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Battlefields of Ethnic Symbols. Public Space and Post-Soviet Identity Formation from a Minority Perspective

ALEXANDER M. DANZER

Abstract

This article provides an analysis of interdependencies between post-Soviet Erinnerungspolitik in public space and the individual perception of urban reconfigurations by ethnic Germans in Kazakhstan. Applying a qualitative social-geographic approach the author examines determinants of the process of ethnic symbolisation of real and imagined places. Individual biography and the extent of Soviet socialisation are factors shaping the personal perception of symbolic landscapes. From the perspective of the individual, space reflects the power distribution within society and hence, impacts on individual identity formation. Depending on the dominance of internal as opposed to external identification, the (perceived) changing ethnicised landscape of cities potentially fuels ethnic tension.

The break-down of the Soviet Union not only led to the collapse of a political empire, but also brought a sudden twist to 290 million Soviet life histories. Within a few months 15 independent states were born. The reshuffling of power relations and the construction of new national identities became central in the realities of citizens in all post-Soviet states. But despite its relevance and prominence in public discourse the impact of this severe historical discontinuity on individual identification processes has received limited scientific attention. This article takes a micro-level approach to contribute to the question of how changes in the built environment of minority members’ everyday life context has shaped their perception of the nationalisation process of the state they live in, and in how far those perceptions interact with their personal ethnic identity.

I would like to especially thank all interview partners in Germany and Kazakhstan for sharing their personal histories with me. Natalia Weisshaar, Andrea Gawrich, Rut Gollan, Günter Heinritz and two anonymous referees as well as participants at the Changing Europe Summer School in Warsaw and the War and Our World Conference in Manchester have made helpful comments and constructive suggestions and thus contributed to improving this research. I am also grateful to Barbara Dietz for making available the survey data collected by the Institute of Eastern European Studies, Regensburg. Responsibility for all errors remains mine.
National reconfigurations took place in all post-Soviet states and affected every citizen, but they must have been especially pronounced for members of ethnic minorities in countries with ethnically heterogeneous populations like Kazakhstan. Although fears of violent ethnic conflict have not materialised in multi-ethnic Kazakhstan, which was initially labelled the ethnic tinderbox of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) (Hughes & Sasse 2001), ethnic differentiation can potentially manifest itself in discrimination and adverse power redistribution. The concentration of power in the hands of the titular nation resembles a process of silent Kazakhification despite the official promulgation of a civic Kazakhstani nation. Ethnicity was reinvented as a distinctive concept, degrading formerly—at least legally—coequal population subgroups to minorities. A particular role has been played by the German minority in Kazakhstan due to its large size and its enduring minority status. In other words, while Russians were not considered a minority before independence, the Germans had suffered from disdain already in the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan. The aforementioned continuity facilitates the analysis of the effect of historical breaks on identity transformation, as the confounding factors stemming from the general reshuffling of socio-ethnic strata can be precluded when focusing on the German minority. Qualitative interviews confirm that the perception of space is filtered through individuals’ personal ethnic identity and biography. Ethnic symbolic landscapes become wildcards for nationalising policies which the interview partners embrace or dislike and which accordingly reinforce ethnic identification.

The intricate way to a Kazakh nation state and public landscape

Kazakhstan declared independence on 16 December 1991, and was the last country of the former Soviet Union to do so. The relatively late proclamation allowed the political elite in the country to anticipate the power and legitimation vacuum caused by the implosion of the Soviet Union. The survival of the ruling political class could only be guaranteed if this vacuum was successfully filled by a political legitimisation beyond Moscow’s support. The avenue chosen by the political leaders was one that relied on a ‘national idea’, referring to the highly influential ideological concept of the nation state which had emerged as a consequence of the enlightenment era some 200 years earlier. At that time however, European popular elites and the intelligentsia had rebuilt crumbling kingdoms into modern nation states and legitimised them as the final stage of the development of (primordial) ethnic groups. In contrast to the European development, the newly independent states of the FSU were the result of a sudden breakdown in central state power rather than products of nationalisation processes. As modernist theorists of nationalism suggest, no matter whether nation states have developed through integration or disintegration they can be considered artificial constructions (Anderson 1983). According to this view, nations bind their members (citizens) to the ideological concept of the nation like limbs of a natural body. From an abstract perspective, individual allegiance is reproduced by nations being ‘imagined communities’.

1The mass emigration of minority members in the 1990s which will be discussed below partially refutes this official version, as no truly civic state should be willing to tolerate such an exodus of citizens.
In the FSU, mediation of the construction of a new national identity to the citizens of the newly established nation state was the linchpin for the success of the legitimation of political elites. The ideological fundament of any nation’s self image comprises historical narratives. Psychologically, one important carrier for this legitimation was the breaking of old historical narratives and the invention of a new (interpretation of) history with associated symbols (Erinnerungspolitik) (Gillis 1994). In contrast to several states of Eastern Europe, Central Asian leaders could not rely on the remnants of any pre-Soviet statehood that might have allowed them to postulate a historical consummation. In Kazakhstan the existing historiography of the Soviet Union was consequently replaced by one of the successor state which, however, completely lacked a history of statehood. Before the Tsarist Russian Empire invaded the area comprising contemporary Kazakhstan, and subsequently established organisational structures from 1822 onwards, the land had been ruled by the leaders of three rival clans or nomadic kinships (zhuz) (Dave 2008). By arguing that the actual birth of the nation was in primordial times, the creation of the new nation state becomes the historically logical consequence of the past and ‘liberates’ the nation from the oppression of ‘foreign’ occupation (Diener 2002). How can states, however, mediate their national idea? The political elites of post-Soviet Kazakhstan faced the problem of transforming the public ‘worlds of meaning’ (Verdery 1999). Among the most visible changes is the reshaping of the official urban landscape, a topic that has started to receive some scientific attention in post-Soviet Estonia and Uzbekistan (Bell 1999; Burch & Smith 2007). The removal of a soldier statue in Tallinn, Estonia, which had commemorated those killed during WWII, revealed the potential (violent) consequences of ethnic struggles over interpretative sovereignty in the symbolic urban landscape (Kaiser 2007).

A further complication in the writing of a Kazakh history was that the formal state power reached beyond the titular ethnicity. In order to build up a national homeland against the background of the complex ethno-demographic composition the Kazakhs had to secure and extend their territorial authority (Chinn & Kaiser 1996). At birth, the country was considered the ethnically most heterogeneous successor state of the FSU. Less than 50% of the total population (14 million) were ethnic Kazakhs at the time of the last Soviet census in 1989, with Russians (6 million) and Germans (1 million) representing the largest minority groups. The existence of the German minority in Russia had its roots in Catherine the Great’s invitation of 1763 to peasants from Central Europe (mostly from Germany and Switzerland) to settle on the southern fringe of the Russian Empire along the river Volga. Despite originating from various German-speaking settlement areas which had not yet been united in a common German nation state, the early pan-Russian movement and the later Soviet passport regularities produced a sense of belonging to a wider German ethnicity which persists until today (Kendirbaeva 1997; Olcott 2002). Stalin’s resettlement policy in 1941 forced these settlers eastwards into the area of contemporary Kazakhstan in order to prevent them from collaborating with Nazi-German troops. There, the Germans were predominantly concentrated in rural areas, in so-called ‘German

\[2\]A similar monument in Astana, Kazakhstan, was removed in 1997 in order to reshape the future capital city. However, despite some local protests, the population did not violently contest the removal.
villages’. Due to both latent and open discrimination and as a consequence of intermarriage, a steady process of Russification among German minority members occurred in the Soviet era. A survey in Kazakhstan in 1994 revealed that 73.7% of German minority members aged below 25 were not at all or only poorly able to speak German, while the comparable numbers among 46–55 year olds (19.5%) and of those aged above 55 (10.4%) were substantially lower. After 1990, the substantial uncertainty about the political future of the young country and the prospects of being granted German citizenship acted as effective push-and-pull factors contributing to the mass-emigration of several hundred thousand members of the German minority (Dietz 2000). By the mid-2000s, the number of ethnic Germans in Kazakhstan had shrunk to approximately 200,000; ‘German villages’ lost their ethnically homogenous character or were entirely deserted. As emigration to Germany was selective with respect to language ties, the degree of Russification of the remaining German minority may even have increased. However, the fate of the remaining Germans may have been affected positively as their external support may potentially grant them a preferential economic position in Kazakhstan’s open economy (Brown 2005).

In the early 1990s, the complex ethnic structure had been identified as a security threat for Kazakhstan by the country’s titular elites and their attempted solution was the invention of the civic concept of the Kazakhstani nation. President Nazarbaev was presented as the unifying father of the nation to all Kazakhstani citizens and strong presidential leadership was claimed to be the sole means of securing the state’s unity in view of its ethnically diverse environment. Astutely, the threat of ethnic cleavage was used as a legitimising tool for the development of a semi-authoritarian political system in Kazakhstan (Ottaway 2003). At the same time, silent Kazakhification in various dimensions of political, social and economic life produced disadvantages for minority group members (Olcott 2002; Peyrouse 2007). This concomitance of political processes has been recognised by Rogers Brubaker, who introduced the concept of ‘post-Soviet nationalism’ to account for the ethnic complexity of overlapping interests in the region (Brubaker 1996). The titular ethnicities that took over state authority after the implosion of Moscow’s central power designed policies for their nationalising programmes in order to legitimate ex-post their titular supremacy inside the newly born states. As a consequence of the initial political uncertainty about the directions of the transition process, large minorities were supported by powerful external homelands which targeted financial and cultural assistance to their ethnic lineage. The main actors in this complex multi-ethnic setting were the nationalising state that wished to support its ethnicity in a developing statehood and the external homelands aiming at securing the cultural autonomy for their minorities. In short, the early newly independent states were characterised by a complex structure of ethnicities which were mirrored in ethnically motivated agents and policies.

Against this background, this article focuses on how the conversion of public space and the associated discontinuity in national narratives affect identity formation in the case of members of an ethnic minority. It also deals with the question of which channels and factors influence the individual perception of symbolic landscapes.

³The survey was carried out by the Institute for Eastern European Studies, Regensburg (formerly Munich) (Sample size: 506); for details see Dietz (1995).
To answer these questions, I analyse the role of national narratives in the nexus of selected policies (transformations of public space) and ethnic differentiation (transformations of ethnic identities) at the level of the individual, the locus of identity. While the existing literature has concentrated on the macro level or has investigated the micro level of symbolic landscapes only from the researcher’s perspective, no attempts have been made to analyse the individual’s perception of complex symbolic landscapes. In accordance with their macro approach, most researchers have investigated the changing historical narratives in public space as an expression of nation building or power struggle among elites (Bell 1999). Contrary to this literature, I analyse how individuals perceive historical breaks in the construction of public space that are observable in their daily routines and focus on the interdependencies of daily routines of space perception and ethnic identity construction. In line with the requirements of a micro approach, I refrain from focusing on certain preselected urban artefacts (like a specific national monument) and choose an open approach to spatial symbols instead, including so-called banal symbols which I consider in the context of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig 1995).

Billig’s concept of ‘banal nationalism’ refers to the use of banal subliminal practices such as flag waving which is used even in established nation states to continuously ensure people’s commitment. In my extension of Billig’s concept to individual perception of space, banal ethnic symbols are places which have been accorded an ethnic connotation that is found to be surprising, as I will later illustrate with the example of ‘German’ grocery shops.

From the individual’s perspective, spatial artefacts are perceived in urban space on a daily basis, in their local life context. In Kazakhstan, the heterogeneous ethnic composition is mirrored in overlaying policies of nationalistic promotion (Danzer 2005). On the one hand, the Kazakh national conception has—in opposition to public claims—been oriented towards an ethnic rather than a civic constitution of the nation. On the other hand, the German minority received substantial financial, cultural and political support from the Federal Republic of Germany (disregarding the loss in members). To some extent these antagonistic policies have been reflected in public space and thus have become ethnic symbols, places that could be seen as a visual manifestation of the power distribution between ethnicities.

Both forms of nationalism left spatial footprints in the physical (and mostly urban) space of Kazakhstan. To render the new historical narrative, new monuments were erected (sometimes replacing Soviet ones) and street names exchanged. However, while monuments of the ‘Kazakh’ national hero Abai, for instance, are omnipresent in Kazakhstan, the existence of ‘German’ monuments is naturally less common. A good example, however, is the monument of Heinrich Vogeler in Karaganda erected with money from Germany in the early 1990s (Danzer 2005). As has been argued in the geographical literature, power relations are being inscribed in the built environment and are thus continuously reproduced (Light & Young 2001).

Although human geographers have studied extensively the power reflection and transformation of

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4 A notable recent exception is Gill (2008) who focuses on the changing role of a single symbol during the post-Soviet regime change.

5 See e.g. Kaiser (2002) for a comprehensive analysis of how spatial ideologies contribute to the making and reproduction of the concept of homelands.
classical official symbols, banal symbols have been widely disregarded and the process of individual identity production has not been considered within these analyses (Johnson 1995; Azaryahu 1996; Atkinson & Cosgrove 1998; Forest, Johnson & Till 2004; Light 2004). In the social sciences, the Erinnerungspolitik literature has long been dedicated to the study of how states produce their national idea through constructing commemorative identity anchors (Hoelscher & Alderman 2004); however, it has done so without analysing individual perceptions. In this article I will explore a surprising variety in interpretations of space which suggests we should be cautious about ignoring the micro level in general and the banal component of ethnic identification sources in particular.

A geography of banal ethnicisation

Any micro-level analysis is complicated by the fact that individuals perceive their environment subjectively, interpersonally different, and often subconsciously. To open the black box of how humans load material with ethnic symbolic content I develop a simple model building on recent geographical research which strongly emphasises the cognitive aspect of space and thereby advances more traditional surface-oriented approaches (Werlen 1997; Danzer 2008). In a process of reducing complexity, individuals attribute symbolic meaning to physical artefacts (objects). A piece of stone can thus be turned into a national symbol. Put simply, there is the physical world, onto which a symbolic world is projected. Symbols can generally have very diverse meanings, but the interest here is on those icons that touch upon places of nationalising policies (‘Kazakh’ symbols) and those of homeland support (‘German’ symbols). For the understanding of how ethnic differentiation is projected onto places, it is helpful to reflect how ethnic belonging is produced. The ethnic identity of human beings can be understood as social self-referencing within the universe of ethnic groups. According to the tradition of Symbolic Interactionism, direct self-perception is infeasible for individuals. Rather, individuals reflect themselves in the mirror image of their counterparts, seen as ‘others’. Emerging from extrinsic inspection, every identity is inter-subjectively comparable and intra-personally unique. Different humans employ the same sources of identification, such as language and rites. In other words, an individual belongs to a group which is constituted by a common frame of reference, by similar anchors of identification. In addition, the personal identity is the self, the holistic self-constructed unique individuality which is a product of all individual identity sources. Hence, ethnic identity is a single individual identity that can only be studied at the micro level (Kłosowska 2001). At the same time, the ethnic identity anchors are the linchpins of ethnic group constitution and thus the carrier of differentiation leading to the mental inclusion of insiders as opposed to the exclusion of outsiders. As concerns space, different local artefacts (objects) are sorted into the scheme of ‘we’ and ‘others’, a process called symbolic appropriation of space. Some symbols are inclusive (such as those that reinforce the feeling of belonging to the

6The interviews with two young women (Maria, 23, and Larissa, 26) revealed that internal identification can also rely on the perceived personal duty to transmit (as mothers) the historical ethnic ties into the next generation. For full details of interviewees, please see Table A1.
German minority), while others are exclusive (such as those signalling the exclusion from another ethnic group).

As ethnic identity is individually unique, the personal perception of multi-ethnic symbolic landscapes may vary substantially between individuals. Decoding the process of symbolic appropriation (Figure 1) requires, first, a detailed knowledge of the biographic aspect, which refers to the life context and the life history of a person as they are constitutive for the ethnic identity of an individual. In the post-Soviet context it seems reasonable to assume that personal ethnic identity is related to Soviet socialisation and that age explains the degree of attachment to the historical cadences of previous Soviet narratives. Younger persons may be more in favour of changes than individuals who attach great importance to the historiography of an obsolete state regime. As places of residence differ with respect to the urban fabric and socio-demographic characteristics, they should impact on both demand for and supply of specific ethnic symbols or goods. Secondly, symbolic appropriation depends on an information aspect, which refers to the knowledge a person has about spatial artefacts, and which is based on personal or transmitted experience. Personal experience implies that a person has loaded a spatial artefact during an immediate unique or repeated event. Transmitted experience indicates that a person has learned about an event through the press or through oral history, as in the case of the collective memory of families or clans (Halbwachs 1985).

Having investigated the process of symbolic appropriation theoretically, the methodological problems in correctly measuring the complex and unobservable process depicted in Figure 1 come to the fore. Sound hermeneutic research requires an elaborated methodology to reduce potential interviewer and misinterpretation biases. To assess the socio-geographical dimension of appropriation practices of nationalisms, I conducted two rounds of qualitative interviews with 27 members of the German minority in Kazakhstan in a two-stage process in the years 2004 and 2005, adding up to a total of 54 interviews. Respondents from different urban areas and within a broad range of age groups were chosen for interviews to gain a typological overview of symbol perceptions. Fourteen interview partners were still residing in Kazakhstan, while 13 interviews were taken in Germany with recent German immigrants from Kazakhstan. This sub-sample can be used to investigate whether individuals who have decided to leave Kazakhstan may differ in their perception of nation-building processes and urban landscapes. 7 From the first (biographical) interviews I extracted

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7For more details see the methodological appendix below and Danzer (2005).
Urban fabric and spatial stereotypes as worlds of meaning

As the ultimate goal of this research is to investigate the determinants of ethnic spatial appropriation we initially require insights into what people actually consider as ethnic symbols. To achieve this, I will depict and typologically sort the perceived symbols before identifying factors influencing their ethnic appropriation.

The interviews reveal three general types of symbols: banal non-intended symbols; official, intended symbols; and semantic symbols. The first two comprise physical structure, which is loaded with ethnic meaning by the observer, while the third exists as semantic labels without any relevant reference to physical structure (Table 1).

The degree of intention depends on whether an artefact was constructed by the state in order to generate an ethnic or national symbolic connotation (such as a national monument) or whether this was not the goal (as with a university). The complexity of the individually anchored process of symbolic appropriation implies that both kinds of artefacts can eventually gain symbolic meaning to represent a specific national or ethnic configuration, but neither necessarily have to meet the intended symbolic content nor be incorporated into the symbolic landscapes at all. The strict focus on individuals’ identification is pivotal to this research as it implies that although the state can supply identification opportunities, it cannot control whether and how artefacts are appropriated (Danzer 2008). As a logical consequence, pure macro-level analyses of symbolic landscapes and their interaction with ethnic identification might be trapped in reification.

As the interviews show, not all symbols gain the same level and direction of symbolising power. Official icons like national monuments or national museums are widely reflected and people have ambiguous feelings towards them: initially, and depending on various personal characteristics like ethnic identity or age, the interviewees reported a specific degree of acceptance for the new state’s need for identity production. However, many members of the minority argued that the state abused its natural right by not only enforcing a new history, but aggressively destroying old history. The relatively low emotional level of their descriptions and the rational argumentation indicate that while individuals talk about official symbols and report their opinion, they talk through banal symbols unconsciously. These are reified.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intention Characteristics</th>
<th>Banal symbols</th>
<th>Official symbols</th>
<th>Semantic symbols</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
<td>No Physical artefact plus semantic label</td>
<td>Yes Physical artefact plus semantic label</td>
<td>No/perhaps Semantic label</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Monuments</td>
<td>‘German village’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grocery shop</td>
<td>Streets names</td>
<td>District ‘Berlin’ in city Karaganda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
places of daily life whose relevance for the personal constitution is disguised. Their 
ethnic connotation highly depends on insider and outsider definitions which derive 
from personal interaction.

An example shows how outcomes may differ according to personal experience: 
while mosques are considered ‘Kazakh’ by all of the respondents (irrespective of 
Islam being a non-ethnic religion), a negative connotation can only be found among 
non-religious respondents who fear the dominance of Kazakhs expanding into the 
religious sphere.\(^8\) Quite differently, respondents actively following Christian practices 
express positive attitudes towards ‘Kazakh’ mosques. Muslims become partners due 
to the simple fact of being religious, and thus of potentially having suffered from 
similar discrimination experiences during Soviet times.\(^9\) One might be tempted to 
explain this by pointing to the non-national character of religion. However, less 
religious interviewees with otherwise similar identification patterns do appropriate 
mosques as ethnic menacing symbols. This leads to the conclusion that individual 
religious practice creates a non-ethnic identity anchor which dominates the ethnic 
identification patterns of believers (Trofimow 2002). The variety in interpretations 
suggests that the same place may serve as proof of very divergent individual 
perceptions of the ethnic setting in Kazakhstan. Within the individual mindset a 
specific place reconfirms the established individual ethnic constellation. Especially 
strong and harmonising are semantic symbols, labels that do refer to physical 
structure, but their temporal and spatial specificities are relaxed. For instance, the 
mentioning of ‘German villages’ as specific symbols of German culture and 
manifestations of ethnically perceived characteristics (such as tidiness) throughout all 
interviews clearly indicates the long term stability of ethnic symbolisations even 
when the physical structure of underlying artefacts has vanished and the villages 
have been abandoned. Pure labels like the colloquial district name ‘Berlin’ (in the 
city Karaganda or elsewhere) show the ethnic referencing towards the homeland 
nation.

Sorting places by ethnic connotation points to a variety of different symbolic 
loadings. Besides the expected ‘Kazakh’ and ‘German’ symbols, some interviews also 
reveal ‘German–Russian’ or ‘Kazakhstani’ symbols. To understand the construction 
of mental landscapes, three determinants of individual ethnic perception of public 
space are considered in the following: ethnic identity; age of the respondent; and place 
of residence of the respondent. Although there are various other factors influencing 
ethnic space appropriation, the analysis in this article is restricted to those that 
featured most strongly across the range of interviews.

Before delving in detail into common determinants, it has to be noted that 
individuals exhibit personal patterns of talking about themselves and others. The 
underlying mechanism of this representation is the biographic \textit{leitmotiv} which can be 
considered a latent general structure of individual thinking and speech (Götz 2001, 
pp. 310–12). \textit{Leitmotivs} are like filters which ‘dye’ individuals’ stories in peculiar

\(^8\)It has to be noted that previously communist political leaders occasionally make explicit use of 
Islam in their national projects which was already reflected in the steady growth in the number of 
mosques between 1989 (44) and 1996 (600). For details see Kolsto (2000, p. 73).

\(^9\)Possibly, believers may also be more likely to obey the commandment of charity.
complexions. To give examples, one interview partner references the discussion to work and labour, another to monetary terms and a third one—a teacher—in terms of learning. The way people talk has to be distinguished from what people actually want to express, otherwise the researcher can be caught in investigating *leitmotivs* only. Biographic *leitmotivs* are closely connected to the biographic aspect of space appropriation.

Ethnic identity as filter to reality

Ethnic identity influences how people perceive their daily life context. Based on the analysis of identification anchors among the interview partners it is possible to detect three broad types of ethnic identities: ‘subjugated’ German identity, civic German identity and non-German identity.\(^\text{10}\) The first group refers to people with some internal but predominant external identification: those individuals define their German identity based on the feeling of exclusion and ‘subjugation’ by the titular ethnicity or central power. Depending on the strength of internal identity anchors, those individuals might be Russified to a certain degree, a fact that silently pervades their articulation of representations of ‘us’ in relation to ‘others’. Weak internal identification occasionally results in an explicit merger of the German and Russian minority groups, which becomes vividly demonstrated when the ‘we’ perspective includes Russians in general. The second group possesses a strong internal identification anchoring in its own ethnic group history, language, rites or cultural heritage. Other ethnicities are described as different in these dimensions, but the depiction lacks the explicit discourse of subordination. In a few cases both internal and external identification are strong, but the dominant focus is then within the group. Those members are often actively engaged in the cultural promotion of the German minority, for example through the minority organisation *Wiedergeburt* (rebirth) which tends to expose them to conflicts with local municipalities. In particular, members who are still residing in Kazakhstan promote a civic concept of Kazakhstani statehood, inclusion in which is based on citizenship rather than ethnicity. Despite acknowledging a few problems in the development of a non-ethnic nation, those respondents assess their integration into the wider society as rather positive. The third group of interviewees consists of *de jure* Germans who entirely lack internal identification and thus do not consider themselves as Germans.\(^\text{11}\)

As expected, integrated individuals describe a symbolic landscape of equal powers while the dominance of ‘Kazakh’ symbols is the prevailing tenor for persons who are subjectively discriminated against. For individuals with strong internal identification ‘German’ symbols such as ‘German’ beadhouses, cultural centres, monuments, restaurants and grocery shops dominate the urban mind map. While ‘German’ places of memory or identity are generally positively appraised,

\(^{10}\)For details see Danzer (2008).

\(^{11}\)Individuals of all three groups had held the German nationality according to their Soviet passports and were principally entitled to become citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany according to German law under articles §4, §7 or §8 of the *Bundesvertriebenengesetz* (Danzer 2005).
interview partners with strong internal German identification declare such places to be essential niches for preserving their culture. Germans who decided to stay in Kazakhstan begin to submerge into a multi-ethnic Kazakhstani nationality and perceive the respective ‘German’ places as symbols of growing respect towards them and the integration of ethnic minorities in general. People, who predominantly define their German identity as being different from Kazakhs, suggest that the fabric of the cities has become Kazakhified. Even when entirely lacking internal identification, interviewees who fear Kazakh dominance see ‘German’ places as indispensable neutral areas. As the respective persons have rarely or never visited such places the symbolic content of resistance dominates their descriptions. Those who feel excluded from the Kazakh ruling class label the post-Soviet changes in urban landscapes ‘aggressive’, ‘rash’, ‘unfair’ and ‘selfish’. The responsibility is attributed to all Kazakhs who are often unconsciously portrayed condescendingly. By drawing on the image of invading savages claiming new territories, Igor, aged 60, expresses the perceived illegitimate character of the change in ownership of space. Picturing humans as zveri (‘beasts’ in Russian) is part of a stereotypical discourse of cultural backwardness assigned to the Kazakh people. To stress the illegitimacy of ethnic dominance (of the others), the description of space is then blended with feelings of one’s own ethnic superiority as exemplified in the description of a grocery shop, which Karen, 39, labels German. She describes in great detail the perfect arrangement inside the shop and the unique way the shop is cleaned up in winter. Her description is enriched with comparisons between the ‘German shop’ and ‘Kazakh shops’, with the latter being considered as untidy. The grocery shop has become a symbol of inclusion (to the German ethnicity) and exclusion (against an ‘inferior’ titular ethnicity).

Although the respondents generally draw on their personal experience from the surrounding vicinity, semantic symbols are omnipresent and appropriated independently of ethnic identity, local occurrence or personal experience. ‘German villages’, for instance, stand for a perfect blueprint of German lifestyle and the cultural heritage of the ethnic minority. Established after the resettlement of ethnic Germans under Stalin’s edict, these villages have long since been given up. Nowadays they exhibit an ethnically mixed character. Nevertheless, all interview partners give very detailed descriptions of what they believe is the ideal tidy ‘German village’ as evidenced by the following pictorial statement of a young woman, who actually never visited such a German settlement:

Every cottage had a garden, a beautiful garden with apple trees. The houses were absolutely lovely and all coloured in white. . . . Now there is mud and dust everywhere and flowers have not bloomed for a very long time. (Maria, 23)

This narration is often explicitly set in contrast to the ‘chaotic’, ‘dirty’ villages of Kazakhs and Russians. The attributed characteristics of the insiders are their highly developed nature, tidiness, high skill and organisational level, and internal cohesion. Calling upon ‘German villages’ serves the historical continuity of their members’ victimisation. This becomes even more evident, when interview partners describe these villages as little islands in the rough steppe, which is home to ‘dirty Kazakhs’. After the
dissolution of the Soviet Union, as the narration continues, the Kazakhs returning from Mongolia ‘invaded’ their ‘German villages’ and physically as well as culturally destroyed their positive character.

The following statement not only illustrates that the use of broad ethnic distinctions leads to a generalised opposition against all Kazakhs, but also shows that weak internal identification may lead to a redefinition of the ethnic insider group—here the Russian minority.

There was a Pushkin Street, it was re-named as well. Pushkin, a Russian poet! What is his fault? Simply renamed! All street names in Kazakh. . . . They were not entitled to make these changes! (Pavel, 27)

This example clearly illustrates that the perceived dominance of the Kazakh language unites minority groups. Any affront against a (linguistically) similar minority group is considered an affront against oneself. Reactions to the demolition of statues of Lenin and of Soviet soldiers are akin to the ones recorded for street names. At a glance, individuals live in spaces that resemble battlefields of antagonistic symbols. What they see around them is a reflection of who they are.

In the narrations on their hometowns, most interview partners decipher the inclusive rhetoric of the political elite as gamesmanship. However, one spatial artefact has been at least partially successful in promoting its intended formal idea. The ‘Kazakhstan 2030’ placards that were present in many cities of the country are repeatedly attributed to the elite’s effort in constructing a multi-ethnic Kazakhstani nation. Those posters are designed in the national colours of the state (yellow and blue) and show the country’s silhouette with a stylised snow leopard (a national emblem). The invention of typical national iconography is combined with reference to a comprehensive policy programme which covers the fields of social, cultural and economic development as well as national security and is intended to lift Kazakhstan up to the development level of Western European countries by 2030. Most of the interview partners who remained in Kazakhstan perceive these signposts as an indication of the government’s evolving understanding that the promotion of a common Kazakhstani nation is the only solution to the many problems of the country. The signs thus perform well in reflecting trust and inclusion into the wider Kazakhstani society. However, interviewees who feel subordinated by the new ruling class call them ‘tranquilisers which are dispensed in order to cover the abrasive power expansion of Kazakhs’ (Oskar, 45).

The discourse of experienced ethnic subordination is sometimes translated into perceived material differences. Especially the location, size and equipment of edifices are set in contrast as two reports from Zhetikara and Astana illustrate:

The financing of the mosque was fully covered by the state, all construction works, the interior, the whole, really the whole was financed by the state. And for the Russians, for the Orthodox, they converted a house which had been a cinema before. . . . They did not receive a penny from the state, while the Kazakh mosque was pretty rich and much bigger. (Arthur, 39)

Yes, one can see the difference. I look at this poor church and then at the sizeable minaret, yes it was unequal. (Maria, 66)
The crucial point is that ethnicity is presented as the determining factor in access to resources and thus becomes projected onto the built environment of cities and their symbolic worlds of meaning.

*The city as a mirror of shattered life histories*

The age of the interview partners plays a significant role in their judgment of symbolic landscapes. Persons too young to have been fully socialised under the Soviet regime may perceive the transformation from Soviet urban space to Kazakh urban space very differently from older generations.

There is indeed a clear difference in attitudes and experiences between those individuals who spent large parts of their life during the Soviet period compared to those whose memory is mainly limited to post-Soviet times. While older interviewees rarely scrutinise the constructive character of Soviet narratives, younger interview partners seem disenchanted with any kind of ideology. For the former, some now purely semantic artefacts like ‘German villages’ were real places, often associated with experience of ethnic discrimination during the Soviet era. As they were socialised according to Soviet values the rebuilding of public space and renarration of history has a detrimental effect on their personal life history. Through the destruction of Soviet history (in the form of monuments) their personal life course is symbolically declared unofficial and incorrect, as exemplified by the following statement:

The history, which I saw around me and which was the standard in our school books, has been entirely abolished. My youngest son, I have to admit, is taught a very new history at school. (Irina, 41)

For members of the younger generation who were not directly socialised under the Soviet system, the political suppression of Germans is a historical anecdote, not an experienced reality. For many, the exchange of Lenin monuments for Abai statues is an exchange of one artificial ideology for another. The same holds for street names:

It’s a piece of impudence to suddenly rename each and every street. . . . Renaming a Lenin Street . . . I can understand that, but what’s the point in renaming a Tolstoi Street to Abai Street? (Michail, 30)

The young more often suffer from general discrimination in the educational system and the labour market. Many are tempted to feel Russified due to external pressure when Germans and Russians experience similar difficulties. For these persons strong external symbols of personal experience play a highly significant role. Others resist external pressure and develop extremely strong internal identification. In this case, integrating symbols of personal experience and collective symbols are of high importance:

The change [in public space] is not so important for me since I see our German culture in a wider context and the [German] cultural house remains a place to keep this culture alive. (Larissa, 26)
Decoupling ethnic space from real places

As the changes in public space are not evenly distributed across the country an individual’s place and region of residence is likely to have an impact on their perception in a variety of ways. During Soviet times, the northern part of the Kazakh Soviet Republic was predominantly inhabited by Russians and Germans while ethnic Kazakhs formed the majority in southern regions. Since independence, three factors have contributed to Kazakhs becoming the majority population in the northern part of the country: the emigration of minorities, a significantly higher natural population growth among Kazakhs, and resettlement policies leading to migration of Kazakhs into the north of the country from the south as well as from abroad, for instance from Mongolia (Rowland 2001; Kolsto 2000). Accordingly, the rebuilding and changing of cities has been especially strong in the northern part of the country. The most prominent example is the redesign of the new capital Astana as a consequence of the official move of the government from Almaty in 1998 (Schatz 2003). Such changes in population composition and in urban fabric have most likely raised the awareness of Germans against nationalising policies especially in the northern part of the country. Furthermore, inhabitants of large cities are more likely to be confronted with changes in public space. Since monuments and other kinds of official national buildings (such as state museums) are predominantly concentrated in cities, spending on changing the urban landscape was prioritised there.

The diversity of my interview sample enables focus on the role of the information aspect, the respondents’ source of knowledge. A total of 74% of interviewees come from the Aqmola, Karaganda, Kostanai, North-Kazakhstan and Pavlodar oblasti, which can be considered the traditional settlement areas of ethnic Germans. Almost 60% of respondents live in large cities such as Almaty, Astana, Karaganda or Pavlodar, 22% are inhabitants of small towns and slightly more than 18% come from German or mixed villages.

To better understand which places are considered ethnic symbols in the specific city, I asked interviewees for a description of the typical local photo tour for newly married couples—a tradition of visiting important local sites which is popular throughout Kazakhstan and other former Soviet countries. As expected, the photo tours differ according to the ethnic self-understanding of the respondents in including ‘German’ places—or not. Individuals claiming that they suffered from the new Kazakh dominance point out that German couples would not take photos in front of statues of the ‘new’ national hero Abai Kunanbajev (1845–1904). More generally, as similar changes have taken place throughout the whole country, all interview partners mention spatial interventions like the relabelling of street names, the appearance of typical Kazakh iconography (including flags, national colours and designs) and the exchange or new construction of monuments. As a general result from the interviews, the location of an individual and thus the exposure to changes in the urban landscape strongly determine the information aspect but not the ethnic content of symbolisation per se: irrespective of the part of the country, inhabitants of big cities are more likely to have personal experience of transformations of public space, while inhabitants of smaller settlement units refer only to a few personal experiences and to collective memory instead. Against the initial intuition, however, the symbolic loading of artefacts seems mainly independent of place of residence: interview partners in the
north and in larger settlements are neither more nor less likely to describe the antagonism between excluding and integrating symbols. To be more specific, the local existence of ‘German’ artefacts like cultural centres or beadhouses does not generally increase the use of those artefacts in the production of internal identification among residents. At the same time, interviewees with a strong internal identification name beadhouses as important places of identification no matter whether such houses exist in their home area. This observation confirms the character of symbolic landscapes as part of a mindset within a dense and organised ethnic minority. People talk about and through space irrespective of specific local places. Public discourse and collective memory seem to promote a symbolic sharing arrangement across large distances.

One symbol that is well known to every Kazakhstani citizen irrespective of ethnicity is the relocation of the capital city from Almaty to Astana in 1998, which was considered a key element of the political construction of the Kazakh nation state. The description of the city of Astana throughout the interviews provides a good example for studying how individuals perceive the way that official politics exploits capital cities for national projects. Historically, every change in the political system bestowed on the city a new programmatic name manifesting the power credited to settlement names. The garrison town of the Tsarist Empire (Akmolinsk) was renamed by Khrushchev to remember the agrarian revolution in the Kazakh steppe (Tselinograd). After independence the city was conferred the traditional Kazakh name (Aqmola). When the city—in the middle of the steppe and with extreme continental climate—was supposed to become the new capital of Kazakhstan in June 1998, the name Aqmola (Kazakh for ‘white grave’) was deemed not to be appropriate anymore. Therefore the city was renamed Astana, which simply means ‘capital’ in Kazakh. President Nazarbaev heralded the discovery of the historical birthplace of the Kazakh nation, a phrasing that clearly shows the official nationalism practiced by the government (Zabirova 2003; Anacker 2004). Except for five interview partners who live in or close to Astana, the informational base of the interviews stems predominantly from public discourse, and particularly newspapers and television. The fact that every interview partner has a strong opinion about the reconstruction of Astana underscores the nationwide relevance of the project. The city is pictured as a comprehensive ethno-social microcosm reflecting ethnic attitudes rather than urban landscape. Perhaps it should not be surprising that Astana is reduced to a symbol for Kazakh ethnic superiority and ‘ambitious megalomania’ (Arthur, 39) in the interviews of ‘subjugated’ Germans. However, even among interview partners who have a civic German self understanding the perceived lack of authenticity in the construction of an all-Kazakhstani capital becomes evident. The common rejection of Astana as a unifying project for all Kazakhstani citizens is rooted in the use of heraldic colours, figures and designs, which are perceived as artificial:

I do not understand why he [the president] talks about the old foundation of the Kazakh nation when building a Disney-Land. Is it funny? … Hundreds of years ago, there were no Russians and Germans. Does he want to go back to that time of the Kazakh nation? (Igor, 60)

12President Nazarbaev had stated that the choice of Astana as Kazakhstan’s capital was the result of hundreds of years of search by his nation (Nazarbajev 2002).
The phrase ‘Disney-Land’ proves scorn for the ‘national’ architecture, and it is flanked by labels like ‘make-up’ or ‘scenery set’ in other interviews. This non-authenticity poses a nontrivial challenge to the construction of a Kazakhstani nation. While the invention of a new iconography is required if the national texture is not to serve ethnic Kazakhs exclusively, the lack of a neutral frame of reference naturally constrains the success of this project. This failure is then metaphorically expressed in the rhetoric of changing Astana which also reveals the perceived threat to the minorities’ right to exist:

With the new besom, they clean up very effectively. (Julia, 53)

The negative attitude of some interview partners towards the ruling class can hardly be missed. Against this background, one would expect that the most dissatisfied Germans should have decided to migrate to Germany. Obviously, emigration is highly selective implying that those who were less in favour of the political and economic developments left Kazakhstan first. Consequently, these individuals might have a different and more critical perception of nationalising changes in urban space. The notable difference between the Kazakhstan and Germany samples relates to ethnic identities, which supports the idea of selective ethnic migration. While the Germans in Kazakhstan consider themselves to be Russians or German Kazakhstaniis (as opposed to ethnic Kazakhs), all interview partners in Germany perceive themselves as Germans, Aussiedler or Kasachstandeutsche. However, further analysis cannot substantiate the hypothesis of structurally different symbolic landscapes according to migration states: respondents interviewed in Germany still have a surprisingly detailed knowledge and memory on their past urban surrounding. Similar to the respondents in Kazakhstan, all different types of perceptions and symbols abound in the interviews. The dominating factors in explaining their ethnic appropriation process are likewise ethnic identity, age and locality.

Channels of ethnicisation of space

Having identified the types and determinants of ethnic appropriation of official and non-official artefacts, more light can be shed on the link between subjects (individuals) and objects (places) in the symbolisation process. A deep understanding of the transmission channels between personal ethnic identity and space is indispensable if one is interested in the development prospects for the multiethnic society in Kazakhstan—and Central Asia more generally. The two most prevalent channels throughout the interviews resemble the drivers of the information aspect.

13 It has to be noted that in the aforementioned survey among Germans in Kazakhstan in 1994, 55.3% stated that the economic situation was one of the major push factors in their migration decision, while 23.7% cited the wish to live in a better national setting.

14 On the contrary, one might expect that opinion about symbolic landscapes that are still experienced on a daily basis (in the Kazakhstan sample) would be stronger than opinion about symbols perceived some years before migration (in the Germany sample).
First, individuals gain information through personal experience with artefacts, through which buildings or monuments become meaningful to them. The negative connotation in the description of the ‘Kazakh’ university by Katia, 34, clearly emphasises Kazakh predominance at university. Her attitude is rooted in personal experience of perceived discrimination and ethnic power demonstration where the directorate had exerted censorship in banning the use of a ‘Kazakh’ flag during a student theatre play. Superficially, the reification of the university concerns its role as institution. Nevertheless it exerts an impact on the spatial dimension when the student argues she no longer wants to expose herself to the arbitrary power game of Kazakhs inside the building and consequently participates in extracurricular activities only outside the university building. The university as a spatial symbol of exclusion even becomes relevant for her personal motion in the city. Thus, while personal experience is a strong device to reinforce our perception of space, the latter, in turn, has an impact back on our expectations about other places and thus upon future personal experience. Due to this interdependence it has to be kept in mind, that urban space not only shapes personal experience but is itself a product of experience.

Secondly, individuals are subject to a collective memory, which manifests itself in space (Assmann 2003). Personal experiences are shared with group members who lack such experience until they slowly become common knowledge within the wider ethnic group as a whole (Halbwachs 1985). Such anchors of group identity are interpersonally (re)produced, as demonstrated with the narration of ‘German villages’. Here, the distinctive power of the ethnic collective memory streamlines ethnic stereotypes even beyond personal experience (for individuals too young to have seen such a village, for instance). The collective memory is an extremely strong mental authority not only relevant for semantic symbols. Deviant personal experience can occasionally even be ruled out by the group memory as exemplified by Viktoria’s (55 years) description of ‘Kazakh’ grocery shops. Initially, she employs the common stereotype of ‘dirty’ and ‘muddy’ places, but later acknowledges that ‘Kazakh’ grocery shops in her home town are actually not much different from other stores.

The function of symbolic appropriation for individual ethnic identity can be analysed through the differences in personal reactions to perceived changes. Many respondents provide insights on how the changing urban landscape has impacted on either their internal or their external identification. The single most common reaction is a feeling of exclusion from the civic community and a subsequent emotional retreat. Although some interviewees accept Kazakhstan’s ‘right’ to build up a new national identity, they criticise what they perceive as the purposeful exclusion of Russophone minorities in order to achieve this goal. Many interview partners note that national identity would be an artificial construct if it was only to be achieved through state manipulation. However, among older persons neither ‘German ethnicity’ nor ‘real Soviet history’ is

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15This perception is widespread throughout all the post-Soviet space, as noted by one of the anonymous referees of this article.
critically evaluated along the same lines. As younger interview partners lack any roots in the Soviet experience and often deprecate the significance of Soviet ideology, their ethnic identification appears either transcendentally introverted or entirely drifting, devoid of internal orientation.

For most interview partners, the impact of changing urban landscapes is tacit: it changes their way of thinking about Kazakhstan, their awareness of ethnic differences and consequently reconfirms individual ethnic identification. For others, the changes lead to adaptations of spatial activity and mobility as confirmed by the interviewees’ descriptions of their patterns of movement within cities. One illustrative example is the narration of marriage photo shoots noted earlier, which traditionally take place at the city’s most popular sites. Monuments of Abai are often purposefully ignored, while ‘German’ places play a more pronounced role. More important are counter-actions taken by some interviewees in daily routines such as the avoidance of ‘Kazakh’ shops, institutions and official buildings. Finally, in some interviews the transformation of cities is stressed as one reason contributing to the decision to emigrate. For the latter, however, it should be kept in mind that interview partners tend to report the change in urban landscape as a symbolic manifestation of changing political and ethnic structures, including their economic deterioration.

To sum up, if appropriation of space influences spatial behaviour, individuals face a battlefield of symbols consisting of ethnically including, neutral as well as excluding places. The character of this battlefield is strongly determined by individual ethnic self image and simultaneously reinforces (proves) the personal perception of the ethnic structure.

Conclusion

Individual perceptions of changes in urban symbolic landscapes in post-Soviet nation building are constitutive for individual ethnic identity as well as for any state’s success in promoting a new national idea. As demonstrated for the case of Kazakhstan, urban space is used as a means of the narration of history and the creation of a national heritage by the nationalising state—and to a lesser extent also by external minority homelands such as Germany. In general, people construct mental symbolic landscapes which comprise official as well as banal artefacts such as ethnicised grocery shops. Semantic labels such as ‘German villages’ which are reproduced through a collective group memory rank especially prominent. In a process of complexity reduction, individuals load a diversity of artefacts with ethnic meaning not inherent to them. As such, space is used as a projection of ethnic differences. The results of this individual-level research calls for methodological sensitivity in the evaluation of nation-building processes: to better our understanding of how people perceive complex nation-building processes, micro-level approaches should be considered in addition to macro analyses. Notably the sometimes contradictory perception of specific icons and the emotionally mobilising role of banal symbols offer insights far beyond the existing macro evidence on preselected symbols.

The empirical evidence demonstrates that individual perception of space is mainly determined by individual ethnic identity, age and exposure to artefacts (place of
residence). It must be highlighted that the way the urban surroundings are perceived feeds back on the (re)production of individual ethnic identity. Consequently, states cannot perfectly dictate their historic construction and narration. Nation-building processes face the risks of promoting perceived exclusion, emotional retreat and real resistance. A lesson to be learnt from the interviews is the reported high level of initial tolerance towards the state’s ‘right’ of nation building. However, negative personal experience has in many cases built up distrust and frustration. In the end, all spatial changes become negatively depicted in ethnic terms—negative ethnic differentiation and ethnic stereotypes revive.

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References
Appendix 1. Methodological appendix for the qualitative interviews

The selection of interview partners was performed according to theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The research design did not aim at statistically representative
results but rather aimed at presenting exploratory research with a new technique. With all interview partners, two sessions were arranged. For the first 27 interviews (biographic aspect interviews), which lasted between one and four hours, biographical narration analysis was applied in order to produce the ‘narrated life history’ of individuals and identify their key narration motives (Wiles, Rosenberg & Kearns 2005). The second round of interviews was conducted as semi-structured interviews focusing on the perception of public space (information and signifying aspect interviews). To reduce halo effects on the second interview and to be able to compare both transcripts for consistency checks, the second interview was taken two weeks after the first. The interviews were conducted at the interviewee’s home or in restaurants.

In the first step I reconstruct sources of individual ethnic identity, taking into account both the lived (objective) and the narrated (subjective) life history. The sequence of narration gives insights into crucial experiences of the individual (lived history) and thus helps to sort preferences and attitudes from the self-representation ex post (narrated history) ordinally (Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal 1997). As a result of this analysis, the biographic leitmotiv and the construction of the ethnic identification with reference to insider and outsider groups was generated. In the second step ethnic symbolisations of artefacts were explored and brought into the identification context.