

**Limits of Reform and Colonial Kazakh Integration: Rural Mullah Elections, the Orenburg
Assembly, and the Muftiate Question in Akmolinsk Province (1868–1905)**

Undergraduate Capstone Project

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Introduction: Approaching the Akmolinsk Province Administration

Recently, a growing number of Central Asian political activists—particularly in Kazakhstan—such as Elmira Kakabayeva¹ and Aynash Mustoyapova, alongside news outlets like *Forbes Kazakhstan*, *Vlast.kz*, *Paryz.kz*, and *Youth.kz*,² as well as scholars, have been actively debating the need for “decolonization,” an agenda marked by calls to transform public consciousness by challenging ‘colonial’ Russophilic sentiments of integration that sustain the socio-cultural norms, literary canons, and political frameworks established during Russian Imperial and Soviet rule.³ Naturally, this debate has fueled societal polarization, with passionate supporters and critics fiercely defending their positions, yet beneath the reactionary discourse lies a seemingly straightforward, but deeply consequential question: How did Kazakhstan come to be a colony, and how well do we understand what we are decolonizing from?

Addressing the question posed above in its totality would be neither feasible nor prudent. Instead, by invoking the concept of “decolonization,” this study attempts to highlight the present-day relevance of re-evaluating the historiographical stakes of the colonial legacy of Kazakhstan. Drawing on Bradley Parker’s framework, this study conceptualizes colonial spaces such as Kazakhstan as arenas in which legal structures were negotiated between colonizers and the colonized, rather than unilaterally imposed from above, while segregation and social hierarchies continued to dominate, affording indigenous communities only limited autonomy.⁴ Similarly, Anatolyi Remnev and Jane Burbank argue that in the Russian Empire, colonialism and law were deeply intertwined: legal discourse and judicial reforms legitimized imperial rule by absorbing the peripheries into the imperial core through peasant colonization and by

¹ Elmira Kakabayeva is a Kazakhstani writer and the founder of the course *"Family Ethnography, or How to Decolonize Your Writing."*

² Examples of articles in the news outlets: [Forbes Kazakhstan](#), [BBC Russian Service](#), [Youth.kz](#), [Paryz.kz](#), [Vlast.kz](#)

³ Mustoyapova, Aynash. *Decolonization of Kazakhstan*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd., 2023.

⁴ Bradley Parker was an archeologist of ancient Andean and Assyrian Empires, who proposed a useful theoretical framework of understanding Imperial frontiers. See: Parker, Bradley. Theoretical Considerations in the Study of Frontiers. P.3-23 in Parker, B. J., and L. Rodseth, eds. *Untaming the Frontier in Anthropology, Archaeology, and History*. University of Arizona Press, 2005.

incorporating diverse legal and spiritual traditions into a pluralistic judicial framework of imperial citizenship to manage resistance and maintain order.⁵ However, although Remnev, Hagen, and Burbank offer diverse perspectives on peoples, hierarchies, and emphasize the plurality of territorial divisions and regional approaches within the Russian Empire, they largely omit Central Asia—particularly the dynamics of the Kazakh Steppe’s status as a military-controlled colony governing nomadic communities.⁶

For instance, Tomohiko Uyama argues that Russian statesmen viewed borderlands such as Turkestan and Central Asia at large not merely as territories to be conquered, but as integral components of imperial governance, highlighting their role in reshaping indigenous societies and housing one of the empire’s largest Muslim populations, thereby making them central to any analysis of Russian imperialism.⁷ Likewise, Alexander Morrison contends that imperial conceptions of citizenship largely excluded Central Asian Muslims, reflecting the empire’s use of legal and administrative pluralism to preserve hierarchy and serve state needs rather than to uphold universal rights.⁸ Similarly, Robert Crews critiques the scholarly tendency to treat the Volga-Urals as the standard model for Muslim interaction with the tsarist state, overlooking the distinct military rule under which the majority of Central Asian Muslims lived.⁹ Hence, while acknowledging "decolonization" as a contemporary paradigm, this study will focus more on evaluating the projects intended to integrate Kazakh communities into the Empire through the mechanisms of colonial rule, analyzing both the objectives of imperial governance and the actual impact of reformist policies on indigenous communities of Kazakhstan.¹⁰

⁵ Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatoly Remnev, eds., *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). and Jane Burbank, “An Imperial Rights Regime. Law and Citizenship in the Russian Empire,” *Kritika. Russian and Eurasian History*, 3 (2006): 402.

⁶ In reference to: Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatoly Remnev, eds., *Russian Empire*, 2007.

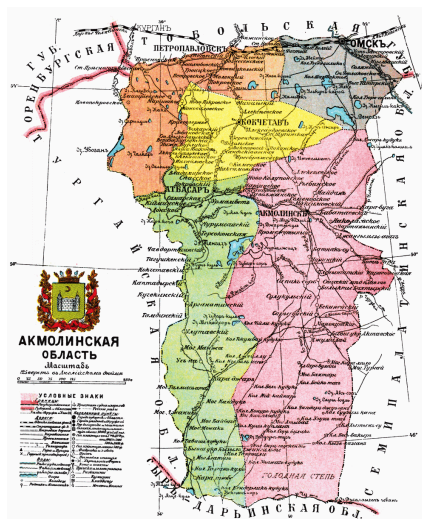
⁷ Tomohiko Uyama, ed., *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007)

⁸ Morrison, A. (2012). *Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire*. *Kritika: Russian and Eurasian History*. 13. 327-364.

⁹ Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006),

¹⁰ This study draws on primary sources from TsGARK: judicial and administrative records on mullah elections, Islamic education, concerns regarding the Orenburg Mufti’s influence. Additionally, it incorporates official reports from the Provincial Administration (1867–early 1900s) and statistical publications by imperial officials from the Omsk State Regional Library, Russian Federation.

Accordingly, this study poses the following question: How did Russian imperial reforms, aimed at integrating Kazakh communities into the Empire and transforming Islamic authority and education in the Kazakh Steppe between 1868 and 1905, reflect the state's security-driven fears, and what do their failures reveal about the limits of colonial governance? As such, the research focuses on the territories of present-day cities of Petropavlovsk, Kokshetau, Akmolinsk (modern-day Astana), Atbasar, and Omsk, which prior to the Soviet period formed part of the Akmolinsk Province (1868–1917). As one of several vast imperial administrative units in Central Asia, the province spanned over 500,000 km²—from Ulu-Tau and the Ishim River in the west to the Irtysh River in the east, and from Omsk in the north to the Sary-Su and Chu Rivers in the south¹¹—and was home to a predominantly Muslim population.¹²



Map of the Akmolinsk Province, 1913¹³

Regarding methodology, this study employs a framework informed by Amanda Lagji's *Postcolonial Fiction and Colonial Time*,¹⁴ which builds on Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*¹⁵ to argue that Empires impose their own sense of time on their subjects. This concept is

¹¹ Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire. Vol. 43 (1868), Article 364.

¹² *First General Census of the Population of the Russian Empire in 1897*. Table XIII, "Distribution of the Population by Native Language" (Provincial Results). Vols. 51–89. St. Petersburg, 1903–1905.

¹³ *Geograficheskoe opisaniye Rossiiskoi Imperii po guberniiam i oblastiam s geograficheskimi kartami*. Sankt-Peterburg: Tipografiya "Berezhlivost'," Rossiia, 1913, 286.

¹⁴ Lagji, Amanda. *Postcolonial Fiction and Colonial Time: Waiting for Now*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022.

¹⁵ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (New Edition)*. Princeton University Press, 2000.

reflected in the “waiting room” model of history, often used in studies of nationalism, where waiting for national “realization” serves as an analytical tool for understanding power structures. To clarify, these perspectives provide valuable frameworks for analyzing the Temporary Steppe Provision of 1868, which established Akmolinsk and created a distinctly colonial legal environment by partially suspending imperial laws to advance Russian administrators’ long-term objectives, effectively placing Steppe populations in a “waiting room” of imperial governance.

Hence, this study argues that evaluating the case of the Akmolinsk Province may contribute to understanding how Russian colonial reforms—especially following the 1868 Temporary Provision—sought to integrate Kazakhs through peasant colonization and the local regulation of religious affairs, but ultimately produced marginalization and factionalism among rural Kazakhs. Moreover, while both imperial functionaries and urban Muslims acknowledged Kazakh isolation, they held conflicting visions for addressing it: imperial officials oscillated between civic integration through Russification, bouts of “information panics” over OMSA’s Islamic activities¹⁶ and a conservative preference for stability over reform, whereas urban Muslims advocated for the institutionalization of Islam through the creation of a Kazakh Muftiate. Hence, I show how the 1868 and 1891 reforms pushed Kazakhs into fragmented rural identities through land delimitation and state-controlled elections, fostering division over integration. Furthermore, the failed efforts between 1898 and 1905 to counter OMSA’s influence¹⁷—whether through Russification or the contrary proposal to establish a Kazakh Muftiate—revealed imperial neglect of rural Kazakhs and the limits of reform, showing how security-driven policies ultimately hindered the Steppe’s integration into colonial governance.

¹⁶OMSA = Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly. Initially, the imperial government facilitated the expansion of OMSA in the Kazakh Steppe. However, this policy was later reversed. See: Allen J. Frank, “Tatarskie mully sredi kazakhov i kirgizov v XVIII–XIX vekakh,” in *Kul'tura, iskusstvo tatarskogo naroda: Istoki, traditsii, vzaimosviazi* (Kazan: Institut istorii AN RT, 1993), 124–131., Sultangalieva, Gulmira. “Tatarskaia diaspora v konfessional'nykh svyaziakh kazakhskoi stepi, XVIII–XIX vv.” *Vestnik Evrazii* 4 (2000).

¹⁷ A good example of the Kazakh and Tatar Communities engaging with the Orenburg Assembly to vote on a mullah is presented by Pavel Shabley in Semipalatinsk. However, it is an urban city case, which is distinct from volost (rural) elections. See, Shabley, Pavel. “Rossiiskaia imperiia i musul'mane Semipalatinska: disbalans vlasti i neodnorodnye obshchestva v kontse XIX veka.” *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2019): 47–87.

Historiography of Colonization and Reforms of the Akmolinsk Province

In this section, I will first fill in the historiographical gaps to overview key aspects of 1868 and 1891 judicial reforms—both at the macro and micro levels—alongside the broader colonization of Akmolinsk Province to later interpret how these developments shaped Kazakh responses and adaptations. Ultimately, I argue that the reforms contributed to a distinctly rural Kazakh identity, reinforcing a communal approach to engagement with colonial authorities.

Generally, in historical scholarship on Russian Imperial frontiers inhabited by Muslim Turkic peoples, the mid-to-late 19th century— following what Paul Werth termed Russia’s “Quiet Revolution” in 1837 and the transition into the “Long 19th Century”¹⁸ – is widely recognized as a transformative period. During this time, Russian and Qing military elites carried out extensive conquests into the Kazakh Steppe, the Ferghana Valley, and East Turkestan, seeking to assimilate the region’s ‘alien’ Islamic populations under a civilizing mission.¹⁹ Accordingly, as Gulbanu Izbasarova notes, while the Russian imperial agendas of 1822 and the 1844 reforms prioritized the partial integration of Kazakh elites, frontier security, diplomacy, and economic interests, it was only after the 1860s that Russia fully committed to integrating the Kazakh *zhūzes* into the Empire—an effort that began as early as the 1730s.²⁰ Likewise, as Alexander Morrison observes, this shift is indicative of the popular sentiments among the post-Napoleonic cohort of Russian generals, who viewed the supposed insubordination of the Kazakh and Central Asian Khanates as intolerable for an empire striving for ‘Great Power’ status, while Russia’s growing rivalry with Britain and France to emulate their Imperial prestige informed the timing of its conquests.²¹

¹⁸ Werth, Paul. *1837: Russia's Quiet Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

¹⁹ Schluessel, Eric. *Land of Strangers: The Civilizing Project in Qing Central Asia*. Columbia University Press, 2020.

²⁰ Izbasarova, Gulbanu. *Kazakhskaiia step' Orenburgskogo vedomstva v imperskikh proektakh i praktikakh pervoi poloviny XIX veka*. Moscow: IP Lysenko A. D. PRESS-BOOK.RU, 2018., p.430-440

²¹ Morrison, Alexander. *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Still, while this era is often framed within postludes of great Muslim empires and the prelude of Russian and Chinese colonial rule, Wali Ziad argues for analyzing it on its own terms, highlighting Central Asia as a dynamic space characterized by active Islamic pilgrimage and trade networks, mobile financial capital, and diverse states operating under varying modes of sovereignty.²² In this regard, Danielle Ross and Zafar Makhmutov explore how the mass relocation of tens of thousands of Kazan Tatar merchants, ulama, and Volga-Ural Muslims to Petropavlovsk, Kokshetau, Akmolinsk, and Semipalatinsk from 1788 to the first half of the 19th century expanded trade in the Kazakh Steppe, fostering the development of the printing press, rising literacy rates, an Islamic educational revival, modern consumer appetites for luxury goods from China and Europe, and the emergence of an urban Muslim culture—all facilitated by the Russian state and the networks of the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly.²³ Similarly, by the mid 19th century, prior to the formation of the Akmolinsk Province, the Kazakh steppe already featured a “*syncretic legal culture*” that blended *adat* (customary law) and *sharia* (Islamic Law), *aruaq* (ancestral veneration),²⁴ widespread presence of the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly and Sufi brotherhoods, shaping a diverse religious elite that included Kazakh *mullahs* and *khojas*, as well as Tatar, Bashkir, and Central Asian *ulama*, each with varying Islamic training and perspectives on imperial influence.²⁵

However, by the mid-19th century, the resurgence of Naqshbandi Sufi leaders and their *Murids* during the Wars in Caucasus, perceived by imperial officials as an organized resistance to Russia, heightened suspicion toward mass Muslim gatherings in Central Asia and the Kazan Tatar region. Naturally, the activities of Sufi movements, including figures like Muhammad

²² Ziad, Waleed. *Hidden Caliphate: Sufi Saints beyond the Oxus and Indus*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021.

²³ Ross, Danielle. *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. And Makhmutov, Z. A. *Istoriia tatar Astany (XIX – nachalo XXI v.)*. Kazan: Tatar Book Publishing House, 2017.

²⁴ Privratsky, Bruce. *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (Richmond, Surrey: Routledge, 2001), 17–18.

²⁵ Frank, Allen. "Shari'a Debates and Fatwas Among Nomads in Northern Kazakhstan, 1850–1931." *Islamic Law and Society* 24 (2017): 61–76.

Sharif Mansur, Mulla Murad, Maylybay Malkarov, Maral Kurmanov, and many others contributed to an "information panic" within the Russian administration, leading authorities to associate Islam with resistance and fanaticism.²⁶ Consequently, in 1868, Russian officials removed Orenburg Assembly's jurisdiction over the Steppes, whom they viewed as promoting Islamic puritanism and anti-Russian sentiment among the allegedly superficially Muslim Kazakh.²⁷ Still, as Danielle Ross observes, this shift stemmed from Russia's earlier reliance on Kazan Tatars and OMSA to help settle, civilize, and administer the region—a policy that inadvertently fueled an Islamic revival the empire struggled to control.²⁸ Paul Werth, too, agrees that the 1868 reform in Central Asia coincided with the Russian Empire's later national renewal efforts to balance the promotion of the Russian language, Orthodox Christianity, and imperial legal norms with the accommodation of indigenous customs and spirituality, aiming to mitigate bureaucratic fears of separatism and external influence.²⁹

Following the "macro-level" political break with the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, Russian officials also sought to integrate the Kazakh Steppe into the empire through "civilizing" policies, where micro-level colonialist discourse was most evident. At the administrative level, the provision established five districts (*uezdy*)—Petrovsk, Kokshetau, Omsk, Akmolinsk, and Atbasar (formerly Sarysu)—each governed by a district head (*nachalnik*). On an even smaller level, it introduced indigenous administrative roles, organizing Kazakh communities into *auls* (villages) and *volosts* (rural collectives of several villages). In turn, aul leaders were elected within their villages and subsequently elected a volost

²⁶ The idea of panic and general fears of Russian Imperial officials is shared by Alexander Morrison, Paolo Sartori, and Pavel Shabley. Paolo Sartori and Pavel Shabley, "Delo Muhammada Sharifa Mansurova: Rossiiskaia imperiia i sufizm v Kazakhskoi stepi v seredine XIX veka," *Cahiers du monde russe* 64, no. 3–4 (2023): 561–594. and Alexander Morrison, "Sufism, Pan-Islamism and Information Panic: Nil Sergeevich Lykoshin and the Aftermath of the Andijan Uprising," *Past & Present* 214 (2012): 255–304.

²⁷ Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan*, 2001, p.17.

²⁸ Ross, Danielle. 2020, p.45

²⁹ Werth, Paul. *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths: Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

administrator (*volostnoy upravitel'*), with the latter being re-elected every three years, reflecting efforts to introduce democratic principles. Furthermore, these reforms also strengthened state control by introducing imperial law courts while maintaining native legal institutions. Thus, courts based on customary law (*adat*), overseen by *biys*, and Islamic law (*sharia*), administered by rural mullahs, were relegated to handling only minor criminal, marital, and civil cases, with the imperial courts holding primary authority. Both *biys* and mullahs were elected within auls and overseen by aul leaders and volost administrators, reinforcing the colonial administration's hierarchical control, expanding bureaucratization, and formalizing rural mullah elections as an alternative to those appointed by the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly.

Even more critically, the 1868 Temporary Steppe Provision designated Kazakh lands as state property, restricting Kazakhs to rights of use or extended lease for the later colonization agenda.³⁰ By 1874, General Governor Kaznakov of West Siberia promoted careful colonization to avoid provoking Kazakh resistance, but the policy failed due to the poor selection of plots for peasant cultivation, resulting in unauthorized settlers (*samovoltsy*) chaotically moving into the province.³¹ Later, general Kolpakovskii in the 1880s deemed the steppe unfit for settlement and too dangerous due to high crime, leading to a temporary halt in peasant migrations.³² Simultaneously, environmental disasters like particularly harsh winters, poor harvests, and *jut* (famine winters) devastated local economies, with the 1880 *jut* alone causing the loss of 700,000 cattle in Akmolinsk province; meanwhile, massive fires, including the 1883 wildfire that burned 2,000 km² of forest and destroyed numerous homes, further destabilized the region.³³

³⁰ Alberto Masoero argues that the Russian Empire's colonization efforts of Asia, including the 1898–1901 land privatization in Siberia and Northern Kazakhstan was driven more by imperial anxieties and political control than economic liberalization. See: Masoero, Alberto. "Layers of Property in the Tsar's Settlement Colony: Projects of Land Privatization in Siberia in the Late Nineteenth Century." *Central Asian Survey* 29, no. 1 (2010): 9–32.

³¹ Konshin, N. *Kratkii statisticheskii ocherk promyshlennosti i trgovli v Akmolinskoi oblasti za 1880–1894 gg.* Omsk: Akmolinsk Statistical Committee, 1896., p.8-9, p.10-11

³² *Obzor Akmolinskoi Oblasti za 1883g.* Omsk: Printing House of the Akmolinsk Regional Administration, 1883. p.10-14.

³³ *Obzor Akmolinskoi Oblasti za 1883.* Omsk: Printing House of the Akmolinsk Regional Administration, 1883, 26–27.

Interestingly, Kazakh communities strategically adapted to new land policies by shortening migration routes to secure economic advantages, maintaining ownership over smaller pastures, and increasingly settling year-round in winter pastures, relying on stored hay instead of seasonal migration.³⁴ Consequently, increased trade and closer interactions with settled communities fostered denser pastoralist communities, which also led to deadly disease outbreaks among livestock and people. These challenges gradually shifted the dominant social unit among Kazakhs from large clan congregations to smaller extended family groups following the 1868 reform. Aldashev and Guirkinger further analyze this shift, arguing that growing land pressure and advancements in agricultural technology encouraged a transition toward a semi-sedentary mixed economy, expanding extended family groups while stabilizing household sizes.³⁵ Hence, as communes and clans weakened, land ownership became increasingly individualized, forcing households to depend more on hired labor, including poorer relatives without cattle and land (*jataqs*), to sustain their livelihoods and retain property rights.

However, the 1889 Resettlement Act further accelerated settlement in the region by formalizing state-sponsored migration, granting Russian peasants 15 desyatinas (16.4 hectares) per household, a process that peaked after 1906 under Stolypin's agrarian reforms.³⁶ Furthermore, to accommodate the anticipated influx of settlers while maintaining stability among the nomadic Kazakhs, the 1891 Steppe Statute introduced significant legal and administrative changes. It expanded police oversight in cities under military governors, increased the numbers of medical facilities, reorganized districts into multiple peasant sectors (*krestyanskii uchastok*) governed by peasant chiefs (*nachal'nik*) subordinate to district heads, and established regional

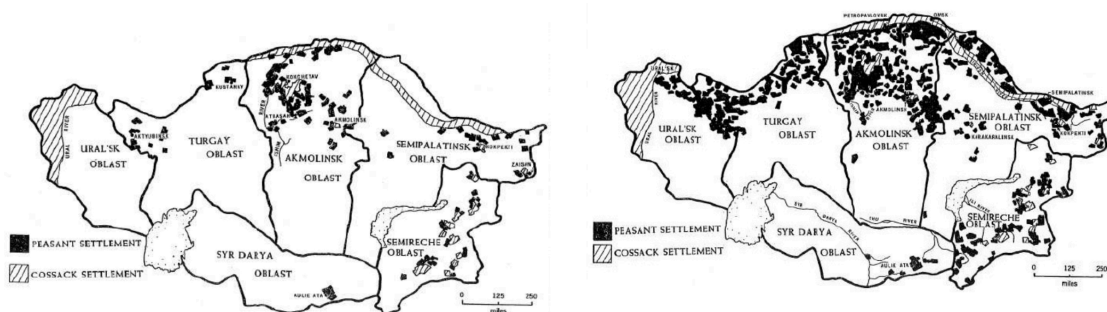
³⁴ *Materialy po kirgizskomu zemlepol'zovaniiu, sobrannye i razrabotannye Ekspeditsiei po issledovaniiu stepnykh oblasteivol.* 3, pt. 2, *Akmolinskaia oblast'. Akmolinskii uezd*, ed. E. Dobrovol'skii (Akmolinsk Province: Printing House of G.M. Veselaya, 1909), 103–113.

³⁵ Aldashev, Gani, and Catherine Guirkinger. "Colonization and Changing Social Structure: Kazakhstan, 1896-1910." *ECARES, ULB - CP 114/04*, 2004., p.15-16

³⁶ Martin, Virginia. *Law and Custom in the Steppe: The Kazakhs of the Middle Horde and Russian Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century*. Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2001., p.87-95

courts while preserving Kazakh *biys*’ and renaming them into people’s judges (*narodniye sud’ii*) courts for customary law.³⁷ The statute also reaffirmed state ownership of Kazakh lands, reallocating "excess" land to incoming settlers.³⁸ Meanwhile, the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the 1890s further intensified peasant migration and land dispossession among Kazakhs. The following quote from the Official 1891 Survey of the Akmolinsk Province offers insight into the steppe’s conditions from the perspective of Russian imperial authorities:

“Two cultures compete in the Akmolinsk region: the northern Russian influence and the southern, Turkestan-origin Sart culture. Both pressure nomads to adopt sedentary agriculture alongside livestock farming. However, natural conditions limit this transition, as only one-sixth of the land is suitable for farming. While irrigation can improve soil quality, water scarcity remains a challenge. Given these constraints, large-scale livestock farming remains more viable. Thus, the regional administration prioritizes supporting the Kazakh steppe pastoralism.”³⁹



Patterns of Russian settlements in Kazakhstan around 1900 (left) and 1915 (right)⁴⁰

By 1915, the population of Akmolinsk Province had more than doubled in less than 50 years, reaching nearly 1.6 million. Kazakhs numbered approximately 570,000, while Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians together exceeded 874,000. Other groups included 25,000 Tatars, 30,000 Germans, 17,000 Poles, and 9,000 Jews, along with other minorities. Cossacks controlled 26,000 km², peasant settlers held 63,000 km², and Kazakhs retained approximately 400,000 km²,

³⁷ ‘Polozhenie ob upravlenii oblastei Akmolinskoi, Semipalatinskoi, Semirechenskoi, Ural’skoi i Turgaiskoi i ob izmenenii nekotorykh statei Polozhenii ob upravlenii Turkestantskago kraia’ *PSZ Sob.3* Tom XI (1891) No.7574 p.143

³⁸ Martin, Virginia, *Law and Custom in the Steppe*, p. 94-99

³⁹ *Obzor Akmolinskoi Oblasti za 1891g.* Omsk: Printing House of the Akmolinsk Regional Administration, 1891, p.22

⁴⁰ Aldashev, Gani & Guirkinger, Catherine, *Colonization and changing social structure*, p.61

with the remainder allocated to cities and minority communities.⁴¹ Naturally, in the 1890s mass peasant settlements threatened Kazakh semi-nomadic livelihoods, leading to a surge in petitions to provincial authorities—particularly concerning land disputes, rising crime, and inheritance issues. This trend is especially evident in the Atbasar district, home to predominantly Kazakh communities, and Kokshetau, a major destination for peasant settlement. Between 1893 and 1895, court cases in Atbasar surged, reflecting Kazakhs' rising engagement with the colonial judicial system, while Kokshetau already had a substantial and steadily increasing caseload.

Criminal & Civil Case Statistics in Omsk City Magistrate, Districts of Kokshetau and Atbasar (1893-1895)⁴²

Year	Omsk (City Magistrate Cases)	% Increase	Kokshetau (District Cases)	% Increase	Atbasar (District Cases)	% Increase
1893	91	-	439	-	36	-
1894	195	114.3%	933	112.5%	261	625%
1895	276	41.5%	1251	34.1%	427	63.6%

Still, surprisingly, despite significant land loss and only modest population growth, Kazakh communities responded by dividing their volosts, doubling their numbers of volosts between 1868 and 1917—from approximately 45–50 to 115–120—in reaction to increasing pressures and peasant colonization.⁴³ Thus, Kazakhs likely began to see auls and volosts not merely as imperial administrative units on the map, but as platforms for appointing their own native administrators, biys, and mullahs to assert their rights. Overall, these dynamics suggest that economic and political motivations prompted Kazakhs to strategically engage with imperial structures and communicate with imperial authorities to advance their interests.

⁴¹ *Review of Akmolinsk Province for the Year 1915*. Omsk: Printing House of the Akmolinsk Regional Administration, 1915, p.12-13

⁴² TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3544, p.3-5

⁴³ Bimoldanova, Aigul, Dalayeva Tenlik, and Bekmagambetova Maysara. "Socio-Historical Portrait of the Kazakh Volost Rulers of the Steppe Region, the Russian Empire (Second Half of the 19th – Early 20th Centuries)." *Bylye Gody* 47 (2018), p.312

Likewise, Virginia Martin and Paolo Sartori further support this analysis: Russian judicial reforms in the Kazakh Steppe and Turkestan Province produced unintended consequences, as Muslims actively engaged with multiple legal systems to navigate colonial rule. For instance, Sartori argues that rather than viewing Russian courts as inherently prejudicial, Kazakhs in Tashkent strategically petitioned and prepared appeals according to the Imperial codes, and made allegations of corruption or legal ignorance to influence authorities while continuing to rely on indigenous Islamic courts under imperial oversight.⁴⁴ In the meantime, native colonial offices such as *aksakals*, *qadis*, and *biys* played a crucial role in shaping legal consciousness of Kazakhs despite accusations of bias or moral failings.⁴⁵ Similarly, Martin demonstrates that Russian reforms entangled *biy* judges in kinship loyalties and land disputes, leading many Kazakhs to seek justice through alternative means, including village elders, mullahs, and *qadis*.⁴⁶

Accordingly, the interference of volost administrators and district officials further complicated the system, facilitating the consolidation of power among Kazakh elites and, unexpectedly for Russian authorities, the emergence of hereditary administrative dynasties.⁴⁷ More broadly, this dynamic signaled a transformation in how Kazakhs conceived of authority, justice, and their relationship with the state. By engaging with customary law, Islamic law, and Russian courts, they developed a nuanced political consciousness that blended local traditions with imperial legal norms. In this way, Kazakhs asserted a measure of autonomy while adapting to a shifting legal landscape, fostering a distinctly factionalist consciousness within the rural, colonial legal-political order of Akmolinsk, where strategically framed petitions in the language of imperial bureaucracy compelled negotiations over the evolving contours of colonial rule.

⁴⁴ Sartori, P. “Judicial Elections as a Colonial Reform: The *Qadis* and *Biys* in Tashkent, 1868-1883”, *Cahiers du monde russe*, 2008, Vol 49, p.79-100, p.85-86, 99-100

⁴⁵ Sartori, Paolo, *Judicial Elections as a Colonial Reform*, p. 98

⁴⁶ Martin, Virginia, *Law and Custom in the Steppe*, p.139-143

⁴⁷ Bimoldanova, Aigul et al., *Socio-Historical Portrait of the Kazakh Volost Rulers*, p.314

Contested Elections of Rural Mullahs: Adapting to the Colonial Anxieties

This section examines how reforms influenced mullah elections, highlighting tensions between local communal agency, where Kazakhs framed their needs in a language shaped by the anxieties of the imperial bureaucracy, and the suspicion with which Russian officials viewed religious activity, while in the case of Zhuken Ayderkin, a Kazakh volost administrator, local elections was conceptualized as a tool for advancing policies of Kazakh renewal and integration into the Empire. Simultaneously, they served as a focal point for Kazakhs to address spiritual needs and voice broader grievances—highlighting the marginalizing and sluggish nature of imperial governance. In this context, Robert Crews⁴⁸ and James Meyer⁴⁹ argue that the 1868 reform fostered a shared language between the state and Muslim subjects, while Elena Campbell contends that the Russian "Muslim question," shaped by Orientalist assumptions and colonial practices, cast reforms as attempts to integrate Muslims into the fabric of Russian society.⁵⁰

However, Pavel Shabley's perspective is especially relevant to this analysis, as he emphasizes how Muslims employed varied linguistic strategies in petitions to navigate an unresponsive imperial bureaucracy.⁵¹ He shows that Kazakhs and other Muslims were divided by competing interests and often resisted integration—driven by fears of Christianization, rising Russian nationalism, and linguistic barriers. Local administrations, too, lacking coherent policy enforcement, further deepened this disconnect. Hence, this dynamic reflects James Scott's notion of "weapons of the weak,"⁵² evident in Shabley's account of Semipalatinsk Kazakhs lobbying for their preferred mullah through repeated petitions and leveraging bureaucrats' political rhetoric.

⁴⁸ Crews Robert, *For Prophet and Tsar*, 20, 26.

⁴⁹ Meyer, James "Speaking Sharia to the State: Muslim Protesters, Tsarist Officials, and the Islamic Discourses of Late Imperial Russia," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 14, no. 3 (2013): 487.

⁵⁰ Campbell, Elena *The Muslim Question and Russian Imperial Governance*. Bloomington, 2015. Pp. 6, 10.

⁵¹ Pavel Shabley, *Rossiiskaia Imperiia i musul'mane Semipalatinska*, 47-87

⁵² Scott, James, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

In this regard, the tragic fate of Zhuken Ayderkin, administrator of the Kireev volost in Akmolinsk province, offers a revealing glimpse into the contentious landscape during the early years of the 1868 reform and how mullah elections were conceptualized as integrationist tools. In 1870, Frolov, head of the Akmolinsk district, reported to General-Governor of Western Siberia, Okolnichy, that Ayderkin and several other volost administrators had refused to wear the their office's official insignia, citing the Christian cross on the imperial emblem as a sinful symbol for Muslims.⁵³ Frolov also accused Ayderkin of spreading rumors that Russian authorities intended to undermine Islam, and of collecting unauthorized taxes to finance a trip to Omsk and Saint Petersburg, where he allegedly planned to present his grievances to the Governor-General and even the Emperor.⁵⁴ Alarmed by these developments, Okolnichy interpreted them as signs of sabotage and fanaticism, instructing district heads to emphasize that the imperial emblem's cross had long been accepted by Kazakh rulers as a symbol of Russian sovereignty.⁵⁵

Simultaneously, district heads in Petropavlovsk and Atbasar warned that the 1868 severance from the Orenburg Assembly had generated widespread discontent, eroding the legitimacy of Russian officials among Kazakh communities.⁵⁶ In response, the General-Governor recommended telling Kazakh communities that the new policies were measures of local autonomy to avoid unrest. He figured that allowing Kazakhs to elect their own mullahs, thereby fostering a sense of self-governance, was supposed to spare them from OMSA's biased testing procedures, and relieving the financial burden of supporting OMSA-appointed religious leaders.⁵⁷ Amid these shifting dynamics, Ayderkin denied all charges, citing a lack of evidence.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, he was dismissed, imprisoned, and exiled to European Russia as a laborer. His

⁵³ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.1963, 1.12-12b

⁵⁴ Ibid, 1.30-31

⁵⁵ Ibid, 1.58-60b

⁵⁶ Ibid, 1.40-41b,

⁵⁷ Ibid, 1.25-29

⁵⁸ Ibid, 1.38-39

once-promising career ended in decades of separation from his wife and children—a fate documented in letters and petitions analyzed by Dmitrii Vasiliyev.⁵⁹

Interestingly, Ayderkin’s case unfolded amid a broader wave of petitions across the province. In July 1870, thirty-four biy judges and Kazakh leaders from Akmolinsk district signed a petition seeking to send a deputation to Saint Petersburg to present grievances and propose changes to the Temporary Steppe Statute’s Islamic policies.⁶⁰ A similar petition soon followed from Petropavlovsk district. However, Akmolinsk district head Frolov quickly questioned their legitimacy, alleging that some signatures were forged or obtained without consent. He suspected local mullah Maykuben Kusegenov of orchestrating a conspiracy due to his ties with OMSA, though Kusegenov denied any involvement.⁶¹ In the end, rejecting both petitions, Frolov claimed in the past 15 years Kazakh shamans and baqsi had been rapidly replaced by dervishes, Bukhari and Turkestani ishans, and Tatar mullahs spreading Islamism through trade fairs, schools, and religious texts.⁶² Though he acknowledged that trade with China and Turkestan had enriched local Kazakh and Russian merchants, he warned the General Governor that it also facilitated the spread of Islamic fanaticism—an obstacle to the “*Kazakh people’s renewal*” that, in his view, required increased Russian settlement to secure the steppe’s integration into the empire.⁶³

Yet, how these efforts at *people’s renewal* through localized self-governance were translated into practice? While the 1868 reform removed the requirement of OMSA-led testing and certification, the selection of Kazakh volost mullahs still partially followed the Volga-Ural model. This required a communal *prigovor* (community decision)⁶⁴ and limited voting—under

⁵⁹ Vasiliyev, Dmitrii. "Provedenie administrativnoi reformy 1868 goda v Kazakhskoi stepi: sud'ba odnoi sem'i." *Novyi istoricheskii vestnik*, no. 1 (59), 2019, pp. 61–76.

⁶⁰ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.1963, l.63-64

⁶¹ Ibid, l.65-67

⁶² Ibid, l.168-170

⁶³ Ibid, 171-173b

⁶⁴ Garipova, Rozaliya *The Transformation of the Ulama and the Shari'a in the Volga-Ural Muslim Community under Russian Imperial Rule*. PhD diss., Princeton University, 2013. Chapter 2, “Becoming an Imam,” 92–96

district supervision—to biys, aul leaders, and one rural elector per 50 male community members for the appointment of a single mullah per volost. In the Steppe, unlike the detailed Tatar prigovory that included census data and credentials,⁶⁵ petitions were simpler, required no formal certification, but still needed majority decision of the electors and approval from both district head and the General Governor.⁶⁶ Furthermore, after the 1891 reform and with the increasing presence of Slavic settlers in Akmolinsk, the procedure for electing mullahs began to warrant involvement of the slavic peasant chiefs, who often tasked with overseeing elections, forwarding nominations to district heads, and seeking ratification from the provincial general governor.

For instance, in early 1905, the chief of Omsk district's 1st peasant sector reported the deaths of two volost mullahs and nominated successors: Shaikhislyam Konofia Kopturov for Kyzylgak Volost and Mukhamedzhan Teldzhanov for Pokrovskaya Volost.⁶⁷ These nominations followed established procedures, with swift approval from the district head and military governor, suggesting that mullah appointments were often efficient when local preferences aligned with administrative expectations. Likewise, in Kireevskaya Volost, following the death of Mullah Baytan Baymagambetov in 1909, the chief of the 4th Atbasar peasant sector oversaw the 1912 election by a council of 20 electors of Suleimen Ryspayev, a 35-year-old literate imam with strong moral character but limited Russian proficiency. Background checks confirmed his suitability, and his appointment faced no objections from district or provincial authorities.⁶⁸ Similarly, in Barniuliyskaya volost, the chief of the 3rd peasant sector supported the 1912 election of Omar Kunangarin, whose education in a Kazakh primary school and clean legal record secured gubernatorial confirmation in 1913.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Garipova, Rozaliya, 2013, p.115-120

⁶⁶ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.3472, l.1, l.2, l.24

⁶⁷ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d. 3887, l.21-29b

⁶⁸ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.4191, l.21-44

⁶⁹ Ibid, l.54-63

However, despite procedural streamlining, the legal criteria for who could serve as a mullah remained vague, and some individuals continued to act as mullahs even without official sanction due to bureaucratic oversights, leading to complications. In the Petropavlovsk district, for example, the 1893 election of Khamza Aisin Sarymsakov as volost mullah encountered delays and bureaucratic resistance. His initial nomination within a local aul went unrati ed in the General Governor office by accident, and it was only after he renewed his petition in 1897 that the process resumed—suggesting he may have served unofficially for nearly six years.⁷⁰ This prompted a legal debate over the validity of the original election. The district head objected on the grounds of Sarymsakov’s youth and the outdated nature of the vote, arguing that, under Article 78, such elections had to be conducted at a volost assembly rather than within a single aul.⁷¹ Later, a new volost level assembly was held in April 1898, where Sarymsakov narrowly won with 19 out of 36 votes. With no legal grounds to reject the outcome—Sarymsakov had no criminal or disciplinary record—the district head endorsed the election, and submitted the case to the Steppe Governor-General for final approval.⁷² Overall, some district heads were committed more to the public preferences over rigid procedure.

While candidates like Sarymsakov were deemed as too young, others were considered unsuitable due to advanced age, lack of education, or poor reputation. In the Bes-Obinskaya volost of the Atbasar district, for instance, the elderly mullah Imamkhoja Baytursunov was replaced by Kenesbay Toktarov following several village assembly decisions that criticized Baytursunov’s advanced age and his inability to properly perform religious rituals.⁷³ Baytursunov protested in 1913, claiming he had never resigned, labeling the elections as fraudulent, and

⁷⁰ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.3647, l.3-4

⁷¹ Ibid, l.5

⁷² Ibid, l.13

⁷³ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.4191, l.63

requesting an investigation. Despite his objections and authorities' preoccupation, the village's choice was upheld, noting strong local support for Toktarov.⁷⁴ However, administrative paralysis dragged on for years, with the chief of 4th peasant sector admitting his limited understanding of mullah's role in 1912, hinting at uneven accumulation of knowledge among officials.⁷⁵

Furthermore, despite prevailing fears of "Asiatic" Islamic fanaticism emanating from Turkestan, Akmolinsk provincial officials at times permitted local Kazakh graduates of Turkestani madrasas to serve as volost mullahs. In one such case in Ishim Volost, Ture Khanafi—appointed mullah in 1902—discovered in 1906 that he had been replaced by Kudaibergen Tekin.⁷⁶ Although Tekin lacked Russian literacy and documentation of his studies, his local reputation and background in a Turkestani Muslim school earned him community support, potentially compelling the authorities to not intervene in the election.⁷⁷ When Khanafi petitioned for state support, the governor's office confirmed his dismissal, demonstrating that the positions of mullahs were not strictly safeguarded by imperial authorities but were instead often contingent on local support, even taking precedence over formal qualifications.

Similarly, some mullah appointments provoked community protests, whether in response to provincial interference or to electoral procedures that failed to reflect popular will or even personal interests of select individuals. In Karachin Volost, for example, elders—led by Balqozha Kudaibergenov—protested the election of Jakup Kuchukpayev, accusing volost administrator Kasym Kunurgolzhin and biy-judge Mukhan Bekeyev of manipulating the process.⁷⁸ Petitions alleged that officials coerced elders into signing pre-written endorsements, while an official investigation hastily confirmed that Kuchukpayev had actively lobbied for the position.

⁷⁴ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.4191, l.1.9-11

⁷⁵ Ibid, l.21

⁷⁶ Ibid, l.10

⁷⁷ ibid

⁷⁸ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d. 3887, l.29-29b

Responding to the complaints, authorities annulled the result and organized a new election in April 1906, resulting in the appointment of Khabibulla Makyshev, who was confirmed in June.⁷⁹

In another case in Akkum-Nurin Volost, despite 14 out of 23 electors backing Khasen Sharmukhamed, over 600 khibitka-owning households petitioned against his appointment.⁸⁰ They claimed that the electoral process had been fraudulent—alleging forged signatures, disregard for popular opinion, and that Sharmukhamed lacked proper religious qualifications. Similarly, in 1905, Omar Kumangarin of Sary-Su Volost (Atbasar district) petitioned for the removal of mullah Saydaly Umin, accusing him of being a divisive and morally corrupt figure. However, an investigation revealed that Umin enjoyed the support of local elders and that Kumangarin's complaint was rooted in a personal dispute over marriage fees—specifically, a higher fee charged to his relative.⁸¹ The administration ultimately upheld Umin's position, citing his honorable conduct and financial independence, while also recommending him to vary his fees according to the circumstances of individual families. Interestingly, these cases also illustrated how Kazakhs employed diverse petition strategies that partially paralleled earlier actions of the bureaucracy.

Moreover, rather intriguingly, amid the division of volosts and administrative restructuring, stark conflicts between Kazakh communities and volost mullahs were also exposed. After the division of Chirubai-Nurinskaya volost of the Akmolinsk district into Chirubai-Nurinskaya and Sharyktinskaya volosts, Jarmukhamet Jaslanov, who had been confirmed as mullah by gubernatorial order in 1908, requested to remain in his position within the newly formed Sharyktinskaya volost without new elections.⁸² While a local official suggested that no new election was necessary, opposition from some local Kazakhs led to a community

⁷⁹ Ibid, 1.31b

⁸⁰ Ibid, 1.37

⁸¹ Ibid, 1.55-56b

⁸² TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.4157, 1.7-10

decision on November 7, 1910, rejecting Jaslanov and requesting his removal. The electors of the newly formed Sharyktinskaya Volost argued that Jaslanov's appointment lacked full community support and had been unfairly imposed during the volost division. Accusing Jaslanov of senility and incompetence, a faction informally elected Abdulkarim Bayborin as his replacement and petitioned for Jaslanov's dismissal and the official appointment of a new mullah.⁸³ Jaslanov protested, insisting on his lawful appointment and requesting an official inquiry. On January 30, 1912, ten elected representatives, among them Bayborin's close associates Ibragim Baltabayev and Japorov Bayradyn, formally petitioned for his removal and for Bayborin's election.⁸⁴ Under pressure from the Kazakh communities, this was confirmed in a June 1912 volost assembly and ratified by the governor in January 1913.

In another case, between 1894 and 1905, a dispute arose over the rightful jurisdiction of Nurgali Akhmetov, a mullah originally appointed in 1894 to serve the Kushmurun Volost.⁸⁵ In 1900, following the administrative transfer of Auls 7, 8, and 9 from Kushmurun to Srednyaya Volost, Akhmetov continued performing mullah duties in the new jurisdiction, claiming his new post at the Minaraly mosque of Aul 8. In 1905, he petitioned authorities to clarify whether he should serve in Kushmurun or Srednyaya Volost.⁸⁶ Unaware the issue had persisted, Russian authorities acted only after reviewing administrative records and finding no documentation of Akhmetov's reappointment. Realizing the oversight, they ordered his removal from the Kushmurun mullah post due to his relocation. On October 24, 1905, Burkutpay Bakin of Aul 2 was elected in his place, resolving the long-standing jurisdictional ambiguity.⁸⁷ Thus, like in other cases, the mullah's role within a volost occasionally invoked factional rivalry.

⁸³ Ibid, l.12

⁸⁴ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.4192, l.28-28b

⁸⁵ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.3887, l.63-74

⁸⁶ Ibid, l.65

⁸⁷ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.3887, l.74

At times, the death of a mullah or the arrival of new volost administrators triggered fresh elections, reflecting shifting local preferences and kinship ties of new native officials. In an 1894 petition, Ermagambet Bekkhozhin, acting mullah of Mulchaktin Volost, sought official confirmation after temporarily replacing the late Ziyanutlla Maykobenov in 1891 with the endorsement of then-volost administrator Kusaydar Kuzukanov.⁸⁸ Although Bekkhozhin's appointment was supported by the community and confirmed by the peasant chief in 1893, a new volost administrator initiated another election in 1894 after Kusaydar Kuzukanov lost his post, ultimately attempting to replace him. This suggests that volost administrators could potentially override prior confirmations and communal support by triggering re-elections.

In conclusion, cases like that of Jarmakhambet Gabaidullin of Kurgaldzhin Volost—who waited for three years after his election and the endorsement by the district chief in 1905, only to have his election rejected in 1908 due to the alleged failure to follow proper protocol⁸⁹—embody the frustrations of both Imperial officials and Kazakh communities with the slowness and the disarray surrounding mullah elections. Following the reform, widespread speculation, factionalism, and competing local interests reflected a continued demand for representation in religious and judicial affairs. Although initially framed as protective of Kazakh interests, the procedures surrounding the elections were unlikely to advance a coherent vision of Kazakh “renewal.” Instead, they served primarily to balance the *status quo*, contain unrest, and shield the steppe from external influences like OMSA. Lastly, while the reforms may have been envisioned by Imperial functionaries as a “waiting room”—intended to gradually transform Kazakhs for integration rather than empowerment—they ultimately provided Kazakhs with a powerful judicial tool and a reason to use it, leaving Imperial authorities struggling to maintain stability.

⁸⁸ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.3454, l.5-5b

⁸⁹ TsGARK, F.369, Op.1, d.3887, l.132-153

The Orenburg Assembly Under Fire: Dual Authority in the Akmolinsk Province?

The state of affairs and daily life in our final outpost on the boundless steppe—the city of Akmolinsk—which stands as the last bastion and the very embodiment of Russian power in the Muslim world, compels me, in my duty to keep Your Excellency promptly informed, to portray a bleak picture of the authority as it presently exists. This authority deviates from both the intentions and directives of the government that is now embodied in the city administration.”

– Troitsky A.I., Lieutenant Colonel, Akmolinsk District Head ⁹⁰

Although the 1868 reform legally removed the Orenburg Assembly from the rural Kazakh regions, its lingering influence in small provincial towns continued to trouble the minds of Russian imperial officials. This concern prompted a prolonged and fascinating investigation from the late 1890s up until 1905 aimed at fully eliminating its presence—a case that is the focus of this section. My argument here broadly aligns with Alberto Masoero’s view that Imperial Russian bureaucratic projects often exerted influence beyond their immediate implementation—or even their failures, such as earlier attempts to articulate a land reform in Siberia to prepare it for colonization—by facilitating the accumulation of administrative knowledge and shaping subsequent policies and practices.⁹¹ Hence, while the reforms of 1868 and 1891 may have limited the role of the Orenburg Mufti and facilitated Slavic settlement, a full-scale campaign to eliminate the Assembly’s presence was still yet to come.

In November 1899, the Steppe Governor-General received a confidential directive from the Chief of Staff, relaying the War Minister’s concerns about the growing influence of the Orenburg Mufti over Muslims in the Steppe Governor-Generalship.⁹² The War Minister stressed

⁹⁰ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3680, p.1 (1898)

⁹¹ Alberto Masoero, “Layers of Property in the Tsar’s Settlement Colony: Projects of Land Privatization in Siberia in the Late Nineteenth Century”, in: *The Land Question in Colonial Central Asia*, ed. Paolo Sartori (Central Asian Survey 29/1, 2010): 9–32.

⁹² TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, 1.1-1b

the need to restrict the Mufti's influence as part of broader measures being developed to prevent Muslim fanaticism in military-administered provinces like Akmolinsk. By December 1899, the Governor-General's office issued circulars to the district heads across the Akmolinsk Province. Most reports returned in early 1900 and dismissed any significant influence of the Orenburg Mufti. The Atbasar district chief and the Omks police chief both claimed the Mufti had no presence or impact in their areas.⁹³ However, the Akmolinsk district chief provided extensive reports that detailed the "indirect but significant religious influence" tied to the Orenburg Mufti.

In his report, Akmolinsk District Head Troitskii outlined several threats to Russian control, warning that Kazakh youth studying in Bukhara and Tatar-run mosque schools were being radicalized in unsupervised institutions that fostered Islamic fanaticism.⁹⁴ He also highlighted the influence of religious families in Turkestan, particularly the Khojas and Sayyids, who spread Islam and collected donations from Kazakhs. Likewise, surging pilgrimages to Mecca and Turkey, as Troitskii argued, disseminated foreign Islamic ideologies and facilitated the activities of Sarts and Tatars, who, posing as traders or circumcisers, spread harmful political ideas in Kazakh volosts. Hence, he recommended revoking travel permits, strictly controlling who could live in or enter the steppe, and even restricting Russian settlers—some of whom had allegedly converted to Islam and became respected mullahs.⁹⁵ Furthermore, Troitskii called for bringing all mosque schools under administrative oversight, enforcing Russian language instruction, and ensuring teachers were locally approved rather than religiously appointed. The report concluded by urging a thorough investigation into the Mufti's covert influence over religious life as it was strengthening religious solidarity that could threaten the imperial order.⁹⁶

⁹³ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, 1.5-6

⁹⁴ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, 1.7-8

⁹⁵ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, 1.8b-9b

⁹⁶ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, 1.10-11

Most interestingly, Troitskii also attached his additional reports from years ago written in 1895, stating that several articles of the Steppe Statute (especially Articles 4, 11, 33, 78, and 97) and accompanying explanations from the Ministry of Internal Affairs do not clearly define restrictions on the rights of *inorodtsy* (non-Russian natives) and their mullahs.⁹⁷ However, he claims that such restrictions are explicitly stated in other legislation, particularly concerning the Bashkirs and Tatars (e.g., Article 27, Note 5, and others). He argued that these limitations are not only appropriate but necessary for regulating Kazakh and Tatar assemblies, and that they should be formally incorporated into the Steppe Statute. Articles 97 and 98 serve as key examples, emphasizing that only one mullah should be elected per volost—rather than per aul—and only with the unanimous consent of all auls within the volost.⁹⁸ He argued that mosque construction should be brought under stricter control through the building regulations outlined in the 1890 Construction Statute, noting that despite earlier directives from 1887 intended to suppress Islamic 'fanaticism,' no effective measures had yet been implemented.

Later, Troitskii observed an increase in pilgrimages, public prayer, oath-taking in mosques, and the wearing of religious attire, which he believed undermined the Kazakhs' traditional tribal customs and oral moral code. He contrasted the Kazakhs' previously indifferent, purely materialistic stance on religion—shaped by their nomadic and tribal lifestyle, which aligned with their historical memory, and their peculiar understanding of Islam—with the rigid religiosity of Sarts and Tatars, whom he described as fanatical and incompatible with and even unable to serve Russia.⁹⁹ Thus, he implied a potential degree of 'redeemability' of the Kazakhs—perhaps comparing them to cases of Russian conversion to Islam, like that of Tokarev

⁹⁷ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.13

⁹⁸ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.14

⁹⁹ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.15

who married a Kazakh woman and became a mullah, which was portrayed as a state security threat, but also signified an Imperial sense of duty to protect Kazakhs from Tatar exploitation.

At the same time, Troitskii contrasted Kazakh and Russian legal traditions, noting that while Russian law allows a single party to take an oath, Kazakh customary law involves a more elaborate process: oaths are taken by both parties and witnesses, with a designated oath-giver swearing to the accused's innocence—potentially absolving or condemning them.¹⁰⁰ According to him, this system is governed by *adat* (customary law) rather than Islamic Sharia. However, he argued that Russian legal reforms, especially after the 1867 Turkestan Statute, threatened to wrongfully impose Sharia law formalism on the Kazakhs.¹⁰¹ More broadly, his report criticized Russian-appointed officials, unfamiliar with Kazakh customs, who introduced foreign practices, including the use of mosques for oaths, which were banned in 1888. Rather peculiarly, Troitskii was firmly adamant about the importance of recognizing and preserving Kazakh oaths within their own customary framework, arguing that legal recognition of the traditional oath in both local and general courts would maintain its significance and authenticity for the Kazakh people, instead of it being associated with Islam.¹⁰² Lastly, he suggested immediate administrative intervention, including the appointment of a new district officer to monitor movement from Turkestan and to coordinate with local police to curb further religious expansion.

Concurrently, the Petropavlovsk District Chief reported his concerns about the “subtle yet significant influence” of the Assembly. From his account, this influence spreads primarily through Tatar-run schools and mullahs trained in Orenburg or Troitsk, who were seen as fueling a growing religious fanaticism.¹⁰³ As a result, his report noted that Kazakhs, especially in the

¹⁰⁰ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.16

¹⁰¹ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.17

¹⁰² TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.18

¹⁰³ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.20

western part of the district, increasingly resisted administrative reforms—like the introduction of civil record-keeping—often spurred by mullahs who fear losing their authority and income.

These religious figures, using sermons and gatherings, quietly fostered opposition to government initiatives. In response, the report recommended curbing the Assembly’s authority—particularly appointing or rewarding mullahs—and transferring that power to local officials to diminish mullahs’ influence and strengthen state control over spiritual affairs.¹⁰⁴ It also emphasized the urgent need for state oversight of Tatar religious schools in cities like Petropavlovsk, where unchecked instruction was seen as fostering intolerance and impeding community development.

Contrastingly, in 1900, a report from the Kokchetav District Chief informed the Military Governor of Akmolinsk about the lack of influence from the Orenburg Mufti. He stated that there were no indications that the Kazakhs from Kokchetav visited Orenburg or that anyone from Orenburg had come to the district.¹⁰⁵ The Orenburg Spiritual Assembly oversaw only two mosques in the district, both Tatar-run. Still, to prevent any potential fanatical influence, the district chief suggested that mullahs and teachers in Kazakh villages should not receive education in major centers of Islamism like Constantinople, Orenburg, or Kazan. He recommended prioritizing candidates who have been educated locally and suggested removing the Kokchetav and Ymantav mosques from the Orenburg Mufti's jurisdiction, placing them under the regulations outlined in Article 98 of the Steppe Statute.¹⁰⁶

In 1900, the Omsk District Chief confirmed the “growing yet unofficial” influence of the Orenburg Mufti, which he argued spread through three main channels: a respected Tatar religious school in Petropavlovsk, itinerant Muslim teachers, and the ahun of the Omsk Cathedral

¹⁰⁴ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.21-23

¹⁰⁵ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.24

¹⁰⁶ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.24b

Mosque.¹⁰⁷ He noted that although Kazakhs generally distrusted Tatars ethnically, the Petropavlovsk school produced graduates who returned to the steppe and disseminated its teachings. At the same time, itinerant preachers—Tatars, Sarts, and Circassians—quietly circulated among villages, often under the protection of influential Kazakh families. The most prominent figure, however, was the ahun of the Omsk mosque.¹⁰⁸ While such religious influences were implicit, the District Chief observed signs of growing boldness to challenge state authority.

On January 12, 1900, quite unexpectedly, the ahun informed the Omsk district Chief of the upcoming Eid al-Fitr, scheduled for January 20. He requested that Muslim civil servants be notified to attend the 8 a.m. prayer—which would include a public supplication for the Tsar and the Imperial Family—and that Muslim employees and students be granted three days of leave in accordance with sharia.¹⁰⁹ Despite lacking official status, the ahun commanded deep respect among Kazakh nomads and had recently sought formal recognition—an appeal the Chief rejected, cautioning against further efforts to consolidate influence and warning of potential consequences. In response to these developments, the Chief proposed expanding Russian-Kazakh schools staffed with qualified teachers to promote civic loyalty and the Russian language—an initiative echoed by other district officials. However, he warned against heavy-handed religious crackdowns, cautioning that such measures might inflame tensions rather than contain them.¹¹⁰ Thus, while opinions on the issue and how to address it varied, the majority favored greater state control over mosques; however, such actions required concrete evidence.

Just months later, a report to the Governor-General renewed concerns about the Orenburg Mufti's influence in Akmolinsk, with particular focus on itinerant Muslim outsiders—Tatars,

¹⁰⁷ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.25-26

¹⁰⁸ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.27

¹⁰⁹ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.29

¹¹⁰ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.128

Circassians, Sarts, and others—who, though possessing passports, lacked fixed residence or employment and were accused of spreading Islamic fanaticism among the Kazakhs.¹¹¹ As such, between 1900 and 1903, a series of reports from Akmolinsk Province provided detailed demographic and religious data on Muslim populations—primarily Kyrgyz and Tatars—across districts such as Omsk, Kokshetau, Atbasar, Akmolinsk, and Petropavlovsk.¹¹² By early 1901, authorities had recorded over 442,000 Muslims, 61 mosques, 56 officially recognized mullahs.

Kazakh and Tatar Populations by District in Akmolinsk Province, 1901¹¹³

Districts	Kazakhs men/women	Tatars Men/Women	Mosques	Mullahs
Omsk	24237, 21218	16, 10	1	5
Akmolinsk	95 931, 89 489	259, 189	8, 15 prayer houses	5
Petropavlovsk	36954: 30954	62, 63	11, 16 prayer houses	8
Atbasar	38762, 34846	217, 220	2	14
Kokshetau	40665, 34012	183, 184	1	10
City Omsk	214, 209	97, 92	1	2
City Petropavlovsk	1090, 1064	3428, 3368	6	12
Akmolinsk Province total	237853, 204792	4262, 4128	61	56

However, while most local chiefs denied the presence of suspicious or unemployed *inorodtsy*, reporting only a small number of recent Muslim migrants, the Akmolinsk district chief doubted the accuracy of these reports. He insisted that nearly every volost had unofficial religious instructors—often teaching children—and demanded more reliable data.¹¹⁴ Sannikov, the General Governor, echoed these concerns in a report that although local reports denied the presence of itinerant Muslim preachers from groups like the Tatars, Circassians, and Sarts, these individuals were still suspected of spreading religious fanaticism and evading Russian

¹¹¹ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.30-34

¹¹² TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.40-51

¹¹³ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.39

¹¹⁴ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.67

oversight.¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, the Department of Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Confessions struggled to legally justify removing Tatars in the Steppe from the Orenburg Muftiate's jurisdiction due to a lack of concrete evidence of their harmful influence on Kazakhs, and thus requested additional documentation from local authorities to bolster its case before the State Council.¹¹⁶

In response, to the further requests of investigation 1903 reports offer sharply contrasting perspectives. For instance, the Atbasar district chief painted a calm, even dismissive picture. He insisted that the local Tatar population was small, mostly made up of traders with minimal contact with Kazakhs, and posed no threat of spreading Muslim fanaticism.¹¹⁷ Pilgrims returning from Mecca, too, were described as law-abiding and uninfluential. In his view, fears of growing Islamic influence were overstated, and any effort to remove Tatars from the jurisdiction of the Orenburg Muftiate was unnecessary and premature.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, the Kokchetav district chief reported no significant Tatar activity.¹¹⁹ In stark contrast, the new Petropavlovsk district chief reported a rise in Islamic observance among Kazakhs, blaming Tatar mullahs and the Muftiate for promoting sharia over adat and spreading anti-Russian sentiment. He cited the Mufti's 1900 visit as evidence of the Muftiate's growing assertive reach into the region.¹²⁰ While he supported curbing this influence—especially by stripping Tatar communities of their ties to the Muftiate—he also warned that doing so without proper enforcement risks pushing these activities underground and provoking further resistance. Similarly, the Petropavlovsk police chief acknowledged that many Tatar merchants considered it a duty to visit the Mufti in Ufa on their travels; however, he warned that removing Tatars from the Mufti's jurisdiction could backfire,

¹¹⁵ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.68

¹¹⁶ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.69

¹¹⁷ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.71

¹¹⁸ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.72

¹¹⁹ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.77

¹²⁰ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.74

potentially increasing his appeal as a figure of resistance due to weak local policing.¹²¹

Supporting this view, the Omsk police chief in November flagged the growing role of poorly educated Tatars from European Russia, who posed as mullahs and spread distorted teachings, gaining Kazakh trust and becoming difficult to monitor.¹²²

In conclusion, the investigation proved inconclusive. By 1905, even the Akmolinsk district chief—once the strongest advocate for removing the Muftiate’s jurisdiction—admitted insufficient evidence to justify such action.¹²³ Still, he restated the narratives of a shift in Kazakh religiosity from superficial ritualism to deeper, more fanatical belief, interpreting revivalist movements as signs of growing Kazakh alignment with the Muftiate. Although the Mufti’s direct involvement remained unproven, the chief accused him of either passive complicity or fear of losing authority over his subordinates. The report also criticized the Mufti for cultivating a dual religious authority that alienated Tatars and their Kazakh followers from broader Steppe society, claiming that Tatars always resisted integration, shunned Russian civic life, and rejected russification initiatives such as Russian-language schools—ultimately leading to the formation of a separate Muslim neighborhood in Akmolinsk. To address this, he recommended adopting the Turkestan model: removing the Muftiate’s authority and placing Tatar Muslims under local civil administration to encourage assimilation.¹²⁴ However, while the Governor-General’s follow-up acknowledged these concerns, it also noted the continued absence of concrete evidence, closing the case.¹²⁵ Thus, despite its inconclusive outcomes—shaped by conflicting perspectives and lack of decisiveness—the investigation revealed both the limits of imperial authority and documented the state's observations to the local religious revival with its failure to dismantle the Muftiate.

¹²¹ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.75

¹²² TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.92

¹²³ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.106

¹²⁴ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.107

¹²⁵ TsGARK, F.369, op.1, d.3696, l.110-111

Russian Schools or a Kazakh Muftiate? Competing Remedies for Kazakh Isolation

Although efforts to dismantle the Orenburg Assembly largely failed by 1905, two parallel and contrary initiatives between 1900 and 1903—one by imperial officials to impose Russification and assert control over the madrasa networks of the Orenburg Muftiate, and another by urban Kazakhs to establish a centralized Kazakh Muftiate modeled on the Orenburg Assembly—likewise achieved little. Hence, while both imperial administrators and urban Muslims acknowledged the need to better integrate Kazakhs and address their colonial marginalization, their competing visions for reform were ultimately undermined by bureaucratic fears of instability and a deep-rooted reluctance to further institutionalize Islam in the steppe.

Following the reforms of 1868 and 1891, the first comprehensive effort to establish Russian-language schools for *inorodtsy* in Akmolinsk Province began in July 1900, when the Inspector of Public Schools issued detailed regulations for Islamic educational institutions (maktabs and madrasas) serving Tatar and Kazakh communities.¹²⁶ It required schools to obtain official approval and include Russian-language instruction by certified teachers, funded primarily by Muslim communities with minor state subsidies. The overarching aim was to assimilate non-Russian, non-Christian children—especially Tatars and Kazakhs—into Russian linguistic and civic life, mandating preparatory Russian classes for those unfamiliar with the language and barring instructors who lacked Russian proficiency. Attendance was compulsory for boys under sixteen, with secular subjects taught in Russian and native languages allowed only for clarification; to mitigate fears of coercive assimilation, Muslim elders would be permitted to observe classes.¹²⁷ Interestingly, the inspectorate framed Russian not merely as a medium of instruction but as the core civilizational goal of education and a fundamental duty of the Empire

¹²⁶ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.1

¹²⁷ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.2

to civically integrate Kazakh communities with some state funding and expecting partial contributions from Kazakhs. Ironically, rather than establishing new institutions, the Inspector aimed to take over and convert existing Muslim religious schools to meet state standards, closing those that failed to comply.¹²⁸ Muslim communities were thus pressured to establish Russian-language preparatory schools, while urban centers with sizable Tatar populations were expected to prepare their children to enter the existing imperial institutions.¹²⁹ Particular emphasis was placed on expanding access for Kazakh children in Akmolinsk and Semipalatinsk, invoking the laws of 1868 and 1870 to justify community-funded schooling and referencing earlier models—such as boarding schools and state-supported institutions—for delivering bilingual, Russified education.¹³⁰ Schools were expected to follow a four-year curriculum modeled on Russian institutions and include boarding facilities to accommodate nomadic lifestyles, with prevention of unauthorized Tatar teaching due to fears of Islamic fanaticism, reinforcing the state's desire to assert control over religious education.¹³¹

However, before implementing these ambitious reforms, it was first necessary to scout and inspect existing Muslim schools on the ground. In Petropavlovsk city, inspectors found that each of the city's six mosques maintained at least one school—primarily for boys, with a few for girls. The most developed institution was the school at Mosque No. 1, which featured two wooden classroom wings and a dormitory (though the latter was in poor condition) and enrolled 61 boys taught by two mullahs, only one of whom, Gabdrakhmanov, had formal Russian education and legal teaching credentials.¹³² Other schools varied significantly: while some occupied new or renovated wooden buildings, others—particularly those at Mosques Nos. 5 and

¹²⁸ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.3-4

¹²⁹ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.5

¹³⁰ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.6-7

¹³¹ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.8-11b

¹³² TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.12-13

6—were housed in overcrowded, cold, and poorly lit stone structures.¹³³ Instructional settings were modest, with students seated on the floor around low tables, and the curriculum was limited to Tatar and Arabic literacy, Qur’anic studies, basic arithmetics, and no Russian language or crafts instruction.¹³⁴ Similarly, girls’ education took place in cramped private homes, led by informally educated women who also taught traditional embroidery. Interestingly, most teachers, nominally mullahs or azanchis, acted more as supervisors, with unqualified assistants providing the actual instruction, and only two mullahs—Gabdrakhmanov and Begishev—held proper teaching certificates.¹³⁵ These schools operated unofficially, without state permits, although some had municipal building approvals and inconsistent tuition fees based on what families could afford. Russian literacy among Tatar children was mostly confined to a local Sunday school and the city school, with only few enrolled.¹³⁶ Hence, the prospects for integrating these schools into the imperial education system appeared bleak.

Having received the report from Petropavlovsk, in February 1901, the Inspector of Public Schools submitted a complaint to the General Governor expressing deep dissatisfaction with the condition of Muslim schools in Petropavlovsk. He condemned the schools for fostering ignorance, religious fanaticism, and ethnic division, noting that many operated illegally with unqualified, often foreign, mullahs who lacked Russian proficiency and ignored the 1870 law requiring Russian language instruction.¹³⁷ To address these issues, the Inspector proposed urgent reforms: closing unauthorized school divisions, replacing mullahs lacking Russian proficiency with certified instructors, and mandating that all future schools include Russian language instruction—funded by the local mosque community, with an annual budget of 400 rubles

¹³³ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.14

¹³⁴ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.15

¹³⁵ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.16

¹³⁶ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.16b

¹³⁷ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.17

allocated for teacher salaries and educational materials.¹³⁸ In June 1901, the Steppe Governor-General urged the Military Governor of Akmolinsk Province to act on the Inspector's recommendations—pressuring Tatar communities to reform their madrasas according to state regulations or face closure, and ordering lists of mullahs lacking Russian proficiency and their service records to enable tighter oversight and gradual reform.¹³⁹

Later, from September 1900 to January 1901, reports from district heads across rural Akmolinsk Province revealed that Tatar schools were even more scarce than previously thought, with many run by unqualified mullahs, highlighting the limited knowledge of the region's religious education. In Omsk District, there were no Tatar communities or schools, except for a few individuals in remote villages, making it impossible to submit required documentation.¹⁴⁰ Likewise, In Omsk city, although the Muslim community requested a public Tatar school, there was none. A private home school for 20 boys, run by Mirziya Kutluakhmetov, had no certified teachers in Russian.¹⁴¹ Similarly, Atbasar District had a single private Tatar school run by Mukhmetnasyr Bekkumametov, who lacked Russian proficiency. The district head informed Bekkumametov that his school would be closed unless it complied with Russian language regulations the following year.¹⁴² In Kokchetav District, two mullahs were present—one in the city and one in the Kokchetavskaya stanitsa—but the mullah in Kokchetav city, Ilman Nurmanov, lacked certification.¹⁴³ The mosque in the stanitsa was Kazakh, and the district chief complained that it was unclear whether the medrese could operate according to the existing rules, especially since it exceeded the allowable number of mullahs for the area.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, The

¹³⁸ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.18

¹³⁹ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.20

¹⁴⁰ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.22

¹⁴¹ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.33

¹⁴² TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.24

¹⁴³ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.28

¹⁴⁴ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.30

Petropavlovsk Police chief reported a single Tatar school in rural areas, led by Kazakh mullah Abdrahman Galimov, who lacked Russian certification. In the city of Petropavlovsk, most mullahs could not speak Russian, with only a few holding certificates but still struggling with communication.¹⁴⁵ The Akmolinsk District head reported two Tatar schools in the city, with around 50 and 25–30 boys enrolled. Both mullahs and two private tutors were unqualified to teach Russian.¹⁴⁶ Notably, Instead of recommending closure, the district head suggested that the local Muslim community raise funds for a Russian language teacher and necessary materials.¹⁴⁷

In response to widespread non-compliance with state regulations, district chiefs in Kokshetau and Petropavlovsk began closing madrasas in early 1902;¹⁴⁸ however, confusion over the reform's timeline, the ambiguous status of rural Kazakh schools versus urban Tatar schools, and an unexpected policy reversal led to a bureaucratic standstill. Hence, in February 1902, the General Governor unexpectedly advised against the immediate closure of madrasas.¹⁴⁹ While reaffirming the requirement for schools to teach Russian, he recommended a gradual transformation, starting with a model school in Petropavlovsk that would incorporate Russian instruction, which aimed to temporarily suspend the School Inspector's reform proposal in order to avoid alienating the local Muslim population.¹⁵⁰ The Governor argued that the existing legal framework did not mandate closures, only the inclusion of Russian language classes funded by local Muslims. He argued that outright closure of madrasas would violate the law and risk unrest, Instead promoting gradual reform, assuring the preservation of religious education while encouraging the Muslim community to accept the Russian language and support state educational reforms, thus delaying the implementation of the Empire's integrationist agenda.

¹⁴⁵ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.40

¹⁴⁶ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.48-49

¹⁴⁷ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.51

¹⁴⁸ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.61, l.48

¹⁴⁹ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.55-56

¹⁵⁰ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3713, l.57-58

The perceived isolation and marginalization of rural Kazakhs were also acknowledged by the urban Muslim community, which, later in 1902, responded with a bold proposal to establish a centralized Kazakh Muftiate—especially in light of the local Russian bureaucracy’s Islamophobic tendencies. In July, Shaymerden Koshegulov submitted a petition to the Akmolinsk Military Governor on behalf of several volosts in the Kokchetav District, calling for reforms to strengthen the position of Muslim religious leaders in the Steppe.¹⁵¹ He pointed out that existing legislation, particularly the Steppe Statute of 1891, lacked detailed provisions on the functions, rights, and duties of mullahs, leaving Muslim religious life underdeveloped compared to that of other confessions like Orthodox Christianity.¹⁵² Koshegulov argued that without legal authority over key life events—such as births, marriages, and deaths—mullahs could not ensure the appropriate observance of Islamic law (sharia), leading to the weakening of religious life and moral standards among the Muslim population.¹⁵³ He proposed several measures: granting mullahs the right to maintain vital records, introducing local (aul-level) mullahs alongside volost mullahs to better serve dispersed communities, creating a hierarchical Muftiate with a city mullah in Kokchetav supervising rural clergy, and requiring candidates for the mullah position to pass examinations in religious knowledge and literacy.¹⁵⁴ He concluded by asking the governor to implement the proposals within his jurisdiction and forward the rest to higher authorities.

Later that year, on September 12, 1902, the Kokchetav District Chief issued a scathing response to Shaymerden Koshegulov’s petition, denouncing it as a subversive attempt to promote Islam—and potentially jihad—among the local population.¹⁵⁵ He specifically criticized the proposed appointment of Mullah Talasov as chief mullah with supervisory powers and dismissed

¹⁵¹ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.21-27

¹⁵² TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.28

¹⁵³ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.30

¹⁵⁴ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.31-34b

¹⁵⁵ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.16

the petition as a threat to imperial order. The district chief condemned the petition as a bold and subversive attempt to promote Islam and possibly jihad among the local population, warning that such initiatives posed a threat to imperial order and must be suppressed.¹⁵⁶ He also scrutinized the legal validity of the attached authorizations from the volosts, declaring most of them forged, improperly certified, or made without due legal process. He criticized the involvement of a local judge, Kudrevetsky, for notarizing these documents despite their irregularities and accused him, along with the petitioners—particularly Koshegulov and his associate Aidarkhan Turlubaev—of conspiring to undermine imperial authority.¹⁵⁷ Turlybaev, specifically, was portrayed as a disreputable opportunist with links to corrupt figures. Generally, the report urged closing the mosque and apprehending both Koshegulov and the mullah Talasov. In October, the Steppe Governor-General echoed these concerns in a report to the Akmolinsk Military Governor.¹⁵⁸ He suspected manipulation behind the petition—particularly due to the involvement of Turlybaev and Judge Kudrevetsky—and viewed the effort as part of a broader resistance to Russification.¹⁵⁹

However, given the earlier episodes of radical attacks against the Muslim communities and disturbances by the investigations of district chiefs and the General Governor, some sympathies from the Russian judges were indeed voiced in defense of both Koshegulov and Taliyasov, and even judge Kudrevetsky who notarized the petition. In December of that year, Chairman of the Omsk District Court informed the Akmolinsk Military Governor that a court scribe who had copied a petition on behalf of Koshegulov violated internal regulations prohibiting private work by court staff and was given a formal reprimand.¹⁶⁰ Still, the Omsk Chairman emphasized that the act itself was not illegal, nor was the petition, which criticized the

¹⁵⁶ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.17

¹⁵⁷ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.18

¹⁵⁸ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.5

¹⁵⁹ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.6b

¹⁶⁰ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.14

Kokshetau district chief's decisions—such as removing metric books from mullah Talasov and interfering in his duties and local judicial procedures.¹⁶¹ He stressed that submitting petitions to higher authorities was a legal right of the Kazakhs and that no unlawful or offensive content was found in the documents.¹⁶² He rejected the district chief's accusations of anti-government Islamic propaganda and misconduct by Judge Kudrevetsky, calling them unfounded and personally motivated. The Chairman further noted that even if procedural errors had occurred, proper legal channels should have been followed rather than making baseless defamatory claims.

Following a formal investigation, no evidence was found to support claims of subversive activity by Mullah Talyasov or his assistant Shaymerden Koshegulov and their radical proposal was left ignored and did not receive further review.¹⁶³ Consequently, in February 1903, the Governor affirmed that, under Article 87 of the 1891 Steppe Statute, only the Military Governor had authority over the appointment or removal of non-Russian mullahs, requiring no further action from the Kokshetau district chief.¹⁶⁴ While supporting efforts to educate nomads on administrative reforms and the Tsar's message of peace and goodwill, the Governor rejected the proposed closure of the Kokshetau mosque, calling it excessive and unjust to penalize an entire community for the alleged actions of a few.¹⁶⁵ He reiterated the Tsar's commitment to religious freedom for all subjects, insisting on concrete evidence for any administrative action against individuals accused of promoting Islamic fanaticism¹⁶⁶—a mostly unsuccessful effort which failed by 1905. Ultimately, the two initiatives reflected competing visions for addressing Kazakh isolation, revealing the limits of reform in an empire unwilling to reconcile civic integration with recognition of Islamic authority, as generals remained wary of disrupting the prevailing order.

¹⁶¹ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.15

¹⁶² TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.15b

¹⁶³ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.85

¹⁶⁴ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.92

¹⁶⁵ TsGARK, f.369, op.1, d.3822, l.92b

¹⁶⁶ *ibid*

Conclusion

In conclusion, contrary to Aynash Mustoyapova's decolonization paradigm, this study has shown that the 1868 and 1891 reforms in Akmolinsk Province were neither uniformly imposed by Russian officials nor passively received by Kazakh communities. As Bradley Parker suggests, colonizers and colonized negotiated competing visions of reform and integration. In Akmolinsk it produced rural factionalism and repeated challenges to native-colonial institutions—especially mullah appointments, often seen as manipulated, fraudulent, and illegitimate. In response, Kazakhs strategically employed imperial legal language—citing procedural breaches, forgery, or public unrest in their petitions to assert religious rights and local legitimacy. Furthermore, although some imperial officials initially saw state-supervised mullah elections as tools for Kazakh “renewal,” they ultimately functioned to sever ties with the Orenburg Assembly, contain unrest, and reinforce the inertia of colonial rule.

Notably, both imperial authorities and urban Muslims acknowledged the marginalization of rural Kazakhs and shared concerns over the growing divide—concerns that informed proposals to establish a Kazakh Muftiate as a locally rooted Islamic institution. Shaymerden Koshegulov's petition exemplifies this dynamic: couched in imperial legal language, it offered constructive proposals nested in the knowledge of the Imperial law to address a widely recognized problem of Kazakh isolation, reflecting a nuanced political consciousness and pragmatic engagement with colonial structures, despite being ultimately rejected. Hence, both rural and urban petitions were not mere administrative requests but acts of communal agency. They sought different ways to assert autonomy within a system defined by legal ambiguity and bureaucratic rigidity. In this contested space, the politics of religious authority emerged as both a vehicle for resistance to Russification and a structural limit to imperial reform.

To clarify further, although Akmolinsk Province was distanced from the Orenburg Assembly's oversight of rural Kazakhs, imperial officials remained divided over how to manage its lingering urban influence. Between 1898 and 1905, reformers invoked fears of Islamic radicalism and modernization rhetoric to justify removing the Assembly's authority and incorporating madrasa networks into Russification efforts. Yet in every instance, generals halted these initiatives, unwilling to override legal procedures or risk unrest among Muslim communities. Thus, despite ambitious aims to reform education and suppress perceived threats to their legitimacy, the Empire's reliance on evidentiary standards and bureaucratic procedure consistently delayed or derailed reform—exposing the paradox of a “modernizing” colonial regime that was simultaneously expansionist and cautious, modernizing yet protective of established norms, ultimately constrained by its own legalism.

Moreover, imperial officials clearly felt threatened by their limited capacity to monitor Muslim populations, their inability to gather sufficient evidence for intervention, and the signs of a growing Islamic revival. So, despite restrictions barring Kazakhs from contacting the Orenburg Assembly or studying abroad, many likely continued to attend the urban madrasas, engage with Central Asian and Tatar mullahs, and circulate religious knowledge—demonstrating the empire's broader dilemma on its Muslim frontier as the Empire failed to articulate and enforce a coherent religious policy. In this context, Amanda Lagji's model of the colony as a “waiting room” for civic integration is especially apt: up until 1905, the Kazakh Steppe functioned as a liminal space where promises of integration were repeatedly deferred, and where imperial authority—despite its reformist rhetoric—remained ensnared in bureaucratic hesitation, legal ambiguity, and the contradictory drive to accommodate local authority while asserting central control.

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