

Knowledge Production About *Dzhatak* Kazakhs: Fragmented Imperial Representations of Settled Poor by Russian Ethnographers, Public Writers, and Bureaucrats (1890-1900s)

Yersultan Kudaibergen, Nazarbayev University, yersultan.kudaibergen@nu.edu.kz

This article examines how the Russian Empire conceptualized and represented *dzhatak* Kazakhs—formerly nomadic individuals who settled due to the colonial dispossession—in the framework of late imperial knowledge production. Drawing on ethnographic surveys, frontier bureaucratic reports, and articles from the *Kirgizskaia Stepnaia Gazeta* (1894–1904), the study explores how these sources with unique expertise and goals framed *dzhataks* as both symbols of progress and objects of disorder. Ethnographic expeditions, particularly the Shcherbina survey, portrayed *dzhataks* as reluctant but ultimately adaptable pioneers of sedentarization, legitimizing Russian colonization through a civilizing mission narrative. In turn, newspaper articles employed “strategic sensationalism” to depict *dzhataks* as impoverished, criminalized urban dwellers, both critiquing and reinforcing the empire’s reformist ideals. Meanwhile, intelligence reports by district chiefs cast *dzhataks* as subversive figures—susceptible to manipulation, Islamic mobilization, and administrative disorder—thereby justifying surveillance and coercive reforms. Rather than offering objective insight, these sources reveal tensions within the imperial knowledge regime, balancing between bureaucratic immediacy of action, emotional public discourse, and scholarly authority. In line with Gregory Afnogenov’s framework, the article argues that late imperial knowledge about the Kazakh Steppe was shaped by overlapping yet divergent aims—strategic governance, intellectual prestige, and ideological legitimation. The figure of the *dzhatak*, thus, illuminates broader contradictions in Russia’s colonial project that sets integration as a goal and yet produces marginalization, struggling to justify Imperial order and rationalize its detrimental consequences.

Keywords: Russian Empire; Kazakh steppe; *dzhatak*; sedentarization; ethnography; Shcherbina expedition; colonial knowledge; frontier bureaucracy

One notable consequence of Russian imperial expansion into the Kazakh Steppe, from the establishment of frontier Cossack settlements in the 1730s to the incorporation of the region into the provinces of Semipalatinsk, Akmolinsk, and Turgay in the 1860s, was the steady emergence of *dzhataks* Kazakh communities near Slavic peasant settlements.¹ As Virginia Martin observes, *dzhataks* were formerly nomadic individuals who, having lost their livestock and land claims due to the ongoing colonization pressures, were compelled to settle permanently and take up agricultural labour for wealthier Kazakh relatives, frontier Cossack *stanitsas* (administrative-military settlements), and Slavic villages.² Over time, as Yuriy Malikov contends, *dzhataks* and Cossacks became pragmatic participants in a process of mutual assimilation within the steppe borderlands, where emerging and dynamic 'communities of shared interests' were shaped by the practical benefits of cooperation rather than by the dominant narratives of violent conquest.³ These settled communities often engaged in economic, cultural, and spiritual hybridity, with 18-19th century documents and scholarly accounts indicating the presence of around 20,000 *dzhatak* Kazakhs by 1820 and their rapid growth by the early 1900s.⁴

At the same time, amid the large-scale colonization of the region by 1890s, the growing presence of *dzhataks*, along with other data on local nomads, was increasingly recorded and officially acknowledged in frontier reports by *uezdnie nachal'niky* (district chiefs), scholarly ethnographic surveys, and newspaper articles authored by Russian elites. According to Ian Campbell, alongside cooperation from the Kazakh intermediaries on the ground, conceptualization of the settled Kazakhs within the colonial knowledge regime, albeit flawed, was vital for justification of the Empire's early mission to extend its power and later colonially integrate the region.⁵ Hence, this article addresses the following query: How did the Russian Empire understand the phenomenon of poor *dzhataks*, and what could a comparison of the available narratives reveal about the broader tendencies of knowledge production in the late Imperial period?

¹ Yuriy Malikov, *Tsars, Cossacks, and Nomads: The Formation of a Borderland Culture in Northern Kazakhstan in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2014), 124.

² Virginia Martin, *Law and Custom in the Steppe: The Kazakhs of the Middle Horde and Russian Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), 98-9.

³ Yuriy Malikov, *Tsars, Cossacks, and Nomads*, 31-2.

⁴ Yuriy Malikov, *Tsars, Cossacks, and Nomads*, 125.

⁵ Ian Campbell, *Knowledge at the Edge of Empire: Russian Ethnography in Central Asia, 1860-1917* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 12-3.

Using a case study approach, I focus specifically on works by imperial scholars on the Akmolinsk province (1868–1917), particularly the 1895–1903 Shcherbina Expedition and the writings of Russian elites published in the *Kirgizskaia Stepnaia Gazeta* (Kyrgyz Steppe Gazette). Taken together, these materials serve as key sources for understanding how the Russian Empire acknowledged the impoverishment and pressures underlying the emergence of the *dzhataks*, yet framed these developments as natural, if regrettable, outcomes of modernity and part of a positive historical trajectory that promoted sedentarization in the Steppe as a marker of progress, emphasizing agriculture and Russian tutelage while obscuring the detrimental consequences of colonial policy. Furthermore, by examining frontier reports of the district chiefs within the local Provincial Administration from the 1890s, it is possible to observe how *dzhataks* were often ignored or cast as threats, associated with illicit activities, manipulations by Tatar merchants, and Islamic networks labelled as fanatical, thereby strategically justifying further imperial intervention. Accordingly, while these sources primarily served colonial objectives and, as many scholars have noted, frequently reflected a superficial and biased understanding of Kazakh nomadic society,⁶ this article treats them not as objective authoritative accounts but as discursive texts with diverse goals and expertise that reveal imperial perspectives on the phenomenon of the *dzhataks*.

However, most importantly, I highlight the evident divergences within available narratives, which reflect the underlying tensions of the empire's knowledge regime. As Gregory Afinogenov argues, Russian scholars and ethnographers formed a semi-autonomous and prestigious group within the imperial knowledge economy, motivated by status and participation in a global marketplace of ideas, that did not directly translate into policy, with their publicly available work at times complicit in, and at other times critical of, imperial power.⁷ In contrast, frontier bureaucrats' intelligence was mostly restricted in access, secretive, and operated through what Gregory Afinogenov terms "intelligence as a substitute for war," driven by a need to do surveillance to respond immediately to threats and compensate for the local administrative or military shortcomings.⁸

⁶ This tendency has been discussed well by Yerik Tungatarov. Please see, Yerik Tungatarov, "Viewing the 19th-Century Kazakh Nomads through the Lens of Russian Ethnographers" (MA thesis, Nazarbayev University, School of Sciences and Humanities, 2023), 28-9.

⁷ Gregory Afinogenov, *Spies and Scholars: Chinese Secrets and Imperial Russia's Quest for World Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 139-40.

⁸ Afinogenov, *Spies and Scholars*, 257-8.

Similarly, by analysing the *Kirgizskaia Stepnaia Gazeta*, I corroborate Felix Cowen's findings on the Kopeck press (1908–1918), noted for its 'progressive' stance and, more importantly for my analysis of the Steppe press, for its use of 'strategic sensationalism'⁹ not merely to attract readers with emotional or shocking accounts of poverty, but to promote discourse on systemic social issues and advocate for reform and modernity. Hence, I argue that these perspectives did not overtly contradict one another but instead embodied distinct functions and forms of authority, revealing how colonial knowledge production was structured to render intelligence reports, newspaper articles, and ethnographic materials complicit in constructing marginalized representations of the Steppe that justified reformist interventions while rationalizing their detrimental consequences, such as the emergence of settled but poor Kazakhs.

Ethnographic Surveys on *Dzhatak* Kazakhs

This section analyses Russian perspectives on Kazakh sedentarization as reflected in state sanctioned ethnographic expeditions led by Fedor Shcherbina and other scholars in the 1890s in the Steppe Provinces, particularly Akmolinsk, to survey land for peasant colonization and assess Kazakh economic conditions. These sources detail the experiences of sedentarized Kazakhs in volosts (rural village collectives), often portraying their hardships as unfortunate but necessary consequences of state policy and the transformation of the steppe under Russian tutelage. The Kokshetau district survey, for example, frequently emphasized the perceived benefits of Russian influence, highlighting how Kazakhs learned, or, more intriguingly, re-learned, agriculture, including the revival of 'ancient' *aryqs* (irrigation canals) said to have been abandoned during earlier periods of historical instability.¹⁰ Ethnographers argued that Kazakhs, or their ancestors, had practiced agriculture in the past and were reengaging with it by the 1890s, sometimes more successfully than newly arrived Russian peasants.¹¹ Interestingly, as Alexander Morrison notes, networks of irrigation canals such as *aryqs* existed across Central Asia as early as 500 BC, particularly around Turkestan and the Ferghana Valley, and were

⁹ Felix Cowan, *The Kopeck Press: Popular Journalism in Revolutionary Russia, 1908–1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2025), 7, 13, 64.

¹⁰ Fedor Shcherbina, *Materialy po kirgizskomu zemlepol'zovaniiu. Ekspeditsiia po issledovaniiu stepnykh oblastei. Akmolinskaia oblast'. Kokchetavskii uezd*, t. 1 [Materials on Kyrghyz Land Use. Expedition for the Study of the Steppe Regions. Akmolinsk Oblast. Kokchetav Uezd], (Voronezh: Tipografiia V. V. Isaeva, 1898), 134.

¹¹ Shcherbina, *Akmolinskaia oblast', Kokchetavskii uezd*, 136.

overwhelmingly built by local populations, with their construction becoming even more active in the 18th and 19th centuries, continuing to rely primarily on local initiative rather than Russian efforts.¹²

However, crucially, ethnographers openly acknowledged the link between the revival of *aryqs*, and the economic pressures caused by Russian colonization and the devastating *zbut* (livestock die-offs), using these crises to frame semi-sedentary agriculture as a historically 'appropriate' lifestyle for Kazakhs, one that conveniently legitimized Russian settlement as a civilizing and benevolent force. As Virginia Martin observed, *zbut* and famine events, such as the 1882 crisis in Karkaralinsk *uezd* (district) and in the *uezds* of Akmolinsk, Kokchetav, and Atbasar, which led to the loss of over 200,000 head of livestock, as well as further episodes in 1894 and 1896–97, consistently “produced more and more *dzhataks* Kazakhs.”¹³ This interpretation echoes scholarly claims, such as those by Maya Peterson, that the Russian imperial gaze was often directed toward “lost civilizations,” animated by a desire to revive an imagined past civility rooted in romanticized visions of decline and recovery.¹⁴ Indeed, ethnographers noted that Kazakhs were 'relearning' how to sow, grind, and bake bread under Russian guidance, often quoting Kazakh informants who repeated, “that’s how the Russians taught us,” with one ethnographer remarking that “necessity serves as the most potent engine for change.”¹⁵

Still, although the reduction in available grazing land compelled nomadic Kazakhs to hire experienced *batraki kyrgyzy* (Kazakh labourers) from Russian households, many likely *dzhataks* themselves, ethnographers generally portrayed Kazakhs as unprepared to become fully self-sufficient farmers.¹⁶ They emphasized Kazakh dependence on Russian peasants and Cossacks for tools, expertise, and infrastructure, including ploughs, windmills, ovens, and fertilization methods. Moreover, statistical data from these surveys showed that farming activity among Kazakhs varied by volost, often correlating with access to fertile land, livestock, and, most importantly, according to the ethnographers, proximity to Russian settlements. Kazakhs living near Russian villages were more

¹² Alexander Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand 1868-1910: A Comparison with British India* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 201-2.

¹³ Martin, *Law and Custom in the Steppe*, 98.

¹⁴ Maya Peterson, *Pipe Dreams: Water and Empire in Central Asia's Aral Sea Basin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 14-5; 116; 130.

¹⁵ Shcherbina, *Akmolinskaia oblast', Kokchetavskii uезд*, 148.

¹⁶ Shcherbina, *Akmolinskaia oblast', Kokchetavskii uезд*, 151.

likely to engage in agriculture, having learned by emulating their neighbours.¹⁷ In contrast, quite intriguingly, wealthier Kazakh communities, more focused on herding and trade, were often described as lacking the technical skills necessary for 'craftsmanship' or productive farming. Thus, engagement with agriculture was portrayed not merely as a matter of land and economic necessity but of artisanal and technical knowledge, allegedly in short supply among the 'complacent' nomadic Kazakhs, thereby reinforcing the perceived need for continued Russian guidance and support.

Surprisingly, while familiar narratives appear in surveys of Atbasar, a dry, southern *uezd*, these texts also, at times, expressed sympathy for Kazakh adaptations and hardships, and offered implicit critiques of the colonization. For example, Yuriy Schmidt's 1894 survey closely examined Kazakh economic practices, including northward spring and southward autumn migrations, and their adaptation to the region's hot, dry summers and short, severe winters, while also expressing concern over the disruptions posed by the expanding Trans-Siberian railway.¹⁸ Moreover, Schmidt argued that *dzhataks* often outperformed Slavic settlers in irrigated farming, effectively cultivating wheat, millet, and barley with traditional *aryq* systems—succeeding where earlier Russian sedentarization efforts, like the Ulytau Cossack outpost, had failed.¹⁹ Rather insightfully, Schmidt noted that *dzhatak* agriculture was fragile and often depended on support from wealthier Kazakhs, who shared land and draft animals to sustain small-scale farming among poorer households.²⁰ Accordingly, Shcherbina's expedition in Atbasar revealed that expanding Slavic settlements displaced Kazakhs from the north into southern Atbasar, intensifying summer pasture competition, prompting hostility, erection of grazing barriers, and fragmenting communities into smaller kin groups.²¹ As a result of these disruptions, as Shcherbina emphasized, by the 1900s, 92% of Atbasar Kazakhs remained nomadic and only 8% were sedentary, as poorer Kazakhs, struggling with a harsh climate, competition from wealthier neighbours, and isolation from Slavic settlers, relied mainly on

¹⁷ Shcherbina, *Akmolinskaia oblast', Kokchetavskii uezd*, 158.

¹⁸ Yuriy Schmidt, *Ocherk kirgizskoi stepi k iugu ot Aralo-Irtyshskogo vodorazdela, v Akmolinskoi oblasti* [Essay on the Kyrgyz Steppe South of the Aral-Irtysh Watershed in Akmolinsk Oblast], *Zapiski Zapadno-Sibirskogo Otdela Imperatorskogo Russkogo Geograficheskogo Obshchestva*, kn. 17, vyp. 2 (Omsk: Tipografiia Okruzhnogo Shtaba, 1894), 44.

¹⁹ Schmidt, *Ocherk kirgizskoi stepi k iugu ot Aralo-Irtyshskogo vodorazdela*, 47.

²⁰ Schmidt, *Ocherk kirgizskoi stepi k iugu ot Aralo-Irtyshskogo vodorazdela*, 52.

²¹ Fedor Shcherbina, *Materialy po kirgizskomu zemlepol'zovaniiu. Ekspeditsiia po issledovaniiu stepnykh oblastei. Akmolinskaia oblast'. Atbasarskii uezd. 2-i tom* [Materials on Kyrgyz Land Use. Expedition for the Study of the Steppe Regions. Akmolinsk Province. Atbasar District], (Voronezh: Tipografiia V.V. Isaeva, 1898), 11-15; 21-24.

hay collection or small plots for subsistence, limiting the viability of settled agriculture and eliciting sympathy from ethnographers.²²

Crucially, in addition to the difficulties of living among nomadic Kazakhs, scholars also detailed how *dzhataks* faced displacement due to colonial land speculation by incoming Cossacks and Slavic settlers. V. Osta'ev's survey of Akmolinsk Province is particularly revealing, despite a land commission's attempt at equitable distribution, the Cossack administration prioritized officer land grants, awarding prime territory intended for pensions to military elites.²³ Initially undervalued, these lands became increasingly desirable with rising migration in the 1890s and the looming construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Osta'ev extensively criticized Cossacks for fraudulently renting or selling land, noting that *dzhataks* with limited livestock, particularly tenants near the Irtysh River, were swept into land speculation they had little power to influence.²⁴ As prices soared, many were pushed south, demonstrating their vulnerable and marginalized position under Russian settler-colonialism in this period.²⁵ Still, while Osta'ev acknowledged the harm caused by such exploitative practices, his critique did not question the civilizing mission itself, but merely advocated easing the shock and suffering experienced by *dzhataks*. Overall, like others, this account reflected the visible freedom ethnographers had to express critical observations that may have conflicted with the empire's modern and benevolent self-image; yet even sympathetic portrayals of *dzhatak* hardships rarely challenged the dominant consensus on the civilizing mission's necessity.

This point is most visible in how Shcherbina expedition materials aimed not only to statistically assess the steppe and document Kazakh lifeways through ethnographic methods, but also to rationalize the emergence of *dzhatak* Kazakhs through a lens of historical change underpinned by the imperial reforms and colonization. Several chapters of the Akmolinsk *uezd* survey emphasized earlier conflicts, particularly with the Zhungars and Kalmyks, that led to the region's temporary abandonment; although repopulation resumed under Russian suzerainty, agricultural development and the mass emergence of *dzhataks* were delayed by Kenesary's rebellion, harsh winters, *zhuts*, and

²² Shcherbina, *Akmolinskaia oblast'. Atbasarskii uезд*, 32-5.

²³ Vladimir Osta'ev, *Zemlevladienie i zemledelie Sibirskogo kazachego voiska*, [Landholding and Agriculture of the Siberian Cossack Host], vol.2, kn.4, (*Trudy Imperatorskogo Vol'nogo Ekonomicheskogo Obshestva*, 1897), 32.

²⁴ Osta'ev, *Zemlevladienie i zemledelie Sibirskogo kazachego voiska*, 37-41.

²⁵ Osta'ev, *Zemlevladienie i zemledelie Sibirskogo kazachego voiska*, 53-6.

persistent instability well into the 1890s.²⁶ Simultaneously, as Russian authorities restructured the steppe into auls and volosts after 1868, Kazakhs were compelled to claim land individually or in small kin groups, fragmenting traditional tribal structures; Russian scholars estimated that competition over pasture drove a more than thirtyfold increase in the number of auls between the mid-18th century and 1895.²⁷ Russian ethnographers interpreted this shift from large, clan-based migrations to smaller, individualized movements as a pioneering progress of *dzhataks* toward a rational and sedentary, peasant-like identity.²⁸ Nevertheless, while the surveys sought to rationalize Kazakh land use through environmental explanations, they acknowledged gaps in understanding pre-colonial lifeways, ultimately preferring to frame sedentarization and agriculture as inevitable and beneficial outcomes of population pressure, land scarcity, and Russian settlement.²⁹

Stories of *Dzhataks* from the *Kyrgyzskaya Stepnaya Gazeta*

The *Kyrgyz Steppe Press* (1894–1904), established by General-Governor Kolpakovskii and later overseen by his successor General Taube, aimed to familiarize the native population with imperial directives, provide practical information, and promote discourse on bridging the imagined primordial wilderness of the steppe with European civilization through state intervention.³⁰ At the same time, in line with Felix Cowen’s observations on the Imperial press’s use of ‘strategic sensationalism,’ it featured numerous emotional stories about *dzhataks* from urban centres in Akmolinsk Province, reflecting critical Russian intellectual perspectives that belittled the urban poor, linked them to crime or portrayed them as unprepared for the rapidly changing conditions of the steppe, thus indirectly critiquing colonization. For example, the 1895 article “Gorodskie Dzhataki” in *Kirgizskaya Stepnaya Gazeta* offers a vivid portrayal of impoverished Kazakhs in Akmolinsk, a city largely inhabited by Tatars and Russians.³¹ While Tatars dominated trade and accumulated wealth, often at the expense of “inexperienced” Kazakhs, those who settled in the city

²⁶ Fedor Shcherbina, *Materialy po kirgizskomu zemlepol'zovaniiu. Sobrannye i razrabotannye Ekspeditsiei po issledovaniiu stepnykh volostei. Akmolinskaia oblast', Akmolinskii uезд*, t. 3, ch. 2 [Materials on Kyrgyz Land Use. Collected and Compiled by the Expedition for the Study of the Steppe Volosts. Akmolinsk Oblast, Akmolinsk Uezd] (Chernigov: Tipografiia G. M. Veseloi, 1909), 97-100.

²⁷ Shcherbina, *Akmolinskaia Oblast', Akmolinskii uезд*, 115-20.

²⁸ Shcherbina, *Akmolinskaia Oblast', Akmolinskii uезд*, 132-3.

²⁹ Shcherbina, *Akmolinskaia Oblast', Akmolinskii uезд*, 132-3.

³⁰ Campbell, *Knowledge at the Edge of Empire*, 96-7.

³¹ N.a., “Gorodskie Dzhataki” [“Town Dzhataks”], *Kirgizskaia Stepnaia Gazeta*, no. 14 (16 April 1895): 3.

out of necessity struggled to adapt. According to the author, they were typically idle, compelled to work only under economic duress, and lived in dire conditions in dark, damp, and overcrowded earth huts. A few succeeded in emulating Tatar business practices to become petty merchants, but most remained in poverty. Some reportedly turned to “deceitful” means of survival, such as gambling and cheating fellow steppe Kazakhs.³² One common scam involved staged card games like three-card monte, where conspirators posed as drunkards to swindle newcomers in clandestine venues. Overall, the article painted a bleak picture of urban Kazakh life, one marked by hardship, dislocation, and exploitation, far from the idealized image of brave pioneers embracing settlement.

Curiously, the *Steppe Newspaper* aimed to assist Kyrgyz in improving agricultural practices, encouraging literate readers to share tips, such as storing snow in ground pits for summer water or preparing fertilizers, hay, and tools.³³ At the same time, it highlighted how *dzhataks* were often scorned by their nomadic kin and worked in fields or even gold mines, such as in Kokshetau, largely in hopes of acquiring enough grain or livestock to return to nomadic life.³⁴ Yet when employed by Cossacks, Tatars, or townsmen in Russian settlements, they earned meagre wages, barely covering food, clothing, and taxes.³⁵ Notably, the press criticized how, despite laws exempting *dzhataks* from taxes if they owned no livestock or land, steppe officials frequently extorted their last kopecks under various pretexts. Most likely, aforementioned conditions explained why most *dzhataks* were said to live in *kara-lashyk*, likely hovels or mud huts, often rented within Cossack enclosures, while others lived in makeshift shacks propped up with stakes.³⁶ These living conditions, characterized by dampness and cold, lead to health deterioration and premature deaths due to a lack of medical care. Still, surprisingly, regardless of the challenges, the Steppe press articles suggested that there were many *dzhataks* who recognized the benefits of a settled life and, upon saving enough, formally petitioned for land—suggesting a modest but growing trend toward permanent agriculture.³⁷

³² N.a., “*Gorodskie Dzhataki*” [“Town Dzhataks”], *Kirgizskaia Stepnaia Gazeta*, no. 14 (16 April 1895): 4.

³³ N.a., “Po voprosu o khlebopashestve v kirgizskikh stepiakh” [“On the Question of Agriculture in the Kyrgyz Steppes”], *Kirgizskaia Stepnaia Gazeta*, no. 3 (16 January 1894): 2–3.

³⁴ N.a., “O zolote i rudakh v Akmolinskoi oblasti” [“On Gold and Ores in the Akmolinsk Province”], *Kirgizskaia Stepnaia Gazeta*, no. 5 (30 January 1894): 2–3.

³⁵ N.a., “Korrespondentsiia iz Kapala” [“Correspondence from Qapal”], *Kirgizskaia Stepnaia Gazeta*, no. 44 (6 November 1894): 3.

³⁶ N.a., “Korrespondentsiia iz Kapala”, *Kirgizskaia Stepnaia Gazeta*, 3.

³⁷ N.a., “Deshevye postroiiki dlia kirgiz” [“Cheap Buildings for the Kyrgyz”], *Kirgizskaia Stepnaia Gazeta*, no. 23 (12 June 1894): 3.

Additionally, in a curious travelogue about the town of Akmolinsk titled “*Ocherk iz Zametok Turista*” (An Essay from a Tourist’s Notes), published in the contemporaneous journal *The Traveler in Siberian and Asiatic Russia*, Russian author A. Sherstobitov briefly mentioned *dzhataks* as unfortunate, marginal figures of urbanization, portrayed more as curiosities for Russian readers than as subjects of serious inquiry.³⁸ Initially, he criticized the average European Russian’s ignorance of Siberia, arguing that persistent misconceptions, imagining the region solely as a land of frost, bears, and gold, stemmed from its remoteness and outdated medieval fantasies about mythical lands beyond “Yugra.”³⁹ While such myths may have faded, Sherstobitov observed that confusion about Siberia and its people remained widespread, prompting him to recount the story of Akmolinsk, tracing its transformation from a mid-19th-century military outpost established to control nomadic Kazakhs into a promising, prosperous, and diverse colonial center inhabited by Russian, Tatar, Kazakh, and Bukharan merchants.⁴⁰ Towards the end, however, with the references to the articles from the Kyrgyz Steppe Press in a moralizing and sensational tone, he concluded that no account of the city would be complete without mentioning the *dzhataks*, whom he divides into two groups: a small number of successful merchants and artisans who had integrated well into urban life, and a much larger impoverished majority, depicted as desperate proletarians surviving through petty labour and deceit, living in overcrowded earth huts alongside livestock.⁴¹ Remarkably, above all, the author’s tone encouraged pride in the Empire’s civilizing reach, presenting Akmolinsk as a distinctly Asiatic yet unmistakably Russian domain, one to be embraced by readers along with its *dzhataks*, who were cast as symbols of the ambiguities and tensions of sedentarization.

Intelligence Reports of District Chiefs regarding *Dzhataks*

Unlike ethnographies or newspaper articles, bureaucratic reports often portrayed *dzhataks* in a very prescriptive and interventionist way, frequently calling for action, operating within a broader bureaucratic “information panic.”⁴² A pertinent example of this is a December 1898 report by

³⁸Alexander Sherstobitov, “Akmolinsk (Ocherk iz Zametok Turista)” [“Akmolinsk (An Essay from a Tourist’s Notes)”], *Dorozhnik po Sibiri i Aziatskoi Rossii* [*The Traveler in Siberian and Asiatic Russia*], no. 2 (March-April 1899): 56–8.

³⁹Sherstobitov, “Akmolinsk (Ocherk iz Zametok Turista),” 65–6.

⁴⁰Sherstobitov, “Akmolinsk (Ocherk iz Zametok Turista),” 69.

⁴¹Sherstobitov, “Akmolinsk (Ocherk iz Zametok Turista),” 73.

⁴²This term was coined by Alexander Morrison. Please see, Alexander Morrison, “Sufism, Pan-Islamism and Information Panic: Nil Sergeevich Lykoshin and the Aftermath of the Andijan Uprising,” *Past & Present* 214 (2012): 255–300.

Akmolinsk district chief Troitskii, addressed to Governor-General Sannikov, that offered a grim account of moral and administrative decay partially linked to *dzhataks*. It recounted an October incident involving Assistant Magistrate Ramazanov, who obstructed police authority and publicly assaulted a local police chief in the city of Akmolinsk.⁴³ Moreover, Ramazanov and his associate Gerlovich, a penniless Polish gambler, was accused of drunkenness, brawling, and gambling with state funds at his position as a Forester.⁴⁴ In turn, their behavior extended into brothels and, most notably, “Kazakh *dzhatak* slums”, described as lawless zones beyond imperial control, where Gerlovich played billiard for money and bartered fake gold watches for horses alongside *dzhatak* Kazakhs.⁴⁵ Furthermore, within the district chief’s report, a brothel labelled a “soldier-*dzhatak* den” was singled out as a hub of disorder, frequented by both marginalized Kazakhs and imperial officials.⁴⁶ One such official, Lieutenant Yazykov, unlawfully wore his officer’s uniform while visiting such an establishment and got into a conflict with a local merchant’s son, being publicly assaulted. He later called a local police officer for help, who upon failing to support Yazykov was publicly beaten by the Lieutenant.⁴⁷ The matter was quietly settled, revealing the impunity of officials and their complicity in the disorder.

Later, during the New Year celebrations, Troitskii again reported the growing disrespect toward government officials, including district chiefs, which he attributed to the influence of a local veterinary doctor, Shesterikov. On January 1, at a public masquerade, Shesterikov addressed a crowd of merchants, Kazakh youth, including Tatars and *dzhataks*, with a provocative joke: “The police! Their job is to hang around the threshold and wait until they’re called to act—acting themselves? No-no! The district chief? He’s in charge of the district. Acting in the city? No-no! He should march to the door and stand there, otherwise, we’ll handle him in Kazan student-style, kick him out and toss him down the stairs!”⁴⁸ Despite the inflammatory nature of his joke, according to Troitskii, neither the judge nor the investigator that was present at the event took any action against Shesterikov. On the contrary, both laughed, mocked the imperial officials, and even provided vodka

⁴³ TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3680, 2-4.

⁴⁴ TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3680, 5.

⁴⁵ TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3680, 7.

⁴⁶ TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3680, 8-9.

⁴⁷ TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3680, 10.

⁴⁸ TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3680, 26.

to the *dzhatak* Kazakhs.⁴⁹ This lack of response led to bitter complaints from Troitskii, with him suggesting that the disregard for authority and the judicial system called for administrative exile for these officials. Troitskii condemned the actions of the local administration and urged the General Governor to dismiss these figures, who had come to symbolize the collapse of imperial authority.⁵⁰ From the tone of the reports, it is plausible to argue the illegal activities associated with *dzhatak* Kazakhs were not viewed as the root cause of the disorder, but rather as opportunistic responses to a deeper institutional failure, namely, the empire's inability to uphold its own norms and maintain administrative legitimacy.

In another case from the Kokshetau district, *dzhatak* Kazakhs were portrayed as a potentially dangerous group, easily manipulated into resisting Russian authority. In a report dated 12 September 1902, the Kokchetav district chief raised concerns to the military governor of Akmolinsk province about a petition submitted by Shaiyrden Koshyegulov, an educated Kazakh resident of the city.⁵¹ Koshyegulov's petition, which claimed the support of many poor and uneducated *dzhataks*, demanded equal rights for Muslims alongside the Orthodox clergy, the establishment of a formal Islamic hierarchy, and state support for Muslim religious life.⁵² To the district chief, these seemingly outrageous demands reflected a broader boldness in subversive attempts to undermine imperial authority in the region. He expressed particular alarm at the mobilization of *dzhatak* communities, whom he feared were being encouraged to take illegal oaths in mosques and sign the petition, actions that could confer legitimacy on an unauthorized Islamic institution.⁵³ The chief described the *dzhataks* as naive and easily influenced, susceptible to manipulation by Muslim leaders seeking to build a parallel structure of authority. Although the case was ultimately dismissed by order of the General Governor, who wished to avoid provoking instability, the district chief's report offered insightful and detailed observations on the *dzhataks'* ambiguous legal position: they existed outside the formal legal order and lacked official representation in the city. As such, he called for legal reforms to bring them under stricter administrative control and to prevent further political agitation.

⁴⁹ TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3680, 28.

⁵⁰ TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3680, 33.

⁵¹ TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3822, 16.

⁵² TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3822, 17-17b.

⁵³ TsGARK, F..369, op.1, d.3822, 18.

With regard to religion, it is worth taking a detour to examine the motivations behind *dzhataks*' support for Koshegulov's petition advocating the institutionalization of an Islamic Kazakh Muftiate in the Steppe provinces—particularly in light of widespread but contradictory narratives that *dzhataks* were superficially Muslim⁵⁴ and compelled to convert to Orthodox Christianity in order to formally enter the peasant estate.⁵⁵ According to Yuriy Malikov's research, conversions to Orthodoxy were more common among orphaned Kazakhs lacking family or clan ties, children sold to Russian peasants by impoverished parents, or adults seeking to “start life from scratch” due to irreparable conflicts with their clans or issues with the traditional justice system.⁵⁶ However, for the vast majority of *dzhataks*, conversion was highly undesirable due to significant social and economic deterrents, making continued adherence to Islam a more practical and culturally resonant choice. Similarly, Pavel Shabley's findings on Semipalatinsk show that large urban populations of poor Kazakhs actively participated in mosque imam elections, supporting candidates who could offer moral leadership, spiritual guidance, representation before imperial authorities, and access to charitable aid.⁵⁷ Thus, it is not surprising that *dzhataks*, faced with marginalization, would pragmatically support initiatives such as Koshegulov's petition to secure religious representation and protect their interests within the imperial system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has examined the striking disparity in how Russian ethnographic studies, newspaper periodicals, and imperial bureaucratic reports conceptualized *dzhatak* Kazakhs, individuals marginalized by both society and the state. Ethnographic surveys, such as those led by Shcherbina and Schmidt, often cast *dzhataks* as symbols of the empire's civilizing mission: pioneer Kazakh agriculturalists and adaptable figures who embraced sedentarization under Russian guidance, occasionally even surpassing Russian settlers in agricultural productivity. Although this

⁵⁴ Tungatarov, “Viewing the 19th-Century Kazakh Nomads,” 77.

⁵⁵ Yuriy Malikov, “Disadvantaged Neophytes of the Privileged Religion: Why Qazaqs Did Not Become Christians,” in *Islam, Society and States across the Qazaq Steppe (18th – Early 20th Centuries)*, ed. Niccolò Pianciola and Paolo Sartori (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2023), 202.

⁵⁶ Yuriy Malikov, *Disadvantaged Neophytes of the Privileged Religion*, 199; 202; 208.

⁵⁷ Pavel Shabley, “Rossiiskaia imperiia i musul'mane Semipalatinska: disbalans vlasti i neodnorodnye obshchestva v kontse XIX veka [The Russian Empire and the Muslims of Semipalatinsk: Power Imbalance and Fragmented Societies at the End of the 19th Century],” *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2019): 50; 60; 74.

vision rarely materialized on the ground due to the widespread poverty experienced by actual *dzhataks*, such portrayals served to legitimize colonial expansion by framing sedentarization as a natural and ultimately beneficial historical progression. In contrast, other perspectives, including those from Atbasar or voiced by officials like Osta'ev, highlighted the harsher consequences of imperial policy: land dispossession, economic marginalization, and the breakdown of traditional Kazakh social structures. Accordingly, newspaper narratives from the Kyrgyz Steppe Press often intensified this pessimistic portrayal, casting *dzhataks* as morally suspect and rootless, symbols of failed integration and collapsing economic structures. Yet such emotional or sensational accounts likely operated within a framework of 'strategic sensationalism,' not to discredit sedentarization outright, but to reaffirm the Russian civilizing mission by prompting discourse on how to modernize the steppe, promote Slavic settlement, and more fully integrate the region into the empire.

At the same time, bureaucratic reports reveal how *dzhataks* became proxies for deeper anxieties about governance, religious authority, and imperial legitimacy. They were variously portrayed as unruly and easily manipulated, as participants in potentially subversive Islamic movements, or as disruptive elements within urban life. In each case, the figure of the *dzhatak* functioned both as a perceived threat and as a pretext, justifying legal reforms, administrative exile, and increased surveillance. Their ambiguous status laid bare the contradictions of the empire itself: its reliance on legal ambiguity to govern the Kazakh steppes, its limited administrative reach, and its mounting struggle to assert control over a rapidly changing society. Imperial functionaries often used reports to fill in these 'blind spots,' compensating for their inability to fully accommodate groups like the *dzhataks* within the existing system. Viewed through this lens, imperial discourse on *dzhataks* offers insight not only into the social disruptions of colonization, but also into the underlying fragility of the imperial project.

Lastly, returning to the question of knowledge production in the Russian Empire, this article broadly affirms Gregory Afinogenov's argument that by the mid- to late nineteenth century, scholars and ethnographers had become a contingent and competitive group operating within a broader imperial knowledge marketplace.⁵⁸ Hence, rather than serving the state exclusively, many of these figures sought to impress academic audiences and bolster Russia's intellectual legitimacy on the

⁵⁸ Afinogenov, *Spies and Scholars*, 258-9.

global stage—an ambition that aligned with the empire’s evolving “modern” self-image.⁵⁹ Institutions such as the College of Foreign Affairs and the Academy of Sciences increasingly codified the distinction between strategic (state-serving) and scholarly (academic) knowledge.⁶⁰ Within this context, as evidenced by narratives about the *dzhataks*, Russian intellectuals often operated as semi-autonomous actors: at times complicit in colonial enterprises, occasionally critical of imperial policy, but most often aligned with frontier bureaucrats in portraying Russian dominance over the Kazakhs as both inevitable and historically justified. Despite their divergent perspectives and individual ambitions, the collective output of these scholars and officials contributed to a distinctly Russian model of imperial knowledge—one that supported the extension of imperial power while blurring the lines between academic inquiry, public discourse, strategic governance, and colonial ideology.

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⁵⁹ Afinogenov, *Spies and Scholars*, 60-1.

⁶⁰ Afinogenov, *Spies and Scholars*, 63.