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“I fell into librarianship”: Experiences of Post-Soviet Librarians at the National Academic Library in Astana, Kazakhstan

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Abstract: This paper explores the attitudes of librarians in post-Soviet Kazakhstan regarding their roles at the new National Academic Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan (NAL). Using ethnographic observation, interviews, and surveys of library staff (n=24), we find that Kazakhstani librarians either sensed a ‘calling’ to librarianship or ‘fell into’ library careers given life circumstances, and value their library for its contribution to cultural preservation and digital access on a national scale. This pilot project presents NAL to an international community, sharing the voices of Russian- and Kazakh-speaking librarians to highlight the role of libraries in the development of the post-Soviet nation.

Keywords: Ethnography; Kazakhstan; librarianship as profession; library surveys; national library; nation-building; post-Soviet Central Asia; post-Soviet librarians

INTRODUCTION

We are welcomed to the National Academic Library of Kazakhstan by Zhanna Zhanturina¹, a red-haired administrator with an engaging smile. After passing our bags to the coatroom attendant and using our university IDs to register for reader cards, we step into her office. The window is open, letting in the spring breeze from across the broad central boulevards of Astana, Kazakhstan’s capital city. The office smells of smoke, as Zhanna pours instant coffee into glass and porcelain mugs.

“I’m not a librarian by trade,” Zhanna disclaims, describing how she came to work as a library administrator after a career in Kazakhstan’s foreign affairs ministry, where she had travelled abroad to Kyrgyzstan and Eastern Europe. The youngest in her class and one of few women, Zhanna received a *kandidat nauk* (Soviet PhD-equivalent) at just 26 years old. Yet the paperwork in the ministry—and the continual review of bylaws and procedures—bored her terribly.

Zhanna describes how the National Academic Library was established in 2004 and opened to readers in 2005.² When Zhanna heard in 2005 that a new library was opening in Astana, she joined the team as an administrator. Listing each of the department heads for us, she gives us a tour of the first state library built in Kazakhstan's new capital city. Kazakhstan's National Academic Library (NAL) features reading room for art and culture, displays honoring Kazakh artists and war heroes, a small ethnographic museum, and a children's library. Near the front gates, posters advertising the Beeline brand of cell phones (see Figure 1), leading up to an American Corner library which is staffed by employees of the US Embassy. In the basement is closed-stack storage of archival material and periodicals, and on the sunny fifth floor, a suite for the catalogers (for once, catalogers enjoy a good view!).

In this article, we use this introduction to the National Academic Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan (hereafter, *NAL*), alongside librarian surveys, interviews, and ethnographic observations, to uncover librarians' experiences in entering the profession, working within reference and public service departments, and understanding their library's role in a wider post-Soviet



Figure 1. Posters advertise the Beeline cell phone company in the lobby of the National Academic Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Central Asian context. Through our observations, we find that some Kazakhstani librarians experience a calling to the library profession, while others “fell into” library careers during a career change or geographic move. They value their outreach to academic users, and highlight their library as advancing cultural preservation, information access, and “innovative” digital libraries on a national scale. This paper shapes our understanding of Central Asian libraries by sharing the voices of Russian- and Kazakh-speaking librarians, and their values on the development of technical infrastructure and information access in post-Soviet Central Asia. Our pilot project supports the importance of continued local and external funding for Central Asian libraries, as well as for greater investment in professional development for post-Soviet librarians themselves.

SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET NATIONAL LIBRARIES

Within Kazakhstan, NAL is unique in its recent founding as well as its academic focus. Within a decade of Kazakhstan’s independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, President Nursultan Nazarbayev moved the country’s capital from the southern city of Almaty to a new northern capital city in Astana. This move of political power created the need for a national library to better establish the new capital. Situated in the heart of the country’s capital, NAL was christened as a national *academic* library when it opened in 2005, to distinguish it from its older sister, the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan, founded in the Soviet republican center of Almaty in 1931.³ NLRK remains in operation today, with the goal of “cultivating the national historical written memory” in Kazakhstan.⁴ Given the continued existence of a national library in the old capital city, NAL was formed in the new capital with a particularly academic and international focus, one that lends itself well to the business and political interests of Kazakhstan’s capital city.

This concept of a national library was well established in Soviet librarianship. Today’s independent national libraries were started as ‘republic’ libraries in each of the Soviet Socialist Republics, during a period in which national book chambers provided bibliographic control for new monographs in each republic, and arranged for deposit of publications within the national libraries.⁵ Across communist and socialist countries, librarians were expected to support political ends,⁶ even providing advice to nearby socialist countries such as China on the practice of socialist librarianship,⁷ or working to create a “socialist type of human being” in Hungary.⁸ While librarians understood themselves as preserving and promoting culture, the public at times perceived libraries as political dissemination centers,⁹ where the promotion of party solidarity (*partiinost’*) led to distortion of information towards Soviet ends.¹⁰ Mass libraries (public libraries) aimed to “support working-class

communist education and promote scientific and technical progress.”¹¹ Yet while Soviet libraries were intended for broad societal development, they also limited access to information depending on readers’ rank, connections, or social status.¹²

Soviet librarians directed this development of readers within their society in part through the use of readers’ cards, which were records of what patrons read and the reader’s advisory services provided to them by librarians.¹³ As B. Korsch notes, such cards could be used to note:

“if the reader was registered in another library; what means were employed to raise his or her political level; interests in political literature; how he or she was guided in book selection; characteristic demands; what books he or she refused to borrow; records of the librarian's 'casual' conversations with him or her; were there books at home; what were they; [and] in what political circles did he or she participate” (285).

Such surveillance occurred in the larger context of Soviet control of information, a key aspect of population management under communism.¹⁴ Lenin’s wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, recommended that Soviet libraries avoid using open stacks or otherwise stocking books that could introduce counterrevolutionary ideas.¹⁵ Librarians were regularly directed to interdict forbidden books, withdrawing them from circulation and placing them in secret *fondy* (fonds; collections) that required librarian approval for access.¹⁶ Increasing control over information could also be seen in spatial changes, as pre-Soviet desks were turned from communal to individual readers’ use, and reading rooms were segregated by status for *doktorant*-holders, *kandidats* and undergraduates.¹⁷

In such a context, Soviet librarians had great control over access to information, as arbiters of access and copying privileges, as well as through controlling access to indexes of restricted collections.¹⁸ In some prisons and labor camps, librarians were assumed to be informers,¹⁹ while in other contexts, librarians could be allies to the public by ignoring state directives, falsifying readers cards, or showing favored readers the full catalogs for restricted collections.²⁰ Such *spetskhrany* (special collections) often included the writings of minorities or discredited intellectuals²¹—a collection that continued to grow throughout the Soviet period. While Soviet libraries lost much of their collections in repeated purges,²² the mixed history of cooperation and antagonism between American and Soviet librarians means that some of the cold-war perspectives in the earlier citations above should be viewed with a grain of salt.

In the present day, librarians in the post-Soviet republics continue in the shadow of this mixed legacy of encouraging access to some information, while restricting other types of access due to limited finances or political controls. In Bosnia, as in other post-totalitarian regimes, libraries are left

with “inadequate funding, outdated collections... a lack of skilled personnel, and compromised social and financial status.”²³ In Kazakhstan, closed stacks remain common and accessible websites are still in development,²⁴ while Russian archives require documented scholarly affiliations (*otnoshenie*) before providing access to researchers.²⁵ In Montenegro, as in other Eastern European countries, libraries receive minimal resources and low-priority budgets.²⁶ And in Armenia, many bookstores have closed and school libraries stock only standard textbooks,²⁷ a situation also to be found in other post-Soviet republics.

Yet while post-Soviet librarians have adapted to financial constraints, there remains a great improvement in access to information.²⁸ Polish librarians found that many “lost” books were returned after the fall of communism in 1989, once readers believed that these resources would be saved rather than suddenly withdrawn from the collection.²⁹ While post-Soviet Russians read less than they used to,³⁰ national libraries are still respected for preserving the cultural materials created within their territories,³¹ and continue to collect widely in ethnic and national languages, thereby preserving “the histories and cultures of the diverse peoples of Russia” and surrounding areas.³² Former republic libraries also promote the ‘culture and heritage of [their] so-called titular nation.’³³ In Kazakhstan’s case, this means that the national libraries not only collect in each of the ethnic literatures represented in the country (Russian, German, Tatar, Uzbek, Uighur, etc.), but are active in developing print and digital collections of Kazakh literature and culture, which can support the development of the Kazakh nation and Kazakhstani state.

METHODOLOGY

Given NAL’s unique position within Kazakhstan’s capital city, we wanted to understand the perspectives of its Russian and Kazakh librarians, how they came to the library, and what they saw as the role of their library in this region. This pilot project was conducted in spring 2012, using ethnographic observations, a questionnaire, and informal interviews. Our preliminary questionnaire was short and consisted of five open-ended questions: on the role of NAL, differences from other regional libraries, and about the respondent’s career path and daily tasks. After gaining informed consent, we received 24 responses to the 30 surveys distributed across several departments, including 7 from reference and 17 from other library divisions.³⁴ Each handwritten respond was typed and translated from Russian and Kazakh into English by our library assistants.³⁵ To analyze qualitative responses in a way that focused on shared understandings across diverse roles, we adapted *qualitative content analysis* to code the frequency of key themes in columns in Excel, as outlined by Loo and Dupuis (2015).³⁶ We supplement this overview of themes with a discussion of the perspectives arising in quotations

from these Russian and Kazakh librarians. In sum, this paper shares the experiences of Zhanna and 24 other librarians at the National Academic Library (all names are pseudonyms), in order to highlight the experiences of librarians in one post-Soviet capital city for a western audience. While this pilot project is not fully representative of librarians in Astana or Kazakhstan, we hope it sets the stage for further research on Central Asian libraries in the future.

RESULTS

1. “Describe the readers with whom you usually work, and what they most often use the library for.”

Although the national library contains local, international, and children’s collections, most librarians highlighted the library’s primary outreach to *academic* users and those seeking access to foreign literature. Of the 14 librarians who worked directly with users, half mentioned high school and college students, and a quarter mentioned teachers and graduate students. Lawyers, scientists, construction workers, language learners, state workers, and the elderly also frequented the library, with librarians noting that many Astana residents come seeking genealogical records that were not yet digitized or otherwise widely available. These reports suggest continuity with the Soviet era, when national libraries focused on scientific and technical users, as well as students, researchers, and other specialists.³⁷ Anna, for instance, framed her readers as “sophisticated digitally liberate people,” while Saltanat promoted NAL for “experts in the field of medicine, law, economics—those who shape and implement innovative Kazakhstan,” framing her library as “a *modern* library corresponding to the *modern* user.” Even though other readers frequent the library, then, NAL librarians connected their work at the national *academic* library specifically with the presence of students, teachers, and professionals—especially those with international or academic interests.

2. “What are your professional responsibilities and for how long have you worked here?”

In our survey, respondents reported an average 5.4 years of service. Because this survey was distributed in 2012, just seven years after the library opened, it suggests substantial longevity of employment. Most commonly, librarians mentioned duties in the following areas: meeting reader requests (12 librarians), cataloging and collection development (8), supporting library events (7), providing reference services (7), technical services (5), managing others (4), making presentations (3), and teaching computer skills (1).

In the reference department, covered in more detail towards the end of this paper, they mention answering reader questions as well as cataloging to improve bibliographic access. One respondent writes, “I entertain reader questions for about 10-15 minutes at a time,” and another that she works on “serving readers, electronic cataloging of books, holding mass events for readers.” A third drafts “answers to virtual reference requests from various ministries and agencies... to give deeper information to readers, and to satisfy [*qanaghattandiru*] a larger volume of questions.” And in cataloging, librarians worked in “document processing and... training new employees in cataloging documents” and supporting “the automated processes. I try to preserve our electronic library.”

Finally, some department heads and administrators comment on their broader work within the library and in external relations. A manager for the center of library development does analysis “and provides methodological and advisory assistance to libraries of the Republic. We are beginning to study innovations and to participate in international projects.” Another professional works “with a tight [*tygyz*] connection to regional libraries, making yearly accounts, preparing analyses,” and the director of public relations works to “form a positive image of NAL as a modern, outspoken cultural-educational center. We carry out cultural and educational events, and versions of the library website.” (We have not added pseudonyms here, to preserve the privacy of respondents’ answers to other questions. However, the range of roles, from reference to cataloging to public relations, hints at the continuing development and complexity of professional roles in post-Soviet national libraries.)

3. “Why did you choose the library profession? How did you come to NAL?” We hoped by this question to learn how librarians came to the profession in Kazakhstan, and why. One third of the librarians surveyed mentioned a love of books, while a similar number “fell into librarianship” by chance. Only a third of the librarians had formal library training at the time of this survey,³⁸ as a library degree is not currently required for professional library roles in Kazakhstan. Of the 24 librarians surveyed, the most frequent themes emerged as follows: eight librarians “fell into” the profession; eight reported a love of books from a young age; five were searching for a job when they moved to Astana; five were invited by former colleagues or advised by a friend to apply; three loved helping readers to find books; three saw librarianship as a spiritual calling, two found a place for their technical skills, and one “just needed a job.” Below, we discuss some of the most frequent themes alongside quotes from the librarians.

“I fell into the library”: library as profession for post-Soviet women

One of the most frequent narratives was of a librarian who “fell into the library by accident” [*ia popala v biblioteku sluchaino*], or as a result of their

life situation. For instance, Moldir came to the profession by accident [“*kezdeisoq keldim*”], while Lezzat “searched a long time for work, and was lucky to find a place here.” An older librarian, Galia, explained her situation in detail:

To be honest, I originally came into this profession by accident. But after finishing institute, having worked for a while, and then raising children, I realized that I made the right choice. I’ve been working in NAL for three years, and fell here by chance, too. After canceling my previous work, I sent a resume to the library. Three days later I was invited for an interview. And since then I work here.

This is a good example of how a librarian entered the profession by accident, yet begins to develop a career path within the field. As a librarian, Galia integrated her new career into an identity and sense of agency in life, reflecting that although this was an accident, she made “the right choice.” Sometime earlier, Salikha went through a similar process, reporting that she studied at the Institute of Culture in Almaty and sang in a philharmonic choir, then taught children singing before moving into a post at the Opera and Ballet Theater library. After working for almost twenty years in libraries, she joined NAL when it opened in 2005, finding over time that arts librarianship was a way to merge her interests in singing with librarianship. Likewise, Sveta reports a gradual move into librarianship:

I chose the profession of librarian, most likely by accident. My path went from being a simple librarian at the city library, [which] was an excellent platform and gave me the opportunity to “grow up” professionally. Fate decreed that I moved to Astana. I just came to see if there is a job for me at the library, and I was immediately accepted to work here.

Although we did not inquire about prior jobs, responses suggest that Kazakhstani librarians came from a range of life situations. Ainur was trained as a teacher, “but after working in the school, and moving to the city, I chose this profession,” while Jannar’s early career moves had a long-term effect: “to some extent this was a random choice, but it defined the course of my life.” Dinara “chose by accident” then “fell in love and stayed for life,” growing to appreciate the opportunities she had to help the library’s readers. In contrast, Elena was much more cautious, writing that:

I didn’t even choose, so as not to offend parents. I went to the philological faculty [languages department] in the first technical college I applied for. I came to NAL from [another institution], from which I was in shock for many reasons. I took this job without any cronyism [*blat*] or acquaintances [*znakomstvo*].

Here, Elena informs us that she got her librarian job without any friend or family connections, or bribery—all of which are at times used to gain access to the limited professional job market in Kazakhstan.³⁹ Yet Elena also expresses ambivalence, compounded by her parents’ expectations that she

find a good career. This hesitation could be due to the low reputation of librarianship within the post-Soviet sphere, as well as the financial challenges that libraries have encountered since independence.⁴⁰ Such narratives of “falling into the library” indicate that many women entered librarianship given the constraints of families, movement between cities, or career changes, perhaps when their first career choice was not available.⁴¹

Such contingent experiences happen not only within the constraints women face worldwide as they navigating professional opportunities alongside of gendered caretaking and household responsibilities,⁴² but also within the socioeconomic context of the post-Soviet labor market. As Joma Nazpary notes, Kazakhstan went through a chaotic transition in the 1990s and 2000s—just as many of these women were entering their professional lives.⁴³ As the Soviet Union’s educational system dissolved,⁴⁴ a lack of career work led some lower-income Kazakhstanis into make-work, whether shuttling goods between cities,⁴⁵ selling goods in the bazaar,⁴⁶ or engaging in illicit drug work in urban centers.⁴⁷ Even middle class citizens relied on connections and bribery to find jobs or enter university during the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods,⁴⁸ perhaps by renting out property,⁴⁹ investing in privatized land, or starting businesses based on their personal connections.

By the time the National Academic Library opened in 2005, Kazakhstan’s economy had recovered from the shock of an abrupt independence and begun to prosper. Yet the impact of transition may have led middle-class women to adjust their professional expectations to available economic opportunities. Although regional economies are growing steadily,⁵⁰ Kazakhstanis continue to move to the urban centers of Almaty and Astana for good work. Perhaps for this reason, many NAL librarians came to the profession in the context of moving to Astana for work.

“I chose the library profession to help the spirits of mankind”: librarianship as calling

While many librarians entered the profession in Kazakhstan by happenstance, the next largest group framed their career narrative around professional choice and a deeper meaning. Some reflected back to an early love of books, with Aqjan reporting that she chose to be a librarian because “I love books, love people,” and Meruert becoming a reference librarian because:

I very much liked reading books. For me it’s necessary to be a comprehensive [*zhan-zhaqty*] librarian. It’s necessary to give answers to readers, to instruct in the good road... I came to NAL as a palace of knowledge; I worked to give knowledge to passionate hearts among those who came.

Here, Meruert describes herself as someone who came to librarianship through love of books, yet her framing of libraries as “a palace of knowledge” suggests a larger purpose to her work. Aigerim similarly elevates her work to

the realm of the spiritual, saying, she chose librarianship “to help the growing generation in their spiritual development” [*adam balasyňa rukhani kömek körsetu üshin*]” from the day that NAL’s cornerstone was laid. In these poetic renditions, both Aigerim and Meruert refer to the library as a spiritual center or sacred space,⁵¹ where they can engage in a calling to help fellow humans acquire the knowledge necessary for living well.

Still other librarians connect their career choices to the values their parents shared with them in childhood. Karina remembered that her parents “accustomed us to a love of books since childhood, not just by forcing us to read, but by their example. My father read a lot... perhaps this influenced the choice.” Yet while Karina’s model was her parents’ reading habits, Gaukhar found that her love of books was a personal choice that was revealed over time:

Since childhood, I was very fond of books and reading. And although I enrolled in the cultural-educational school not quite consciously [*ne sovsem osoznanno*], I then realized that it was in my character and preferences. I fell into NAL at the invitation of my head of service, with whom I worked at another institution.

In other words, Gaukhar’s path combined the most frequent professional themes for Kazakhstani librarians, as “falling into” a library was combined with a personal connection/invitation, as well as a growing sense of calling within the field. Finally, Saltanat integrates a range of literary interests and commitments into her choice of librarianship, resulting in a strong sense of professional selfhood:

The job in NAL is a private extension of my professional career. Interest in reading and books, the cultivation of literary culture in my family since childhood, and special reverence for the book, newspapers, and magazines... led me to the profession of librarian. In all the years of life I have never, under any circumstances, seriously contemplated a change of profession. I considered my choice, and realized it.

The range of personal experiences reflected in these survey responses present a window into the experiences of post-Soviet librarians in Kazakhstan—and they also hint at the wide range of education and training experienced. In many post-Soviet countries, librarians are considered professionally trained with a bachelor’s in library science. Four universities in Kazakhstan offer a library program, a low-demand major that often graduates cohorts of only two to six people. One program in Kazakhstan offers distance education (*zaochnaya forma obucheniya*) for professionals already working at libraries. Yet given the cost of library training in relation to the low salaries of librarians, many library workers in Kazakhstan do not have a formal library education.⁵² Instead, they bring education in other majors to work in academic libraries, or education at the community college level (*tekhnikum* or *uchilische*) to work in small public libraries. In addition,

some Russian universities offer distance certificate programs which NAL librarians undertake to pursue accreditation. There are master's programs in librarianship in the region, but none have yet been established in Kazakhstan.

Given a concern with privacy, we did not collect demographic data such as age, marital status, or educational level. Yet the responses above, combined with the labor market and educational opportunities, suggest a potential division between those who see librarianship as a calling and those who “fell” into librarianship given family moves or the need to pick up available work in the capital city. Such a practical approach may result in greater ambivalence about the role of librarian and how that balances with other economic or social identities.⁵³ More in-depth and longitudinal study would help us understand if the experience of post-Soviet Central Asian librarians indeed changes over time or in response to demographic variables.

4. “How does NAL differ from other public libraries in Kazakhstan?” and 5. “How do you see the role of the National Academic Library in Astana and in Kazakhstan?”

Finally, we asked two related questions. Question four, about the differences between NAL and other libraries, elicited answers about NAL's *characteristics*, with the 24 librarians framing their institution as modern and electronic, with a full digital catalog and wide selection of e-books. In order of frequency, librarians commented on the National Academic Library as uniquely electronic (16), modern (9), reader-centered (7), with access to remote databases (6), national in scope (5), with virtual reference and home access to the catalog (5), with its own local databases (4), hosting trainings and cultural events (4), a larger collection than peers (3), academic in nature (2), automated in process (2), and a world library, with relations to foreign libraries (2).

Similarly, in question five, we asked about the *role* NAL plays in Kazakhstan's capital city. In response, librarians highlighted the library's contribution to cultural preservation and technological development on a national scale. Librarians highlighted NAL most often as a *national* library (11), also noting it as electronic and technical in operations (8), built *for* the readers and other citizens (6), serving an educational (5) and cultural (3) function in society, providing information widely (3), commissioned by the country's president (2), serving as a literary center (2) and electronic repository (2) for the country, contributing to national infrastructure (1) and accessible to people with disabilities (1)—something that is unusual in most post-Soviet Central Asian libraries. In the section below, we draw out comments on two of these themes—first on NAL as a highly electronic library in comparison to its peers, and then on NAL as a national library with international connections.

The National Academic Library as electronic library

Librarians at NAL promote the institution as an “electronic” library, given its context in a country with unevenly-developed library infrastructure. Tamiris notes that other Kazakh libraries have “traditional collections,” but that NAL’s “virtual collections [*fond-virtual*]” provide access to international databases. Ainur likewise notes that the national scale and electronic features set her library apart from its peers, saying, “Throughout Kazakhstan, NAL is the largest [*eng iri*] electronic library. To me, it’s interesting to give services for readers’ use, computer devices [*qurilgilar*] and internet systems.”

Given the library’s scope, it has adopted the universal decimal classification, used within academic libraries in the region, rather than BBK / Soviet Library-Bibliographic Classification system common in post-Soviet public libraries.⁵⁴ As Sveta notes, “this library has a qualitatively new format, conceived as an electronic, digital library, which has no analogues in the Republic of Kazakhstan... from the beginning the electronic catalog of books was introduced by UDC classification with the full system of automation of work processes.”

Another difference is that the library catalog—and even some of databases and eBooks—can be accessed outside of regular library hours and locations. Marzhan highlights the distance services, which let readers request books “while sitting at home,” and Samal mentions the “electronic catalog... full-text databases, a very popular service of ‘virtual reference,’ and the electronic document delivery.” These features, in Jannar’s mind, make the library “a significant component of the information infrastructure of Astana” and of the country. In an interview, Saule describes the changes she has seen in librarianship at length, saying:

It’s encouraging to me as a person who has worked in this field for thirty years... now we are super-open [*super-otkryti*] because we are *seen*... In Kazakhstan, librarians were one of the first to have mastered the Internet, because we grasped its *perspectivnyi* (forward-looking) prospects. What distinguishes us is our systemic minds... People with a vision like this, with such a system of mind, quickly capture promising things and accordingly develop them.”

One major enterprise developed by the librarians is *kazneb.kz*, a trilingual electronic library which lets readers to sample digitized books from libraries across Kazakhstan (see Figure 2). Kazakhstan’s National Electronic Library, or KazNEB, was developed to promote Kazakh language and literature, and brought together teachers, librarians, and IT specialists in order to digitize both regional scholarship and cultural heritage;⁵⁵ the website now provides full-text for over 2000 Kazakh-language books.⁵⁶ Through the KazNEB portal, Galia notes that NAL uses electronic means to preserve culture in Kazakhstan:

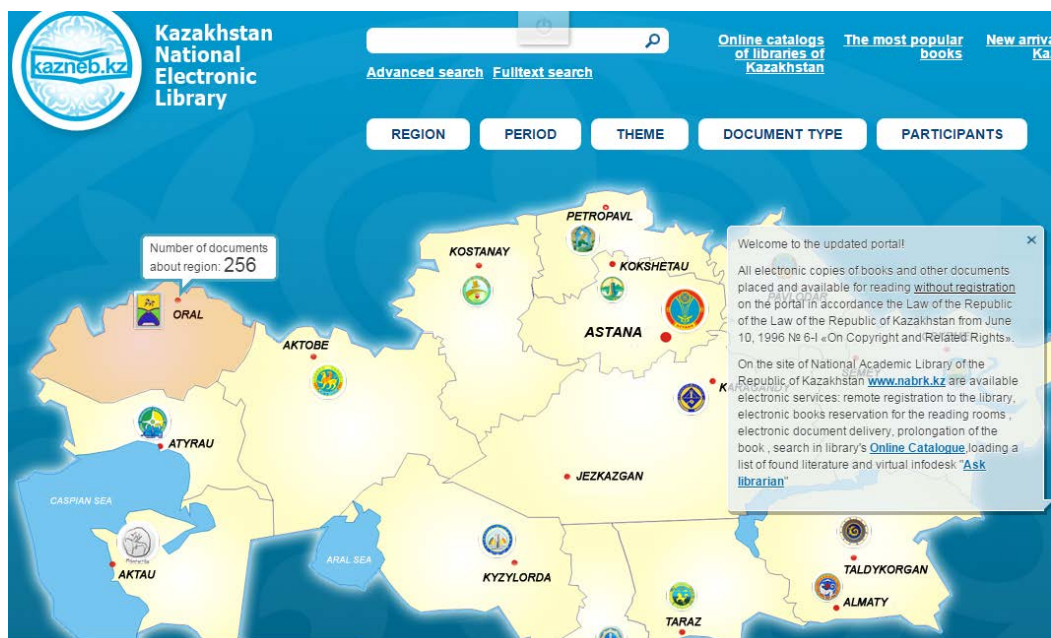


Figure 2. KazNEB, the electronic library of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The very name... speaks for itself. One of the main tasks of the library is to preserve the cultural heritage of the book for present and future generations. The main difference between our libraries is the creation of KazNEB as the most modern, digital, and *perspectivnyi* (forward-looking) digital library.

The National Academic Library as a national library with international links

Samal is revealing when she refers to NAL as Kazakhstan's "second National Library." As discussed above, Kazakhstan's first national library (NLRK) was established in 1931 in the southern city of Almaty. In being framed as an academic library, NAL could be founded in the new capital city, Kazakhstan, while retaining NLRK to continue as Kazakhstan's first major library in the older capital of Almaty. Given its location in the new capital, though, NAL has a special political role in national development, and was established directly by Kazakhstan's long-reigning president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. By creating the NAL, Anya writes, "the president identified the high purpose of the library as a conductor of knowledge in Kazakhstan," and Galia adds that for her, "the creation of NAL in the heart of the capital is evidence of the wisdom of our President. It must become the cultural-educational and enlightening center of the Republic of Kazakhstan." For all of these reasons, Saule says, "we try to have all the information about Astana" in the NAL library.

Indeed, NAL is situated at the political center of the nation, located on the prestigious left bank of the Ishim river, along the central boulevard and within walking distance of the parliament, high courts, state archive, and national headquarters of the ruling *Nur Otan* political party. As with other



Figure 3. Kazakhstani librarians participate in a cultural exchange during a Nauruz celebration at the National Academic Library.

newly-constructed capital cities, Astana was built in a defensible location⁵⁷, as part of a larger nation-building project to solidify Kazakhstan's unity and independence.⁵⁸ In a city designed as a "showpiece of Kazakh culture and identity"⁵⁹, the National Academic Library hosts singers, artists, and scholars as well as celebrations of national festivals such as the spring *Nauruz* holiday, celebrations which serve to reinforce Kazakhstan's ethnic heritage and intercultural unity through the venue of food and clothing (see Figure 3).

The National Academic Library also works not only to develop Kazakhstan's national heritage, but to promote internationalism within the nation's capital city. As Aigerim notes, NAL is a world library with "an electronic stock and clean information [*tazal malimetter*]" that does "full-blooded [*tolyq qandy*] work. At NAL, you can know the whole world [*bukil alem*]." Her colleague Moldir highlights the library's close relations with foreign libraries," and Meruert adds that the difference between NAL and other libraries in Kazakhstan is "land and sky" [*zher men koktei*]. In an interview, Saule highlights the increasing connections with international libraries as one way that NAL provides services to its patrons, reporting on a request for an old article from the 1970s which "we did not have... but we finally found it at the Karaganda State University library. They scanned it and sent it to us, and we were able to provide it for the patron." Saule reports a good connection with Moscow State University libraries, and the presence of politically savvy (*politicheski podkovany*) librarians who network with other state institutions; "for example, now we have healthcare developing rapidly at the state level, so we are in contact with new health centers that are opening here in Astana, the National Cardiac Research Center and others."

And while the National Academic Library aims first to promote Kazakhstani cultures and literatures, it also remains connected to business and international interests. The library's security gates are sponsored by Exxon-Mobil, and an American Corner sits near a cultural reading room with cultural and language books donated from embassies across Astana. A reading room sponsored by Chevron even contains periodicals from the oil and gas industries, and conferences promote the work of scholars, artists, and painters visiting from around the globe.

Observations in reference: a library is for its users

Finally, we highlight our observations of the reference and bibliographic services department, through which NAL answers research requests from the public. When we arrived for observation in March 2012, Meruert was responding to a digital request for resources on mysticism in Chekhov. First, she checked NAL's online catalog as well as that of its sister library, NLRK, before skimming search results at *mail.ru* (a search and social networking site), *google.com*, and *library.ru* (a then-popular site for illegal book downloads). Meruert and the other reference staff alternate handling reference questions in Russian and Kazakh, depending on their language skills.

At another computer, Anel added catalog entries to the locally-sourced library content management system, *RABIS*. She comments that her responsibilities are answer virtual reference questions [*virtual'naya spravka*] within three days. As a Russian speaker, she gets 3-6 detailed Russian-language questions each day. The librarians are also expected to write catalog descriptions of local journal articles, with a quota of about 10-14 new article records entered into the bibliographic system each day.⁶⁰ Often, government agencies call requesting information, especially around international events being hosted in the country, such as the Asian Olympic Games or OSCE summit. Reference librarians also organize library events, virtual exhibits online, and compile extensive bibliographic lists related to memorable dates, authors' birthdays, topical concerns such as healthy living. When work is quiet, they also help colleagues in cataloging.

Anel notes that reference librarians also keep records for assessment, including the number of materials cataloged, use of materials and databases, and number of reference requests answered, adding "...so everything has a notebook [*tetrad'*]!" In our observations, readers who arrived to the reference desk are quickly helped, then directed to browse print materials and databases via nearby computers.

Another reference librarian, Saule, sat down to talk with us at length. With her hair pulled into a wispy bun and wearing a necklace engraved with the name of Allah, Saule moved with a dancer's elegant hands. She explained her philosophy of reference, that librarians should not be saying "*qoldan kelmeidi*, it not my responsibility," but instead, "*sening qolyngda goi!* It's in your

hands, and you can do it.” While an *academic* library, NAL is still open to the public, and so reference librarians need to be willing to serve patrons from off the street. As Saule continues,

We work with real people who come to the library. They come and have a question... and you are looking along with them. That is, the person is physically present here. And you spend [*provodish'*] a search. Inside yourself, you feel that it's fast and you can quickly pull things out, but when you feel that a person is losing their time, you say 'please write your question, I will look for an answer, and then I'll write by mail or call on the phone.' Or a person just says, 'I'll come in two days,' and in this time, we're preparing a response.

Saule compares her work as a reference librarian to that of a doctor, noting that if a patient asks for help, a doctor must provide it. Librarians should operate similarly, she suggests, saying, “He’s not interesting to me – this *can't* be. He *should* be interesting.” Because of this need to respond to library patrons, Saule believes that reference librarians must be open and friendly, offering assistance and placing “a few suggestive questions [*navodiashchie voprosy*].” Here, Saule hints at a reference interview that would help the user understand their own needs and navigate their own path to information. As Johnson and Yadamsuren suggest among Mongolian librarians⁶¹, such a friendly attitude is a major transition for many post-socialist libraries. In their case, Mongolian librarians had to shift from directing readers to the *best* material and towards meeting *patron* requests and preferences. Likewise, Saule seeks to support Kazakhstani users with *their* needs in providing reference services for both academic and public users in Astana.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have outlined the experiences of librarians at the National Academic Library (NAL) in Astana, Kazakhstan as reported in surveys, interviews, and ethnographic observations. While preliminary, our results suggest that Kazakhstani librarians come into the profession from a range of prior experiences, some ‘falling into librarianship’ and others developing a sense of calling over time. Still others integrate happenstance with a determination to embrace librarianship as part of their identity and vocation in life. We also discuss librarians’ ideas about what their institution brings to Kazakhstan, with a focus on building electronic libraries, preserving cultural heritage, supporting national development, and meeting the needs of users. Finally, we share observations of the reference department at this public academic institution, considering how Kazakhstani librarians are building a new outreach ethic in line with international standards in librarianship—one that contrasts with the more restrictive modes of Soviet information support

outlined in our literature review. We highlight these results for an international audience seeking to learn about the challenges, experiences, and self-perceptions of librarians at a new institution in Kazakhstan, and encourage others to join us in further comparative work in the future.

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Notes

¹ Zhanna passed away unexpectedly while we were conducting this pilot project in spring 2012. We highlight her real name and story to honor her memory here.

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³ NLRK, "About the Library/History," Organizational website, *National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, (2015),

www.nlrk.kz/page.php?page_id=251&lang=3&parent_id=246&menu_id=250.

⁴ Orynassar Issakhov, "The National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan: History and Priorities for Development," *Alexandria* 22, no. 1 (2011): 39–45.

⁵ Daniel M. Pennell, "The Fate of Book Chambers and National Bibliographies in Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova Since 1991," *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 11, no. 1 (March 25, 2010): 12.

⁶ Hermina G.B. Anghelescu et al., "Acceptance of Social Marketing Concepts by Selected Romanian Librarians: Culture and Context," in *Advances in Library Administration and Organization*, vol. 27 (2009), 124.

⁷ H Cheng, "The Effect of the Cold War on Librarianship in China," *Library Review* 50, no. 3 (2001): 134.

⁸ Z Toszegi, "Digital Libraries Need Digital Librarians," in *Social Sources of Disparities in Health and Health Care and Linkages to Policy, Population Concerns and Providers of Care*, vol. 27 (Emerald Group Publishing, 2009), 78.

⁹ Anghelescu, "Acceptance of Social Marketing Concepts by Selected Romanian Librarians," 129; E. M. Knutson, "Libraries and Ecology in Post-Soviet Russia," in *Social Sources of Disparities in Health and Health Care and Linkages to Policy, Population Concerns and Providers of Care*, 27, 2009, 162.

¹⁰ Ellen M. Knutson, "New Realities: Libraries in Post-Soviet Russia," *Library Trends* 55, no. 3 (2007): 718.

¹¹ V Zverevich, "Developing the Library Network in Postcommunist Russia: Trends, Issues, and Perspectives," *Library Trends* 63, no. 2 (2014): 145.

¹² T Vaiseta, "Informacijos Hierarchija Vėlyvuoju Sovietmečiu: Bibliotekų Atvejis [The Hierarchy of Information in the Late Soviet Period: The Case of Library]," *Informacijos Mokslai* 60 (2012): 126; D Kimmage, "Glasnost in Soviet Libraries; Part One of Two," *American Libraries*, 571.

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- ¹⁴ J. Bone, "Soviet Controls on the Circulation of Information in the 1920s and 1930s," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 40 (1999): 65–89.
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- ¹⁶ Istvan Kiraly, "Library Secret Fonds and the Competition of Societies," *Libraries & Culture* 36, no. 1 (2001): 185–92, doi:10.1353/lac.2001.0011. p.190
- ¹⁷ Andrei Rogachevskii, "Homo Sovieticus in the Library," *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 6 (2002): 977.
- ¹⁸ E. Kasinec, "A Soviet Research Library Remembered," *Libraries & Culture* 36, no. 1 (2001): 16–26, doi:10.1353/lac.2001.0010.
- ¹⁹ I Mäkinen, "Libraries in Hell: Cultural Activities in Soviet Prisons and Labor Camps from the 1930s to the 1950s," *Libraries & Culture* 28, no. 2 (1993): 132.
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- ²³ Indira Kasapovic, "In 'No Man's Land': Libraries in Post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Library Trends* 63, no. 4 (2015): 666.
- ²⁴ Elizabeth A. King, Heidi E. Dowding, and Julia T. Pflager, "User-Centered Design and Reference Services in International Librarianship: A Case Study of Nazarbayev University Library," *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* 18, no. 3–4 (July 1, 2013): 212, doi:10.1080/10875301.2013.856368.
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- ³² Aleksei Asvaturov and Dmitry Ravinskiy, "The Library in a Multiethnic Urban Environment: The Experience of the Department of National Literatures of the Russian National Library (Saint Petersburg)," in *Advances in Library Administration and Organization*, vol. 27 (Emerald, 2009), 31.

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- ³³ Irene Chadnova, "Library Services to Multicultural Communities: Russian Best Practice," *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 241, doi:10.1080/15228886.2012.727159.
- ³⁴ We did our best to ensure that participation was voluntary; staff were given time to complete surveys on the job, thus driving up the response rate.
- ³⁵ Many thanks to Yermek, Zeinaf, Marzhan, and Anuar, students at the Nazarbayev University Library, for their translation assistance on this project.
- ³⁶ Jeffery L. Loo and Elizabeth A. Dupuis, "Organizational Learning for Library Enhancements: A Collaborative, Research-Driven Analysis of Academic Department Needs," *College & Research Libraries* 76, no. 5 (July 1, 2015): 20, doi:10.5860/crl.76.5.671.
- ³⁷ Thomas J. Whitby, "Libraries and Bibliographical Projects in the Communist Bloc," *The Library Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (1958): 280-1, doi:10.1086/618587.
- ³⁸ (Personal communication, March 2012).
- ³⁹ Jakob Rigi, "Corruption in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," in *Between Morality and the Law: Corruption, Anthropology and Comparative Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 101–18; Cynthia Werner, "Gifts, Bribes, and Development in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *Human Organization* 59, no. 1 (2000): 11–22.
- ⁴⁰ S Benz, "Ukrainian Libraries of Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: Impressions from an American Fulbright Librarian," *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 10 (2009): 329–31. [p. 328]
- ⁴¹ As in other countries, Kazakhstani librarians are most often women. One administrator commented in conversation that "librarians today are very modern girls and women [*devushki i zhenshchiny*]," repeatedly referring her employees of any age as "my girls" (*moi devushki*). Another librarian called her colleagues "girls" [*devushki*, as well as *devochki*], regardless of age.
- ⁴² Pamela Stone, *Opting Out?* (University of California Press, 2007).
- ⁴³ Joma Nazpary, *Post-Soviet Chaos: Violence and Dispossession in Kazakhstan* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).
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- ⁴⁷ Jakob Rigi, "The Conditions of Post-Soviet Dispossessed Youth and Work in Almaty, Kazakhstan," *Critique of Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 35–49, doi:10.1177/0308275X03023001811.
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- ⁵⁰ World Bank, "Kazakhstan Overview: Context," *World Bank*, 2014, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kazakhstan/overview>.

⁵¹ Asvaturov, "The Library in a Multiethnic Urban Environment," 142; and Heather Lea Jackson and Trudi Bellardo Hahn, "Serving Higher Education's Highest Goals: Assessment of the Academic Library as Place," *College & Research Libraries* 72, no. 5 (September 1, 2011): 428–42, doi:10.5860/crl-123.

⁵² Large, academically oriented libraries like NAL seek to increase the percentage of staff with professional library degrees in order to pass annual accreditation. This leads management to encourage library workers to pursue formal education through organizations such as the Russian Chelyabinsk State University.... yet NAL provides no funding for their librarians' professional development in order to meet institutional accreditation goals.

⁵³ Nicole Pagowsky and Miriam Rigby, "Contextualizing Ourselves: The Identity Politics of the Librarian Stereotype," in *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions and Presentations of Information Work* (Chicago: ACRL, 2014), 24.

⁵⁴ C Edwards, "The Social Role of Public Library Classifications," *NASKO* 4, no. 1 (2013), doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.7152/nasko.v4i1.14644.

⁵⁵ cf. Heidi Dowding, "The Role of the National University in Developing Nations' Digital Cultural Heritage Projects: A Perspective from Kazakhstan," *OCLC Systems & Services* 30, no. 1 (2014): 52–61.

⁵⁶ Z Shaimukhanbetova, "The Role of Kazakhstan's Libraries in Shaping the Country's Linguistic Landscape." (Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Cyberspace, Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference, Yakutsk, Russia: UNESCO, 2012), 228.

⁵⁷ Richard L. Wolfel, "North to Astana: Nationalistic Motives for the Movement of the Kazakh(stani) Capital," *Nationalities Papers* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 2002): 485–506, doi:10.1080/0090599022000011723.

⁵⁸ Edward Schatz, "What Capital Cities Say About State and Nation Building," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 9, no. 4 (January 1, 2004): 111–40, doi:10.1080/13537110390444140.

⁵⁹ Bernhard Köppen, "The Production of a New Eurasian Capital on the Kazakh Steppe: Architecture, Urban Design, and Identity in Astana," *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 4 (July 1, 2013): 590, doi:10.1080/00905992.2013.767791.

⁶⁰ Most libraries in Kazakhstan create catalog entries for individual articles from most journals and newspapers. With no single catalog, much work is duplicated but appears necessary for access at the local level. The monthly plan for the reference department at NAL is to enter 1,400 new articles into the catalog each month.

⁶¹ Catherine A. Johnson and Borchuluun Yadamsuren, "Libraries in Transition: How Librarians in Mongolia Are Re-Visioning the Role of Libraries in the New Democracy, a Case Study," *International Information & Library Review* 42, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 10, doi:10.1080/10572317.2010.10762836.