Land and water in Tsarist and early Soviet Central Asia.

**Summary**

Land and water usage in Central Asia is shaped by precipitation and elevation, which distinguish the southern irrigated oases from the steppes, deserts, and prairies, where instead nomadic pastoralism (sometimes rain-fed agriculture) is economically rational. The former was included in Russian Turkestan, the latter in the Steppe provinces. The colonial state recognised land usage rights of the nomads; whilst not formally admitting land property among the settled population, it allowed them to enjoy it within Islamic law. Nomads paid a capitation; at first tilled land continued to be taxed as a share of the real harvest. Land-assessment works from the 1890s, though, imposed a tax based on the estimated harvest value, initially on irrigated land and then, with some differences, on rain-fed land. Irrigation was paid for eminently through labour corvées. The increase in the share of land under cotton did not derive from state coercion, but from factor endowments and absolute and relative prices. Subsidies, in the form of import duties and, above all, a growing tax break contributed to this. Despite political claims, new irrigation had a limited impact under the Tsars. While the ‘cotton boom’ altered the rural landscape and the local economy in the oases, in the Steppe and Semirechie the natives lost land to settler peasants from European Russia. The latter received land that statisticians and surveyors had deemed excess for the nomads and former nomads. Conflicts around land, water, and forests coalesced in the 1916 uprising, which in turn initiated a cycle of violent retaliation between Russians and natives that would last until the early 1920s. With the establishment of Soviet power, a first land reform “decolonized” former resettlement areas; in 1925-1927 another land reform aimed at reducing landlessness in southern Central Asia, while restoring pre-war output levels and cotton procurement mechanisms. [298 words]

Keywords

Central Asia; Turkestan; land rights; land tax; cotton; agriculture; nomadism; resettlement; land reform.

**Land rights in the colonial period**

Land in Central Asia is defined in relation to the presence of irrigation, or the lack thereof. In the oases of Russian Turkestan (broadly corresponding to the ancient Transoxiana), the most valuable land was irrigated (*abi*, from Per. *ab*, ‘water’) land. This land was cultivated under cereals (especially winter varieties of grain), rice, clover, sorghum or maize, vegetables, fruit trees (including mulberry), oil plants (flax, sesame, rapeseed, and opium poppy) and, increasingly, cotton. Rain-fed land was called *lalmi* or *bahari* (from Per. *bahar*, ‘spring’; in Russian, *bogara*). Although a spurious etymology links this to rains in the spring season, the second term actually refers to the fact that *bahari* plots were mostly under spring grain or, less often, barley.[[1]](#endnote-1) On the margins of the oases, in mountain areas, and to the north into the Kazakh steppe, a harsher environment and less precipitation made agriculture more difficult, while the presence of grassland, prairie, or steppe environments were compatible with nomadic pastoralism. The latter could be either ‘horizontal’ (usually between different latitudes) or ‘vertical’ (between pastures located at different altitudes). Broadly speaking, in the period under consideration, the first was associated with the Kazakhs, the second – with the Kyrgyz.[[2]](#endnote-2) One must be wary of too rigid a definition of nomadic pastoralism, and even more of the assumption that ethnicity and lifestyle were coextensive: in colonial times and even before there existed Turkmens who tilled the land or bred livestock without nomadism, Kyrgyz who practiced agriculture, either as a main or as a side activity, on rain-fed land, and Kazakhs who fished.[[3]](#endnote-3) Raiding neighbours and protecting (or attacking) caravans were additional sources of income. The distinction between those who embarked on an annual long-distance migration and those who did not was increasingly a social matter, with the poorer households or lineage groups staying behind. The settled population equally failed to fit neatly into ethnic categories, although the term ‘Sart’ was used to refer to those urban and rural dwellers who (unlike those called ‘Uzbeks’) had lost tribal affiliations.[[4]](#endnote-4) Overall, while the distinction between the steppe and the sown remained meaningful at this time as in previous epochs in the history of the region, on the spot it was more difficult to see ethnic categories match forms of land usage, and even harder to classify territorial units on this basis.

After the period of military conquest and first organisation, in southern Central Asia (excluding Semirechie) the legal status of the natives’ land was fixed in several articles of the 1886 Turkestan Statute.[[5]](#endnote-5) At the conclusion of a few years of debates and experimentation, a clear juridical distinction between urban land, rural land used by the settled population, and the nomads’ land emerged. While the latter only enjoyed *usage* rights on the basis of customary norms, full private property was recognized for urban land plots. As a reflection of the complex discussions that accompanied the drafting of the Statute, the status of the second category, which included the vast majority of agricultural land, was ambiguous: the law was silent on whether the rural settled population enjoyed property rights, or mere usage. Instead, it ordered that land which they used, possessed, or disposed of on the basis of customary rules should be ascribed to them. This amounted to recognizing a set of subjective juridical positions (usage, possession, and disposition) which, together, are associated with property rights, without any recognition of property itself – at least from the viewpoint of the Russian imperial legal system. Instead, the very existence and the discipline of these positions were “sent back” (a *renvoi*, in lawyers’ parlance)to the native legal system, which included both what the Russians identified as ‘customs’ *strict sensu* and *shari’a*. To all practical effects, this meant that full property rights on agricultural land existed in rural Turkestan within the realm of the native legal system (*i.e.* according to the *shari’a*), while the Russian administration had deliberately divested itself of the duty of supervising them. The Russian colonial state did not possess any grasp on individual landownership within the village: at best, it had some idea of land possession at the village level. As explained below, this was mirrored in the levying of land tax.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Broadly speaking, the Russian take on the nomads’ land rights led to a similar state of things, not only in Turkestan but also in the Kazakh Steppe and in Semirechie. Both the Steppe Statute in its different versions and the Turkestan Statute limited themselves to the recognition of the nomads’ usage rights, while the state in principle owned ‘their’ land. Yet, rights closer to full property were enjoyed by those who could assert them in native courts. This explains how some Kazakhs, for instance, could rent out plots to landless Slavic settlers, even while they did not own this property according to Russian law. While scholarship has shown that the land rights of members of the Kazakh Chinggisid (White Bone) elite were sometimes formalized as property, the vast majority of the native nomadic and settled population of both Central Asia and the Steppe would not have been affected by the way Russian law disciplined land rights, because the colonial authorities had delegated this task to the native judges, notaries, etc. It was true, however, that bureaucratic control over the decisions of customary courts also grew over time. The White Bone elite’s rights were gradually eroded, together with the ties that linked them to the dependent Black Bone commoners who followed them between summer and winter pastures.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Scholars have just started tapping into the way principles and practices changed within the native legal sphere itself, including on land rights: much work remains to be done, though. There were obviously situations in which one had to (or could) overcome this legal bifurcation, most notably when land rights were transacted between natives and non-natives. They will be discussed in connection to the agricultural and economic change that brought about their multiplication in the last two decades of colonial rule.

**Land tax and land assessment**

***Reforming native taxation systems***

This framing of land rights in the Turkestan and Steppe Statutes mirrored the way land was taxed. The nomads of both the Steppe and Turkestan did not pay a tax for their right to use the land: instead, each household (*kibitka*, or the nomads’ tent) paid a capitation (*kibitochnaia podat’*). This did not change substantially throughout the colonial period, although the amount to be paid grew, particularly during the Great War. By contrast, in the areas of settled agriculture the way the land tax was levied evolved over time. After the conquest, Russian authorities did not at first alter the way agriculture had been taxed by the khans or emirs. Broadly speaking, tax was levied on cereals as a percentage (usually one-fifth) of the real harvest (*kheraj*) to be paid in kind to one of the ruler’s agents or tax-farmers, or their delegates. According to some testimonies, the tax collectors received what was due when inspecting the mounds of grain after threshing; on the same occasion, smaller shares were also paid to those who fulfilled various ritual functions and services in the village, for instance the local imam or barber. This mechanism was called *kapsan* (or *kipsan*), a term that refers to the fold in the garment where each of those entitled collected their quotas. Rice was sometimes more heavily taxed, to reflect the higher profitability of this crop and its greater water consumption. For very practical reasons, perishable produce (*e.g.* fruit and vegetables) was instead taxed in money on the basis of the acreage on which it was grown; this kind of tax was known as *tanap* (or *tanab*, *tanabana*) – a term that also designates a unit of surface, roughly one-eighth to one-sixth of a hectare depending on the region. (The rural population had many other duties to pay: those on water well be discussed below; transit duties had multiplied in particular under some of the last Khoqand khans, attracting severe criticism as ‘impious’: they ceased to exist under Russian rule.) This system remained in place in the protectorates, while the Russians at first limited themselves to a reduction of the *kheraj* from one-fifth to one-tenth of the grain harvest, in an attempt to gain the hearts of their new subjects. This resulted in a temporary incentive for the cultivation of rice, which was now taxed on a par with wheat.[[8]](#endnote-8) Russian officers still used the word *kheraj* to refer to their land tax, although occasionally the word *ulpan* was also recorded.[[9]](#endnote-9) The effects of this halving of the main land tax are not yet clear: while objectively lighter, it seems plausible that the Russian-style *kheraj* was more rigorously levied.

What mattered most, though, was that the advent of Russian rule curtailed – and ultimately abolished – many of the fiscal privileges that had existed under the khans and amirs. This process was shaped by the way the colonial authorities understood land rights in the newly annexed land and re-interpreted some of the corresponding terminology. With some generalization, one can say that, before the conquest, a vital distinction existed between barren or unclaimed land and ‘live’ land, which could be employed for agriculture thanks to the construction of irrigation systems. Property could be enjoyed on such land by both private individuals (who had made such land ‘alive’, purchased it, or received it because of their services to the sovereign) and the ruler. The ruler’s domain was called *padshaliq*, while privately-owned land had different names depending on its fiscal status, which in turn reflected the way it had been first obtained. While neutral as such, the term *mulk* most often designated land properties that enjoyed some sort of tax privilege, ranging from complete to partial exemption (*e.g.* one-tenth of the harvest, rather than the standard *kheraj*). The term *amlak* (*amliak* in Russian transliteration) was even more ambiguous, in that it was both the plural of *mulk* and another category of land, this time fully taxed. To complicate things further, puzzled Russian observers noted that the word *amlakdar* referred, in former Bukharan lands, to tax collectors, who extracted from the peasantry both a share for themselves, and one for the treasury. It was manifestly impossible for the newly arrived Russian military authorities to check all the individual documents (authentic and forged) of those who claimed to enjoy fiscal privileges: this was why such privileges were abolished, parallel to the introduction of the halved land tax. This led to the protests of both those who lost a tax break and those who lost their role as collectors. The words *amliak* and the corresponding adjective (Rus. *amliakovye zemli*) nonetheless remained common in the parlance of the colonial officials to designate agricultural land on which the land tax was levied and, after 1887, was ascribed to the natives on the basis of the Turkestan Statute, as explained below.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The collection of the land tax was accompanied by various attempts at cadastralisation, most of which were abortive. A first experiment took place in 1877-1878 in the Ferghana valley, which had just been added to Russian territory after almost a decade of rule as a protectorate. Promoted by the first governor-general of Turkestan, K.P. von Kaufman, these “organisation works” aimed at a census of individual landownership (including pious endowments and the domains of the former khan and his family), on which the new land tax (the ‘Russian *kheraj*’) would be paid. This also implied (on paper) an assessment of the quality of the soil. The ambition underpinning this project was not proportional to either the human resources invested in it, or to their level of understanding of native village society. While some officials did indeed compile lists of individual landowners and of their property, the “organisation works” failed to deliver what they were meant to and were discontinued by von Kaufman’s successor and personal arch-enemy, M.G. Cherniaev. The end of the “organisation works” also meant the end of all Russian attempts to grasp individual landownership, both from a legal and a fiscal viewpoint: instead (see above) individual land rights became a matter for native (Islamic) law, while the allotment of the land tax within each village was to be decided by the villagers themselves or their local leaders.[[11]](#endnote-11) For a further (this time, successful) attempt to record and discipline individual landownership one needs to wait, paradoxically enough, for the Soviet era.

As the experience in Fergana in 1877-1878 had shown, there were excellent practical reasons for such ‘outsourcing’. From another viewpoint, it remains true that, at the same early stage of colonial rule, Russian military officers were debating whether there was, in the settled areas of Turkestan, a village community analogous to what existed in some parts of Russia.[[12]](#endnote-12) In the *mir*, regarded as a backbone of Russian identity by Slavophile thinkers, land was periodically reallocated to the members of the village community on the basis of their productive forces, some resources were exploited in common and, above all, the villagers bore collective responsibility for the payment of taxes. In the oases of Central Asia, though, this very seldom happened. Beside some evidence of land allocation by ‘lottery’, which Kostenko observed in cities,[[13]](#endnote-13) the so-called *paykāl* system (where land and water were assigned to ‘teams’ of farmers) was characteristic of poorly irrigated areas of the eastern parts of the Bukharan emirate and ceased to exist when better irrigation became available:[[14]](#endnote-14) neither of these cases, at any rate, would have been relevant at the time of these discussions on cadastralisation. By and large, the search for something similar to the Russian *mir* in Turkestan, combined with the objective difficulty in grasping individual landownership, ultimately meant that the Central Asian sedentary villages were framed, for fiscal purposes, in a way that contradicted the overwhelming predominance of individual land rights.

***Land assessment from 1887***

This approach was enshrined in the 1887 Turkestan Statute, where land was to be ascribed to village communities rather than to households; it also underpinned the resulting land tax assessment operations (*pozemel’no-podatnye raboty*), which took place over almost two decades from the early 1890s in the provinces of Samarkand and Fergana, as well as in the settled parts of Syr-Darya province. Through this land assessment, the colonial authorities were able to define the boundaries of each village, which served as the basic unit for the definition of the land tax, approximately ascertain land use (buildings, main crops), and – to an extent still unclear – define soil quality and draw small-scale, watercolour maps of the villages. Through this, they defined the boundaries of irrigated land *vis à vis* non-irrigated and/or unclaimed land – which was, in some cases, used by the nomads; above all, this was essential to calculate the amount of tax to be paid on irrigated land. According to the new instructions passed with the Statute, the land tax ceased to be one-tenth of the actual harvest, to become one-tenth of the estimated value of the harvest for that village. The harvest was estimated in the following way: inspectors conducted a sample survey of the fields (theoretically, including plots of different soil quality) with the help of a wooden square frame, then multiplied the estimate harvest for the sample by the acreage of that specific crop in the village, and finally multiplied that amount by an average of market prices for the five previous years. Although this was a laborious method and included a good degree of approximation, documents produced by the land assessment commissions witness a genuine commitment to accuracy (some described the irrigation system, while others even included ethnographic details), while the copious correspondence on their work shows how the colonial authorities at various levels strove to improve the quality of such surveys, despite the limited resources at their disposal. What the land assessment works could not reveal, was how the total land tax for each village was then allotted among its members. This was, in principle, the task of the village assembly (*skhod*): in practice, though, it was the “native administration” (*tuzemnaya administratsia*), in particular the elders (*āqsaqāl*) and the ‘heads of fifty households’ (*ellikbosh*), that handled the operation. While it is probable that *āqsaqāl*s in particular kept a more or less rough record of the amounts due by each household, only a handful of their ledgers (*daftar*) have found their ways into the colonial archives, usually because they formed evidence for the contestation of abuses or corruption.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Non-irrigated, rain-fed land, which was also ascribed to the settled population, was a separate category from the fiscal viewpoint. On this land, taxation followed the older model: until 1900 the land tax continued to be one-tenth of the actual harvest. Only after 1900 would the amount to be paid per unit of acreage (*desiatina*, ca. 1.09 *ha*)be fixed by the tax authorities each year. Unproductive land would also be taxed in a similar way from 1907 onwards, on the basis of the claim that villagers were deriving some income from it (*e.g.* pasture, fishing, nut-gathering, wood-cutting etc.) From the authorities’ viewpoint, a greater imposition on marginal lands was broadly consistent with the evolution of land usage: the ‘cotton boom’ and demographic pressure, as illustrated below, did indeed bring about the intensification of the usage of *bahari* land for cereal production and of untilled land for pasture. It has been argued that it was the systematic taxation of marginal lands that allowed the primary budget of Turkestan to attain parity at the end of the first decade of the 20th c. From the population’s viewpoint, however, this sudden increase in fiscal pressure made the ascription of *bahari* and marginal lands to the village less desirable than it had been hitherto. It also increased the contentiousness in the allocation of the land tax within the community, and strained the relations between nomads and settled dwellers of the countryside. Chronologically at least, there exists a parallelism between these changes in the way non-irrigated land was taxed, and villagers’ demands to register their plots as a separate fiscal unit from the village as a whole, as explained below.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**The “cotton boom”**

***American cotton in Turkestan***

The single most evident aspect of agricultural change that occurred in the colonial period was the introduction of American cotton varieties and, consequently, the expansion of the acreage under this crop and of the corresponding output from the early 1890s to 1916. After unsuccessful experiments with *Sea Island*, the sturdier *Upland* variety quickly displaced the Central Asian cotton species, *Gossypium herbaceum*, locally known as *ghuza*: overseas *Gossypium hirsutum* had longer fibres, which made it more suitable for the burgeoning textile industry in European Russia. This had been a fundamental shortcoming of Central Asian cotton before, including during the American Civil War, when demand for it had grown. Exports of ginned cotton from Turkestan grew substantially as a consequence.[[17]](#endnote-17) While most conventional narratives of the introduction of American cotton into Russian Turkestan insist on the role of the first governor-general von Kaufman and of other military officers, an alternative version reports that the first seeds were brought back from the *hajj* by a Tashkenti mullah.[[18]](#endnote-18) The next phases are better documented: while in the 1880s the centre of the ‘cotton boom’ was the district of Tashkent, by the 1890s Ferghana was taking the lead, especially in terms of the share of cotton in the crop mix. This shift matched a crucial change in the organisation of the cultivation of cotton: at the time of the Tashkent “cotton fever”, Russian officers with no farming experience and a few native merchants acquired relatively large plots and had them sown under cotton by sharecroppers or labourers. By and large, this system (which is the closest thing to a plantation that would emerge in colonial Turkestan) did not yield the expected results, mainly because of the very high surveillance costs inherent to the management of relatively large units by absentee landlords. In Ferghana, instead, cotton was mainly cultivated on smallholdings, either by petty farmers or by tenants, who were more directly invested in the results of the new business. The labour-intensive cultivation of cotton matched well the factor endowment of native agriculturalists, where farmhands were abundant but land was scarce: indeed, wage workers seasonally migrated from Kashgaria, the Kazakh Steppe, and Bukhara to satisfy the need for labour at peak moments. Adopting cotton at the expense of other crops made sense, so that the ‘cotton boom’ in Tsarist Turkestan cannot be regarded as the product of coercion.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Although quantitatively very modest if compared with what would take place in the mature Soviet period, the pre-revolutionary ‘boom’ altered the overall economic environment of Turkestan, leading to the establishment of new industrial activities (*e.g.* cotton ginning, cotton seed oil presses, soap factories) and services. The latter ranged from basic carting and storage, to more complex transactions, in particular credit and, to a lesser extent, insurance. The ‘cotton boom’ led to a somewhat disorderly development of local canals, but also expelled other crops from irrigated land; cereals in particular were increasingly grown on rain-fed land. This led nomads who lived on the fringes of the oases to assume the symbiotic function of purveyors of *bahari* grains. This happened to the Kyrgyz in eastern Fergana, but also in Semirechie (where Slavic settlers played a role, too) and in the Bukharan emirate.[[20]](#endnote-20) To this, one may add that cheap grain easily reached the cotton-growing regions after the extension of the Central Asian (Transcaspian) railway to Andijan in 1898, and even more after the quick construction of the Orenburg-Tashkent railway by 1906.

***Institutions and the role of the state***

Beside high international prices in the last two decades of the century, factor endowments, and the growing availability of cheap grain, other circumstances objectively contributed to making cotton an attractive option. As explained below, new irrigation projects paid for or incentivized by the Russian imperial state were negligible in this respect, while it mattered more that food became more cheaply available. Even more important was the fact that Central Asian American cotton was subsidized, though not sensibly more than industrial crops in other countries at the same time. Subsidies took two forms: duties on imports and (what mattered more for the Turkestani villagers) a tax-break on cotton fields.[[21]](#endnote-21) Starting from the early 1890s, fields sown under American cotton were to be taxed as ‘dry’ crops, *e.g.* wheat. Because the harvest value of cotton was several times more than that of wheat for the same acreage, this made cotton an even more attractive option. Other details in the conduct of land assessment amplified this effect over time: wheat prices used for the calculation of the land tax were not revised, while increases in the share of the land under cotton and in the overall irrigated surface went unrecorded. Even discounting demographic growth –and the consequent parcelisation of land- and inflation of food staple prices, by the beginning of the Great War the real value of taxes paid on land under cotton had decreased to almost nil, while the fiscal advantage of growing cotton had augmented spectacularly. As some Russian observers noted, cotton-growing peasants could pay off the land tax just with the value of the dried stalks. Although these conclusions are based on generalisation from the few grass roots-level data available, there is no doubt that the tax break objectively reduced the costs of growing cotton for the native peasantry. The question is whether the Russian imperial state –or at least the colonial authorities in Tashkent- subjectively intended the tax break to support the development of this sector: while this is still the dominant view, it has been argued that the tax break, initially intended as a temporary measure for a limited group of planters, was extended and made permanent for reasons pertaining to the colonial bureaucracy. Similarly, it is the inertia and flaws of the land tax assessment systems that brought about the amplification of the tax break well beyond what the proponents had initially envisioned. In sum, even though some questions are still open (*e.g.* the microeconomic viability of cotton farms without the subsidies), there are many reasons to think that the ‘cotton boom’ occurred without any intentional planning –or indeed coercion- by the Russian imperial state.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Other institutional factors worked against the interests of the cotton-growing peasantry, though. The fact that cotton was a global commodity also meant very sharp oscillations in its price year after year, which exposed the farmers –and, to some extent, the intermediaries who purchased their harvest- to an additional risk factor beside natural reasons for crop failure (drought, locusts, etc.). This circumstance, paired with the growing dependence of cotton-growing households on imports of food staples, meant that the latter had to rely more and more on credit. It was not the big Russian cotton companies and banks that provided it, but a number of native intermediaries: from carters (*arbakesh*) to urban merchants, both Muslim and others (Bukharan Jews, Tatar, etc.) Only after the turn of the century were plans for the establishment of small agricultural credit discussed both in Turkestan and in Saint Petersburg, but their implementation and impact remained negligible.

Soviet historiography has insisted on the high interest rates asked by creditors and on the supposed concentration of landownership that followed smallholders’ defaults. It is true that there were a few very rich men in Ferghana, who concentrated in their hands enormous amounts of land, for instance Mir Kamil Mir Muminbaev in Andijan. There is also plenty of anecdotal evidence about the lavish lifestyle of merchants dealing in cotton, *e.g.* the members of the Davidov Bukharan Jewish family.[[23]](#endnote-23) While nobody has yet measured the growth of social inequality in the areas attained by the ‘cotton boom’, all data available point in this direction. Yet, both official memos and economic common sense suggest an explanation for such reliance on native intermediaries and for the high cost of credit that goes beyond the evil of the Turkestani proto-bourgeoisie (as Soviet Marxist interpretations would have it):[[24]](#endnote-24) interest rates may have reflected either the high risk of loans to cotton-growing households, or an oligopoly in the provision of financial services, or –more probably- a mixture of these two reasons. In the absence of small agricultural credit (backed by the state, or run by cooperatives), cotton-growing households had to rely on native intermediaries because they had no direct access to Russian banks.[[25]](#endnote-25) Only a few native Muslims and Bukharan Jews could offer guarantees (collateral) that the banks would accept. This ostensibly happened because of the above-mentioned bifurcation between the native and the Russian legal systems: petty Muslim farmers could not show Russian titles of ownership that would have allowed them to tap into the cheaper credit of the banks. When Russian titles became more widely available thanks to a 1900 amendment to the Turkestan Statute, they were addressing (but never really exhausted) a growing desire to access financial services under Russian law. Overall, scholars have yet to address many questions on the impact of the ‘cotton boom’ on the livelihood of rural households, inequality, and the emergence of new social groups (from moneylenders to landless labourers) in a way that takes into account institutional economics and critiques teleological Marxist interpretations.

**Water usage and governance**

***Irrigation in Central Asia***

Precipitation in Central Asia being scarce, some crops can only be cultivated on irrigated (*abi*) land.[[26]](#endnote-26) Water flowing in the main rivers (the Syr-Darya, Amu-Darya, and Zeravshan) was diverted into larger feeder canals (*nahr*, li. ‘river’) and, from those, into smaller ones (*ariq*). Despite the very high evaporation rates in the hot months, there were basically no surviving long-distance underground canals in the region, similar to the Iranian *qanat*s.[[27]](#endnote-27) Gradient was exploited for irrigation whenever possible. In Khorezm, because the level of the fields was often much higher than that of water in the canals, water-wheels (*chigir*) or other water scoops (suspended, or counterpoise lifts) were used. The *chigir*s being operated by humans or, more often, camels or donkeys, irrigation in Khorezm was heavily dependent on draught animals, which in turn made agriculture in this region more capital-intensive.[[28]](#endnote-28) When internal combustion engines became available at the turn of the century, they started being used against adverse gradient, for instance on the right side of the Syr-Darya in the Namangan district. Field irrigation was predominantly by inundation, where water was allowed to flow into a field through a breach in the canal’s bank. On the banks of the Syr-Darya and in the Amu-Darya delta this was simply achieved by cultivating land where the river had flooded, leaving behind a layer of precious nutrients. Because of evaporation, in the long run irrigation by inundation poses the problem of the salinisation of the fields, which was alleviated by crop rotation and the cultivation of sorghum.

The technology and institutions presiding over the management of water in Central Asia remained, by and large, impenetrable to the gaze of Russian colonial officers. Despite von Kaufman’s early experiments in replacing the native canal managers with Russian technicians (*irrigatory*), his successor Cherniaev reversed this move – in a way that resembles the discontinuation of the above-mentioned “organisation works”. The native water managers were called *mirāb* (from *(a)mir* ‘commander’ + *āb* ‘water’) or, at a higher level, *ariq-āqsaqāl* (‘canal elder’). In Russian Turkestan the *mirab* were elected (which paved the way to accusations of corruption), while the *aryq-āqsaqāl* appear to have been appointed. These persons were responsible for the allocation of water between villages and users who depended on the same water system, as well as for the organisation of annual and extraordinary cleaning and repair works. The technology mobilised for these tasks was quite simple: while a few Russian observers appreciated it and noted that experiments with more modern materials had not yielded the expected results, the majority of colonial observers criticized it and advocated the shift to proper “water engineering”. For instance, disposable dams made of stones, branches, and straw were erected at the head of rivers and main canals when the water level was low, and destroyed at the right moment to allow water to feed a given system. Rather than absolute estimates of the volume of water assigned to each village, native water managers divided the water in relative terms only. Gradient was ascertained with the help of simple devices, *e.g.* by looking at the water in a cup (*piola*), or by observing the trickle of water from a damp cloth wrapped around a stick.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Russian colonial authorities were at loss in particular when confronted with the organisation of maintenance works, in particular on the major canals. Water users were supposed to clean the canals (to avoid siltation), repair the banks, etc. once a year. This *corvée* was called *hashar*, or *kazu* (‘to dig’) in Khorezm. The Russians called it “duty in kind” (*naturopovinnost’*): a tax paid by the rural population, beside the land tax, the local tax (*zemskii sbor*, for *e.g.* bridges and roads), the payments to the *mirab* and *ariq-āqsaqāl*, and all the indirect taxes. Although in principle the number of days/men to be provided (either in kind, or by paying workers) was proportional to the surface of irrigated land, in practice customary arrangements based on the history of the water system, the balance of power between communities, and corruption blurred the picture considerably. As a rule, Russian observers considered this system as inefficient: pressure existed toward the end of the colonial period to turn the *naturopovinnost’* in a duty to be fully paid in money and managed by technically-minded water authorities. This went in parallel to the appointment of a number of Russian *ariq-āqsaqāl*s and to discussions about a possible “water law” for Turkestan.

***New irrigation and legislation***

Somehow reflecting the limitations of colonial sources, scholarship on the organisation of the *hashar* and on water management in general fails to grasp the social reality of water usage and rights in Central Asia. A clear example of the need to incorporate vernacular sources pertains to the question of private property on water. While many colonial officers liked to assume that rights on water were tied to those on land, some of them knew that water was indeed sold, bought, or endowed separately from land: yet, one does not know much about how this happened, whether these transactions grew over time, or if this happened both in Russian Turkestan and in the two protectorates of Bukhara and Khorezm. Historians have worked on colonial perceptions of water management in Central Asia, legislation, and the introduction of ‘modern’ technology.[[30]](#endnote-30) While native entrepreneurs’ investments in new irrigation (*e.g.* pumping stations in Fergana) still await study, a lot of attention has been paid to the canals dug by Russians, whether private or institutions: this is especially the case of irrigation in the Hungry Steppe, on the left bank of the Syr-Darya between Samarkand and Tashkent. Sponsored by the grand-duke Nikolay K. Romanov, a first canal was opened in 1891, followed by the “Emperor Nikolay I” canal in 1898. Rather more successful was the “Romanov canal”, inaugurated in 1913. In 1915 the engineer G. Riesenkampf (Rizenkampf) published a first version of his new irrigation project for the Hungry Steppe, which would be re-exhumed and adapted in the early Soviet period.[[31]](#endnote-31) Another important new irrigation project concerned the Chu valley in Semirechie, while negotiations were underway for the irrigation of new land on the Lawzan canal, in the Khivan khanate under Russian protectorate.[[32]](#endnote-32) Finally, the Russians rebuilt the dam at Bayram-Ali on the Murghab river. Even at the end of the colonial period, Russian-built new water facilities accounted for a very minimal share of irrigated land in the region. One must also consider that this newly irrigated land, especially in the Hungry Steppe and the Chu valley, was used to cultivate grain, rather than cotton: besides technical and environmental conditions, most of the European settlers who received the land would not have known how to handle other crops.

The persistent (but false) idea that the Russian empire built canals in Central Asia in order to increase cotton output derives from the fact that indeed new irrigation and cotton were linked in the mind and statements of authoritative decision-makers and lobby groups. After a trip to the region in 1908, A.V. Krivoshein promoted the idea of a “New Turkestan”: to compensate for the costs the colony was generating, he advocated a three-pronged strategy based on irrigation, resettlement, and cotton.[[33]](#endnote-33) Because of the high costs involved in the first, he planned to invite private investments. Indeed, Moscow-based textile industrialists had expressed their will in this sense, but between 1909 and 1916 the two sides did not manage to find an agreement on the juridical framework for such an operation and, ultimately, on the allocation of costs and benefits. As scholarship has shown, Krivoshein insisted that the state retained “supreme domain” on water (a view reflected in the 1916 new “water law” for Turkestan), while the industrialists would have liked to obtain property rights. Disagreements also existed over the allocation of the revenue that would result from the concessions, as well as on the ultimate goal of such new irrigation: Krivoshein had linked it to the arrival of more Slavic peasants, who typically grew grain, while the industrialists were not interested in fostering crops other than cotton, which was better cultivated by the native population. Ironically enough, it was legally easier for Russian entrepreneurs to negotiate concessions in Khiva, a protectorate, than in the colony proper. From another viewpoint, the colonial authorities opposed Krivoshein’s policies for their own reasons, and feared the possible backlash from changes in the legal framework on Central Asia’s water. They understood well that Krivoshein’s insistence on the state’s “supreme domain” was not just a barrier to the investors’ desire to privatise water, but also a tool to subordinate the usage rights of the native population to those of state agencies, namely the Resettlement Administration.[[34]](#endnote-34)

**The nomads’ land and resettlement**

***Nomads’ usage rights***

While formally recognized by the Russian imperial legislation, in the steppe region the nomads’ usage rights had already progressively shrunk in the course of the 19th century. From the 1820s, following the overhaul of the governance of the natives of Siberia (including, at this time, the Kazakhs), the establishment of Russian fortresses and the prohibition to cross the boundaries of the territory where Russia claimed sovereignty limited the length of the annual migration for many Kazakhs, which in turn caused a diminution of the livestock such reduced pastureland could support. The traditional nomadic lifestyle was increasingly limited to the White Bone elite, while poorer Black Bone dependents stayed behind on the winter pastures, occupying themselves with stationary livestock breeding, hay-mowing, and rain-fed agriculture. With the Russian conquest of southern Central Asia, similar limitations came into being for the Kyrgyz (although these lacked a Chinggissid elite). Ultimately the first Steppe Statute of 1868, its new version in 1891, and the Turkestan Statute in 1887 formally asserted that the nomads’ land was state land, and that the nomads possessed communal (not individual) usage rights on it. As explained above, private property was recognized for members of the elites in a few cases, although it could exist in practice within the parallel realm of customary and Islamic law.[[35]](#endnote-35)

This state of things had important consequences for the subsequent history of the competition for land and water between Kazakhs and Kyrgyz *vis à vis* the growing presence of settlers from the European parts of the Russian empire. Often considered in Soviet historiography as part of the “progressive influence” that Russian rule brought to Central Asia, resettlement (Rus. *pereselenie*)is a well-explored topic in historiography. While most historians from the region devote themselves mainly to studies of the legislation and of conflicts between natives and newcomers, recent scholarship has explored the ‘technologies of rule’ and ideology underpinning resettlement in Russia, or compared the latter to contemporary forms of settler colonialism.[[36]](#endnote-36) Very recently, a cliometric approach has allowed new glimpses into the effects of resettlement on demography and agricultural innovation among the Kazakhs.[[37]](#endnote-37) The interaction between natives and settlers on the spot (*e.g.* mixed marriages) has also been studied, although in a more sketchy way.[[38]](#endnote-38) While the overall legal and institutional framework of resettlement is broadly clear, there is scope for a more robust and systematic social and economic history, which should integrate both quantitative sources and methods, and access to vernacular documents.

In the encroachment of European settlers on the nomads’ land right one must distinguish between different periods. Besides the presence of Cossack garrisons (*stanitsa*), which secured Russia’s pretentions of sovereignty in exchange for land rights (and sometimes fishing), the flow of peasants from European Russia had increased as a consequence of the 1861 emancipation of serfs. For many, the land they were entitled to was too small, or their debts were too heavy, while from Siberia came stories of bounty. Emigration was also an option for religious minorities and dissenters, *e.g.* Mennonites and Old Believers. This outflow of peasants was not actively supported by the state, which was rather worried about the lack of viability of the farms the migrants would establish. First attempts to legislate on resettlement date to the late 1880s, but were made obsolete by the 1891 famine and the consequent massive wave of outmigration it provoked. Another factor contributing to the growth in the number of migrants was the construction of the Transsiberian railway, which reached Petropavlovsk (in what is now northern Kazakhstan) in 1896. In this first phase, the vast majority of settlers were ‘self-driven’ (*samovol’tsy*): they were occupying land without much support from the state, or even against it. This gradually changed at the end of the century.[[39]](#endnote-39)

***From “resettlement” to “colonization”***

From the mid-1890s, the Russian imperial state took a more proactive stance on resettlement. First through the Transsiberian railway, and then through the newly established Resettlement Administration, it promoted a comprehensive survey of the land usage of the Kazakhs, which was meant to identify suitable land for the newcomers. This survey, led by the zemstvo statistician F. A. Shcherbina, was representative of the technocratic approach of the institutions that commissioned it, namely the Resettlement Administration and the Head Administration for Land Organisation and Agriculture (GUZiZ in Russian acronym).[[40]](#endnote-40) The latter, led by A.V. Krivoshein, embraced a developmentalist approach to the management of natural resources, whereby all of them (including land) should be used in the most productive way. While in Turkestan (as explained above) this meant the triad “cotton-new irrigation-resettlement”, the development of the steppe was equivalent to their “colonization” (*kolonizatsiia*). This added to resettlement a new political connotation and made it a priority of the imperial state.

Because the European settlers’ grain-growing techniques were allegedly more productive than the Kazakhs’ usage of supposedly ‘empty’ land for extensive pasture, the latter’s rights were to be limited to what was strictly necessary for their survival, while the rest could be earmarked for *pereselenie*. The Shcherbina commission was therefore charged to calculate how much land was enough for a Kazakh or Kyrgyz household, taking into account the number of heads of livestock (expressed in “adult horse-equivalent units”) and the ability of each district’s land to support them (which depended on soil, grass cover, water sources, etc.). There existed a “land standard” (*norma*)for nomadic pastoralist usage, and another based on the subsistence of sedentarised nomads. Everything beyond the cumulative sum of the “standards” was regarded as “excess land” (*izlishki*) and could be allocated to the settlers.

This principle was enshrined in an annotation to art. 120 of the 1891 Steppe Statute, which defined the nomads’ land rights in the four steppe provinces (Uralsk, Turgai, Akmolinsk, Semipalatinsk) and in Semirechie, even after the latter’s inclusion in the Turkestan general-governorship. On the contrary, no such a provision existed in the corresponding part of the 1887 Turkestan statute (art. 270). In Turkestan, land for the settlers had to be obtained in other – sometimes circuitous – ways, for instance by defining land as “spontaneous forest” and thus part of the state land patrimony, which the natives had to pay to access.[[41]](#endnote-41) Pressure to change the art. 270 to include a similar delimitation of the nomads’ rights in favour of the settlers was quite strong in the two pre-war decades, which saw the local agency of the Resettlement Administration and of the GUZiZ engage in a battle against the colonial administration. Unlike the former, Tashkent had an interest in ascribing as much land as possible to the natives, especially when rain-fed and ‘marginal’ lands started to be more heavily taxed. Colonial officers were also worried about the possible backlash in terms of discontent and uprisings, not only in the core provinces of Turkestan, but also in Semirechie, where the alienation of “excess land” had forced Kazakhs and Kyrgyz (both nomadic pastoralists and peasants) out of their winter quarters and onto less productive areas. Their doubts were largely echoed in the monumental report which senator Count K.K. Pahlen, charged with the revision of governance in Turkestan, prepared and sent to press between 1908 and 1910. At the same time, the clash between Tashkent and the GUZiZ escalated to the point that the then Turkestan governor-general, V.I. Grodekov, was forced out of office.[[42]](#endnote-42) While the longed-for addendum to art. 270 was actually approved in the end, the colonial administration still resisted its implementation by delaying the drafting of the necessary practical instructions.

The number of settlers (by now mostly supported by the state in their claims for land) skyrocketed after 1905, when the Stolypin reforms made it easier to quit the *mir* and the Stolypin-Krivoshein tandem led the empire’s policies on agriculture and natural resources. The two politicians advocated three measures to incentivize the “colonization” of the Kazakh steppe: the continued earmarking of “excess land”, on the model of the Shcherbina commission; a clear definition of the boundaries of the land of sedentarised nomads; and simplified procedures to rent land from the Kazakhs. By and large, mass resettlement concerned the Kazakh steppe and Semirechie, much more than the core provinces of Turkestan, where the density of the native population would have made it exceedingly difficult to identify land for the newcomers. Displacement due to resettlement explains why, in the vernacular press, Kazakh identity was more and more articulated in reference to an “ancestral land” and the need to retain it, even at the cost of quitting the traditional nomadic lifestyle.[[43]](#endnote-43) At the end of the colonial period there were only a few Russian settlements in the Syr-Darya province (especially along the railway) and in Fergana, *e.g.* Markhamat in the Andijan district, which was founded after the revolt of the self-proclaimed sufi leader Madali Dukchi Ishan had been punished, among other things, by destroying the village where he had had his headquarters. A more notable exception was the newly irrigated land in the Hungry Steppe. This explains the different form land conflicts and land reforms took in the revolutionary period and in its aftermath.

**From Russian colony to Soviet “decolonization”**

***The crisis of the colonial system***

In the summer of 1916 a widespread uprising threatened Russian rule in both Turkestan and the steppe region. The revolt started in Djizakh and in Khujand (at the entrance of the Fergana valley), and it soon spread to areas of Turkestan where the density of settlers was higher, in particular Semirechie and the central part of the Syr-Darya province. In the steppe, the epicentre of the revolt was Turgai province.[[44]](#endnote-44) The revolt has received much historiographical attention especially by scholars from the region, who have sometimes portrayed it as a “national liberation movement”[[45]](#endnote-45) or, until 1991, as a foretaste of the class struggle that would fully bloom under Bolshevik guidance.[[46]](#endnote-46) The trigger for the revolt was the decree that ordered the conscription of native men for work in the rear lines of the war front; factors that increased the population’s malaise were the corruption and arbitrariness (in the absence of birth certificates) in the way native administrators compiled the lists of those mobilised, the confusion around labour conditions, and disastrously poor logistics. Inflation, the imposition of war-time monopolies (especially on cotton) and the doubling of the land tax had prepared the terrain. However most observers at the time, as well as scholars now, agree that the deeper reasons for discontent are to be found in the increasing competition around resources brought about by resettlement.[[47]](#endnote-47) This is reflected by the geography of the revolt, as well as by its first victims, which included native collaborators (village elders, scribes), settler villages, and forestry inspectors. The repression of the uprising was ruthless, although it is hard to qualify it (as some scholars and writers in the region do) as a straightforward genocide against the Kyrgyz or the Kazakhs. Although sources are imperfect, an estimated quarter of a million Kazakhs and Kyrgyz in Semirechie died or emigrated into Chinese territory. Many natives lost their land and dwellings, which passed into the settlers’ hands. All suffered from the almost complete failure of the 1916 grain harvest, which paved the way to famine during the revolution. Both resistance and retaliation were the bloodiest in the parts of Semirechie (*e.g.* Przhevalsk) where the Kyrgyz had actually shifted to settled agriculture and even established irrigation systems, partly to respond to the greater demand for grain in cotton-oriented Fergana. General A.N. Kuropatkin, who led the repression, advocated ethnic cleansing measures and the physical segregation of the Semirechie natives onto mediocre land: a measure that was indirectly enacted by the early Soviet regime in its internal boundary-making.[[48]](#endnote-48) The intensity of the 1916 uprising and the cycle of violence that ensued are a testimony to the degree of disruption which colonial land policies – in particular resettlement – had brought about in the region.

This cycle of violence for the control of land and other resources continued through the revolutionary year 1917. The Bolshevik coup of the autumn, in particular, provided the advocates of the interests of the Russians in the region with a new, powerful ideological justification. Both the February and the October revolutions in Russia reached the periphery by telegraph and led to an increase in political activism both in the steppe and in Turkestan, although the degree to which the countryside was touched by it remains disputable. Together with the new political rights which the fall of the empire brought about, the land question was at the very top of the platform on which candidates for the Russian constitutional assembly from both the steppe and Turkestan voted in Orenburg in July 1917. They advocated the return of the land reserved for resettlement, although curiously they also embraced the technocratic notion of “land standard" which had guided the Resettlement Administration. If the February revolution was met with enthusiasm, the same was not true of the Bolshevik coup half a year later. The dismissal of the constitutional assembly, on which native activists were counting, was a severe blow. More generally, the Bolshevik-dominated Tashkent Soviet – and, increasingly, other local councils – excluded Muslim representatives from participation in the political arena on the grounds that native society lacked a genuine proletariat: workers (mainly from the railway) and soldiers were mostly European. The same ideological motivations shaped the hierarchy that disciplined access to increasingly scarce food, with the Old City of Tashkent and Fergana coming as an afterthought. The nationalization of cotton (including unsold raw cotton still in the farmers’ hands) was another severe blow. To use Marco Buttino’s famous expression, this was eminently a “revolution of the Russians”, at least in the short term.[[49]](#endnote-49)

Because of these premises, the very first land policy of the Bolshevik-dominated Soviets in Turkestan consisted in the expropriation of plots that belonged to the natives. The principle of “toiling land usage”, promised in Lenin’s ‘decree on land’, led to the creation of short-lived communes in particular on vineyards, fruit orchards, and vegetable gardens in the cities or in their immediate hinterland. This led to the virtual collapse of Turkestan’s very valuable horticultural sector, which would take more than a decade to recover. More limited was the impact of this first round of expropriations in the countryside, where Soviet rule failed to imposed itself until the early 1920s and security reasons put off Party activists. In the areas affected by the 1916 uprising, though, the ideological framework of the new regime provided a justification for the settlers (many of whom had in the meantime come back from the front) to retaliate violently against the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, in continuity with general Kuropatkin’s repression.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Despite the involvement of a few native activists (*e.g.* in famine relief), it was only in the summer of 1919 that Lenin cautioned the Bolsheviks in Central Asia about the need to open their ranks to sympathetic members of the local elites. In the steppe, this was related to the choice by some prominent Kazakh leaders to side with the “Reds” rather than with general A.V. Kolchak’s project of imperial restoration;[[51]](#endnote-51) in southern Central Asia, growing security concerns suggested collaboration with those who, amongst native progressives, had seen in the revolution an opportunity to advance their own agendas.[[52]](#endnote-52) The rejection of “great-Russian chauvinism” became now the official line of the Bolsheviks, who aimed, by this, not only at strengthening their position in many ‘national peripheries’, but also at spreading their revolution in neighbouring Asian countries.[[53]](#endnote-53)

***Early Soviet land reforms***

In the Kazakh steppe and in Semirechie, where the ‘land question’ had featured as a prominent item in the vernacular press since its inception after 1905, the alliance between Bolsheviks and reformist intellectuals coalesced into policies that favoured the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz in the allocation of land, especially between 1921 and 1922. In the steppe, implementing “toiling land usage” meant the transfer of land from European settlers to Kazakh sharecroppers. In Semirechie the so-called “land and water reform” aimed more explicitly at the decolonization of Kazakh and Kyrgyz land. Understandably, the natives seized this opportunity not only to reclaim the land lost with the repression of the 1916 uprising, but also to retaliate with violence against the European settlers – many of whom ended up as internally displaced persons in Tashkent.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Because of the lower density of settler villages in the core parts of Turkestan, this decolonizing reform had a more limited impact there, with the exception of the Hungry Steppe. A ‘land question’, however, existed also in the areas of irrigated agriculture. The cycle of violence that had started in 1916 and continued through the revolution and civil war had taken a heavy toll on the rural economy of Central Asia. For the same reasons (political instability, war, etc.) it is difficult to quantify: yet, all approximate estimates and sample surveys of post-revolutionary agriculture point at the massive shrinkage of tilled land, at the decay of irrigation infrastructure, and at the return of the rural population to subsistence agriculture. Sometimes – as in the Samarkand district – a perverse cycle was observed: canals were not repaired due to lack of security and social disruption, or because there were fewer able bodies; this led to the formation of swamps, and then to bouts of malaria, which in turn weakened and diminished the population… According to the best estimates, Turkestan lost one-fourth of its population to war and famine, but landlessness still existed, because the stock of irrigated or otherwise productive land had also diminished.[[55]](#endnote-55) Furthermore, the collapse of the cotton economy swept away opportunities for the casual or seasonal work of landless rural dwellers, either in the fields or in the few plants that processed raw cotton and its byproducts. The plight of landless labourers (as opposed to sharecroppers) was particularly evident in eastern Fergana. Agricultural capital was also lacking: besides the lack of repairs to the irrigation systems, tools had not been repaired or replaced, and the number of draught animals had also plummeted.

Hence, the “land and water reform” of 1925-1927 in the Uzbek and Turkmen republics was only marginally a form of decolonization (with a few exception, again in the Hungry Steppe), but implemented the principle of “toiling land usage” in the shape of a partial or total expropriation of some categories of households, followed by the redistribution of the same land and capital to landless or smallholding households (first sharecroppers, then wage labourers).[[56]](#endnote-56) It was clear from the very beginning that such a redistribution would not have satisfied all those who had, on paper, a right to receive land from the reform: this land stock was therefore supplemented by newly irrigated land – often land where decayed irrigation was restored. The state also provided implements or credit to obtain animals and tools, thereby pushing peasants to join the cooperative system. While the usual distinction between “land standards” and “excess land” was used both to target both the victims and the beneficiaries of the reform, the categories singled out for complete expropriation and the treatment they received (*e.g.* show trials) reflected broader political priorities: first (in the Tashkent, Fergana, and Samarkand provinces) merchants and artisans above a certain level, then (in the former Bukharan lands and Khorezm) former officers and dignitaries of the emirate and khanate – which included members of the *‘ulama’* elite. The first ‘wave’ of reform did not lead to the exile of those who lost their land and other properties: this happened only from 1927, under the label of “final liquidation” (where the reform had already been completed) or “land organisation”. At the beginning, only *waqf* land that supported educational institutions was nationalized and included in the land stock for redistribution; only from 1927 were *waqf* that supported a mosque or shrine (“religious”) targeted, parallel to an intensification of anti-religious struggle.

***Re-capturing the peasantry***

While the land reform did not eliminate landlessness, it did indeed foster changes in landownership: the number of landless peasants and of large landowners diminished everywhere, while the share of smallholders (up to 4 *desiatina*s) grew. The land reform had the important effect of extending state control over individual land rights: while the colonial authorities had delegated the issues of land property and the allocation of the land-tax to native village authorities, on the occasion of the reform the Soviet regime issued its own certificates to prove the land rights of each household. The land reform can be regarded as a massive titling operation, which paradoxically recorded individual rights on nationalizedland. The reform extended the Soviet grasp on the countryside in another way: it ‘captured’ the peasantry through the cooperatives and the cotton procurement agencies, which also managed credit and the distribution of food staples and consumers’ goods. In the mid-1920s there even existed a struggle for supremacy between the Central Asian Bureau of the Party and the all-Union Cotton Committee, whose priorities for Central Asian agriculture did not always coincide. In any case, first by striving to maintain a 1:3 parity between the price of grain and that of cotton, and then through a policy of advance credit on the cotton harvest, the Soviet regime allegedly managed to restore the pre-war output of Central Asian cotton by 1926. In this respect the Cotton Committee had merely taken the place of the pre-revolutionary Russian cotton companies. The Soviet government also revived the fiscal incentives that had existed before the revolution, though in the framework of the new “standard land tax”, and increasingly forcibly excluded rice from potential cotton-growing land.[[57]](#endnote-57)

Another goal of the land reform – and, even more, of the waves of expropriations that followed it from 1927 – was to break up bonds of loyalty and dependence in the village, in particular by emancipating the landless peasants from their richer patrons. In doing so, however, attention should be paid to smallholders or “middling peasants”, often portrayed as the backbone of economic recovery: this category was not meant to fear the Bolshevik regime, but to be persuaded instead to side with the poorer elements in the village. This amounted to a polarization of loyalties within rural societies – or, as ideologists would have put it, to a precondition for the kind of class struggle Central Asia had not yet experienced. A similar principle, combined with the idea that native societies had to ‘catch up’ with the metropole in this respect, was at the origin of the campaigns against the rich (*bay*) in the Kyrgyz and Kazakh ASSRs in the last quarter of the 1920s. Stirring up of class struggle was portrayed, more than in the other republics, as part of a more general fight against “feudal-patriarchal relics”, parallel to anti-religious measures, public hygiene initiatives, and the emancipation of women. In practical terms, these “debaysation” campaigns reduced the livestock available to nomads and other pastoralists, both because the owners preferred to slaughter and consume animals they would lose anyway, and because of the emigration of some richer livestock-breeding households into neighbouring China and Mongolia.[[58]](#endnote-58) Among the Kyrgyz, the “land reform” also incentivized a move toward hay-mowing and a more sedentary lifestyle, while in the cotton-growing districts of the south the population was ‘captured’ through the same mechanisms as their neighbours in Uzbekistan.[[59]](#endnote-59)

Because of such an early ‘capture’ of the cotton-growing peasantry, the subsequent collectivisation drive in the sedentary oases of Central Asia aimed more at the increase of the output (in the shape of Stalin’s unrealistic “cotton plan”), than at the strengthening of procurement mechanisms – as happened in grain-growing districts. From the beginning of the 1930s, this was accompanied by deportations and repression.[[60]](#endnote-60) Among the nomads - and in particular for the Kazakhs - the experience of collectivisation was essentially one of arbitrary requisitions (of grain in 1930; of livestock in 1931). Already affected by “debaysation” and by adverse weather in the winter of 1927-1928, the Kazakhs’ livestock plummeted during collectivisation, while the republic was forced to export grain surpluses it did not possess. In this, land usage patterns mattered for the way Kazakhstan was viewed in Soviet economic planning: as in Krivoshein’s time, the Kazakh steppe was regarded as a granary. This spiraled into the Great Kazakh Famine. By comparison, the neighbouring Kyrgyz republic was less affected, because – unlike the Kazakh steppe – it was not considered as a grain-producing region.[[61]](#endnote-61)

**Discussion of the literature**

Historiography on land and water in colonial and early Soviet Central Asia in the past decade has radically departed from Soviet historiography and, to some extent, from studies of the same issues produced before archival materials became accessible. While often valuable in the empirical information it contains and in its attention to detail in the reconstruction of normative frameworks, Soviet historians tended to look at the history of land and water – and of the underpinning social and economic relations through the prisms of social stratification and the nature of economic development before the revolution. The emergence of social stratification and, in particular, the growing polarization of village society were considered as preconditions for class conflict (or its precursors), which would in turn lead to the socialist revolution – if not immediately in 1917, at least by the time of the collectivisation drive.[[62]](#endnote-62) Signs of such stratification were therefore sought in landownership patterns: a difficult task because, as explained above, there were no systematic records of individual landownership, and ownership of ‘land’ in the abstract is not a good measure for social inequality, especially on its own. Post-Soviet historiography, however, may have gone too far in the opposite direction: having embraced post-colonialism as a privileged approach and having focused on issues of identity and intellectual development, it has not yet led to an alternative appraisal of social structure, land relations, or even the crop mix. Questions on income and living standards have barely been asked, while – especially for the early Soviet period – ethnic or cultural cleavages seem to matter more than the cleavage between rich and poor.

In a similar way, the question of the capitalist, proto-capitalist, or non-capitalist nature of pre-1917 economic development in Central Asia was politically loaded. After some rather open exchanges of opinion in the 1920s,[[63]](#endnote-63) the idea that the region transited to socialism “without going through capitalism” prevailed. This interpretation enhanced the leading role of Russian communism: it was a way to encourage potential allies in decolonized Asia and Africa to rely on Soviet counsel and help for growth, rather than launching themselves in capitalist experiments.[[64]](#endnote-64) Here again, these themes have not been yet been re-examined, although some have tried, from outside the field, to include colonial Central Asia in global histories of capitalism.[[65]](#endnote-65) Hopefully specialists in Central Asia itself will participate in this comparative conversation.

Groundbreaking changes in the last decade have transformed our understanding of land rights in Central Asia, thanks to the exploration of legal pluralism in this part of the Russian empire. Until ten years ago, for instance, one could still reproduce what some Russian observers wrote: that private property did not exist in the region, and that, consequently, there was no reason for the imperial state to recognise more than usage rights. This version has now been completely shattered through the study of judicial documents, a better sense of Russian colonial knowledge and prejudices, and an accurate grasp of the drafting process of some key pieces of legislation (*e.g.* the Turkestan Statute).[[66]](#endnote-66) A more precise reconstruction of land-tax assessment has also undermined the idea that Russian colonial rule, due to its “progressive” nature, anticipated Soviet land reform by “giving land to those who tilled it” with no regard for pre-colonial land titles.[[67]](#endnote-67)

Other important achievements have been a more granular understanding of the workings of colonial (and, to some extent, Soviet) bureaucracy and decision-making, including on topics such as land organisation, resettlement, and agriculture. Rather than talking generically about “Russia”, for instance, one is now aware of profound divisions between interest groups (*e.g.* the colonial administration *vs.* the GUZiZ) or even between individuals (*e.g.* von Kaufman *vs.* Cherniaev). Even more important, the post-colonial approach mentioned above, the greater availability of grass-root documents (in Russian or in vernacular languages), and a distinctive preference for micro-historical or ‘village’ studies have cast new light on the economic agency of Central Asians themselves, *e.g.* in their dealing with the institutional change brought about by the empire,[[68]](#endnote-68) or engaging with legal pluralism.[[69]](#endnote-69) In this respect, recent years have been characterized by the cross-pollination between anthropology and history.[[70]](#endnote-70) Finally, one notices a growing tendency of historians of Central Asia to compare the region to other colonial peripheries (before 1917)[[71]](#endnote-71) or to other experiments in “authoritarian modernization” (after 1917),[[72]](#endnote-72) although policies on agriculture and resources are not the main focus. Knowledge of these other contexts (often unreciprocated) is possibly the most durable effect of the opening of Central Asian history to post-colonial research agendas.

Among the open questions that polarize historians of the region nowadays, most concern intellectual, religious, and political history. As far as land and water are concerned, one may venture to say that controversy exists about the interpretation of Krivoshein’s plan for the “New Turkestan”: between resettlement and cotton, what was more closely related to the third element – new irrigation? Partly related to this is the controversy over the relative importance of Russian irrigation plans.[[73]](#endnote-73) Finally, historians do not agree on the interpretation of the 1916 new “water law” for Turkestan: in establishing the state’s “supreme dominion” on this resource, whose interests was it fostering? Were the interests of the local population and their customary rights protected, as recently claimed?[[74]](#endnote-74)

**Primary sources**

A study of land rights and land relations in Central Asia should include both primary sources produced by the Russian colonial bureaucracy and by the imperial government, and sources that result from transactions (contracts) and litigations between natives themselves.[[75]](#endnote-75) Petitions (which are situated between the two) must be read bearing in mind that they were a tool for local politics. Materials produced by the offices of the Turkestan general-governorship (*e.g.* its chancellery, the Turkestan treasury, etc.), together with those of colonial institutions for all provinces (apart from Semirechie) down to the district (*uezd*) level, the proceedings of the Russian and native courts, the papers of the local offices of the GUZiZ and Resettlement Administration, of some merchant houses, etc. are all to be found in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan (TsGARUz). The exception are a few residual district-level materials from Khojent (now in Dushanbe), Osh and Djalalabad (in Bishkek), and Syr-Darya districts other than Tashkent (in Almaty). They make up all the archival series starting with “I” (*e.g.* I-1 is the chancellery, I-18 is the military government Samarkand province, etc.). Unfortunately the cadastral maps from the Tsarist period were used for Soviet-era expropriations and have not yet been located. The archive retains records of land-tax payments down to the village level, plus a handful of *āqsaqāl* ledgers. Useful materials are also to be found in regional museums.[[76]](#endnote-76) Very few (if any) colonial-era documents are kept in Uzbekistani provincial archives. TsGARUz holds documents from republican- and regional-level (*i.e.* Central Asia) Soviet institutions. Only rarely does one find province-, district-, or *rayon*-level documents, which are kept in the local archives. Party documents are available down to the provincial level (at least in part) as carbon-copies sent to the PCUS Central Committee’s Central Asian Bureau (*fond* 62, Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History (RGASPI), Moscow). Some holdings of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) are of interest for the period up until the national delimitation, when the Turkestan republic was part of Soviet Russia. One must note that there was no all-Union people’s commissariat for agriculture before collectivisation.

Tsarist-era documents for Semirechie are to be found in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Almaty and, to a more limited extent, in the Central State Archive of the Kyrgyzstan Republic in Bishkek. As for materials from the steppe, most of them have been moved to the same archive in Almaty. The State archives in Omsk, Orenburg, and Astrakhan (esp. for the Kazakhs of the Inner Horde) – all of them in the Russian Federation - retain documents produced up until the 1820s and some from the later period. Provincial archives in Kazakhstan mainly house documents from the Soviet period, although select earlier documents are also present (*e.g.* ‘metrical books’ in Ural’sk). Because the Kirgiz (then Kazakh) republic was part of the RSFSR until 1936, GARF holds useful materials, *e.g.* on the land-and-water reform of 1921-1922. This is still truer for the Kyrgyz autonomous province (then republic).

While the holdings of archives in Turkmenistan remain largely unexplored, historians interested in the history of colonial Transcaspia can work in Tbilisi, from where the province was administered between 1871 and 1881.

A visit to St. Petersburg’s Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) allows access to the papers of Krivoshein’s GUZiZ, the Resettlement Administration, and related agencies (*e.g.* forestry, entomology). Materials from the ministries of finance, justice, and industries and trade sometimes contain discussions about the state of Central Asian agriculture (especially the cotton sector) and the interpretation of legal provisions (*e.g.* the Turkestan or Steppe statutes) in specific cases. Finally, RGIA holds a collection of the “general reports” (*vsepoddanneishie otchety*) by provincial military governors to the Tsar, often including the sovereign’s *marginalia*. The inventories of RGIA’s holdings are generally accessible online; the archive has an efficiently organized –but inevitably not comprehensive- card catalogue. The Russian State Military Historical Archives’s documents from the war ministry and the military hierarchy may also be of some interest for land and water history.

As far as printed sources are concerned, a good starting point for the history of land use among the Kazakhs in the late 19th-early 20th c. are the published materials of the Shcherbina commission, which include both statistical tables and thematic essays. Consisting of twelve volumes printed between 1898 and 1909, *Materialy po kirgizskomu zemlepol’zovaniu* is the most complete and systematic source of quantitative information on the economic life, tribal structure, demography, and land usage of the Kazakhs in this period, on which both Soviet and contemporary historians still rely. Many volumes, together with other assorted publications by the Resettlement Administration, are available online through *Kazneb* (see below). For Turkestan, published sources include the relevant volumes (*e.g.* taxation, land assessment, irrigation, etc.) of Pahlen’s report and its statistical appendix.[[77]](#endnote-77) The materials at the basis of this work are kept at RGIA. Statistical materials - including data on land usage, agriculture, population, and prices – were published at the provincial level in various forms, *e.g.* the series *Spravochnaia knizhka Samarkandskoi oblasti*, *Sbornik materialov Syrdar’inskoi oblasti*, *Materialy dlia statisticheskogo opisania Ferganskoi oblasti* etc. Prices and information on the markets for livestock and agricultural produce for the late colonial period, together with essays on cultivars, technology, and the rural economy are in the specialized journal *Turkestanskoe sel’skoe khoziaistvo*, aimed mainly (though not only) at a Russophone audience.

**Links to digital materials**

* [*Zerrspiegel*](http://zerrspiegel.orientphil.uni-halle.de/)
* [RIFIAS digital library](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cbpenati%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CTemp%5C%E2%80%A2%09http%3A%5Cwww.letrs.indiana.edu%5Ccgi%5Cb%5Cbib%5Cbib-idx%3Fc%3Drifiascaa%3Bg%3Drifias%3Bcc%3Drifiascaa%3Bsid%3Ddc33e78c387f6e5b01e436e7e527780e%3Bpage%3Dindex)
* [*Vstrechi na granitsakh*](http://www.lib.okno.ru/RKP/katalog/index.htm)
* [KazNEB](http://kazneb.kz/)
* [Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan](http://www.cga.kz/)
* [Russian State Historical Archive](http://www.fgurgia.ru/#!)
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22. Penati, ‘The Cotton Boom’. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
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