




## The Steppe Region as the “Other Russia” in the Thought of the Kazakh Intelligentsia of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

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**Abstract.** This article examines the intellectual construction of the Steppe Region through the writings of prominent Kazakh intellectuals – scholars, political activists, educators, and publicists – as well as through the discourse of the Russian-educated elite in the region. Employing an interdisciplinary framework that incorporates methodologies from new cultural-intellectual history and new biographical history, the study reveals how Kazakh conceptualizations of the Steppe evolved into a complex, multidimensional mental construct. This construct reflected the interplay of competing discourses from various communities, including imperial authorities at both central and regional levels. Building upon historiographical traditions from the second half of the 20th to the early 21st century, the article demonstrates that the identity of the Kazakh intelligentsia – descendants of the titled steppe aristocracy who became enmeshed in imperial “population politics” – underwent a profound transformation. Initially shaped by Russian political structures, educational institutions, and intercultural exchange, this elite developed a dual identity that positioned the Steppe as an organic extension of Russia, albeit a distinct one – a space where sedentary Russian and nomadic Kazakh cultures intersected. However, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, traumatic experiences of bureaucratic discrimination and land dispossession prompted a shift toward a hybrid identity. This new self-perception led Kazakh intellectuals to reimagine the Steppe as “the other Russia” – a nostalgic vision of a “lost homeland” or “paradise lost.” The article argues that this reconceptualization was accompanied by the development of passive resistance strategies. Kazakh intellectuals increasingly advocated for national unity and subtle forms of defiance, such as the rejection of state-imposed social norms and administrative conventions. The political radicalization following the 1905–1907 Revolution further accelerated this process, as Kazakh intellectuals engaged more closely with Russian political exiles and separatist thinkers. These interactions infused the image of the Steppe with explicitly anti-imperial meaning, transforming it from a peripheral colonial space into a potential site of national revival. By analyzing personal correspondence, publicistic writings, and institutional records, the study illuminates how Kazakh intellectuals navigated their position between imperial integration and national self-assertion. Their evolving discourse not only reflected broader trends in

anti-colonial thought but also laid the ideological groundwork for later nationalist movements. The article thus contributes to ongoing debates about empire, identity formation, and decolonization in Central Asia, offering new insights into the complex interplay between intellectual history and political resistance in the late Tsarist period.

**Keywords:** Steppe Regio; colonization; Kazakh intelligentsia; ethnocultural identity; mediation; discourse; representations; image of the region

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## Степной край как «другая Россия» в представлениях казахской интеллигенции второй половины XIX – начала XX вв.

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**Аннотация.** В статье на материалах личных текстов выдающихся деятелей казахской интеллигенции, а также дискурса образованного сегмента российского социума Степного края выявляются паттерны представлений казахских ученых, общественно-политических деятелей, педагогов, публицистов о регионе, его истории и будущем. Междисциплинарный формат исследования и обращение к научным практикам и подходам «новой культурно-интеллектуальной» и «новой биографической» историй позволили констатировать, что представления казахской интеллигенции о Степном крае, сливавшиеся в образ региона, являлись сложным, многомерным и динамичным ментальным конструктом, в котором оказались запечатлены результаты дискурсов многих сообществ, в том числе имперской власти высшего и регионального уровней. С опорой на исследовательский опыт и историографическую традицию второй половины XX – начала XXI вв. удалось доказать, что идентичность лидеров казахской интеллигенции – потомков титулованной степной аристократии, включённой в исследуемый период в контекст имперской «политики населения» в Степном крае, переживала сложную эволюцию, трансформируясь от «дуальной» к «гибридной». Дуальная идентичность сообщества, формировавшаяся под влиянием российских политических структур, институтов образования и воспитания, практик межкультурной коммуникации, первоначально выступала определяющим фактором рецепции Степного края как органического продолжения России, но России «другой», пространство которой складывается в результате взаимопроникновения культур русского оседлого и коренного кочевого населения. Во второй половине XIX – начале XX вв. в результате приобретённого казахскими интеллектуалами травматического социального опыта

и дискриминационных практик, исходящих от имперской бюрократии, образ Степного края как «другой России» начинает строиться в ностальгических категориях «утраченной родины» и «потерянного рая», возвращение которых возможно только при условии национального единства и разработки пассивных форм сопротивления имперской власти, что находило выражение в практиках избегания и игнорирования конвенций социального поведения, инициируемых властными структурами. Процесс политической радикализации казахской интеллигенции, инспирированный событиями революции 1905–1907 гг. и последующими за ней реформами, оказал прямое влияние на представления образованной группы казахского социума о месте проживания, формах устройства общественной жизни и хозяйственной повседневности. Сближение казахской интеллигенции с российскими политическими ссыльными, носителями сепаратистских идей, способствовало переформатированию в сознании сообщества образа Степного края, наполняя его рельефно выраженным антиимперским содержанием.

**Ключевые слова:** Степной край; колонизация; казахская интеллигенция; этнокультурная идентичность; колониальное посредничество; дискурс; представления; образ региона

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## **Дала өлкесі – «өзге Ресей» ретінде: XIX ғасырдың екінші жартысы мен XX ғасырдың басындағы қазақ зиялыларының көзқарастары**

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**Аңдатпа.** Бұл мақалада қазақ зиялыларының жеке жазбалары мен Дала өлкесіндегі ресейлік қоғамның білімді өкілдері арасындағы дискурстар негізінде, өңірге, оның тарихы мен болашағына қатысты қазақ ғалымдары, қоғам және саясат қайраткерлері, ұстаздар мен публицистердің көзқарас үлгілері айқындалады. Зерттеудің пәнаралық сипаты мен «жаңа мәдени-интеллектуалдық тарих» пен «жаңа биографиялық тарих» әдіснамаларына сүйену арқылы қазақ зиялыларының Дала өлкесіне қатысты көзқарастары біртұтас аймақтық бейне ретінде қалыптасқан күрделі, көпқырлы әрі динамикалық менталдық құрылым болғаны анықталды. Бұл бейне империяның жоғарғы және өңірлік деңгейдегі билік құрылымдарының дискурстарының нәтижелерін де өз бойына сіңірген. XX ғасырдың екінші жартысы мен XXI ғасырдың басындағы зерттеушілік тәжірибе мен тарихнамалық дәстүрлерге сүйене отырып, авторлар қазақ зиялыларының – өз заманында империялық «халық саясаты» аясында Дала өлкесіне тартылған тектік-аристократиялық топ өкілдерінің – болмысында орын алған

күрделі сәйкестік эволюциясын көрсетеді. Бұл эволюция бастапқыда «дуалдық» (қосарланған) сипатта болса, кейін «гибридті» (аралас, күрделі) түрге айналды. Дуалдық сәйкестік – Ресейдің саяси құрылымдары, білім беру мен тәрбиелеу институттары және мәдениетаралық қатынас тәжірибелері ықпалымен қалыптасқан – Дала өлкесін Ресейдің ажырамас, бірақ өзіндік, өзгеше бөлігі ретінде қабылдаудың негізі болды. Бұл «өзге Ресей» бейнесі – орыс отырықшы халқы мен қазақ көшпелі жұрты мәдениеттерінің өзара ықпалдастығынан туындаған кеңістік ретінде қарастырылды. Алайда XIX ғасырдың екінші жартысы мен XX ғасырдың басында қазақ зиялыларының империялық бюрократия тарапынан көрген әлеуметтік әділетсіздіктері мен дискриминациялық тәжірибелері нәтижесінде бұл бейне өзгеріске ұшырады. «Өзге Ресей» образы енді «жоғалған Отан», «жұмақтың жұрнағы» сынды ностальгиялық категориялармен өріліп, оны қайтару тек ұлттың бірлігі мен империялық билікке қарсы пассивті қарсылық түрлерін дамыту арқылы ғана мүмкін деп пайымдалды. Бұл қарсылық билік тарапынан таңылған әлеуметтік мінез-құлық нормаларын айналып өту, елемеу, бойсынбау тәжірибелері арқылы көрініс тапты. 1905–1907 жылдардағы революциялық оқиғалар мен одан кейінгі реформалар қазақ зиялыларының саяси радикализация процесін үдетіп, олардың қоғамдық өмірді ұйымдастыру мен тұрмыстық шаруашылық формаларына деген көзқарастарына тікелей әсер етті. Қазақ зиялыларының ресейлік саяси жер аударылғандармен, әсіресе сепаратистік идеяларды ұстанушылармен жақындасуы қоғам санасындағы. Дала өлкесінің бейнесін қайта қалыптастырып, оған айқын антиимпериялық мазмұн дарытты.

**Түйін сөздер:** Дала өлкесі; отарлау; қазақ зиялылары; этномәдени бірегейлік; делдалдық; дискурс; өкілдіктер; аймақ бейнесі

## ***Introduction***

The second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century marked a period of profound transformation in Kazakh society. The growing administrative and cultural influence of the Russian Empire over the Kazakh Steppe brought not only changes in the region's political and legal status but also a rethinking of its place within the broader imperial space. In this process, a key role was played by the Kazakh intelligentsia, who emerged not only as advocates of enlightenment ideals but also as interpreters of a changing reality. For them, the Steppe became more than just a geographical or ethnographic entity – it was envisioned as a distinct social, cultural, and historical space, a kind of “Other Russia,” where indigenous traditions intersected with imperial modernization.

Kazakh intellectuals, writers, and public figures – such as Abai, Chokan Valikhanov, Akhmet Baitursynov, and Alikhan Bukeikhanov – sought to comprehend their position within the expanding imperial framework. On one hand, they viewed Russia as a source of knowledge, science, governance, and opportunities for progress. On the other, they critically assessed manifestations of colonial policy, inequality, and disregard for national identity. In their writings, speeches, and correspondence, they constructed the Steppe as a unique space that could become part of the empire – but on its own terms, with the preservation of language, customs, and legal consciousness.

The aim of this article is to explore how the Kazakh intelligentsia imagined the steppe region as a different, “distinct” Russia – a space that called not for assimilation, but for cultural dialogue

and mutual recognition. Through the intellectual practices of Kazakh thinkers, one can trace a dual aspiration: the pursuit of modernization and the preservation of cultural identity amid colonial pressures.

One of the significant cultural phenomena associated in various ways with the colonial experience of empires in both early modern and modern times is what contemporary scholarly literature and historical journalism recognize as the population policy of European states. This policy led not only to the economic and administrative-political development of colonized territories, but also to the mental "mapping" or "construction" of spaces inhabited by "others", carriers of behavioral patterns, worldviews, and linguistic forms that differed from European norms.

In this context, an appeal to the ideas of the Kazakh intelligentsia regarding the Steppe Region as a space of permanent residence and a site for the implementation of economic and cultural behavior patterns is especially relevant for constructing a multidimensional image of the region. This image was shaped not only by government actors but also by society at large, including national elites.

### ***Materials and methods***

The article's source base consists of two types of materials that form the primary and secondary discourses surrounding the Kazakh intelligentsia's ideas about the Steppe region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first group includes personal writings by prominent Kazakh figures such as Ch.Ch. Valikhanov, G.B. Valikhanov, and I.A. Altynsarin. These texts reflect the community's views on various issues related to the organization of the administrative, socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural space of the Steppe region. They also capture the rational and emotionally expressive responses of Kazakh intellectual leaders in their scientific, public, and journalistic communications, as well as their relationships with the authorities. The second group of sources comprises autobiographical and biographical materials authored by Russian-Siberian figures involved in the social movement, scientists, publicists, and others, who had direct and long-standing relationships with members of the Kazakh titled aristocracy, often serving as their mentors, colleagues, or fellow students.

The texts analyzed in the study form a discourse that, within its broad framework, makes it possible to identify the Kazakh intellectual community's ideas about the Steppe region within the context of colonization, and to trace the dynamic evolution of these ideas throughout the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This work is situated at the intersection of the "new biographical" and "new cultural and intellectual history" research approaches. In constructing the study's methodological framework, particular attention was given to personal self-identification and individual behavioral scenarios within specific historical contexts. This perspective enabled a shift in focus from well-known episodes in the biographies of Kazakh intelligentsia leaders to the realm of personal history, where the primary research object is personal texts, and the subject is the full life story of the individuals studied (Repina et al. 2004: 265).

The processing and analysis of texts were guided by the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which provides critical tools for examining the social construction of reality through language. Accordingly, discourse analysis was employed as a form of social practice that enables the constitution of the social world (Fillips, Iorgensen 2008: 109).



## **Literature Review**

The colonial past of the Eurasian continent marked by exceptional ethnic and religious diversity is inextricably linked to the strategies and practices of Russian expansionism, which began during the era of the centralized Moscow state. This period has been described by scholars as the “neonatal empire” (Filyushkin 2009) or the “empire on the banks of the northern rivers”. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Muscovite discourse and rhetoric established a stable tradition of framing peripheral regions through the lens of patrimonial law, presenting territories acquired through military or diplomatic means as “Russia’s own East”, and imagining the populations of these regions as subalterns (subordinates) of the state (Tolts 2013; Etkind 2016). In the 18th century and the first half of the 19th, Enlightenment ideas, particularly the belief in inevitable progress and the universality of the European path of development, provided theoretical grounding for the Russian Empire’s colonial ambitions. By the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the moral obligations of the “civilized” toward the “uncivilized” and the rationalization of violence against the indigenous populations of the empire’s peripheries became key components of the imperial policy. This dynastic state policy was characterized by a disregard for the national and cultural identities of colonized peoples and a strong belief in the benefits of overcoming cultural differences to integrate ethnic communities into a “greater Russian nation” (Katkov 2009).

In modern historiographical discourse concerning cultural differences and the dynamics of social and ethnocultural homogenization in the peripheral regions of the Russian Empire during the post-Reform period, a key trend relevant to this study has been identified. The civilizing mission pursued by the imperial government in the 18th and early 19th centuries based on principles of agricultural cultivation, Russification, and the sedentarization of nomadic communities (Khodarkovskii 2019: 10), proved increasingly ineffective in the second half of the nineteenth century. This inefficiency became evident in the imperial administration’s compromise decisions in areas such as indigenous education (e.g., the use of native languages) and social policy (Lor 2012: 15). By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these shortcomings contributed to a rise in national identity among indigenous peoples, accompanied by sociocultural mobilization and the political radicalization of ethnic elites (Lor 2012: 17–18).

Of particular research interest is the population policy of the Russian Empire in the Steppe Region, which became a focal point of colonial expansion during the 1870s–1880s. Notably, by this time, the Siberian territories (Western and Eastern Siberia) had already attained the status of internal provinces of Russia. This was largely due to the numerical dominance of the Russian population, a development shaped both by the empire’s military and administrative practices and by the decline in the number of indigenous peoples. According to S. Bekker, by the 18th century, Russians in Siberia outnumbered the indigenous population threefold; by the mid-19th century, nearly fourfold; and by the early 20th century, almost eightfold (Bekker 2004: 75). In contrast, as Russia and Russian settlers expanded into the steppe periphery, they encountered a distinctly different ethnocultural landscape. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, statistical data indicate that the indigenous population, primarily Kazakhs, constituted 74.4% of all inhabitants in the Steppe Region (Russia. A Complete Geographical Description... 1903: 185).

This circumstance inevitably introduced significant modifications to the universal formula of Russian “civilizationism” in the eastern regions of the empire, necessitating balanced decisions

and flexible implementation methods. V. Malakhov, while acknowledging the general failure of the Russian Empire's integrative measures in its eastern peripheries, highlights the active and consistent efforts of regional administrations to co-opt members of the national aristocracy and descendants of the titled nobility into Russian society (Malakhov 2023: 47). R. Dzherasi, in his analysis of the cultural and integrative role of N.I. Ilminsky's pedagogical system, first tested in the Volga region and later extended in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the Steppe Region and Turkestan, identifies a clear ambition on the part of the imperial government and the Russian educated elite to create "their own foreigners". These individuals were to be "transformed and civilized" while still preserving their ethnic identity (Dzherasi 2013: 101).

It is noteworthy that, in the thinking of Russian ideologists and the imperial bureaucracy, the concept of forming "their own foreigners", a group drawn from the indigenous population, implied the creation of a loyal community that would support state administrative programs in the peripheries, demonstrate willingness to cooperate with the authorities, and serve as intermediaries in the colonial context. In practice, the colonial expansion into the Steppe Region was accompanied by the emergence of a broad and diverse stratum of the national intelligentsia, which hierarchically included representatives from the Senior and Middle Zhuzes. Importantly, the willingness to adopt Russian educational standards and collaborate with regional administrations took various forms. First, the spread of N.I. Ilminsky's system in the Steppe Region mobilized a segment of Kazakh society that had undergone Orthodox baptism and expressed a desire to engage in pedagogical or missionary work. Members of this group may be considered intellectuals only conditionally, based on their professional roles as teachers, priests, or deacons. Engaged in complex and multifaceted work among the broader population, this contingent of "their own foreigners" exerted influence on their compatriots. However, due to their limited exposure to broader intellectual discourse, they neither aspired to nor were equipped to formulate ideas reflective of national identity. Second, the descendants of the titled steppe aristocracy constituted a much more influential and intellectually integrated community. The demonstrated willingness of certain Kazakh families to cooperate with the Russian administration enabled many heirs of khans, sultans, and biys to receive education in line with Russian-European standards (Mazhitova 2016). This, in turn, allowed them to pursue military or administrative careers and granted them access to civil service. Unlike the "kryashchen" (baptized Kazakhs), whose educational trajectory typically led through catechetical colleges and into routine service among largely uneducated tribal communities, the aristocratic Kazakh descendants gained entry to military academies and universities. These institutions opened up a wide array of social and class privileges available to individuals of noble rank within the Russian Empire.

Among these factors, not only the opportunity to participate in public administration was significant, but also the high likelihood of engagement in intellectual activity, an attribute of a class possessing a stable socio-cultural identity and sufficient free time to develop and disseminate socio-political ideas and principles.

The study of the personal biographies of such iconic figures of the Kazakh intellectual elite as Ch.Ch. and G.B. Valikhanov, I.A. Altynsarin, A. Bukeikhanov, and others who left a vivid mark on the history of Kazakhstan (the Steppe Region) provides a basis for identifying not only common patterns in the development of their professional careers, which evolved within the framework

of Russian educational institutions, military service, and administrative conventions, but also for recognizing the presence of a complex identity and a multidimensional worldview within this community. This worldview was reflected in their construction of an idealized image of the region, one whose fate was not merely a passive backdrop to their socio-cultural and political activity, but rather a “place of memory” where reflections on the past and visions of the future were intertwined ([Absattarova, Mazhitova 2024](#)).

## **Results**

The construction of the Steppe Region’s image as “the other Russia” in the discourse of the first generation of the Kazakh intelligentsia took place amid intensive cultural, socio-political, and everyday interactions with Russian figures involved in the socio-political movement, scientists, writers, publicists, and travelers. Biographical accounts of descendants of the steppe titled aristocracy, who – by force of circumstance found themselves in major cities of the Steppe Region (such as Omsk and Karkaralinsk) and the Orenburg region, frequently mention such notable figures as N.M. Yadrintsev, S.Ya. Kapustin, G.N. Potanin, V.V. Grigoriyev, N.I. Ilminsky, and others. These individuals often acted as patrons to young Kazakh talents and became part of their regular intellectual and social circle. Although this group held ideological and political differences particularly regarding the relationship between the imperial center and its peripheries, and whether the Asian borderlands should be viewed as colonies (a liberal position) or as peripheral regions of Russia (a conservative one), they were united in recognizing the importance of integrating the indigenous peoples of the eastern outskirts into Russian society through cultural management. N.M. Yadrintsev articulated this shared vision particularly clearly when he outlined the educational and cultural objectives that, in his view, should guide interaction with ethnic communities in Asian Russia, including the Kazakhs: “Give him, first of all, a description of his life, his nomads, a description of his tribe, his customs and his history; let him see himself described and what is close to him; let him know what his tribe has done and what he should do” ([Yadrintsev 2000](#): 242).

It was within the framework of communication between the highly educated segment of Kazakh society and Russian public and political figures that the image of the Steppe Region as a homeland began to take shape in the minds of the former. This homeland was conceived as a territory inhabited by fellow tribesmen, people of the same cultural sphere, integrated into both the all-Russian and broader universal space. Ch. Ch. Valikhanov (1835–1865), in a conversation with G. N. Potanin, expressed this layered vision of belonging as follows: “First of all, I love my Kyrgyz people, then Siberia, then Russia, then all mankind...” ([Potanin 1904](#): XXXI). Valikhanov’s position was shaped not only by his ethno-cultural identity and sense of belonging to his national group but also by the educational environment of the Siberian Cadet Corps in the 1840s and early 1850s. This institution had evolved from what was once called a “Cossack bursa” into a broad-based educational establishment with democratic values. His worldview was further influenced by ongoing contact with classmates and mentors such as G. N. Potanin, E. I. Starkov, A. I. Sulotsky, and I. V. Zhdan-Pushkin. Many of these individuals supported the federalist ideas and sentiments that had begun to circulate widely in Russia by the mid-nineteenth century. In this context, the reflections of Kazakh intellectuals on the Steppe Region as a cultural space are particularly significant. They saw the region as shaped through a



careful convergence of traditional nomadic life and economic organization with the cultural and economic innovations introduced during the period of Russian colonial presence. For instance, in his writings on the nomadism of the Kazakhs in the Semipalatinsk region, Valikhanov sought to connect the past, present, and future of his people with their economic activity, particularly nomadic cattle breeding. He emphasized the negative impact of the Cossack presence, stating that they "do not cultivate grain, but live only on rent from the Kyrgyz, giving them temporary use of their village sites" (Valikhanov 1904: 326). At the same time, the image of the Steppe Region presented in Valikhanov's texts was not grounded in narrow nationalism. On the contrary, he advocated for peaceful coexistence between the Russian sedentary population and the Kazakh nomadic communities. He emphasized mutual benefit, cooperation, and respect for the economic and cultural interests of both groups. According to him, such coexistence could be achieved through the proper demarcation of land (Valikhanov 1904: 326).

A similar logic in constructing the image of the Steppe Region as "another Russia" can be traced in the statements of Kazakh military and public figure G. B. Valikhanov (1842–1903), a graduate of the Siberian Cadet Corps. He rose from the rank of cornet to colonel in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and carried out various assignments through the Russian Geographical Society. In his speech at the ceremonial meeting marking the 300th anniversary of Siberia, held on October 26, 1881, Valikhanov emphasized "the great importance of the necessary unification between the Kirghiz and other Siberian non-Russians with the Russian nationality (Celebration in St. Petersburg and Moscow ... 1882: 8). His further remarks are especially noteworthy: "The Kyrgyz people have already partially exchanged languages with the Russians, and many Western Siberians speak Kyrgyz and vice versa. Although the Kyrgyz call the indigenous Siberians Urus-Kazak, and themselves simply Kazak, it would be desirable that these distinctions in names be smoothed out, just as the former struggle between these Cossacks might be transformed from battlefield conflict into noble competition in the realm of culture and civilization" (Celebration in St. Petersburg and Moscow... 1882: 8). This statement reflects a new qualitative stage in the thinking of the educated Kazakh elite about the Steppe Region as a homeland. It highlights the emergence of broad cultural convergence, particularly in the economic and linguistic spheres, as a defining feature of the region's evolving identity.

In the educational work of the prominent Kazakh teacher I.A. Altynsarin (1841–1889), the idea of the homeland as a unified cultural space, created through the joint efforts of different communities, found concrete expression. The concept of bringing Kazakh and Russian cultures closer through education in the native language, originally formulated by N. I. Ilminsky and supported by the Russian School of Oriental Studies, was seen by Altynsarin as the most effective tool for integrating the Kazakh people into the evolving society on the eastern periphery of the Russian Empire. In one of his letters to his mentor and friend N. I. Ilminsky, Altynsarin expressed frustration with prevailing stereotypes, writing: "The Kyrgyz are a simple people, without arts, but we also find a lot of goodness in simplicity. The printed words of some of the smartest that the Kyrgyz is a thrasher, the Kirghiz is bloodthirsty will forever remain only lifeless printed words... And you, who have been wandering the Horde steppe for three years, I am sure will say: the Kyrgyz are a smart, intelligent, capable people, but uneducated" (Altynsarin 1978: 19).

In general, the concept of the Steppe Region as a shared homeland of both Kazakh nomadic and Russian settled agricultural peoples, as articulated by the first generation of the Kazakh national intelligentsia, reflected the presence of two competing positions. On one hand, there

was the imperial government's discourse advocating the creation of a homogeneous cultural space in the peripheries including the Steppe Region through its "transformation" into Russia. On the other hand, this was countered by a discourse of cultural rapprochement and coexistence, which emphasized the preservation of ethnocultural identity. This alternative perspective was shaped and expressed in the writings of Kazakh intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Notably, the ideas of Kazakh intelligentsia leaders regarding the Steppe Region as an object of mental geography were far from monolithic. Rather, they were characterized by internal diversity and dynamism. This was evident in the emergence and propagation of the idea of the region as "ancestral land", a space to which return was seen as the natural culmination of the steppe aristocrat's life cycle. In this vision, the Steppe Region as an idealized homeland marked a departure from the notion of the Steppe as "another Russia." This shift in perspective was driven by a range of cultural, historical, and existential factors.

Amid the establishment of state control in the peripheries and the intensification of migration from the Russian provinces in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, overcoming cultural differences between the newly arrived Russian settlers and the indigenous Kazakh population of the Steppe Region became a central concern for the Russian Empire. In this context, the institution of colonial intermediaries played a crucial role. These intermediaries were drawn primarily from the Kazakh titled aristocracy and were integrated into the empire's bureaucratic and military structures operating in the frontier regions. The careers of many prominent Kazakh intellectuals began with the direct involvement of high-ranking imperial officials. Ch. Ch. and G. B. Valikhanov, for instance, were admitted to the Siberian Cadet Corps under the personal patronage of the West Siberian Governor-General G. Kh. Gasfort. I. A. Altynsarin was enrolled in a special school for scribes and translators thanks to the intervention of Major General M. V. Ladyzhensky, Chairman of the Orenburg Border Commission. His subsequent professional advancement was facilitated by the patronage of the Russian official V. V. Grigoriyev. However, the initial gratitude felt by Kazakh intellectuals for these imperial connections was later complicated by "traumatic" experiences encountered throughout their education and service. Steppe aristocrats often faced discrimination, expressed through both subtle exoticization and overt restrictions. G. N. Potanin, in his memoirs about Ch. Ch. Valikhanov, observed: "... many people were interested in him, a Kyrgyz boy, and at the same time, he was so capable; he was already drawing before he even entered the institution. Therefore, he was often invited on holiday by those who appreciated such an extraordinary phenomenon" (Potanin 1904: XII).

Potanin further reported that Valikhanov graduated from the cadet corps a year earlier than his peers, noting: "... the final year of the corps focused specifically on military sciences, tactics, fortification, artillery, and the government considered it dangerous to introduce these subjects to foreigners" (Potanin 1968: 544).

Encounters with such "civilizing" restrictions significantly altered the perceptions of educated Kazakhs regarding the Steppe Region as a space of cultural coexistence. These experiences heightened their sense of national identity and contributed to the construction of the Steppe Region in their minds as a lost homeland. Within this conceptual framework, two behavioral scenarios emerged among the descendants of the titled nobility.

The first was the scenario of the "return of the family name", clearly exemplified by G.B. Valikhanov. While still a student at the Siberian Cadet Corps, he succeeded in gaining the official

right to be addressed as "sultan" (Prokhorov 2021: 4.). Deeply affected by constant administrative rotations and bureaucratic harassment, Valikhanov lamented: "In the past, the local steppes were the homeland of great people such as Tamerlane, Genghis Khan, Batu, and others, conquerors who terrified Russia and even enslaved it..." (Valikhanov 1904). The sense of a lost homeland as a reaction to the traumatic experiences of newly subordinated Russian subjects was common among members of the Kazakh intelligentsia. For example, in a report (essentially a denunciation) submitted by the district chief of the Kurgutul volost in the Kokchetav district, it was stated: "Ch. Valikhanov remembers that he is the direct and only descendant of Khan Vali, ruler of the lands and people of the Middle Horde. He considers himself deprived of his royal rights, destitute, offended, the desire to restore himself to power is natural" (Valikhanov 1904). I.A. Altynsarin also expressed disillusionment with the circumstances surrounding his teaching practice. In a letter to N. I. Ilminsky, he wrote: "For a long time I have been formally requesting to return to the Steppe, to Tobol, to my native land; but for some reason, they do not sympathize with my distress and still do not release me from the fortress. I would not part from it with tears in my eyes, on the contrary, I am ready to leave with a beaming, joyful face" (Altynsarin 1978: 19).

The second scenario was that of passive resistance, which the scholar M. Adas defines as "protest by evasion." This refers to a strategy used by discontented groups to ease the burdens of their lives and express dissatisfaction through short-term refusals to follow prescribed directives, along with other actions that reduce the likelihood of direct confrontation with those they view as oppressors (Adas 1981: 217–247). A well-known episode involving Ch. Ch. and G. B. Valikhanov illustrates this form of passive, non-confrontational resistance. Both men witnessed "the atrocities of Russian troops against their co-religionists during the capture of Pishpek" (Potanin 1904: XXXI), which took place during M. G. Valikhanov's campaign under General M. G. Chernyaev in 1863–1864. In response, they each left their respective regiments independently and submitted letters of resignation, thereby quietly withdrawing from participation in the imperial military campaign.

It should be noted that the intensification of the Russification policy by the Russian Empire at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with a series of empire-wide reforms following the revolution of 1905–1907, significantly reshaped the Kazakh intelligentsia's response to external conditions and contributed to its political radicalization. Among the intelligentsia of the Steppe Region who were educated according to Russian-European standards, including figures such as A. Bukeikhanov, A. Beremzhanov, M. Shokai, and A. Baitursynov, the earlier strategy of passive resistance gave way to the idea of active resistance. This new approach manifested in the promotion of national liberation ideologies and demands for autonomy, influenced in part by the theorists of Siberian regionalism. As P. Werth observes, it was after the revolution of 1905–1907 that "imperial officials discovered that a Muslim who had assimilated the achievements of European civilization was perhaps becoming less predictable than his 'fanatical' and 'uneducated' co-religionist, and that the very mixing of cultures was not the least of the reasons for this" (Vert 2005: 67). The programmatic statements and official documents of the Alash-Horde movement, which record instances of active cooperation between Kazakh leaders and Russian left-liberal public figures, support the arguments of several historians. These sources point to the emergence of new "hybrid" communities in the imperial peripheries, united by a shared critical stance toward Russian political structures and cultural practices (Barrett 2000: 163–194).

As a result of these developments, the Kazakh intelligentsia's conception of the Steppe Region also evolved. The earlier patterns of cultural and economic cooperation, once seen as the foundation for the idea of a "different Russia" emerging in the region, were gradually supplanted by the notion of a political alliance of radical forces. The goal of this alliance was to combat all forms of discrimination, including national discrimination, faced by the population of the Steppe Region.

### **Discussion**

The narratives devoted to the genesis, socio-cultural development, and socio-political activity of the descendants of the titled steppe aristocracy, the leaders of the Kazakh intelligentsia, have become a notable and enduring subject in both domestic and international historiography from the late twentieth century into the first quarter of the twenty-first century. A characteristic trend within this historiographical tradition is the gradual shift of scholarly interest. While research in the 1990s largely focused on vivid episodes from the personal and professional biographies of the educated segment of Kazakh society (Kozybaev 1998; Ternova, Isetov 1998), more recent studies have turned toward a deeper understanding of the forms and modes of representing their intellectual activity, such as journalistic and epistolary work, social communication, and mental frameworks. Discursive practices that reveal the internal processes of intellectual reflection and self-reflection among Kazakh intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have increasingly come to the forefront. Scholars have examined this group's engagement with broader social and intellectual developments, including their role in constructing social imaginaries. This focus aligns with wider historical inquiry into national and socio-cultural dynamics in the imperial periphery. Such research has stimulated investigations into the strategies and behavioral practices of ethno-local communities and their individual members, the conditions and factors shaping ethnic identity, and evolving perceptions of social reality (Bekker 2004; Vert 2012; Remnev 2007; Tokmurzayev et al. 2025).

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, it can be stated that the Kazakh intelligentsia's ideas about the Steppe Region, which merged into a collective image of the territory, represented a complex, multidimensional, and dynamic mental construct. The community's dual identity, shaped by Russian institutions of education and upbringing, initially played a key role in the perception of the Steppe Region as an organic extension of Russia. However, this was understood as a "different" kind of Russia as a space formed through the interaction of Russian settler culture with that of the indigenous nomadic population. By the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this perception had shifted. The traumatic social experiences and discriminatory practices encountered by Kazakh intellectuals led to a reinterpretation of the Steppe Region. It came to be viewed through a nostalgic lens, as a "lost homeland" or a "paradise lost". The possibility of returning to this homeland, whether literal or symbolic, was now seen as achievable only through national unity and the development of both passive and active forms of resistance to imperial rule.



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