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Communicating Colonial Space: How Imperial Discourse Produced "Surplus Land" in the Kazakh Steppe

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Abstract

This article examines how Russian-language press debate and official statistical reporting produced, disputed, and operationalized "surplus land" in the Kazakh Steppe and adjoining Turkestan territories. It analyzes 43 items reproduced in the *Turkestanskii sbornik*: 37 newspaper and publicistic texts and six Resettlement Administration studies published between 1885 and 1915. Rather than treating the archive as a unified imperial voice, it distinguishes advocacy, regional criticism, and official calculation. Claims made availability plausible; counterclaims exposed instability; statistical practices converted disputed assumptions into surveys, pastoral norms, tables, maps, and calculable surpluses. A comparison with Port Phillip in 1835 distinguishes Crown authorization of possession from the calculation of pastoral requirements. Communicative legibility is a general process of making representations actionable across genres. Its colonial configuration here joined imperial authority, the subordination of Indigenous territorial claims, and settler allocation, rather than constituting a mechanism exclusive to colonial governance.

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Terminological note: Primary sources use the imperial Russian ethnonym kirgiz for Kazakhs and, in some Fergana materials, kara-kirgiz for Kyrgyz. The article uses Kazakh and Kyrgyz in the author's prose while retaining historical terms in translated titles and quotations.

Keywords
colonial communicative legibility, colonial discourse, communication and colonialism, production of space, settler colonialism, Russian Empire, Kazakh Steppe, historical discourse analysis

Introduction

Land did not become available for Russian settlement simply because imperial officials found it empty. It became available when particular descriptions of mobility, cultivation, productivity, and need were made credible and portable. In the Kazakh Steppe, the terms svobodnye zemli (free lands) and izlishnie zemli (surplus lands) condensed that transformation. They displaced questions of historically embedded, seasonal territorial use with a seemingly technical question: how much land exceeded a state-calculated pastoral norm? This article investigates the communicative work through which that question acquired administrative force.

The case matters to communication history because the archive links public argument to bureaucratic procedure. Newspapers, publicistic essays, expert commentary, surveys, tables, and maps did not perform identical functions and did not speak with one voice. Metropolitan papers could promote migration or criticize policy from afar; regional newspapers reported conflicts and ecological constraints; Resettlement Administration studies addressed officials and specialists through standardized forms and calculations. Their interaction, rather than any single text, made "surplus" a usable colonial category.

The article asks: How did heterogeneous communicative genres make Kazakh territory legible as "surplus land," and how did disagreement shape rather than simply obstruct that process? It argues that public claims, counterclaims, expert descriptions, and administrative inscriptions formed a recursive circuit. Press discourse made territorial availability thinkable and contestable; official statistical genres translated selected premises into commensurable variables; and the resulting norms and tables returned political judgments as apparently objective facts. Communication, therefore, did not mechanically precede administration in a single linear sequence. It connected sites in which meanings were proposed, circulated, challenged, reformulated, and materially consequential.

Colonial communicative legibility does not mean that discourse alone caused conquest, nor that every imperial-language text legitimized colonization. Communicative legibility names a general process by which representations travel across genres and institutions until some become actionable classifications. Its colonial configuration here arose through the conjunction of imperial authority over classification, the subordination of Indigenous territorial authority, and the orientation of withdrawal toward settler allocation. Simplification or calculation alone does not establish coloniality. The concept directs attention to mediation, repetition, uptake, genre conversion, and contestation within these historically specific relations.

Empirically, the study draws on 43 Russian-language items reproduced in the *Turkestanskii sbornik* between 1885 and 1915. The expanded corpus combines 37 newspaper and publicistic texts with six book-length statistical investigations produced by the Resettlement Administration. It thus permits comparison between advocacy and reportage intended for public readers and technical studies intended primarily for administrative and expert use. The article first situates the argument within communication, colonial knowledge, and settler-colonial scholarship; it then explains corpus provenance and analytical procedure. The Results examine five interconnected dimensions: redefinition, circulation, administrative calculation, infrastructure, and contestation. Their order separates analytical functions without prescribing their historical sequence.

Communication, Discourse, and Colonial Classification

The terms communication, discourse, and administrative classification are related here but not interchangeable. Discourse refers to patterned rules of meaning: the recurrent oppositions between cultivated and idle, settled and nomadic, productive and excessive, improved and wasted. Communication refers to the material and institutional movement of those meanings through newspaper publication, quotation, polemic, compilation, reporting, forms, maps, and official reading. Administrative classification is a more specific outcome: discourse is inscribed in authorized categories capable of directing surveys, calculating norms, designating a land fund, or allocating plots. A newspaper assertion that land is "free" is discourse communicated to the public; a statistical schedule that subtracts a calculated pastoral requirement from a measured territory is an administrative classification. The article examines how the former could inform, legitimate, or be reworked within the latter without assuming a simple one-way causal chain.

This distinction draws on a constitutive understanding of communication: communication not only transmits already formed policies but also participates in organizing the objects, actors, and relations on which policy operates (Carey, 2009). Yet the constitution occurs through institutional uptake, not through words acting autonomously. The analytical question is therefore not whether a phrase appeared before a decree, but how claims became repeatable across genres, acquired expert warrants, and were embedded in procedures. The concept of communicative legibility complements Scott's (1998) account of state simplification by specifying the mediating practices through which a simplification becomes credible, circulates, and enters routine use.

Settler Colonialism, Land, and Comparative Perspective

Scholarship on the Russian Empire has established the centrality of resettlement, agrarian expertise, and contested knowledge to rule in the steppe and Turkestan (Brower, 2003; Campbell, 2011, 2017; Holquist, 2010; Khalid, 2021; Masoero, 2013; Morrison, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2016; Sunderland, 2000, 2004, 2010). This literature

shows that colonization was debated within the state and depended on surveys, intermediaries, and regionally uneven institutions. The present study does not replace that historiography with a universal communication theory. It asks a more delimited question: how did different textual genres connect public justification, situated criticism, and technical calculation around one consequential category?

Settler-colonial theory identifies the replacement of Indigenous territorial orders as a durable structure rather than a single event (Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006). Comparative work on Australia and the Pacific shows that land transfer followed different legal and institutional routes (Banner, 2007; Ford, 2010). It cautions against treating Russian izlishki as unique or assuming that cultivation provided the only measure of recognizable use. The late-imperial Russian studies combined household questionnaires, livestock units, seasonal pasture requirements, maps, and tabular subtraction. The Port Phillip example below examines a different procedure for authorizing possession. The comparison concerns these documented operations, not an equivalence between izlishnie zemli and terra nullius or a claim that calculation was unique to Russia.

Colonial-archive scholarship further warns that collections are not neutral containers (Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001; Stoler, 2009). The *Turkestanskii sbornik* joined texts first written for different venues and audiences under a gubernatorial collecting project. That recontextualization matters: it enabled later official readers to encounter metropolitan commentary, regional reporting, and administrative expertise within a common archive. At the same time, inclusion did not erase disagreement. The collection preserved attacks on maladministration and warnings that suitable land did not exist alongside colonization advocacy. The archive is therefore analyzed as curated and internally heterogeneous, not as the transparent voice of "the empire."

Materials and Methods

Corpus Construction and Provenance

The revised corpus comprises 43 discrete items from 32 volumes of the *Turkestanskii sbornik*. Thirty-seven are newspaper articles or publicistic texts originally published in regional and metropolitan periodicals; six are book-length statistical studies issued by the Resettlement Administration between 1912 and 1915 and subsequently bound into the collection. A document, rather than an individual chapter or table, is the unit of corpus counting. Chapters, maps, schedules, and tables within an official study are coded as components of that document. This prevents the expansion from artificially inflating the number of sources.

Items were selected purposively when their principal subject concerned land availability, pastoral land use, peasant migration, settlement plots, irrigation, land surveying, colonization capacity, agrarian norms, or disputes produced by allocation. The corpus is not a statistical sample of everything published between 1885 and 1915. Its adequacy rests on variation in genre, institutional origin,

position, and communicative function. The expanded end date reflects the addition of official statistical studies whose value lies in documenting how disputed assumptions were formulated and revised within bureaucratic routines. The press inventory includes historical retrospectives and settlement debates (Andreevich, 1908; Beletskii, 1909; Geier, 1907; K. I. Zh., 1908; "Kolonizatsiia Turkestana," 1907; Lapin, 1908; "Material dlia istorii," 1885; "Nashi zadachi," 1885; "O kolonizatsii," 1908; O-V., 1909; Pessimist, 1910; Poniatovskii, 1907; Pravdin, 1907; Timaev, 1910; "Turkestanskoe sel'skoe khoziaistvo," 1906; V. N., 1909; Zarzhitskii, 1908).

The two source strata require different evidentiary treatment. Newspaper and publicistic texts originated in such outlets as *Turkestanskie vedomosti*, *Tashkentskii kur'er*, *Turkestanskii kur'er*, *Novoe vremia*, *Slovo*, *Rech'*, and *Orenburgskaia gazeta*. Their immediate audiences ranged from regional educated publics and colonial officials to metropolitan readers. Some writers promoted settlement; others criticized unsupported estimates, unauthorized migration, or the legal treatment of Kazakh land. Fedorov wrote a signed publicistic intervention in *Na rubezhe*, while Khvorostanskii published both newspaper commentary and a longer article in *Voprosy kolonizatsii*. They are therefore not treated as impersonal government reports or as interchangeable "officials." Newspaper titles are retained as identified for each item: Timaev's 1909 and 1910 articles appeared in *Turkestanskii kur'er*, a title distinguished in the references from *Tashkentskii kur'er*.

The six official studies were produced under the Main Administration of Land Management and Agriculture's Resettlement Administration. They investigated the Hungry Steppe and adjoining parts of Khodzhent and Jizzakh; southern Fergana; Namangan; the Chu and lower Talas region; Kazalinsk; and sedentary Sart households in Chimkent district. Their prefaces identify statistical parties, research programs, editors, and contributing specialists. Their primary readers were administrators, statisticians, agrarian experts, surveyors, and resettlement planners. The Namangan and sedentary Chimkent studies widen this institutional comparison (Resettlement Administration, 1912, 1913a). These documents did not merely express preferences: standardized questionnaires, household lists, livestock conversions, pasture and haymaking norms, maps, and schedules gave claims an authorized calculative form (Table 1).

Provenance includes the compilation itself. The *Turkestanskii sbornik* was assembled under the authority of the Turkestan governor-generalship, so selection and preservation were institutionally structured. Late-imperial journalism operated under censorship, and neither publication nor inclusion can be equated with an unrestricted public sphere. The analysis, therefore, treats surviving disagreement as disagreement that passed through unequal editorial and censorship conditions; it does not infer the absence of positions that were not preserved. Nor does it assume that inclusion signified official endorsement. The coexistence of incompatible claims is used to reconstruct a bounded field of permissible imperial-language debate.

Table 1. Composition, Provenance, Audience, and Analytical Role of the Revised Corpus.

Source Stratum	*n*	Producer/Origin	Primary Audience	Analytical Function
Press and publicistic texts	37	Regional and metropolitan newspapers; signed and anonymous commentators	Newspaper readers, officials, settlers, educated regional publics	Public claims, counterclaims, repetition, legitimation
Official statistical studies	6	Resettlement Administration and its statistical parties, 1912–1915	Officials, agrarian experts, surveyors, resettlement planners	Forms, measurements, norms, tables, maps, calculable "surplus"
Total	43			

Research Design and Coding

The study uses qualitative historical communication analysis, combining discourse analysis with source criticism. Each document was read at three levels: provenance (producer, venue, date, intended audience, and genre); representation (terms used for land, mobility, productivity, rights, scarcity, and improvement); and institutional operation (quotation, repetition, survey, normalization, tabulation, mapping, recommendation, or allocation). Coding distinguished supportive, conditional, critical, and descriptive positions rather than assigning every Russian-language text to a single imperial viewpoint.

A second coding pass followed the movement of claims across genres. The analysis asked whether a claim remained public advocacy, was challenged by situated observation, acquired an expert warrant, or became embedded in an administrative instrument. Particular attention was paid to transformations: seasonal pasture became a measurable area; livestock became standardized units; household need became a norm; and the difference between total territory and calculated need became "surplus." Negative cases were retained. Statements that suitable land was scarce, that migrants occupied Kazakh land without authorization, or that calculated surpluses were unusable were analyzed as evidence about the instability and repair of classification.

Interpretive reliability derives from an auditable chain between claims and source strata, repeated comparison across texts, and explicit attention to counterevidence. The article does not infer reception among all newspaper readers, for which circulation and reader-response evidence is incomplete. "Audience" therefore denotes the institutionally intended readership suggested by publication venue and genre, not demonstrated individual effects. Likewise, the study does not claim that press texts directly caused particular allocations; it identifies documented correspondences and conversions through which categories became available for administrative action.

Scope and Limitations

The corpus privileges Russian-language materials selected for an imperial compilation and cannot recover the full range of Kazakh political concepts or oral territorial knowledge. Indigenous claims appear largely through mediated reports, disputes, petitions, and administrators' descriptions. This asymmetry is a substantive feature of the colonial archive but remains an evidentiary limitation. The article consequently makes claims about Russian imperial communication and classification, not about Kazakh consent or the totality of land relations.

The corpus is purposive rather than exhaustive, and its six official studies postdate many press debates. This temporal asymmetry is analytically useful for tracing institutionalization but does not establish a simple chronological transmission from a particular article to a particular table. The proposed model is recursive: public argument, administrative investigation, local conflict, and renewed justification repeatedly inform one another.

Results

The five dimensions below identify different operations within a recursive process. They are not successive historical phases. A single case can connect several dimensions: the Romanovskii canal project prompted investigation of pastoral use, and that investigation supplied a calculated claim of land available for irrigation and colonization. Reports of unauthorized settlement likewise concern both material occupation and demands for administrative knowledge. The section order permits comparison among these functions without making communication the necessary temporal predecessor of either administration or infrastructure.

Dimension 1: Discursive Redefinition and the Production of Surplus Land

Discursive redefinition made Indigenous territory describable as available for settlement. Across the corpus, representations of the Kazakh steppe as economically underutilized or insufficiently productive supplied a vocabulary through which existing territorial relations could be recast as "free," "vacant," or "surplus" land. These descriptions interacted with investigations, settlement disputes, and projects of improvement; they cannot be isolated as an initial phase completed before administrative intervention began. The analytical issue is how descriptions of land use acquired authority within those interactions. The evidence supports a claim about the production and contestation of availability, rather than dating a single discursive origin of the category or attributing the same position to every writer.

What is especially striking in these texts is that "surplus" land is rarely presented as a category requiring sustained political justification. Instead, it is often framed as an almost self-evident agrarian fact discoverable through competent observation, survey, and technical evaluation. In this rhetorical structure, the key question is not whether

land belongs to Kazakh communities in historically grounded and seasonally differentiated ways, but whether such use counts as legitimate occupation within an imperial agrarian framework. The archive thus shifts the terms of debate: land alienation is no longer represented as a political act of dispossession, but as a technical matter of identifying excess.

The expanded official stratum makes the conversion visible. The 1914 Hungry Steppe study did not merely call the territory empty. Its contents move from natural conditions and existing land and water use to a chapter on land-use norms, culminating in "pasture norm and area of surplus lands." The preface then reports 830,338 desiatinas as available for withdrawal for irrigation and colonization, while acknowledging that these were principally mobile grazing areas. The surplus was therefore the remainder generated by a procedure: define normal need, convert use into standardized quantities, and subtract that need from surveyed space (Resettlement Administration, 1914).

A similar logic appears in N.'s article Semirech'e i pereselentsy, which explicitly questions official numerical claims regarding the amount of land suitable for settlement and cultivation in Semirech'e. The author notes that the quantity of "udobnye zemli" (suitable lands) remains uncertain and warns that migrants continue arriving despite the lack of reliable knowledge regarding actual land availability (N., 1907). This is analytically crucial. Rather than confirming the abundance of "free" land, the article reveals how imperial settlement discourse often moved ahead of secure agrarian knowledge. In other words, "available" land was not simply found; it was administratively presumed into existence.

The discourse of "free land" works by flattening the ecological and temporal complexity of steppe land use. Seasonal migration, dispersed pasture systems, access to water, and shifting patterns of summer and winter habitation are repeatedly subordinated to a sedentary agrarian logic in which land is expected to appear visibly occupied, bounded, and continuously cultivated. This flattening of seasonal and ecologically differentiated land use is already visible in contemporary critiques of resettlement practice, where authors questioned whether lands classified as suitable for settlement had been adequately assessed in relation to actual environmental and agrarian conditions (Mikhailovich-Stepniak, 1907; N., 1907). In this sense, the category of "surplus" does not emerge from the landscape itself. It emerges from a colonial grammar of legibility in which only certain forms of territorial use are fully recognized.

Importantly, some of the strongest evidence in the corpus directly undermines the official fiction of abundance. Mikhailovich-Stepniak's Golodnaia step' i pereselentsy is particularly revealing in this regard. Writing about the early settlement of the Hungry Steppe, the author openly questions the viability of creating a land fund for settlers by cutting off land from Kazakh users, stressing that there are no cheap and genuinely "free" or "surplus" lands available among the Kazakhs (Mikhailovich-Stepniak, 1907). This is analytically significant because it shows that the category of "surplus land" was never simply an empirical reality. It was an unstable administrative claim that had to be repeatedly asserted, defended, and operationalized despite direct evidence of its fragility.

Dimension 2: Circulation and the Stabilization of Colonial Categories

Repetitive circulation helped stabilize colonial categories, but this stabilization remained provisional. Descriptions of Kazakh land use as deficient or excessive gained force when they were repeated in policy debate, invoked as reasons for investigation, or incorporated into accounts of rational agrarian development. Surveys and settlement conflicts could then supply new claims for the press to repeat or challenge. Circulation, therefore, connected public argument with administrative practice in both directions. Its significance lay in making particular interpretations recognizable and reusable across venues, even while their empirical basis and political implications remained disputed. The corpus documents attempts to establish administrative common sense alongside interventions that exposed its limitations.

Across the corpus, this delegitimization of Kazakh land use is often implicit rather than explicitly stated. Some authors frame pastoral land use as excessive or insufficiently productive, while others advocate its transformation into sedentary agriculture. For example, discussions of sedentarization and agricultural reform frequently appear in texts such as "Vopros o zaselenii stepei" (1885), where the transition to agriculture is treated as both necessary and desirable, despite recognition of its practical difficulties.

However, other materials complicate this narrative. Several texts explicitly acknowledge the adaptive and historically grounded nature of pastoral land use, emphasizing that it cannot be easily replaced by sedentary agriculture without significant disruption (e.g., Khvorostanskii, 1908; "Vopros o zaselenii stepei," 1885). This ambivalence suggests that the representation of Kazakh land use as inefficient was not universally accepted, but rather functioned as a strategic justification within colonization discourse.

In arguments favoring land withdrawal, extensive Kazakh use could be acknowledged yet recast through an economic vocabulary of inefficiency. Seasonal mobility, dispersed grazing, and low-density occupation could then be judged as incomplete economic development rather than recognized on their own terms as territorial practices. This reframing displaced the political question of Indigenous territorial rights with the administrative question of agrarian productivity. The justification for intervention consequently rested on an asserted failure to meet imperial standards of rational agriculture. Critical accounts and studies of pastoral requirements exposed the limits of that assertion; its circulation did not establish its universal acceptance.

This rhetorical hierarchy becomes especially visible in policy-oriented materials that treat Kazakh land use not as a historically legitimate territorial order, but as an object of investigation, correction, and administrative adjustment. In V. P.'s discussion of settlement policy, the search for "free land" implicitly assumes that existing forms of Kazakh occupation can be measured, recalculated, and partially withdrawn without violating the logic of proper agrarian order (V. P., 1907). Similarly, in Timaev's discussions of resettlement policy and land investigation, the very fact that "diverse studies" of Kazakh life, economy, and land conditions were being conducted in order to avoid repeating earlier mistakes in land alienation suggests that Kazakh land use had

already become an object of external evaluation rather than recognition on its own terms (Timaev, 1909). This reclassification of Kazakh land use was reinforced by policy-oriented discussions that called for further investigation and regulation of Indigenous land practices, particularly in relation to irrigation, land leasing, and the determination of agrarian norms within the framework of resettlement planning (N., 1909; Timaev, 1909).

The reports reveal why classification cannot be reduced to rhetoric. The southern Fergana study organizes evidence into population, land and water use, farming, livestock, normal household requirements, haymaking norms, pasture norms, and finally the "area of surplus lands" (Resettlement Administration, 1915b). The sequence is an architecture of inscription: heterogeneous livelihood relations are progressively reformatted until a residual territorial quantity can appear. Its authority derives from genre, institutional sponsorship, tables, and maps as much as from vocabulary.

Dimension 3: Administrative Calculation and Territorial Classification

Administrative calculation gave representations of land use an authorized and operational form. Bureaucratic procedures, expert assessments, land surveys, and resettlement planning selected, tested, and reformulated assumptions about availability rather than simply receiving categories already stabilized in public debate. Communication operated within these practices through questionnaires, instructions, tables, maps, and reports, as well as through newspapers. The calculation of a norm could generate a new territorial claim; a disputed allocation could prompt another investigation. Administrative classification thus constituted one site in the recursive circuit, where representations became capable of directing withdrawal and allocation while remaining open to qualification and revision.

At the same time, several authors point to the limitations and failures of this system. Critiques of resettlement expeditions note the lack of expertise among personnel and the resulting inaccuracies in land assessment (Timaev, 1909), while other texts emphasize the chaotic and poorly coordinated nature of administrative intervention (Chuzhoi, 1909). These tensions reveal that colonial expertise was both a tool of governance and a source of uncertainty.

The resettlement bureaucracy and associated survey, planning, and agrarian institutions played a central role in this process. The archive repeatedly references land-allotment procedures, field investigations, survey expeditions, agrarian evaluations, and efforts to calculate the "capacity" of different territories for peasant settlement. These practices determined how much land could be withdrawn from Kazakh use and reassigned, whether explicitly described as "surplus" or folded into the language of settlement preparation. Authorized allocation required land to be rendered divisible, enumerable, and administratively assignable. Yet unauthorized occupation could precede that determination and create pressure for subsequent classification or regularization. Paperwork, technical judgment, and migration therefore interacted through different local sequences rather than forming a single obligatory progression.

This administrative logic is especially explicit in A. K.'s article on the agrarian question in Chimkent uezd, where the author notes that a group of officials from the Resettlement Department was being sent to determine how much land could be allocated "for the purposes of Russian colonization" (A. K., 1906). This is not incidental wording. It demonstrates that colonization was being operationalized through bureaucratic determination of land quantity and distribution rather than through spontaneous demographic movement alone.

The official land-use studies illustrate this process particularly clearly (Resettlement Administration, 1914, 1915a, 1915b). Their coordinated treatment of land and water use, household requirements, livestock, and pasture norms turned economic and environmental observations into estimates of land available for withdrawal. The significance of these documents lies not simply in their administrative recommendations but in their procedures for establishing territorial suitability through expert knowledge. Categories such as normal need and "surplus" were specified within the investigation itself. The resulting figures could reinforce public claims about availability, but the reports also recorded qualifications that limited what those figures warranted. Expertise thus helped produce and revise the classifications through which administrative authority operated.

Debate over norms reveals that criticism could also support more restrictive recognition of pastoral claims. Pessimist (1910, pp. 136–138) questioned calculations that treated the livestock of an aul community as an undifferentiated whole, arguing that large herds belonging to wealthy owners distorted an average household requirement. The article proposed a sharper distinction between land retained for household use and pasture remaining under state control, and anticipated that households would adjust their reported livestock to the rules of assessment. This was not a rejection of imperial authority over land. It was an argument over how that authority should calculate need and prevent apparent excess from becoming a permanent entitlement. Administrative categories were therefore themselves objects of public dispute, and disagreement could press for greater withdrawal as well as expose the danger of insufficiency.

This bureaucratic dimension is especially visible in texts that frame settlement as a problem of rational distribution. The steppe is repeatedly imagined as a territory that can be assessed, partitioned, and optimized through expert knowledge. Agrarian planning, cadastral thinking, and the language of administrative order all work together to transform a historically layered landscape into a calculable field of intervention. In these materials, colonial authority is exercised not only through coercive power but also through the ability to define what counts as available land, how much of it exists, and to whom it should be assigned.

The Chu-Talas and Kazalinsk studies demonstrate both portability and friction. Each reused a recognizable program of household schedules, livestock accounting, pasture duration, and regional norms. The Chu-Talas report calculated 4,188,353 desiatinas of surplus land, most of it desert and common grazing space, whereas the Kazalinsk report acknowledged that more than three million desiatinas classified as surplus could not all serve colonization because water and soils made major zones

unsuitable (Resettlement Administration, 1913b, 1915a). Standardization made comparison possible, but the reports' own qualifications show that calculability did not eliminate ecology.

Administrative legibility established a claim of availability; ecological suitability determined whether that claim could support settlement.

Dimension 4: Infrastructure and the Reassessment of Land

Infrastructure altered the conditions under which land could be classified and allocated. Irrigation systems, transport links, environmental engineering, and agrarian improvement projects could implement an allocation, stimulate a survey, or expose the limits of an existing estimate. Their relationship to communication and administration was reciprocal. A projected canal made particular territories newly relevant to settlement planning, while the classifications generated by investigation could authorize withdrawal and guide construction. Existing Indigenous irrigation works likewise shaped the spaces that settlers and officials sought to control. Material intervention, therefore, belonged within the same circuit of representation, calculation, and contestation; it was not the automatic realization of classifications established at an earlier stage.

Irrigation occupies a particularly important place in this discourse. Across the corpus, irrigation appears both as a practical agrarian tool and as a developmental promise. It is frequently invoked as a means of increasing the productive capacity of land, stabilizing settlement, and opening new areas to cultivation. In several materials, references to canals, water management, and irrigated agriculture imply that land previously considered marginal or insufficiently productive could be incorporated into the logic of colonization through technical improvement. Through this framing, the availability of land is no longer understood as fixed. Instead, it becomes expandable through intervention.

The importance of infrastructural transformation is emphasized in materials discussing irrigation and environmental intervention. Komarov (1903, pp. 79–81) observed that settlers occupied lands already improved through Indigenous irrigation works, while the labor invested in those canals remained "without compensation," revealing the material inequalities embedded in colonial development. Similarly, Sokolov (1908) stresses the need for a specialized irrigation administration capable of expanding agricultural capacity in the region. Taken together, these materials show that colonization depended not only on the reclassification of land as available but also on the control, extension, and administrative reorganization of productive systems that were often already socially embedded in local landscapes.

This logic is especially clear in Mikhailovich-Stepniak's Golodnaia step' i pereselentsy, where the author argues that the lands allocated to settlers had not been adequately tested for fertility and had not been supplied with irrigation water. This is a crucial detail. It reveals that the viability of colonization depended not only on administrative allocation but on whether the state could materially transform the landscape into an agriculturally functional environment (Mikhailovich-Stepniak, 1907). The

article, therefore, demonstrates that irrigation was not merely an agricultural question; it was one of the infrastructural foundations of colonial settlement.

The Hungry Steppe report documents this reciprocal relationship. Its preface states that the investigation of nomadic land use was occasioned by irrigation works and the construction of the Romanovskii main canal. The project created an administrative demand to assess the territory already used by pastoral households. Statistical investigation then translated that use into norms and a calculated remainder presented as available for withdrawal for irrigation and colonization (Resettlement Administration, 1914). Here, the direction of inquiry ran from a material project to a survey and a revised claim of availability. The report, therefore, supports neither a general priority of press discourse over infrastructure nor a claim that engineering made pastoral land unused. It shows how infrastructure and classification supplied warrants for one another within a specific colonial project.

Dimension 5: Contestation and the Revision of Colonial Claims

Contestation operated throughout the production of colonial communicative legibility. Competing interpretations, administrative failures, ecological constraints, and land conflicts challenged descriptions of availability, calculations of need, and the practical consequences of allocation. These challenges could precede a survey, accompany settlement, or prompt the reconsideration of an existing decision. They made the premises of classification visible and created demands for further investigation or justification. Colonial classifications acquired material consequences without becoming universally accepted accounts of territorial reality. Their authority depended on repeated maintenance within an unequal institutional field, and the resulting disputes formed part of that field rather than a terminal phase outside it.

The corpus contains extensive evidence of conflict arising from these processes. Numerous texts describe tensions between settlers and local populations, often linked directly to land redistribution. For example, Fedorov (1909) describes disputes between Kazakh communities and land commissions, emphasizing that local populations regarded the land as their own and perceived settlers as violators of their rights. Similarly, Khvorostanskii (1907, 1908) reports violent clashes and growing interethnic tensions resulting from the mismanaged allocation of land and the broader failures of resettlement policy.

The note *Samovol'nye pereselentsy* reports unauthorized Russian settlers attempting to occupy land in the Ploskii Kurgan tract identified as belonging to Kazakhs of the Irdzhar district. Published in *Tashkentskii kur'er* and signed "St. Syr-Dar'ia," it warns that "there might even be insufficient land for the Kazakhs themselves" (*"Samovol'nye pereselentsy," 1908*, p. 111). The signature does not establish the writer's occupation, and the note is treated here as a press intervention rather than an official acknowledgment. Its account connects attempted occupation with uncertainty about availability and the need to establish actual land use. It is evidence that the assumption of an available excess was contested within the published Russian-language record.

Conflict is visible in the report on the attack by Kazakhs on settlers in Iany-Kurgan volost', where the hostility is linked above all to "land disorder" and to the unauthorized seizure of lands "originally belonging to the Kirgiz" ("Napadenie kirgizov," 1909, pp. 58–59). This is analytically crucial because it demonstrates that the violence surrounding the settlement was not incidental. It was structurally tied to the reallocation of land and to the mismatch between imperial administrative categories and local territorial realities.

The archive reveals a contradiction at the level of imperial discourse itself. Alongside texts that celebrate agrarian settlement and developmental planning, there are others that question the pace, method, or practical wisdom of resettlement policy. Timaev's critique of the policy of mass compulsory alienation of Kazakh lands is especially important here, because it shows that even within the imperial-language corpus, there were voices warning against the political and practical consequences of colonial land withdrawal (Timaev, 1909). Similar tensions are evident in contemporary critiques of the resettlement process, where unauthorized occupation of Kazakh lands and the general disorganization of settlement administration were identified as sources of escalating conflict with the local population (Zaitsev, 1907). V. L.'s discussion of available land and Indigenous allotments makes the legal stakes of classification explicit (V. L., 1908). These internal disagreements do not amount to an anticolonial critique, but they are analytically significant. They demonstrate that colonial governance was not monolithic. It was an unstable field of competing judgments, technical claims, and political anxieties.

B. K.'s reply to Novoe vremia offers a particularly direct counterclaim. Published within the same imperial-language field, it rejected the assumption that a change in law would suddenly produce suitable land, distinguished truly usable land from abstract excess, and defended the recognition of nomadic claims grounded in actual need (B. K., 1907). The article matters not because it stood outside colonial power, but because it shows regional knowledge contesting metropolitan assertion inside a censored and institutionally unequal press system.

Other materials expose disagreement over the colonists themselves. "Turkestanskie kolonisty" presents settlement through a developmental and civilizing vocabulary, whereas Turkestantsev's "Kolonizatsiia Ferganskoi oblasti" records unauthorized settlement, rental and purchase of Kyrgyz-held land, and officials' difficulty regularizing faits accomplis ("Turkestanskie kolonisty," 1909; Turkestantsev, 1910). These competing descriptions show why administrative knowledge could be demanded after an occupation had occurred. The problem was not merely to circulate an assertion of abundance, but to determine how existing occupation and land claims would be classified and acted upon.

Discussion

The findings identify a colonial configuration of a broader process of communicative legibility. Imperial discourse helped constitute an epistemic infrastructure through

which territory became governable. Representational categories circulated, entered administrative routines, and interacted with infrastructural intervention, while controversy exposed their unstable premises (Mikhailovich-Stepniak, 1907; N., 1907; V. P., 1907). The five analytical dimensions distinguish operations that could overlap and recur. Planned infrastructure could generate surveys, and unauthorized occupation could generate demands for classification. Communication connected public argument and administrative practice recursively; neither its constitutive role nor its relationship to state power was exclusive to colonial settings.

One of the central contributions of this article lies in demonstrating that the category of "surplus land" was not an empirical discovery, but a political and administrative construction. The repeated invocation of *svobodnye zemli*, *izlishnie zemli*, and related formulations across the corpus reflects a particular mode of seeing the steppe, grounded in imperial judgments about productivity and recognizable occupation. Advocates of availability could treat seasonal mobility, dispersed grazing, and flexible access to resources as evidence of excessive territorial use. Critics disputed the adequacy of those judgments, while statistical investigators also incorporated livestock, pasture duration, and seasonal requirements into their calculations. The issue was therefore not a uniform absence of knowledge about pastoralism, but the authority to decide how pastoral need would count. This finding connects the communicative analysis to scholarship on the classification and simplification of complex social and ecological relations.

Scott's (1998) concept of state legibility provides the broader framework for these findings. His account already encompasses European and colonial settings; communicative legibility is therefore not intrinsically colonial. The contribution here is to specify mediation and genre conversion within that general process. Public claims, situated objections, and statistical tables carried different warrants, and their institutional uptake determined which judgments could become actionable. Analogous processes may be investigated in European land reform, forestry, and pasture administration. This corpus does not test those settings or demonstrate the uniqueness of the mechanism; it identifies its historically specific colonial configuration.

Mitchell (2002) shows how expertise presents political projects as technical problems of administration. Here, representations of "free land," "surplus land," and "colonization capacity" framed expert inquiry, while investigation could qualify and revise them. Their relationship was reciprocal, rather than communication necessarily preceding expertise. What makes the configuration colonial is the authority to subordinate Indigenous territorial claims to imperial norms oriented toward settler allocation. Classification remained political even where its immediate question concerned the adequacy of a calculation. The sources support this situated argument, not a universal sequence for the origins of expertise.

The findings specify a communicative dimension of territorial replacement in settler-colonial theory (Morrison, 2016; Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006). Reclassification made the Indigenous land relations administratively intelligible within settler spatial regimes, but it did not necessarily precede appropriation. It could prepare

an allocation or retrospectively justify, regularize, and contest an occupation already undertaken. The contribution concerns how public descriptions and administrative instruments are connected under unequal authority. "Colonial" thus identifies the relations and purposes in which communicative legibility operated here, not an essential property of communication or an assertion that comparable mechanisms were absent from European agrarian redistribution.

These disagreements also clarify how the circuit operated. An objection could challenge the existence of suitable land, the reliability of an estimate, or the rules for recognizing claims. It did not follow that all such objections challenged imperial authority to make allocations. The contrast between warnings of insufficiency and Pessimist's (1910) argument for stricter treatment of apparent pastoral excess makes that distinction explicit. Controversy could demand better substantiation of need while preserving the premise that the state would determine what remained withdrawable. For communication history, the relevant outcome is the redistribution of authority among claims and genres: a public assertion sought the warrant of a survey, while a technical classification returned to public debate as something that could be defended, corrected, or contested.

Comparative Implications: Russia and Australia

Port Phillip provides a concrete comparison. In June 1835, John Batman presented a deed as a purchase of land from Aboriginal leaders for the Port Phillip Association, in exchange for goods and annual tribute (State Library Victoria, n.d.). Bourke's proclamation of August 26, 1835 declared such private agreements ineffective against Crown rights and classified occupation without government authorization as trespass (Bourke, 1835, p. 1). It called the territory "vacant Lands of the Crown" while referring to agreements with Aboriginal people: vacancy was an authoritative designation, not proof of absence. A contested written claim was thus answered by a governmental rule determining which claims to possession would count. This illustrates the unequal relationship between property and jurisdiction discussed by Banner (2007, pp. 13–46) and Ford (2010); it does not establish Aboriginal consent to permanent alienation.

The Turkestan studies examined here used a different operation: they acknowledged pastoral use, quantified what administrators considered necessary, and designated a remainder as potentially withdrawable. The Hungry Steppe and Chu–Talas calculations exemplify that procedure (Resettlement Administration, 1914, 1915a). Although Bourke invalidated private agreements against asserted Crown rights, these reports constructed availability through a norm of retained need. Both procedures subordinated Indigenous territorial authority, but the Russian surplus was not equivalent to terra nullius. Nor was Australia exclusively legal or Russia exclusively statistical. Port Phillip's pastoral settler venture further qualifies a simple cultivation-versus-mobility opposition: whose use and authority counted was decisive. This bounded comparison identifies different routes to actionable classification without claiming to represent all Australian practice or establish a universal colonial sequence.

Conclusion

This article has shown that "surplus land" was neither a simple discovery nor a message uniformly imposed by a coherent imperial speaker. It emerged within a heterogeneous communicative field containing advocacy, reportage, criticism, expert investigation, and official calculation. Press texts made land availability publicly plausible and debatable; situated counterclaims exposed legal, social, and ecological problems; and Resettlement Administration studies converted selected assumptions into forms, norms, tables, maps, and quantified remainders.

Communicative legibility names this movement across genres and institutions. Discourse supplies patterned meanings; communication circulates and recontextualizes them; administrative classification inscribes some meanings into authorized procedures. The process belongs to state legibility more generally. Its colonial configuration here joined imperial authority, the subordination of Indigenous territorial claims, and settler allocation. The relationship is recursive rather than mechanically sequential. Conflict and failure prompted clarification, investigation, and repairs to classifications whose apparent objectivity depended on continual maintenance.

The 43-item corpus places the Russian case within settler-colonial history without making its mechanism exclusively colonial. At Port Phillip, Bourke's proclamation asserted Crown authority to recognize possession; the Turkestan studies calculated pastoral need and a territorial remainder. Both made Indigenous territorial relations subject to imperial procedures through different operations. Statistical expeditions and pastoral norms furnished a calculative route to dispossession. Communication connected public justification to that machinery without independently displacing people or uniformly preceding occupation.

The evidentiary limits remain important. The *Turkestanskii sbornik* is a curated, censored, Russian-language archive, and its intended audiences cannot stand in for demonstrated reception or Kazakh perspectives. Within those limits, however, its internal disagreements and official studies permit a precise historical claim: contested representations became consequential when institutions made them portable, comparable, and actionable. That claim extends communication history by identifying how mediation and genre conversion participate in the making of governable colonial space.

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