kazakhstan before 1917 came to be located outside Kazakhstan: they are found in the bookstores of Moscow and St Petersburg, Orenburg, Omsk, Kazan, Tashkent and in some private collections. Turkic-language studies about Kazakhstan are found in the libraries of the countries of Central Asia. In order to provide Kazakh readers access to this kind of literature a special department was set up in the research division of the National Library to create a data base of Kazakhstaniana.

⁸ See note 4.

⁹ Stel'makh, V. D. "Bibliotchnoe obslyzhivanie v Moskve" [Library Services in Moscow]. *Bibliotekovedenie* (Vol. 4, 1993, p. 64); and Chudokova, M. "Ne zasloniat'cia ot real'nosti" [Don't Cut Yourself Off from Reality] *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (9 January 1991).

READING IN THE KAZAKH LANGUAGE

Readers' preferences and demands are closely related to the status of the languages used in Kazakhstan. According to the Constitution the state language is Kazakh (a Turkic language), but the language of international communication is Russian. It is very difficult to draw any conclusions about the priority of these languages in Kazakhstan, a country of many ethnicities. The widespread prevalence of the Russian language in all spheres of life—science, industry, education—is obvious. It is especially typical for the big cities and the northern regions of the republic. Unfortunately, we have no exact official data on people's language use, but the data from the 1991 sociological research on reading Kazakh fiction reveals that 45% of all ethnic Kazakhs can speak fluently and read both Kazakh and Russian; 34% of ethnic Kazakhs can easily speak and read Kazakh and know Russian well enough to communicate; 21% of ethnic Kazakhs can fluently speak and read Russian and can communicate in Kazakh. On the other hand, 94% of the Russians living in Kazakhstan speak and read only Russian, and only 6% of the Russians are able to communicate in Kazakh (the results vary from region to region).

But Kazakh literature is very under-represented in the nation's libraries. It comprises only 20·8% of the holdings of the libraries run by the Kazakhstan Ministry of Culture and thus, accordingly, the circulation of books in the Kazakh language in 1993 was 4·2 times less than the total circulation in these libraries.

Since the end of the 1980s, the number of people who want to use Kazakh in daily life—business, science and industry—has greatly increased. The state publishing houses and libraries are trying to meet this new demand for Kazakh literature as efficiently as they can but they are handicapped by financial constraints. There remains a huge deficit in Kazakh language books on science and medicine, dictionaries, textbooks, encyclopedias and children's literature.

The roots of this complex language situation lie in peculiarities of the history, culture and politics of Kazakhstan which are outside the scope of this article. We will mention only the most salient features of this history: first, the prominent Kazakh thinkers Chohan Valihanov, the scientist and ethnographer, and the poet Abai Kunanbaev, whose 150th anniversary UNESCO and the whole world will be celebrating in 1995, were influential in the spread of the Russian language in Kazakhstan. The views of these men were formed under the influence of the advanced Russian thinkers of the 19th century. Thus, the Kazakh reader has been oriented to Russian classical learning for well over a century.

Second, since the 1920's the alphabet used for Kazakh has been changed several times—from the Arabic to the Latin, then from Latin to Cyrillic.

This vacillation has irreparably damaged reading. The arising confusion promoted illiteracy and destroyed literary traditions connecting generations.

Third, the huge migrations of different ethnic groups into Kazakhstan in the 20th century also affected national reading habits: in the 1930's the migrations were the results of Stalin's persecution of certain national groups, in the 1940's the results of evacuation during the war, and in the 1950's the result of the policy of developing the Soviet Union's virgin lands.

After Kazakhstan gained independence, the language problem began to transcend mere reading and library questions. Nevertheless, reading research gives us a lot of information useful not only for library and publishing purposes but also for historians, political scientists and economists, who study social life and its development. Moreover, reading research allows us to obtain important data about the processes occurring in society without directly addressing difficult political and ethnic areas about which many people might be too sensitive to be queried effectively.

CONDITION OF LIBRARIES IN KAZAKHSTAN

The social and economic changes exacerbated the crisis already existing in Kazakhstan's libraries at the time of independence. From 1989 to 1993 the number of libraries administered by the Kazakhstan Ministry of Culture declined by 1118: there were 9659 libraries in 1989 and 8541 in 1993. The number of library workers declined in the same period by 207: there were 16 452 workers in 1989, and 16 245 in 1993. The decline was even sharper in scientific, trade union, party and other organizations' libraries. Sharp budget reductions negatively affected the normal functioning of all library processes. First of all, it damaged book supply. Under the harsh conditions of the market, Kazakhstan's publishing houses raised their prices sharply and reduced their output of scholarly literature in all fields. As a result the libraries drastically reduced acquisitions. Soaring postal costs undermined international book exchanges and the exchange of literature between the countries of the former Soviet Union. Because of the curtailment of hard currency allocations to libraries, there is no more accession of literature from foreign countries.

After the collapse of the USSR, the libraries of Kazakhstan found themselves in an extremely difficult situation. Moscow's huge information and library resources became freely available only to Russians. Kazakhstan has lost such important sources of acquisition of scientific and technical literature and documents as the All-Union Book Chamber (the central publishing house), the All-Union International Book Organization (the central import house), the Central Distributing Agency, and the All-Union

Institute of Scientific and Technical Information (the central scientific and technical literature reviewing and indexing agency). It has become necessary for Kazakhstan to create its own information centres and publishing system; but the financial crisis following independence and the absence of trained staff means that the building of these new structures will take many years to accomplish.

Certainly this chaos affects readers and the satisfaction of their information needs. According to a recent public opinion poll 42% of the people in Kazakhstan considered public library service satisfactory, while 40% found it unsatisfactory, lamentable, even disastrous. Readers were unhappy about the absence from the library collections of new literature, of magazines from other republics of the former USSR, and of foreign literature. They also complained about circulation restrictions due to the small number of available copies, about high prices for photocopying and about slow service. However, due to the high costs and general rarity of new publications in bookstores, readers today have no options other than the library: to the question "Will you use the library next year?" 80% of those queried answered positively, only 7% answered negatively, and 13% had no answer.

Library leaders in Kazakhstan have focused on the development of libraries' informational functions as a way out of this difficult situation. It has become clear that Kazakhstan's libraries are not able to provide all by themselves the information required by the new conditions. It will be necessary first of all to unite the efforts of all the republic's libraries, the National Book Chamber, the national book museum and commercial information vendors in order to start up a national information system.¹⁰ The second important step will be to increase participation in the international information systems which already exist. Thus, the Kazakhstan National Library is taking part in various UNESCO and IFLA projects aiming at increasing the mutual accessibility of the national documents of member countries. These changes will open new possibilities both for Kazakhstan's libraries and their readers.

¹⁰ Berdigalieva, R. A. "Budushchee natsional'noi bibliografii Kazakhstana" [The Future of the National Bibliography of Kazakhstan], *Kitepkana* (Vol. 3, 1993, p. 17).