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SCHOOLING THE STEPPE: KAZAKH INTELLECTUALS AS AGENTS OR APPARATUS OF EMPIRE IN RUSSIA'S COLONIAL EDUCATION PROJECT (late 19th – early 20th century)

This article reconstructs the infrastructure, intent, and impact of Russian colonial education in the Kazakh Steppe and explains how Kazakh intellectuals shaped that project from within. Using primary sources from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (TsGA RK) and the State Archive of Tomsk Oblast (GATO), complemented by contemporaneous periodicals, the study employs close reading, source criticism, prosopographic reconstruction, selective tabulation, and discourse analysis. Framed by an intermediaries approach, it shows that the empire pursued a dual strategy-tightening oversight of mektebs and madrasas while building a secular, Russian-language school network – that yielded a multi-tiered system from village classrooms to specialist colleges

. For the purposes of this study, "Kazakh intellectuals" denotes members of the political elite, teachers, students, and secularly educated professionals who became enmeshed in school and administrative work. Their motives were layered-status preservation, salaried service, social mobility, and communal reform and their contributions concrete: petitioning for stipends and schools, organizing endowments, staffing and supervising institutions, publicizing or contesting regulations, and translating policy into classroom practice. Reassessing "collaboration," the article advances the concept of **hybrid agency,** whereby intermediaries selectively appropriated imperial resources to advance local priorities even as they furthered aspects of imperial rule. The findings clarify how knowledge, funding, and legitimacy were co-produced and how schooling functioned as both a technology of governance and a site of negotiated modernization.

Keywords: Kazakh Steppe in imperial period, Kazakh intellectuals, colonial education, collaboration, intermediaries.

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Қазақ даласындағы білім саясаты: Ресей империясының отарлық білім беру жобасындағы қазақ зиялылары империя агенттері ме, әлде аппараты ма? (XIX ғ. аяғы – XX ғ. басы)

Бұл мақала Ресейдің отарлық білім беру жүйесінің инфрақұрылымын, мақсатын және ықпалын қайта құрастырып сипаттайды әрі қазақ зиялыларының бұл жобаны ішінен қалай қалыптастырғанын түсіндіреді. Зерттеу Қазақстан Республикасының Орталық мемлекеттік мұрағаты (ҚР ОММ) мен Томск облысының мемлекеттік мұрағаты (ГАТО) қорларындағы бастапқы дереккөздерге және сол дәуірдің мерзімді баспасөзіне сүйеніп, мұқият мәтінталдау, дереккөз сыншылығы, просопографиялық реконструкция, іріктемелі кестелеу және дискурс талдауын қолданады. «Делдалдар» тәсілі аясында империяның қос стратегиясы айқындалады: мектептер мен медреселерге бақылауды күшейту және қатарынан зайырлы, орыс тілді мектеп желісін құру; соның нәтижесінде ауылдық сыныптардан арнайы оқу орындарына дейінгі көпсатылы жүйе қалыптасты. Осы зерттеуде «қазақ зиялылары» деген ұғымға саяси элита өкілдерін, мұғалімдерді, студенттерді және зайырлы білім алған кәсіби мамандарды кірістіріп отырмыз; олар мектеп пен әкімшілік жұмыстарға тартылған. Олардың білім беру жобасындағы мотивациясы көпжақты болды – мәртебені сақтау, жалақылы қызмет, әлеуметтік мобильдік және қауымдық реформа, – ал үлестері нақты: стипендиялар мен мектептер бойынша өтініштер жасау, қайырымдылық қорларын ұйымдастыру, мекемелерді кадрмен қамтамасыз ету және қадағалау, ережелерді жариялау немесе дауластыру, саясатты сыныптағы тәжірибеге аудару. «Ынтымақтастық» ұғымын қайта бағалай отырып, мақала гибридті агенттілік (әрекетшілдік) тұжырымын ұсынады: делдалдар империялық ресурстарды жергілікті басымдықтарға сай іріктеп пайдаланып, сонымен бірге империялық

басқарудың жекелеген қырларын да ілгерілетті. Нәтижелер білім/ақпарат, қаржыландыру және легитимділік қалай бірлесіп өндірілгенін әрі мектептің билік жүргізудің тетігі және келіссөз арқылы іске асатын жаңғырту алаңы ретінде қызмет еткенін айқындайды.

Түйін сөздер: Империялық кезеңдегі Қазақ даласы, қазақ зиялылары, отарлық білім беру, ынтымақтастық, делдалдар.

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Школьное образование в степи: казахская интеллигенция как агенты или аппарат Российской империи в колониальном образовательном проекте (вторая половина XIX – начало XX вв.)

Статья реконструирует инфраструктуру, замысел и воздействие российской колониальной системы образования в Казахской степи и показывает, как казахские интеллектуалы изнутри формировали этот проект. Опираясь на первичные источники из Центрального государственного архива Республики Казахстан (ЦГА РК) и Государственного архива Томской области (ГАТО), дополненные материалами современной тому времени периодической печати, исследование использует внимательное чтение, источниковедческую критику, просопографическую реконструкцию, выборочную табуляцию и дискурс-анализ. В рамках «посреднического» подхода демонстрируется, что империя проводила двойную стратегию – ужесточение надзора над мектебами и медресе при одновременном создании светской русскоязычной школьной сети, – что породило многоуровневую систему от сельских классов до специализированных училищ. В данном исследовании под «казахскими интеллектуалами» понимаются представители политической элиты, учителя, студенты и получившие светское образование профессионалы, вовлечённые в школьную и административную работу. Их мотивы были многослойными – сохранение статуса, оплачиваемая служба, социальная мобильность и общинная реформа, – а вклад конкретным: ходатайства о стипендиях и школах, организация пожертвований и фондов, кадровое обеспечение и надзор за учреждениями, обнародование или оспаривание регуляций, перевод политики в практику учебного процесса. Переосмысляя «сотрудничество», статья продвигает концепт гибридной агентности, при которой посредники избирательно использовали имперские ресурсы для продвижения локальных приоритетов, одновременно поддерживая отдельные аспекты имперского управления. Полученные результаты проясняют, как совместно производились знание, финансирование и легитимность и как школа функционировала одновременно как технология управления и как площадка согласованной модернизации.

Ключевые слова: Казахская степь в имперский период, казахские интеллектуалы, колониальное образование, сотрудничество, посредники.

Introduction

The administrative reforms of 1867–1868 drew the Kazakh Steppe decisively into the orbit of Russian imperial governance, recasting its political and social order. The region was reorganized into a hierarchical grid of governor-generalships, oblasts, uezds, and volosts; while Kazakhs elected elders at the township level, upper tiers remained in the hands of appointed officials. Judicial continuity persisted through *biy* adjudication, but elsewhere the bureaucracy was imperial in personnel and ethos (Masevich, 1960: 282-319). Socially, elements of the estate system took hold–new labels such as "Kazakh nobility" and "honorary citizens" emerged–though they never fully mapped onto imperial estate logic (Sultangalieva; Tuleshova, 2019: 36-40). In this setting a small, secularly educated Kazakh intelligentsia began to form, even as most Kazakhs remained tied to nomadic pastoralism.

Administrative reorganization and shifting social hierarchies shaped both the tsarist design of a colonial schooling project and Kazakh society's reception of it. By the later nineteenth century the pool of educated Kazakh officials had grown, parental anxieties about Russian schools were waning, and demand for places and scholarships intensified. Scholarship funding broadened access beyond officials' and sultans' sons, and the state expanded a network of elementary, secondary, and specialized institutions. Secular education thus produced intermediaries who staffed the imperial apparatus while disseminating *ağartuşılıq* ideals among their compatriots. Against this backdrop, this article asks: how did Kazakh intellectuals interpret the imperial drive for schooling and to what strategic ends did

they promote formal education? In what concrete capacities did they mediate between administrators and communities, shaping, implementing, and legitimizing the colonial educational project?

Answering these questions addresses a historiographical gap. Kazakh intermediaries' political roles are well studied, but their educational interventions–how they influenced perceptions of Russian schooling, engaged youth, and positioned themselves vis-à-vis reform–remain underexplored. Reframing intellectuals not as passive transmitters but as active participants and brokers allows a clearer assessment of how imperial education reconfigured values, worldviews, and identities in the Steppe, and how Kazakh agency could both serve and subtly redirect the aims of colonial governance.

Literature review

Scholarly engagement with Russia's colonial project in the Kazakh Steppe has shifted markedly over time: early imperial administrators and statisticians celebrated the "civilizing mission" of Russification and schooling; Soviet-era historians recast the same initiatives as contradictory agents of both progress and class exploitation; and, in the post-Soviet and global-imperial turns of the last three decades, researchers have reframed the steppe as a dynamic contact zone in which Kazakh intermediaries negotiated, appropriated, and sometimes resisted tsarist designs. Tracing this evolution–from triumphalist narratives, through Marxist critiques, to recent studies of hybrid modernities and indigenous agency–provides the necessary historiographical lens for reassessing how imperial policies of administration, estate differentiation, and secular education collectively re-configured Kazakh society in the late nineteenth century.

Imperial administrative reports and statistical surveys form the earliest and most voluminous body of evidence on the establishment of Russian-run schools in the Kazakh Steppe. Inspectors of Public schools such as A.E. Alektorov (Alektorov, 1900), V. V. Vasil'ev (Vasili'ev, 1896), S.M. Gramenitskii (Gramenitskii, 1896) compiled meticulous tables on enrolment, language of instruction, curricular content, and the socio-economic background of pupils, while offering finely grained observations on individual Kazakh families' decisions to seek secular education. These authors also offered assessments of the effectiveness of imperial educational institutions for Kazakhs and described the conditions within those schools. Yet the very richness of these documents is inseparable from their authors' ideological purpose: they consistently frame schooling as a "civilising mission" whose success was to be measured by the speed and depth of Kazakh Russification. Consequently, although these sources remain indispensable for reconstructing the infrastructure and social reach of colonial education, they must be read critically, with full awareness of the normative assumptions that shaped both the collection and interpretation of their data.

During the Soviet period, historians approached imperial educational policy in the Kazakh Steppe through a different theoretical framework. The foundational works of T.T. Tazhibaev (Tazhibaev, 1962) and K.Berzhanov (Berzhanov, 1965) provided systematic and statistical data on schooling in Kazakhstan, the spread of enlightenment, and the general conditions within educational institutions. In their analysis of the emergence and development of education in the Kazakh Steppe, these authors emphasized the progressive role of Russia. The very fact that Kazakh children were educated in state schools was interpreted as evidence of the government's concern for the needs of the local population. However, there are clear contradictions in the studies of Soviet historians, as they simultaneously highlighted both the progressive aspects and the ethnic pressures exerted by imperial power.

Over the past three decades–coinciding with the broader "imperial turn" in global historiography–scholars have reconceptualized Russian colonial education in the Kazakh Steppe as a dynamic arena of negotiation between metropolitan designs and local agency. Andreas Kappeler (Kappeler, 2001) and Alexander Morrison (Morrison, 2021) foreground schooling as an instrument of imperial control, detailing how curricula, language policies, and credentialing of native elites were calibrated to secure loyalty through selective assimilation. Terry Martin's comparative work situates the Russian case within a wider colonial spectrum, exposing the paradoxical coexistence of "affirmative action" for ethnic minorities and a simultaneous drive for cultural integration under an imperial umbrella (Martin, 2001). Adeeb Khalid's studies of Jadidist schools highlight modernized Islamic education that fostered a Muslim intellectual stratum even while remaining subject to Russian oversight, planting seeds of early nationalist activism. (Khalid, 2001). Robert Geraci's analyses of Orthodox missionary and secular schools further complicate the picture, showing how Russification intersected with confessional identities and how non-Orthodox com-

munities constructed parallel educational spaces to preserve cultural distinctiveness. Research on resistance–from Ismail Gasprinski's reformist pedagogy to local counter-schooling movements–underscores that colonial education was never a one-way imposition but a contested field in which indigenous actors repurposed imperial resources (Gerasi, 2001). Complementing these strands, Uyama Tomohiko's work on *Dala walayatinin gazeti* illuminates how exchanges between the Russian administration and Kazakh intellectuals opened a public forum for debating social problems, thereby revealing collaboration and friction in real time. (Tomohiko, 2003).

A growing body of scholarship also traces the long-term legacies of tsarist and Soviet educational frameworks, showing how institutional templates, language politics, and credential regimes continued to shape post-1991 nation-building and identity formation across the former steppe provinces. Together, these studies mark a shift from top-down narratives of a "civilizing mission" to nuanced analyses of collaboration, adaptation, and resistance–an approach that better captures the contingent, negotiated character of colonial modernity in Central Eurasia.

Despite these advances, important gaps remain. First, we still know comparatively little about Kazakh popular attitudes toward state-sponsored schooling beyond programmatic uptake statistics; micro-level studies of household decision-making and village politics are sparse. Second, the roles of named officials, inspectors, and especially Kazakh intellectuals–as students, teachers, journalists, and legal intermediaries–in shaping local educational practice require further prosopographic and network analysis. Third, the interface between estate transformation (e.g., the changing status of sultans), administrative reform, and educational opportunity has not been systematically integrated into accounts of social mobility. Finally, teachers' everyday brokerage–how they publicized, interpreted, or quietly bracketed rules (for example, language-of-instruction provisions)–remains underexamined relative to high-politics narratives.

This article addresses these lacunae by centering Kazakh intermediaries and their motivations for entering, shaping, and leveraging imperial educational structures. Building on administrative reports, periodical literature, and archival personnel and school files, it reconstructs how actors at different social positions–students, teachers, and credentialed elites–translated imperial norms into local idioms, advanced communal agendas, and navigated the material and symbolic economies of schooling. In doing so, the study links estate and administrative change to educational pathways and probes the everyday practices through which colonial policies were enacted, contested, and repurposed in the Kazakh Steppe.

Materials and methods

This study examines how Kazakh intellectuals engaged with the imperial educational project in the Kazakh Steppe during the second half of the nineteenth century through a qualitative historical design that incorporates selective quantitative tabulation where sources permit. The evidentiary base is built primarily from archival materials in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (TsGA RK) and the State Archive of Tomsk Oblast (GATO). These documents are treated not only as new sources but also as a basis for re-reading familiar evidence from a fresh angle. Periodical publications in Russian and Kazakh supplement the archives by recording policies, debates, and everyday practices surrounding schooling from the 1860s onward. Taken together, the archives and the press provide broad factual coverage of institutional development and fine-grained insight into the concrete participation of students, teachers, and credentialed elites in the colonial educational project.

The analytical lens is informed by Frederick Cooper's concept of imperial intermediaries. Rather than treating "global," "national," and "local" as fixed containers, the study focuses on the connective spaces in which actors moved and on the limits of those connections. It asks how individuals defined and navigated multiple scales of authority, how categories of difference were produced and revised in practice, and how everyday brokerage within schools translated metropolitan policies into local idioms. This framework is particularly suited to a field where civilizing rhetoric coexisted with anxiety about the political consequences of "too much" schooling, and where success often hinged on a careful balance between proximity to imperial norms and credibility within Kazakh communities (Cooper, 2003).

Empirically, the analysis follows three strands that are then triangulated. First, close reading and source criticism identify the administrative purposes and normative assumptions embedded in official files and press accounts, as well as their silences and contradictions. Second, prosopographic reconstruction traces individual trajectories–

from schooling to appointments in teaching or administration–to map recurring pathways of mediation; where possible, basic indicators such as enrolments, stipends, and placements are tabulated to contextualize qualitative claims. Third, discourse analysis of petitions, circulars, school reports, and newspaper articles reveals how rules (for example, language-of-instruction provisions) were publicized, interpreted, or quietly bracketed by local actors. Motivation is operationalized as reasons ascribed to choices in these sources–material advancement, a service ethos, and cultural brokerage–and then tested against observable outcomes such as school openings, transfers back to the steppe, or community uptake of education.

Reliability is strengthened by pairing official records with locally authored press materials and by cross-checking self-presentations against verifiable institutional outcomes. The study acknowledges limitations arising from incomplete personal files, uneven survival of documents, and the ideological framing of both administrative and journalistic sources; claims are calibrated to the density and consistency of the evidence, and all inferences are presented with explicit trails back to the underlying documents.

I argue that Russian colonial schooling in the Kazakh Steppe was simultaneously an infrastructure of imperial rule and a generator of hybrid agency among Kazakh intellectuals. By petitioning, founding and curating schools, shaping stipend regimes, and translating law into classroom practice, these intermediaries appropriated imperial resources to advance local mobility, protect communal interests, and articulate a territorialized Kazakh national vision–thereby recasting "collaboration" from passive compliance to a negotiated, situational practice.

Results and discussion

Constructing Empire's Classroom: Infrastructure, Intent, and Impact of Russian Colonial Education in the Kazakh Steppe

Beginning with the administrative reforms of 1822 and 1824 and intensifying during the sweeping restructurings of the late nineteenth century, imperial Russia pursued educational policies that served a broader strategy of integrating the Kazakh Steppe into its multi-ethnic polity, systematically reshaping the region's political, social, and cultural landscape through the gradual implantation of colonial schools.

Martin Carnoy famously argues that colonial schooling was designed to entrench foreign domination, dubbing it "education as cultural imperialism" (Carnoy, 1974: 16). Few cases illustrate his thesis more clearly than the Russian Empire's educational project in the Kazakh steppe. To trace the policy's evolution from the mid-nineteenth century onward, one must briefly survey how the schooling landscape for Kazakhs took shape: the network of aul and urban schools established for steppe communities; the imperial administration's strategic aims in propagating this system; and, equally important, the way Kazakh society's attitudes toward Russian education changed over time– ranging from tactical opposition in some districts, through pragmatic accommodation, to a broader acceptance as education increasingly became a vehicle for social mobility and political voice.

During the period under review, Kazakh society remained predominantly nomadic and retained its own system of education. As Muslims, Kazakh children were taught in mosques and madrasas, institutions whose organization and curriculum were necessarily adapted to the constraints of a mobile pastoral way of life (Sabitov, 1950). This distinctive context shaped the region's educational landscape by foregrounding ethno-confessional considerations. Consequently, the Russian imperial administration adopted a two-pronged educational strategy: Firstly, tightening state oversight of indigenous Muslim institutions–mektebs and madrasas–and secondly, integrating Kazakhs into the imperial educational sphere through a network of secular schools and Orthodox seminaries (Sturova, 2013: 199).

In accordance with the primary goal of the policy–bringing Muslim schools under tighter supervision–the imperial government limited the establishment of mektebs attached to mosques: members of the Muslim clergy could only do so after securing a special permit from the district authorities. Financial accounts requested by the mullahs had to be funded by Kazakh commoners (sharua). Simultaneously, these sharua were allowed, for a small fee, to enroll their children in schools located in nearby Cossack settlements and Russian villages (Tazhibayev, 1962: 24-25). However, the imperial government's interest in educating Kazakh children was never purely pedagogical. It also sought to curb their attendance at mektebs and madrasas–part of a broader campaign to stem the spread of Islam in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. As the historian T.Tazhibayev rightly observes, Orenburg Governor Kryzhanovskii's 1867 memorandum, "Measures to Combat Islam in the Eastern Part of Russia," stands as a clear example of the administrative pressure exerted to limit the number of Islamic schools (Tazhibayev, 1962: 26).

Local Jadid reformers, not just imperial officials, pressed for change. In a 1900 memorandum to the Ministry of Public Education, one Kazakh modernizer urged "turning mektebs and madrasas into full-fledged general schools by imposing a common program of study, adding secular subjects such as arithmetic, geography, the natural sciences, and Russian and world history, replacing poorly trained mullah-teachers with qualified instructors, adopting the more effective phonetic method of reading, introducing final examinations with certificates that conferred lighter military service, and placing supervision in the hands of elected Muslim notables rather than state inspectors or the clerical hierarchy" (GATO, f.126, op.2, d.2131, l.3-7).

The second policy track–integrating Kazakhs into the imperial educational sphere through secular schooling, since Orthodox seminaries never took root–served two purposes: spreading Russian language and knowledge among the steppe population and training a local bureaucratic corps (Vremennoe polozhenie, 1844). To boost literacy in the Ural and Turgai oblasts, a ministerial memorandum of 11 December 1879 proposed founding a dedicated teacher-training college for Kazakh mektebs; its graduates were to become village elders, volost clerks, or even mullahs. The first Kazakh teacher-training school soon opened in Orsk, Orenburg province (Tazhibaev, 1962: 27-28.). In addition, the "Temporary Regulations on the Administration of the Ural, Turgai, Akmolinsk, and Semipalatinsk Oblasts" set the basic contours of educational policy in Kazakhstan. These provisions not only defined the empire's instructional priorities for the region but also granted Kazakhs the right to raise funds voluntarily for schooling. Numerous collections were organized, and the proceeds were used to endow scholarships for children from the respective oblasts (OGAOrO, f.79. Op.1.d.129).

By the late nineteenth century Kazakhstan had built a broad, multi-tiered school system that balanced imperial objectives with local needs. Elementary instruction took place in progymnasia, mixed Russian-Kazakh and aul schools, and short literacy courses, while secondary education was offered in real'nye uchilishcha, male and female gymnasia, and teacher seminaries. Specialized training was provided by Kazakh teacher schools, technical, agricultural, medical, craft, and navigation colleges, and by mid-level teacher institutes opened in Omsk (1872) and Tashkent (1879). On the eve of 1900 the region counted several full gymnasia–including a military one in Vernyi (Almaty)–upper classes at the Ural real'noe uchilishche, and smaller gymnasia in Semipalatinsk; Sunday literacy classes and traditional mektebs and madrasas, now aligned with all-Russian curricula, completed the network. Oversight was divided among the Orenburg, West-Siberian, and Turkestan educational districts, coordinated from Tomsk, and in the Kazakh-majority south Russian-Kazakh schools retained Arabic script for initial literacy. Taken together, this layered structure diffused Russian pedagogical models while preserving key elements of Kazakh language and culture, laying a durable foundation for the region's future educational development (Tazhibayev, 1962: 32-33).

In conclusion, by the late 19th century, the Russian Empire had forged a dual educational strategy in the Kazakh steppe–regulating Muslim schools while promoting a secular Russian system–that produced a multi-tiered network from village classrooms to specialist educational organizations. This framework extended imperial cultural influence yet also nurtured a Kazakh intelligentsia poised to reinterpret and eventually challenge colonial authority.

With the contours of the Kazakh steppe's educational landscape now established, we can turn to the deeper question of why the Russian administration invested in this infrastructure–namely, the political, cultural, and administrative objectives that underpinned its colonial schooling project.

Officially framed by the Temporary Regulations as a benign program of language dissemination and local cadre training, the expansion of imperial schooling in practice operated as a deeper colonial project of cultural hierarchy and identity formation–one that Kazakh political and intellectual elites entered with their own purposes. Beyond the stated aims, the policy sought to affirm the supremacy of imperial culture over local traditions, to reorder identities, and–through schooling–to inculcate a sense of belonging as citizens of a "great state." Within this system, Kazakh elites pursued distinct goals of their own: securing credentials and administrative leverage, advancing social mobility, acquiring tools for communal reform, and safeguarding local interests. The result was not a one-way imposition but a negotiated field of power in which collaboration, appropriation, and resistance coexisted. It is within this complex causal framework that the relationship between the Russian administration and Kazakh intellectuals should be examined, for the colonial educational project was conceived, interpreted, and implemented differently by these two parties.

As historian Z.T. Sadvakasova has argued, education in the Steppe became a battleground of competing visions. On one side stood the imperial administration, seeking to suppress Islamic educa-

tional institutions and replace them with Russian-language schools aligned with imperial ideology. On the other side were Kazakh intellectuals and local communities, who viewed Islamic schools–mektebs and madrasas–not only as educational spaces but as vital strongholds of cultural autonomy and resistance (Sadvakasova, 91–94).

In this light, imperial education was not merely about Russifying Kazakhs–it was about shaping a new political subject, one who internalized loyalty to empire while shedding elements of local identity deemed incompatible with imperial cohesion. This process, however, was neither uncontested nor fully successful.

Imperial officials themselves recognized the deeper political purpose of education. Inspector Alektorov wrote explicitly that the state's goal extended beyond literacy–it aimed to systematically incorporate the "Kirgiz" into the Russian cultural family, countering the perceived threat of Muslim exclusivity. Alektorov and others also saw schools as vehicles for transforming nomadic Kazakhs into sedentary, governable subjects (Alektorov, 1900: 245-246). Similarly, N. Bunge emphasized the need for Kazakhs to be convinced of the "superiority of the Russian school" and to recognize that education was intended to make them "full citizens of the state to which they belonged " (Sturova, 2013:).

What emerges from this picture is not a one-sided story of colonial domination, but a far more layered process–one where empire sought to mold subjects, and subjects negotiated the terms of their inclusion. The meanings of education diverged between the colonizers and the colonized: for Russian officials, it was a means of integration and control; for Kazakh intellectuals, it was both a threat to identity and, paradoxically, a potential tool for self-assertion within the imperial structure.

Thus, applying Cooper's framework enables us to move beyond simplistic narratives of assimilation. It invites us to explore how education functioned as a zone of dynamic interaction–where hierarchies of knowledge, identity, and power were not just imposed from above, but constantly contested, reinterpreted, and reshaped by those on both sides of the imperial divide (Frederick Cooper; Ann Laura Stoler, 1997: 3).

What follows grounds this argument in the 1860s–early 1900s, tracing how reforms and regulations reconfigured the educational landscape and its reception among Kazakhs. From the 1860s to the early twentieth century, the imperial government effected significant changes in the educational landscape of Kazakh society, and these reforms were consequential for how secular imperial schooling was perceived by both the political and intellectual elite and by ordinary people. Contemporary observers–most notably A. V. Vasil'ev, a prerevolutionary author who served as Director of Public Schools in Kazan' province in 1907–attributed these shifts in educational policy to administrative initiatives by Russian authorities and to legal measures that facilitated the spread of schooling in the Steppe, an assessment with which we concur (Vasiliev, 1900). In short, both policy design and legal codification underpinned the expansion of imperial education and reshaped its reception among Kazakhs.

In the initial phase, the diffusion of Russian schooling was closely tied to the activities of Kazakh officials–primarily members of the traditional nomadic elite–who were relatively familiar with Russian culture and wished to secure inherited privileges for their sons, something that could be achieved only through Russian education. Up to the mid-nineteenth century, the prevailing majority of educated Kazakhs were the children of Kazakh officials; institutions such as the Orenburg School at the Border Commission, the Neplyuev Cadet Corps, the Page Corps (Dzhangers-Bukeevs) (Sultangalieva; Tuleshova, 2019: 273), and other schools admitted the sons of Kazakh administrators on the basis of parental petitions from families intent on seeing their children occupy high administrative office in the Steppe. A memorandum by the ruling sultan of the Western Part, Baimukhamed Aĭchuvakov, in 1845–shortly before the Orenburg School at the Border Commission opened–demonstrates both the rationale for admitting the children of the region's political elite and the perceived need to campaign among Kazakhs to send their sons to Russian schools. As the sultan wrote, "by every means he endeavored to incline the Horde people to give their children to study at the aforementioned school and corps. As a result, the sultans and honored members of the Horde of the Western Part expressed to him their wish to place their children in the Neplyuev Cadet Corps and in the school being established at the Commission, while others, having children still too young to be admitted to the Corps, asked that they be enrolled as candidates until reaching the requisite age" (TsGA RK. F.4. Op.1. D.3414. l.41-42 ob.) The evidence from petitions and official correspondence indicates that the earliest channels of admission were designed around elite families and that such pathways were deliberately leveraged to legitimate and seed the new institutions.

Further insight is provided by an instruction of the Orenburg Border Commission to the cornet (khorunzhii) Sultan Kusyap-galii Urmanov dated 15 August 1845. Addressing rumors of coercive child removal for the new school, the Commission wrote: "You are aware, Mr. Sultan, that the absurd rumors spread by ill-disposed persons among the Horde people–about the alleged forcible taking of their children for the school being opened at the Border Commission, and the like–have aroused among the credulous certain fears, talk, and some disturbances; although by now the entire inconsistency of this nonsensical gossip has been explained and the frivolous have convinced themselves of the contrary. You yourself have set an excellent example for your fellow tribesmen by requesting the Commission's consent to admit the children of your sultans–Shagin-Girey, Sakhyp-Girey, Gadil'-Girey, Gadil'-Girey, and Salim-Girey–into the aforesaid school for their education; of this praiseworthy act of yours the Orenburg Military Governor has been informed. I hereby charge Your Nobility, making use of your present journey to the Inner Bukey Horde, to employ your exhortations and influence upon the Horde people in order to explain to them the real benefits of educating their children, and to incline honorable men–distinguished by good morals and respected by their fellow tribesmen–to voluntarily give their children to the school that has been established; and should such men be found, let them send their petitions to me. At the same time, do not fail to ascertain indirectly whether the Kirgiz [Kazakhs] have understood the benefits of establishing fortifications in the Steppe, and on your part strive to explain that the Government, in erecting them, intended precisely to protect the well-disposed who are obedient to the Government from the claims of marauders and, by restoring thereby order and tranquility in the Horde, to afford them the possibility of attaining prosperity and increasing their herds and studs" (TsGA RK. F.4. Op.1. d.3414. l.85-86.). This document confirms that admission focused chiefly on the sons of sultans and notable Kazakhs, while also revealing pockets of resistance to imperial schooling and the crucial mediating role of the local elite in persuading Kazakhs of its utility. Taken together, these sources show that early recruitment to imperial schools combined elite gatekeeping with proactive persuasion to normalize Russian education among Kazakhs.

Over time, fear of Russian schooling gradually dissipated, and interest in imperial education spread beyond the ranks of officials and sultans to lower social strata. As exemplars of prosperity and authority emerged in the figure of the imperially educated Kazakh, wider society came to view schooling as a path to social mobility and public standing. In this evolving context, colonial education increasingly served Russian authorities as an instrument for training loyal personnel and, ultimately, for fashioning future citizens of the empire. In effect, shifting perceptions among Kazakhs and the state's staffing needs reinforced each other as the educational project deepened.

It is important to underline the dynamics of this changing perception: by the second half of the nineteenth century competition among Kazakh children for places intensified; private fundraising by Kazakhs, the establishment of stipends, and even individual initiatives to open schools for Kazakh children all signal how attitudes toward Russian education were transformed. Thus, in 1909 Collegiate Assessor Akhmed Kurgambekovich Beremzhanov petitioned the Turgai governor "in view of the absence of free vacancies in the gymnasium and the opening of a stipend at the Orenburg Real School (Realschule)" to have his brother, Gazymbek Beremzhanov, considered for the newly created stipend at that institution. (TsGA RK. F.25. op.1. d.1545. l.7-8.) Numerous similar petitions from Kazakhs – including members of the emergent intelligentsia –attest to the popularity and perceived value of stipends. The cumulative record of such appeals demonstrates a broadening base of demand for secondary education and targeted financial support.

Equally noteworthy is the eagerness of Kazakhs to open schools and to finance and sustain educational development within their communities. From the latter half of the nineteenth century, the number of those willing to found and maintain schools grew, particularly among wealthier and socially prominent Kazakhs, some of whom had themselves received imperial educations. Thus, Arūngazy Isengulov of the Taldyk volost, Irgiz uezd, expressed his wish to establish a school for Kazakh children, describing the educational situation in his locality; he also proposed to serve as honorary curator and to appoint his educated nephew as teacher. As he wrote, he sought "to open an aul school in my aul, appointing me its honorary curator, for I have built at my own expense for the school to be opened a schoolhouse with an apartment for the teacher and a kitchen between the classroom and the said apartment. Assuming at my own expense only the heating and lighting and the duties of honorary curator at the said school, I have in view my nephew Dosmberdi Akkushkarov, who

has received specialized pedagogical training at the Orenburg Kirgiz [Kazakh] Teachers' School, for the performance of teaching duties at the school to be opened on the river 'Qairaḳte,' which lies 35 versts from the settlement of Karabutak. Should Your Excellency find it difficult to confirm me in the title of honorary curator of the school to be opened in my aul, you may ascertain through the administrator of the Taldyk volost what influence, honor, and trust I enjoy among the Kirgiz. I myself am the petitioner and literate in Russian" (TsGA RK. F.25. Op.1. d.921a. l.13.). The petition shows that the author was well informed about the educational circumstances of his aul and neighboring areas, and he specified the anticipated number of pupils and the potential funds that could be mobilized to open the school; in sum, he offered premises and a qualified teacher, justified the local need for a school with prospective enrollment figures, and identified sources to ensure its functioning. Such initiatives illustrate how local agency and philanthropy became integral to institutional growth.

Kazakh intellectuals also wrote extensively about the progress of Russian education and popular attitudes toward it. For example, M. Sarsemyev, teacher at the Naryn Russian-Kazakh School, observed: "The cultural significance of Russian-Kazakh schools in general, and of the Naryn school in particular, is very great for the region. The attitude of the people toward them is friendly. In 1880 there were neither persons literate in Russian nor teacher-Kirgiz. After the establishment of ward and starshina schools in the Horde in 1895–1896, teachers began to emerge from the people; by the end of the century there were 15 of them. At the beginning of the current century their number reached 40. Ten graduated from the Kazan' Teachers' Seminary. In the Horde 20 feldshers are at work." (TsGA RK, f. 59, op. 1, d. 227, ll. 5–6). Read together, such testimonies chart a steady expansion of local teaching cadres and basic medical personnel and a generally favorable reception among the population.

In the early twentieth century, the newspaper *Kazakh* (*Qazaq*) frequently discussed the spread and necessity of education–what should be taken into account, the overall state of schooling, and the dynamics of imperial educational activity in the Kazakh Steppe. In his article "Oryssha oqushylar" ("Pupils in Russian-Language Schools"), Akhmet Baitursynov described the entrance examinations to the Orenburg Kazakh Teachers' Seminary, which offered only five stipends despite eighty applicants. Those who failed to gain admission, he noted, could, if their means allowed, study on a fee-paying basis; ideally, wealthy children should study at their own expense so that stipends would be available to the poor, whereas in practice both rich and poor competed for scholarships. Baitursynov further argued that Kazakh youths ought to continue into secondary and higher institutions, for greater returns could be expected from such graduates than from those who studied only a few years and then returned to the auls to take minor posts, later becoming vain among the Kazakhs–an outcome that bred resentment toward "those educated in Russian." He called for collective action among Kazakhs to establish more stipends and thereby expand opportunity beyond, for example, six places for eighty candidates, adding that he would subsequently specify which schools should receive how many scholarships. The public debates in *Kazakh* both reflected and propelled the widening demand for sustained, higher-level education among Kazakh youths (Qazaq gazeti, 59-60.).

Taken together, the evidence shows that imperial Russia did not merely "add schools" to the Kazakh Steppe; it built an institutional architecture designed to incorporate a Muslim, largely nomadic population into a hierarchized imperial order, while relying on–and reshaping–the agency of local elites. The dual track of policy–regulating mektebs and madrasas while expanding a secular, Russian-language network–advanced the formal aims of language dissemination and cadre formation, yet it also pursued deeper objectives of cultural ranking and subject-making, consistent with Carnoy's view of education as cultural imperialism. At the same time, petitions for admission, locally funded stipends, and philanthropic school-founding reveal a social reception that evolved from guarded resistance to pragmatic accommodation and, eventually, instrumental embrace, as schooling became a pathway to mobility, office, and voice. In this negotiated field, Kazakh intellectuals acted not simply as objects of policy but as strategic intermediaries who could collaborate, appropriate, or contest imperial designs–an interplay better captured by Cooper's emphasis on collaborative empire-building than by one-way models of assimilation. The outcome by the late nineteenth century was a hybrid educational order: Russian pedagogical forms grafted onto steppe realities, producing the intermediary cadres and intelligentsia that would later reinterpret–and sometimes challenge–the very project that formed them. Having mapped how the classroom of empire was assembled and received, the analysis now turns from the architecture to the agenda: the political, cultural,

and administrative purposes that the Russian state sought to realize through colonial schooling, and the ways Kazakh actors negotiated those purposes in practice.

Kazakh Intellectuals as Intermediaries in the Imperial Educational Project: Emergence, Motivations, and Contributions

Having mapped the architecture of the "empire's classroom," this section shifts from institutions to the intermediaries who animated them. I use "Kazakh intellectuals" to denote a socially diverse cohort–teachers and students of imperial schools, volost clerks, translators, medical and technical specialists, journalists, and reform-minded *ʿulema*–whose formation was enabled by the very structures surveyed above. Collaboration with the imperial school system was neither monolithic nor merely coerced; it ranged from instrumental cooperation to strategic appropriation and, at times, overt contestation. Read through this lens, the careers, petitions, philanthropic initiatives, and public writings of Kazakh intellectuals reveal how colonial schooling became a field in which local projects–social mobility, communal reform, and cultural negotiation–could be pursued within (and sometimes against) imperial designs.

Following Uyama Tomohiko, intelligentsia are not simply "educated people," but individuals whose knowledge is joined to a critical stance toward existing society and a desire to bring it closer to an ethical or political ideal; in his reading, late-nineteenth-century Kazakh intellectuals represent a rediscovery–and redefinition–of this tradition (Tomohiko, 2000: 76–77). In this article, however, the term is used more capaciously to include all actors formed by schooling in the imperial period–members of the political and cultural elite, students, teachers, translators, clerks, medical and technical specialists, and reform-minded *ʿulema*–whose education (imperial or Islamic) drew them into academic, school, or training activity in the Steppe.

It is true that the idea of *ağartuşılıq* (enlightenment) reached Kazakh society through Russia, yet Kazakh enlightenment possessed its own content, chronology, and trajectory. Contemporary observers and later commentators noted a program that worked on several fronts at once: challenging obsolete feudal relations and religious fanaticism; urging mastery of knowledge and science to meet the demands of the age; articulating relief from colonial pressure; and, through the creative work of poets, writers, and scholar-philosophers, gradually taking shape as a national project. By the early twentieth century, *zıyalylar* (men and women of letters and learning) explicitly set themselves the task of lifting the "Kazakh people" to the status of a modern nation (Qoigeldiev 2014: 235–37).

Under imperial rule, the formation of a Kazakh intellectual stratum began with access to Russian education by the sons of the traditional elite–sultans, *biys*, and *starshinas*. This access both reflected and reinforced elite integration into imperial social and educational environments: to preserve leadership, the old aristocracy increasingly engaged the institutions, languages, and credentials of the empire. In these first decades, Islamic education (*mektep/madrasa*) and imperial schooling coexisted uneasily; together they produced hybrid literacies and administrative competencies that marked the earliest cohort. There was, moreover, a struggle for leadership of the Kazakh community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Rotier argues, the intelligentsia drew on a vision of Kazakh history not only to legitimate a homeland and secure borders against Russian colonization, but also to validate their own claim to lead the nation (Rotier, 2004).

Modernity's pathway opened chiefly through an elite trained in Russian schools for military and administrative service–initially children of aristocratic and upper-tribal strata, followed by a second wave from similar backgrounds and, only belatedly, by youth from mid-level strata who received more general education (Balgamis, 2000: 7). Over time, the educated elite became the backbone of public life and a primary force of mobilization. As their ideas circulated, authority began to shift away from older aristocratic patrons–who had financed schools and publications from the Steppe to St. Petersburg–without erasing that group's social presence or historical role. Although the native intelligentsia benefited from educational advances, many resisted specific colonial policies and the power they embodied. As in other modernizing societies, this intelligentsia formed a recognizable, if internally diverse, milieu: not sharply delineated by a single doctrine, but united by education and by change-oriented action shaped by professional and institutional training (Balgamis, 2000: 37–38).

The first widely recognized generation coalesced around figures such as Shoqan Walikhanov, Abai (Ibrāhīm) Qunanbaiuly, and Ybyrai Altynsarin. Walikhanov advocated opening Russian schools in the Steppe as a counter to scholasticism in Tatar-led madrasa instruction and as a conduit for secular

knowledge. Altynsarin–often named the founder of Kazakh pedagogy–translated such aspirations into institutional designs while serving as Inspector of Schools in Turgai oblast, advancing curricula built on the Russian language and elementary secular subjects. These pioneers exemplify cultural brokerage and educational collaboration: they integrated Kazakh society into imperial pedagogical space even as they sought to conserve and elevate Kazakh moral and literary traditions. Importantly, the first "national" impulse among Kazakhs emerged not from an urban bourgeoisie (as among Volga Tatars) but from tribal and dynastic aristocracies; early intellectuals thus aimed less at immediate political emancipation than at rediscovering cultural bonds capable of unifying people and leaders (Balgamis, 2000: 188). Educated from childhood within imperial institutions in the Steppe and, increasingly, in the empire's metropolitan centers–most notably St. Petersburg and Kazan (and later Tomsk)–the second generation of Kazakh intellectuals passed through longer, more systematic training in gymnasia, real'nye uchilishcha, teacher seminaries, specialized colleges, and universities. Exposure to higher learning beyond the Steppe furnished them with professional credentials, command of administrative and legal norms, and durable networks that linked provincial schools to central ministries, journals, and philanthropic circles. On returning to the Steppe as teachers, clerks, translators, feldshers, and stipend-supported students, they professionalized the school system: staffing classrooms and offices, endowing scholarships, founding and supervising schools, and carrying pedagogical debates into an expanding public sphere. What had begun as a narrow elite gateway became a social conduit; as access widened, these graduates supplied the personnel, texts, and organizational know-how that enabled schools to function across the region. This cohort also diverged from the pioneers in political imagination. Building on the early reformers' cultural program, they treated "Kazakhness" as a deliberately mobilized political identity, projecting the Kazakh nation as historical and therefore entitled to recognized privileges within the imperial order. Crucially, they tied that identity to a distinct homeland. Whereas the first generation sought moral and cultural renewal without asserting territorial claims, the second confronted the consequences of peasant in-migration from European Russia and the displacement of Kazakhs from prime pasturelands. Territorial preservation thus became integral to national self-definition: without a protected land base–and the cultural practices anchored in it–they feared rapid assimilation into the dominant imperial culture and the forfeiture of status linked to being Kazakh (Rotier 2000, 199). In this sense, the second generation transformed the earlier language of enlightenment into a program of political positioning within the empire, marrying metropolitan training to a territorialized vision of the nation.

Motivations for entering imperial educational projects were layered and situational, combining personal advancement with programmatic aims of communal uplift and cultural brokerage. Credentials promised office and income; proximity to the state offered leverage to lobby for schools in the *auls*; mastery of Russian opened access to resources and legal redress; and pedagogical work enabled a selective translation of imperial norms into local idioms. Education thus functioned as a pathway for status preservation and upward mobility–especially for an impoverished aristocracy. Following mid-nineteenth-century legal reforms, Kazakh sultans lost distinctive corporate privileges and were assimilated into the empire's general estate structure, enjoying rights and advantages only "on the basis of common laws" (Masevich, 1960: 339). Schooling offered a way to convert lineage capital into bureaucratic rank and stable income. Many Kazakh youths–including sons of sultans–studied on stipends, not from surplus wealth but from necessity.

The career of Bakhtygirey Kulmanov illustrates this calculus. A native of the Inner Horde, he completed the Orenburg Gymnasium with a silver medal and in 1881 entered the law faculty of St. Petersburg University. Archival files record repeated requests for one-time financial assistance during his studies, reflecting genuine hardship (RGIA, f. 1291, op.84, d. 17, ll. 10–11). After graduating, he returned to the steppe and built a successful administrative career: by 1908 he drew a salary of 1,350 rubles per year and held the use of an estate plot at Novaya Kazanka with three earthen dwellings and vestibules of adobe brick (RGIA, f. 1291, op. 84, 1908, d. 110, l. 4). For such men, imperial credentials were a fungible asset that secured both office and livelihood. At the same time, the expanding educational policy of the empire from the 1860s–designed to increase the pool of literate subjects and train local personnel–opened channels of social mobility beyond aristocratic circles. Kazakhs from modest backgrounds obtained secondary and higher education and, in doing so, entered provincial administrations, courts, and schools. This cohort formed part of a new regional elite within the imperial polity, their advancement

anchored not in lineage alone but in certified competencies and service.

The trajectory of Asylbek Seitov exemplifies this broader opening. Born to a non-aristocratic family–the son of a governor-general's clerk–he grew up in straightened circumstances; in archival documents his mother described their poor material situation and her responsibilities as a single parent with several children (GATO, f.102. op.2. d.4180). Seitov completed medical studies at Tomsk University and returned to the Steppe as a physician. He was elected a delegate to the First All-Kazakh Congress in Orenburg in 1917; at the Second All-Kazakh Congress (December 1917), which formed the Alash Orda government, an Alash Orda committee in Omsk included Magzhan Zhumabay, Aidarkhan Turlybay, Baymukhammet Serkebay, Asylbek Seitov, Musylmanbek Seitov (Asylbek's elder brother), and others. In May 1918, the youth organization "Birlik" in Omsk adopted the Alash Party platform, with Asylbek and Musylmanbek Seitov among its leaders; at the same time, the "Zhas azamat" youth organization formed in Semey, with Muratbek Seitov (Asylbek's younger brother) as a member. Seitov worked productively for many years in public health and published on how the educational process was realized in Kazakh society (Mukhatova, 2018: 27-40). Such careers show how imperial schooling equipped intermediaries to navigate state institutions while advancing agendas of communal reform and proto-national consolidation.

Other cases underscore the same pattern. Zhiganshah Seidalin worked for years in St. Petersburg before, after multiple petitions, securing a transfer back to the Kazakh Steppe (RGIA, f. 1405, op. 545, d. 11932, l. 17 verso). Salim-Girey Nuralikhanov, upon graduating from Kazan University, entered the Astrakhan district court service on 11 October 1904 and a week later was appointed *ulusny popechitel'* (ulus trustee) of the Maloderbet ulus in the Kalmyk Steppe district (TsGIA SPb, f. 14, op. 3, d. 36393, ll. 6–7). Returning to his native region, he later joined the Alash national movement and was elected to the Kazakh National Council of Alash-Orda as a delegate from the Inner Horde. Teachers, alongside high-profile politicians, were crucial brokers. Reports in the newspaper *Kazakh* document how a respected Kazakh teacher could legitimate schooling locally. In 1915 (no. 101–163), Adilbay Muratuly described Akhmet mırza Barzhaksyoğly, a graduate of the Omsk Teachers' Seminary: once villagers saw that "their own" taught competently and with dignity, parents began enrolling seven- and eight-year-olds, and adults started coming to read books and newspapers (Qazaq gazeti, 163). Teachers also mediated legislation. A rule of 14 January 1906 permitted instruction in pupils' mother tongue, yet in many places Kazakhs did not benefit–not because the law did not exist, but because teachers either lacked explicit administrative orders or had no Kazakh-language press through which to publicize and implement the provision (Qazaq gazeti, 166). This capacity to publicize, interpret, or quietly shelve rules underscores the teacher's role as an active translator of empire.

Finally, contemporary normative discourse reinforced a service ethos. As Akhmet Baitursynov argued in the pages of *Kazakh*, a "true intellectual" is one who completes his education and returns to serve the homeland–contrasted with those who abandon studies and remain suspended between worlds (Qazaq gazeti, 169). The sentiment captures a wider self-understanding: participation in imperial education was not simple co-optation but a strategic engagement meant to extract resources, reshape local institutions, and elevate the community.

In sum, Kazakh intellectuals emerged as hybrid products of imperial schooling and local traditions, claiming an elite role within a transforming society. They entered imperial schools for reasons at once pragmatic and programmatic: to secure salaried positions and restore status; to gain linguistic and legal literacies that conferred leverage with the state; and to act as cultural brokers who could modernize schooling, public life, and law "from within." Their motives are not reducible to assimilation or resistance; rather, they practiced selective translation–appropriating imperial forms to serve local ends while incrementally redefining those forms in the process.

Intellectuals' Contributions to Educational Projects

This section examines how Kazakh intellectuals participated in, and helped shape, the Russian imperial government's educational policy in the Kazakh Steppe. The incentives that drew them toward schooling mattered not in the abstract but in the practices they enabled: curricular mediation, institution-building, and public advocacy that made schools viable. Kazakh intellectuals did not merely write about the necessity of education and call for achievement; they sought political legitimacy among their communities and worked with the

Russian administration when doing so advanced concrete educational aims.

Public forums were central to this work. Debates around *Dala Walayatïnïng Gazetí* (DWG) in the late nineteenth century show close, often intricate ties between imperial officials and Kazakh contributors. Despite the complexity of interests, both sides frequently converged in criticizing malfeasance among local Kazakh administrators, albeit for different reasons: officials to distance themselves from administrative failures by appealing directly to the population, and intellectuals to demonstrate their progressiveness against corruption and stagnation (Tomohiko, 2003:). This convergence translated into actionable agendas for expanding, supervising, and legitimating schooling.

The administrative center's limited knowledge of the steppe created an opening for local expertise. Policy was drafted from written sources, supplemented by field visits and consultation with regional authorities and elements of the Kazakh elite; yet even careful collation of archival materials, reports, and statistics rarely yielded definitive conclusions. As a result, Kazakh intermediaries became indispensable to the production of knowledge that underpinned policy. According to Ian Campbel, their contributions took three forms. First, no scientific expedition worked without Kazakh participation as translators, guides, and logisticians; the practical conduct of research in the steppe depended on their cooperation. Second, low-level Kazakh administrators–especially *volost* officials–fed information upward about local conditions, thereby sustaining the empire's reporting system. Third, a cohort of Russophone Kazakhs wrote for imperial audiences and joined research missions, producing knowledge of the steppe for both local and metropolitan readers; well-known examples include the scholarship of Shoqan Walikhanov, the participation of Alikhan Bokeikhanov in F. A. Shcherbina's land-use expedition, and the sustained educational work of Ybyrai Altynsarin (Campbel, 2017:).

In educational governance specifically, intellectuals acted as informed petitioners and policy interlocutors. Archival materials preserve numerous instances in which they documented needs and proposed solutions. When Kazan University graduate Akhmet Beremzhanov petitioned for a stipend for his brother, he argued that the boys of remote Turgai *uezd* were effectively excluded from Orenburg gymnasium places because scholarships were quickly taken by candidates from closer districts, especially Aktyubinsk. His letter detailed the historical distribution of stipends and demonstrated familiarity with enrolment patterns and geographic inequities; the governor granted the request within a month, displacing two other candidates (TsGA RK, f. 25, op. 1, d. 1545, ll. 5–6). Such petitions show intellectuals leveraging granular knowledge to adjust policy implementation.

Institution-building likewise relied on local initiative. Aruŋğazy Isengulov's application to open a school combined a request for partial state support with concrete data: anticipated enrolment of at least twenty boys and girls, his own Russian literacy, likely contributions from neighboring *aul* no. 2, and the striking fact that the entire Taldyk *volost* (about 2,000 kibitkas) had only one *aul* school, whereas other *volosts* had "sufficient" numbers (TsGA RK, f. 25, op. 1, d. 921a, l. 13). Elsewhere, wealthy Kazakhs of Burtinsk *volost*, including hereditary honorary citizen Pangeray Nurmukhamedov, attempted for years to endow stipends at the Orenburg Real School; their donations sat idle in a bank until, with the assistance of Bakhytzhan Karataev, the fund was finally instituted (TsGA RK, f. 25, op. 1, d. 611). These episodes highlight how intellectuals and local notables identified gaps, mobilized resources, and pushed the bureaucracy toward practical outcomes.

Implementation on the ground depended on teachers and officials who translated norms into practice. A respected Kazakh teacher could legitimate schooling locally, increasing enrolments among seven- and eight-year-olds and even drawing adults to reading circles. Teachers also mediated law. In this sense, teachers operated as active translators of empire, capable of publicizing, interpreting, or quietly shelving regulations.

Students, too, acted as intellectuals in formation. They published opinions in newspapers on the scholarship regime, organized fundraising for Kazakh pupils, and debated what educated youth owed their communities. Such activities extended the educational project beyond classrooms into a public sphere where policy and practice were contested and reshaped.

Collaboration, however, coexisted with protest. Rules issued in 1906 regarding teachers for "inorodtsy" children stipulated that instructors could be either non-Russians of the relevant confession proficient in Russian or Russians proficient in local languages, and that school heads must be Russian subjects with at least a one-class Ministry course (Vseobshchee obuchenie, 1914: 72). These provisions sparked a wave of objections across

Muslim communities; petitions by educated Kazakhs led the West Siberian school district curator to recommend rescission, and the rules were cancelled in March 1907. In 1905 multiple petitions addressed to Governor-General N. N. Sukhotin enumerated problems across institutions serving Kazakhs; his successor I. P. Nadarov convened a meeting where elected local representatives presented demands directly to officials. These episodes show that intellectuals did not merely channel state policy downward; they also conveyed collective grievances upward and pressed for revision.

Finance further complicated the field. The imperial government lacked the resources to meet demand, and Kazakh society funded Muslim schools privately throughout the imperial period. Where funds were sufficient, communities opened Islamic schools; where state assistance was sought, elites often proposed Russian schools to secure subsidies, though many initiatives failed for want of budget. A revealing 1860s discussion noted that Kazakhs agreed to share costs on condition that instruction be in Kazakh; imperial policy rejected this, and the planned schools did not open. Mismatches between administrative assumptions and local realities were common. In 1892, for example, the Akmolinsk oblast proposed thirty stipends (22 for "Kirghiz" and eight for peasant boys), yet agricultural schools in Atbasar and Akmolinsk enrolled no Kazakh pupils that year, and only one "Kirghiz" boy studied in each of the Kokchetav, Omsk, and Petropavlovsk schools–evidence of planning detached from actual access (Yerkulov, 1899: 2).

Kazakh parents and officials also monitored the cultural and confessional environment of schools. A complaint from parents at the Omsk Technical School accused a resident *mullah* of inadequate instruction and of teaching what they deemed inappropriate to their children (TsGARK, f. 775, op. 1, d. 18, l. 8). Such interventions reveal a constituency committed both to secular professional training and to safeguarding community norms within imperial institutions.

From the administration's perspective, collaboration yielded tangible benefits: better information about where to open schools and how they were received; channels for local fundraising to supplement state budgets; and a cadre of teachers and clerks who modeled a "modern" Kazakh and thus enhanced the legitimacy of secular education. From the community's perspective, intellectuals used these same mechanisms to redirect resources to underserved districts, to adapt curricula to nomadic conditions (as in boarding arrangements pioneered in Turgai), and to argue–sometimes successfully–for language policies and school types suited to Kazakh needs. Even where many intermediaries shared "improving" assumptions with imperial officials, their agency meant they were not merely mimicking a dominant culture. They sought influence through knowledge, and, for a time, could shape practice on the steppe; only later did mass resettlement policies narrow this space for negotiation.

In sum, the participation of Kazakh intellectuals in imperial educational policy was multifaceted: they were informants, implementers, advocates, fundraisers, critics, and, at times, opponents. By petitioning, endowing, reporting, teaching, and protesting, they helped decide where schools were built, how they worked, and whom they served. Their efforts advanced the imperial project in some respects while simultaneously modernizing Kazakh society on its own terms. This duality–collaboration and constraint, appropriation and resistance–defines their historical significance in the making of the empire's classroom in the Kazakh Steppe.

Conclusion

This study examined how Kazakh intellectuals participated in–and helped shape–the Russian imperial educational project in the Kazakh Steppe, using archival records and contemporaneous periodicals, analyzed through an intermediaries lens. It found, first, that a two-wave intelligentsia emerged: an initial cohort formed at the intersection of Islamic and imperial schooling, and a second, professionally trained generation educated in gymnasia, seminaries, specialized colleges, and universities in central imperial cities. Second, motives for engagement were layered–status preservation, salaried service, new mobility for non-elites, and a reformist ethos. Third, contributions were concrete: petitions and endowments, school founding and supervision, classroom implementation, public advocacy, and, where necessary, organized protest that prompted policy revision.

Re-evaluating "collaboration" through this evidence, the article proposes hybrid agency: not passive compliance or simple mimicry, but selective translation and tactical use of imperial resources–petitioning, publicizing, interpreting, or withholding–to advance both state aims and local priorities. This perspective relocates power from statutes to practices and shows how knowledge produced by intermediaries underwrote planning,

funding, and legitimation, while schooling also served as a vehicle of negotiated modernization and social mobility.

Future research should connect these intermediaries to Central Asian Jadidism (curricular reform, language politics, publics of debate) and trace continuities and breaks into the Soviet era (korenizatsiia, literacy drives, script reforms, teacher training). Additional priorities include gendered histories of girls' schooling and female teachers, comparative analysis across imperial peripheries, and spatial studies of scholarships and school siting. Pursuing these lines will deepen understanding of education as both a tool of empire and a site of local agency, clarifying the long afterlives of imperial schooling in post-Soviet nation-building.

Gratitude, conflict of interest

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