

# Combating the Struggle Against Excesses: the Resolution of 1955 and Its Sequences in Architectural Discussions and Construction Practice of the Kazakh USSR in the 1960s\*

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**Abstract**—The article investigates the problem of searching for the “national style” in the architecture of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. The contradiction between the search for national identity in the architecture of the republic and the international style in the USSR architecture of the “Thaw” era is studied through the example of the reaction of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic professional architectural community.

**Keywords**—national policy in architecture; postcolonial studies; modernism (art history); orientalism (art history); orientalism in architecture; soviet studies; history and theory of modern architecture

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the problem of the USSR national policy is probably one of the most difficult issues to discuss. Even 20 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this topic still triggers strong emotional reaction in researchers, however, there are still very few significant, well-considered works on the topic. Thus, numerous articles by Sergey Abashin [1], Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor at the European University, are devoted to the problem of studying the Soviet Union history as part of the world history of colonialism; among the works by Western scholars, The Affirmative Action Empire by Terry Martin [2], Professor at Harvard University, is worth mentioning. As for modern research, which could clarify the USSR national policy in architecture, such works are practically non-existent today, except for the articles by Boris Chukovich [3]; though he primarily focuses on the former Uzbek SSR territory, but by this example, he analyses processes that are more global.

The modern international discourse and the products of the former Soviet republics “national” architecture allow

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considering relations between Moscow (the Centre) and the republics through the prism of post-colonial theory; and in the case of the so-called “eastern republics”, to which modern Kazakhstan belonged up to 1991, also through the prism of the theory of orientalism. Its founder, Edward Said, stated that the “West” constructs the image of the “East” based on their own ideas, frequently being far from reality [4].

In Soviet practice, such “construction” of the “East” (beside its “exoticization” in Soviet mass culture) usually looked as follows: conditional “Muscovites” came to the capitals and other cities of the republics to design the “national style” architecture. Since the 1920s, such a situation was standard for the USSR rather than unique.

However, nowadays this story can hardly be interpreted disconcertingly. We consider it necessary to approach each case and each building independently, taking into account all the aspects, available data, and if possible, evidence.

The attitude of the “Centre”, by which in this research we understand Moscow, to the development of the “national architecture” in the republics, was changing significantly throughout the whole period of the USSR existence. Moreover, it is perfectly obvious that the attitude towards different republics was far from being equal — for instance, what could be acceptable for the Armenian SSR in the 1960s could not be acceptable for the Belarusian SSR, etc. Throughout the entire period of the USSR existence, the formula “the culture, national in form and socialist (proletarian) in content”, proposed by Joseph Stalin in 1925 [5], was interpreted ambivalently, with contrary meanings. In our opinion, the internal mechanisms of those changes - in time and in relation to the different subjects (republics), is one the most important topic for study.

However, there is another aspect — regarding the “national architecture”, the republics were not just passive subjects, following the instructions from the Centre. On the contrary, local architects and party leaders also tried to

participate as actors in the process, finding various, usually “soft” ways to escape the influence of the Centre, taking advantage of their remote, “provincial” position.

Analyzing the reaction of the architectural circles of the Kazakh SSR to the resolution of November 4, 1955 “On excesses in architecture and construction” can be considered a significant and characteristic case for studying the USSR national policy in architecture.

Since this resolution, or more precisely, since the speech by Khrushchev at the Builders' meeting in 1954 preceding it, the return of modernism to the USSR began, with its orientation on universalism and equality, which did not presuppose the development of national motifs in architectural forms. However, as it will be shown below in the article, the new wave of modernism faced opposition in the republics, which found their own “architectural face” a way to preserve their own identity within the USSR.

The chosen example is based on the shorthand record of a meeting of the architects Kazakhstan, found in private archives. The meeting was held in Almaty on October 29, 1957, and chaired by the architect Alexander Leppik [6]. One more data source was the interview with the architect Almas Ordabayev, honorary architect of Kazakhstan, Doctor of architecture.

## II. THE SEARCH FOR NATIONAL FORMS IN KAZAKH SSR ARCHITECTURE BEFORE THE RESOLUTION “ON EXCESSES IN ARCHITECTURE AND CONSTRUCTION”

Before analyzing the found document itself, it is essential to mention that practically from its foundation in 1854, Almaty (the city of Verniy, until 1921) was the outpost for the promotion of Russian colonization. Since the city's foundation in 1854, throughout its history, obtaining the status of the capital city of the Kazakh Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic within the RSFSR in 1927, and until the dissolution of the USSR, the building-up of Almaty was mainly carried out under the Russian architects' leadership. The most well-known example of construction upon a project by a Moscow architect is the constructivist House of Government, built in 1929 upon the project of Moisey Ginzburg and Ignatij Milinis. The project was selected in the competition with over 50 Soviet architects, including Ivan Leonidov, participating.

In fact, according to the architect Almas Ordabayev, and confirmed by the projects analysis, the search for “national architecture” in Kazakhstan, peaked in the 1940s, the so-called period of the USSR “heritage development”. Basically, that search, or rather, the development was carried out in the late 1940s. “There is an interesting nuance about Kazakhstan. Unlike Transcaucasia, Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, its national architecture originated, started to evolve much later. In Transcaucasia, it was the 30s, and even the 20s, in Tashkent it also took place earlier than in Almaty, where the first opera house was constructed in 1940-1941, at very difficult times. On a larger scale, certain architectural techniques stated to be used in the 1940s, and not immediately after the war, as time to recover was needed. So,

it was rather late”. [7] Another distinctive feature of the search for “national forms” in the architecture of Kazakhstan, beside the chronological difference in comparison with the other republics, was the fact that it was mainly conducted by the architects-visitants, primarily from the RSFSR.

Remarkable is the fact that until 1966, in Kazakhstan there were no opportunities for acquiring an architectural education. The Department of Architecture at the Polytechnic University in Almaty was first established in 1966. “Previously, there had been a civil engineering college with an architectural department, which trained architects. The architects with higher education came to Kazakhstan from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, or Novosibirsk. Quite large first groups from Almaty, 7-8 people, all of them Kazakhs, as I remember, were sent to the Moscow Architectural Institute. It was in early 1950s”. [8]

Eventually, the combination of all these factors resulted in certain specificity of the Kazakh architecture of the 1940-1950s. At that time, specific “hybrid” projects appeared, where the architects attempted to combine the “classical heritage”, already interpreted through the Russian Empire style and the 19th century neoclassical style, with certain “eastern” features and ornaments, as envisaged by the “western” (with regard to Kazakhstan) architects.

An illustrative example of such a “hybrid” construction is the Opera House in Almaty, created by Russian architects N. Kruglov and N. Prostakov, designed and constructed in 1936-1941 (“Fig. 1”).



Fig. 1. Kazakh State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater named after Abai, 1936 – 1941, arc. N. Kruglov, N. Prostakov ©Institute of Modernism, Moscow.

It is an example of the eclectic mixture of classical proportions and order elements, the Russian interpretation of the classics (the authors emulated the image of the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg) and the national Kazakh decor. Meanwhile, this very building was heatedly discussed in 1957 debates.

The House of Government in Almaty (architects B. Rubanenko and G. Simonov) and Youth Theatre (constructed in 1935 by architects Rudnev and Tverdokhlebov in a post-constructivist style as a cinema, and in 1944, reconstructed by architect N. Prostakov, with lavish “national” decor), illustrate a similar approach to design and construction (“Fig. 2”).



Fig. 2. Youth Theatre after reconstruction by architect N. Prostakov, 1944, foto by 1947 © Institute of Modernism, Moscow.

Thus, as we can see from the above and other examples, only “visiting” architects were involved in the search for, or more precisely, the construction of “national” features in the Kazakh architecture, combining this process with “developing the heritage” and decorating newly created classic facades and interiors with stucco mouldings.

### III. NATIONAL FORM VS INTERNATIONAL STYLE: THE DISCUSSION ON THE STRUGGLE AGAINST EXCESSES IN KAZAKHSTAN

The development of “virgin lands”, mainly located in Kazakhstan, which was started by Khrushchev in 1954, naturally resulted in a building boom, with no exception of Almaty, where many whole land workers tried to settle. Simultaneously with that, Khrushchev began the struggle against architectural immoderacy.

One of the basic sets of early “Khrushchev’s” modernism, started in the mid-1950s, beside the set to extreme efficiency, was the set to universality, “equality” and, thus, internationality.

However, as indicated in the shorthand record of 1957, in the architectural community of the Kazakh SSR, the set to renouncing immoderacy was received with varied reactions. Having read the shorthand record, one can conclude that those participating in the meeting on October 29, 1957 divided into two opposing parties, one of which can be called the “conservative party”, the other — the “progressist party”.

Despite the architects' meeting being entitled “The practice of design and some issues of the creative direction of the Soviet architecture in Kazakhstan,” in fact, the discussion was limited to a few topics.

The topic of reducing construction costs, most relevant for the Centre since 1954, from the speech by Khrushchev at the Builders' Meeting [9], was merely touched during the discussions in Kazakhstan, formally and mainly as a promise in the Komsomol and Stakhanov spirit, with optimistic statistics. In fact, the meeting participants were concerned about two main issues. The first issue was the interrelation with the previous architectural experience (since the 1920s), the second one was the future of architecture, including the possibility to work “as before”, especially without any changes in terms of style.

The meeting started with a lengthy speech by Malbagar Mendikulov. Being an ethnic Kazakh, Mendikulov studied at the Leningrad Institute of Municipal Construction. In 1955, that is, two years before the meeting, Mendikulov had been appointed head of the Board of architectural affairs and Construction at the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR - so, initially, he was an architectural government official. Moreover, in 1957, shortly before the meeting, M.M. Mendikulov had been elected a corresponding member of the USSR Academy of Construction and Architecture, thus, among all the meeting attendees, he was closest to Moscow.

Mendikulov was a key figure in the Kazakh architecture and simultaneously, or, consequently, the leader of the party of “architectural conservatives”. In his speech, he primarily addressed the national problem. He drew attention to the significant role of the visitants, primarily the RSFSR architects, in creating the national Kazakh architecture, and interpreted it positively: “Remarkable is the fact that Russian architects have played a critical part in developing national forms of the architecture of Kazakhstan (italics supplied) - academician A.V. Shchusev, B.R. Rubanenko, S.V. Vasilkovsky, A.V. Arefyev, N.A. Prostakov, A.A. Leppik and others. This fact vividly represents the disinterested fraternal assistance of the great Russian people to the Kazakh people in shaping their new socialist culture”. [10].

Mendikulov held to the same “Stalinist” rhetoric, dating back to the 1930s, with regard to constructivism architecture: “In constructivism, ignoring aesthetics resulted in squalor of architectural forms” [11], “some architects see the idea of reconstruction in simplism, duplication of primitive constructivist forms, which inevitably leads to alienation of architectural creativity from national background, and to the impersonal cosmopolitan architecture of capitalist countries, as a result” [12]. Moreover, the decline of the capitalist countries' architecture was mentioned by Mendikulov in his speech, which abounded in multiple repetitions. [13]

Having criticized the constructivist past and the decadent West, Mendikulov proceeds with the situation of the mid-1950s, threatening architects, interested in modernity with what lack of character may lead to: “In the works by certain architects, there is a tendency towards simplism, which is another extremity that may cause not only the impoverishment of architecture, but also the loss of its national character...”.

Mendikulov provides illustrative examples of the appeal to the principles of constructivism in modern architectural practice, fiercely criticizing the building of the sports school in Almaty (architects Pakidov, Popova): “Such characteristic constructivism techniques as the asymmetry of a three-dimensional composition, horizontal windows along the entire facade, a deliberate contrast of bare concrete-plastered walls with glass, thin and round racks supporting the heavy walls and the absence of any decorative elements are peculiar to the architectural appearance of this building” [14]. As well he criticized the project of the hotel “Kazakhstan” (“Jetysu”). The main reproach concerned the national issue again: “There is no attempt to search for the national form and use any plastic means - mouldings,

ornaments, painting, sculpture, color, etc. As a result, the architectural solution of the building lacks character, eliminating all the positive experience of the previous period of the Soviet architecture development in Kazakhstan [15].

However, scathing criticism of constructivism combined with the criticism towards the Western countries' architecture in 1957 directly contradicted the statements by Khrushchev, who, in his speech at the Builders' Meeting in December 1954, had had a neutrally positive view of constructivism. What is more, in his speech, Khrushchev emphasized the need to adopt advanced experience of Western countries in the field of construction [16]. By 1957, the construction of the ninth block of Novye Cheryomushki district was on fast-forward, panel housebuilding was being introduced, the technology of which was purchased in France from Raymond Camus. This fact was well known to all architectural officials, and Mendikulov as one of them.

What did Mendikulov himself (and his "party comrades") suggest to do in order to avoid the risks of "losing national character" in the context of the approaching modernism? He did not try to reinvent the wheel, being convinced that national forms of architecture tend to transform over time, adjusting to current conditions. It meant that they would be able to adjust then. Finally, Mendikulov proposed a radical solution to the problem of combining tradition and innovation: "Let us develop a set of prefabricated industrial architectural elements with the application of national elements." [17]

Mendikulov, being a key figure in the architectural circles of Kazakhstan in the late 1950s, was not alone in his endeavour to resist the decrees from the Centre. The statement of the architect Bayanov, which he started his speech with, was surprisingly careless: "The idea that every resolution should be saluted with cheers and "Hurray!" is not close to me. That would be a mistake". On the side of the "conservative party", the architect Stesin gave a speech, protesting against the fashion for "Americanism", as well as Toleu Basenov and the party president, Alexander Leppik.

The "progressists party" held to the contrary point of view on the issues outlined by their opponents, headed by Mendikulov, from what the essence of the current (of the late 1950s) national Kazakh architecture was, on down to a polar opposite vision of its ways of development. Thus, the architect Semenov spoke in support of the constructivism of the Vesnins, Wright, Gropius and Nervi [18], to a certain extent supporting the course set by Khrushchev. It can be stated that at that short period a unique situation of the unity of intelligentsia and authorities, uncommon for the USSR history and the history of the Russian Empire arose.

Apparently, feeling the changing times and their strong stand, the "progressists" allowed themselves to speak ironically about their opponents, regardless of their ranks. The main figure of the progressists' camp was the architect Nikolai Ripinsky, who had graduated from Kazan Engineering and Construction Institute in 1931, attended courses at Vkhutemas (Higher Art and Technical Studios), worked with Zholtovsky, had been repressed and exiled to Kazakhstan in 1949. In 1957, he was a Chief Architect of

the Kazgorstroyproekt Institute. He must have been the only person to focus on economics of construction and types of housing in his speech, emphasising to his opponent that those were the issues to pay special attention to, not "discussions on industrial production of arches" [19]. Fascinated by the spirit of "Thaw", "progressists" refer to all the "old" with a considerable degree of contempt: "Is it possible to transfer the old form of the old life, representing the old content, to the present day? We do not think so." [20] The position of Ripinsky was supported by the architect Vladimir Ischenko; for him, as well as for his colleagues, the mechanical repetition of "national" forms in the new era of international architecture of "Thaw" was an obvious absurdity: "Why not make this pointed arch of new building materials, like reinforced concrete? Why not make Kazakh ornament in modern concrete forms? But can architecture be approached this way?" [21].

Meanwhile, it should be mentioned that like the senior USSR officials in the name of Khrushchev, the progressists did not propose almost any positive program regarding the future of architecture, drawing on the constructivists' principles of logical construction of buildings and their compliance with climatic conditions: "We understand the classical and national heritage not canonically, not as the use of excesses and traditional forms and details, but as a system of logical construction in the forms that correspond to modern development... National forms in architecture should be primarily based on an in-depth consideration of climatic features ... Lavish use of ornamentation does not solve this problem, it only leads it the wrong way" [22]. Ripinsky spoke about creating national forms in architecture through an in-depth consideration of climatic features, but in fact, as his further work would show, he was fascinated by the ideas of modernism and international style, which he and his supporters would be able to implement on the nationwide wave of modernism.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

What caused Mendikulov's desire to continue designing in national forms, even at the price of mechanical "printing" of "national" architectural details by industrial means, in violation of the all-Union architectural policy?

There are a number of possible options. The most prosaic one may be associated with financial remuneration - it is known that in the 1940-1950s, architectural elements affected the architect's fee; the same practice was common in Kazakhstan: "Those people, the architects, who worked before the war - of course, when it all happened in 1955, it was very challenging for them. There also was a financial interest. Many workers were paid by the piece. Each flourish, each small column cap, each rosace was paid separately. There the level of difficulty was measured. And here is just simple architecture, without any stucco, without all that stuff" [23]. However, being an official and having rather close links with Moscow, Mendikulov could not but understand that after the resolution those rates were unlikely to be maintained.

Another possible option may be the inability to design in the “modern” forms and the unwillingness to change the methods of work.

Finally, the “conservative party” might have really been concerned about the preservation of the newly created identity of Kazakh architecture.

The winner of the battle of 1957 was undoubtedly the party of innovators. Not surprisingly- such was the political and social landscape in the USSR at that time; the wave could not be stopped in an individual republic.

During the first years following the discussion, Nikolay Ripinsky, Vladimir Ischenko and other modernist architects built such exemplary buildings of early modernism in Almaty as the building of the Kazgorstroyproekt Institute (1958 - 1961, architects V. Ischenko, A. Nedovizin, N. Ripinsky and others).

It was a Soviet modernist breakthrough; there were no such fully glazed buildings yet either in Moscow or in Leningrad. Among the bright samples of the Kazakh international style are the following: the Athletics arena of the Institute of Physical Education (N. Ripinsky, A. Kapanov, late 1960s), hotel Almaty (1962 - 1967, I. Kartasi, V. Chirkin, A. Kossov, N. Ripinsky), the House of the Soviets (1966 - 1968, A. Naumov, V. Mikheev, M. Popova), and the State Library of the Kazakh SSR n.a. A.S. Pushkin (1962 - 1970, V. Ischenko, V. Kim).

It is questionable, to what extent the climatic conditions were taken into account, but those buildings definitely stayed in-step with the times.

The conservative leaders, M. Mendikulov and A. Leppik, also had to change their views — in 1966, they designed the Palace of wedding, in which they managed to combine the national element with the modernist form ("Fig. 3").

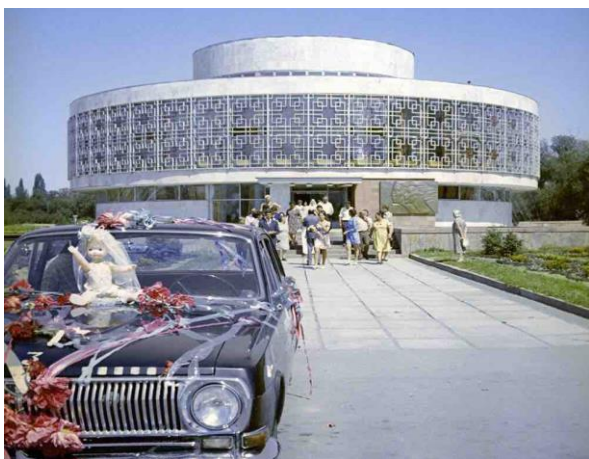


Fig. 3. Palace of wedding, Almaty, M. Mendikulov, A. Leppik, 1963 © Institute of Modernism.

In the 1970s, the “conservatives” took a revenge, and the national element in the architecture of the Kazakh SSR became more noticeable - in the building of the Arasan recreation complex, and in the television studio complex (1973 - 1983, architects A. Korzhempo, N. Ezau, V. Panin),

("Fig. 4") with the stalactite cornice and ornament returned, as if they had never been away.



Fig. 4. Television studio complex, 1973 - 1983, arc. A. Korzhempo, N. Ezau, V. Panin © RIA NOVOSTI.

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