

## SOVIET LAND REFORM AND ITS IMPACT ON INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE IRTYSH REGION (1920–1940)

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**Annotation.** This article examines the land disputes and their impact on interethnic relations in the Irtysh region during the 1920s–1940s, based on archival sources. The main objective is to analyze the specific features of land conflicts, their influence on interethnic interactions, and the role of state policy in this process. The study identifies the key socio-economic and political factors that triggered tensions among various ethnic groups and investigates the role of local authorities and public institutions in resolving these disputes.

The research relies on archival materials from the Presidential Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Central State Archive, introducing previously unused data into scientific circulation. Special attention is paid to the consequences of collectivization, resettlement policies, and changes in land legislation. The establishment of the All-Union Resettlement Committee in 1926 turned the Irtysh region into one of the main targets for “surplus land resources,” which led to numerous conflicts among Kazakhs, Russians, Ukrainians, Cossacks, and other communities living in the region.

The use of archival documents allowed for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of these conflicts, highlighting the decisive role of economic, social, and cultural factors in shaping interethnic relations and assessing the effectiveness of state and local responses to land disputes.

**Key words:** land and water reform, national-territorial autonomies, agrarian policy, modernization, resettlement policy, Soviet government, Bolsheviks, land management, Kazakh ASSR.

### Introduction

Land has historically served as the foundation of agricultural productivity, economic stability, and social cohesion within states. In the context of the Irtysh region, land distribution and access to land resources played a decisive role in shaping not only the material well-being of different ethnic groups but also the overall dynamics of interethnic relations. Land disputes, when unresolved, frequently gave rise to social tensions, economic decline, and the intensification of ethnic conflicts. Therefore, understanding the roots and outcomes of such disputes is essential for analyzing the ways in which land management policies contributed to or hindered socio-economic development and interethnic harmony.

The Irtysh region, encompassing today’s Abai, East Kazakhstan, and Pavlodar regions, occupies a strategically important position in the history of Kazakhstan. During the 1920s–1940s, this area became a focal point of agrarian reforms, collectivization campaigns, and mass resettlement programs initiated by the Soviet state. The establishment of the All-Union Resettlement Committee in 1926 marked a turning point, as the region was increasingly regarded as a reservoir of so-called

“surplus land resources.” This policy inevitably affected the indigenous Kazakh population, as well as Russian, Ukrainian, Cossack, and other ethnic groups inhabiting the area, often creating fertile ground for disputes, grievances, and interethnic clashes.

The study of this period is particularly relevant today, as many post-Soviet states continue to experience territorial disputes and conflicts over resource distribution, especially in ethnically diverse regions. The historical experience of the Irtysh region thus provides valuable examples of both constructive and destructive strategies of conflict resolution, offering lessons for contemporary approaches to governance, land reform, and interethnic cooperation.

Moreover, the reliance on archival documents introduces new empirical evidence into academic discourse, expanding the historiography of land relations and interethnic dynamics in Kazakhstan. These materials shed light on issues that were previously underrepresented in scholarship, helping to uncover the multi-layered, complex, and sometimes contradictory nature of interethnic relations in the early Soviet period. The inclusion of such data not only deepens our understanding of local experiences but also highlights the interplay between state policies, local authorities, and community-level responses.

The main purpose of this article is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of archival sources concerning land disputes and their implications for interethnic relations in the Irtysh region between 1920 and 1940. The key objectives are to examine the political and socio-economic conditions that led to the emergence and escalation of conflicts, to evaluate their impact on ethnic interactions, and to assess the long-term consequences of these processes for the historical development of the region.

## **Materials and methods**

The primary sources for this study are archival documents relating to land reforms, interethnic relations, and socio-economic changes in the Irtysh region during the Soviet period. The most valuable materials were obtained from the Presidential Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which contain extensive collections of reports, resolutions, meeting protocols, projects, and plans on land distribution, as well as records of district and departmental committees.

Archival sources were systematically examined and categorized into several groups:

1. Political and legal documents – decrees, orders, and instructions on land reforms, along with decisions of local authorities;
2. Social data – petitions, letters of complaint, and appeals from local residents, which reflect the attitudes and grievances of the population;
3. Statistical materials – census data, demographic changes, migration flows, and ethnic composition;
4. Economic reports – information on land resources, agricultural output, and structural changes in farming practices.

This combination of sources made it possible to construct a comprehensive picture of the processes taking place in the Irtysh region. The diversity of archival materials

provided insight into the social realities of the time, the origins of ethnic tensions, and the dynamics of land disputes.

Particularly important were the records from Fund 141 of the Presidential Archive and Fund 74 of the Central State Archive. These contain protocols of the RCP(b) Semipalatinsk Provincial Committee bureau and plenums, reports from district committees, and documents of closed sessions. They reveal the decision-making mechanisms of the period, the actions of local authorities, and the political and socio-economic consequences of land disputes, while also highlighting their impact on interethnic relations.

Methodologically, the research employed a range of general historical approaches, including comparative-historical analysis, which helped to trace the chronological development, logical connections, quantitative indicators, and qualitative features of land relations in the Irtysh region between 1920 and 1940. In addition, content analysis was applied to the letters and petitions of local residents, identifying recurring themes, emotional tones, and perceptions of authority. A systematic approach was used to understand the interconnection between political, social, and economic changes in the region.

The study was guided by the principles of historicism, objectivity, and academic integrity. Historicism ensured that materials were presented in chronological order, objectivity was achieved through the direct use of archival documents, and academic integrity required that data be analyzed without distortion.

Furthermore, comparative insights from other regions of Kazakhstan and the Soviet Union were considered, which allowed for a broader assessment of the specific features of the Irtysh region. This approach not only described the archival evidence but also systematized it, identified key factors, and revealed the historical patterns underlying land disputes and interethnic relations.

During the 1920s, most researchers provided a rather one-sided assessment of the Soviet government's land policies. The land and water reform of 1921–1922 was interpreted not as a measure addressing national interests, but primarily in terms of class struggle and political efficiency. For instance, Slastukhin, in his article “The Socialist Transformation of the Kazakh Nomadic Village”, argued that the redistribution of hayfields and arable lands contributed to the emergence of class differentiation in the village, struck a blow at patriarchal and tribal traditions, and facilitated the centralization of rural life (Slastukhin, 1933: 35). Such views were in line with the ideological orientation of the time, emphasizing the “successes” of Soviet modernization.

From the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s, studies on land issues became relatively scarce. Scholarship of this period tended to remain within the framework of official ideology, with limited critical analysis. However, some works offered more nuanced perspectives. M. Kim, for example, revealed the essence of the Provisional Government's land policy, describing it as a direct continuation of Tsarist colonization strategies. At the same time, he noted that the Soviet agricultural measures of the early 1920s failed to resolve the deep-rooted problems of the region (Kim, 1947: 105). G.F. Dakhshleyger shared a similar view in his work “Socio-economic Transformations in

the Kazakh Village and Countryside (1921–1929)”, concluding that the 1921–1922 land and water reform did not fundamentally change the land system in Kazakh villages (Dakhshleyger, 1965: 171).

Nevertheless, not all researchers agreed with this critical stance. B. Semevsky, in his study “The Economy of the Nomadic Household of Kazakhstan at the Beginning of the Reconstructive Period”, emphasized the positive impact of the land reform. According to him, the redistribution of arable and hay lands in 1921–1922 stimulated the development of agriculture among Kazakhs and promoted the spread of settled farming practices (Semevsky, 1941: 98). This interpretation aligned with the broader Soviet historiographical tradition of presenting reforms as instruments of progress.

A new stage in the historiography emerged from the mid-1950s to the 1980s, characterized by both qualitative and quantitative shifts in the study of rural history. Scholars began to approach the Soviet land policies with more varied perspectives. For instance, A. Chupekhov analyzed the early Soviet agrarian decrees such as the “Decree on Land”, the “Decree on the Socialization of Land”, and the “Decree on Socialist Land Management”. He concluded that these measures had little effect on the traditional land-use practices of the Kazakh population (Chupekhov, 1961: 113).

By the late Soviet period, new methodological approaches emerged, offering a broader analysis of Kazakhstan’s traditional structures and their transformation. J.B. Abylkhozhin’s seminal work “The Traditional Structure of Kazakhstan: Socio-economic Aspects of Functioning and Transformation (1920-1930s)” examined the economic functioning of traditional institutions while highlighting the specific features of land use. His analysis of the 1926–1927 redistribution of hayfields and arable lands provided a fresh perspective on the outcomes of Soviet agrarian reforms (Abylkhozhin, 1991). This contribution was particularly significant for its methodological innovation and its attempt to move beyond ideological interpretations.

Thus, the evolution of historiography on land reforms in the Irtysh region demonstrates a clear transition: from the ideologically determined assessments of the 1920s, through the cautious and limited analyses of the mid-20th century, to more critical and multi-dimensional evaluations in the later decades. The diversity of scholarly interpretations underscores the complexity of land relations in Kazakhstan, showing how reforms shaped not only economic life but also interethnic relations and social structures.

The issue of Soviet land policies in Kazakhstan has also been reflected in foreign historiography. One of the most significant contributions is the seminal study by Harvard University professor Terry Martin, who provides evidence of interethnic conflicts that emerged during the early 1920s land reforms in Kazakhstan (Martin, 2011). Similarly, the research of S. Cameron, while primarily focusing on the famine, also analyzes the broader consequences of agrarian colonization and its impact on Kazakh society (Cameron, 2020).

Kazakhstani scholars have also made important contributions to the study of land norms and regulations. In their joint article, U.Sh. Ismagulov and D.M. Ismagulova examine the mechanisms of establishing land quotas, the particularities of their formation, and the procedures for identifying land reserves, using previously unexplored archival sources (Ismagulov, Ismagulova, 2022).

At the regional level, valuable data regarding the Irtysh area can be found in the works of many local researchers. For instance, K.K. Baysarina, in her textbook “The History and Lessons of Collectivization in East Kazakhstan”, describes the socio-political context of the 1920s-1930s and highlights the problems of confiscation and land redistribution during forced collectivization (Baysarina, 2014). In another study, “The Famine in the Semey Region and Its Consequences (1931-1933)”, she emphasizes that one of the main causes of the famine was the ineffective agrarian reforms carried out by the Soviet authorities, and she provides a detailed account of their consequences for the Semey region (Baysarina, 2021).

In his dissertation, G. Khalidullin offers a general overview of Soviet agrarian policy in Kazakhstan between 1917 and 1940, analyzing its institutional and social dimensions (Khalidullin, 2001). Meanwhile, the doctoral research of R.Zh. Ekibayev sheds light on the socio-political life of the Irtysh region in the 1920s–1930s, alongside the region’s broader economic development and demographic conditions (Ekibayev, 2010).

The articles of A.S. Adilbayeva and T.U. Zhakypova provide a thorough examination of demographic changes in East Kazakhstan, which were the result of forced resettlement, confiscation, and land redistribution under collectivization policies (Adilbayeva, Zhakypova, 2022). Similarly, the study “Confiscation of Wealthy Farms as a Component of Collectivization Policy in the 1920s–1930s (on the Example of East Kazakhstan)” by B.Zh. Atantayeva and colleagues analyzes the structure of confiscation campaigns targeting wealthy households, as well as the socio-economic conditions of those dispossessed (Atantayeva, Akhmetova, 2021).

Finally, in their article “The Historical Memory on Modernization of the Kazakh Aul in Soviet Narratives”, A.S. Zhanbosinova and co-authors reflect on how Soviet land reforms, under the guise of modernization, fundamentally transformed the everyday life of Kazakh nomads, leaving a lasting mark on cultural memory (Zhanbosinova, 2020).

Overall, both domestic and foreign historiography highlight the diversity of interpretations surrounding Soviet land policies. While some scholars emphasize the modernizing or developmental aspects of the reforms, others focus on their destructive consequences for traditional Kazakh society, economic stability, and interethnic relations. This broad range of perspectives underscores the importance of analyzing archival data in order to gain a more objective and multifaceted understanding of the Irtysh region’s historical experience.

## **Results**

The early decades of the twentieth century represented a period of profound transformation in land relations across the Soviet Union. In the Irtysh region, where the interests of sedentary Russian settlers and nomadic Kazakhs intersected, land disputes became particularly acute. These conflicts were rooted in the legacy of pre-revolutionary colonization, shifts in Soviet land policy, and the persistence of traditional pastoral economies.

Tsarist colonization had already laid the groundwork for future tensions by redistributing fertile lands, including pastures, hayfields, and arable plots, in favor of

settlers from central Russia. Archival records confirm that indigenous populations were deprived of their best resources: “The seizure of fertile hayfields and the best wintering areas led to the collapse of Kazakh animal husbandry” (F.141. Op.1. D.742 L. 17). Such policies created the structural basis for long-term interethnic conflicts.

After the 1917 Revolution, the new Soviet government proclaimed equal rights to land and the elimination of non-labor landholding. According to the decrees of the Central Executive Committee of the Kazakh ASSR in 1923-1924, land redistribution prioritized the indigenous Kazakh population, who had suffered most under Tsarist rule. However, archival evidence demonstrates that these reforms faced resistance from Russian settlers. For example, in Pavlodar district local Russians declared: “We, Russians, shed our blood for the Revolution, but under Soviet power we have become stepchildren, since the best lands have been given to the Kazakhs” (F.141. Op.1. D.757. L. 374). This statement highlights the deepening of social and national tensions in the region.

Land relations in the Kazakh ASSR thus emerged as a continuation of unfinished processes of colonization and sedentarization inherited from the imperial period. The decline of nomadic livestock breeding and the forced transition to sedentary farming reflected both the structural crisis of the traditional economy and the pressures of Soviet modernization. Several key features of land relations during this period can be identified:

1. The complexity of interethnic land-use relations, with conflicts between different economic systems (nomadic pastoralism versus extensive agriculture);
2. The persistence of traditional Kazakh practices of free land appropriation, which contributed to inequality in land use and frequent disputes;
3. The decline of pastoral nomadism and the crisis of extensive farming, which destabilized land-use patterns among different ethnic groups.

As a result, large-scale voluntary internal migrations occurred within the Kazakh ASSR, leading to chaotic and often exploitative patterns of land use (F.141. Op.1. D.742. L.13). These tensions and instabilities hindered the development of Kazakhstan’s agricultural productive forces.

Officially, the Soviet government declared land to be state property to be redistributed among the working peasantry. Party documents emphasized: “The Soviet government resolves the land issue in Kazakhstan primarily in the interests of the Kazakh people, who had long suffered under Tsarist oppression and had never received a fair settlement of the land question. The priority task is to fully and obligatorily settle the Kazakh working population on land according to their economic needs.” (F.141. Op.1. D.742. L.14). At the same time, the government promised that this would not diminish the rights of other ethnic groups, stating that all minorities engaged in agriculture would also receive land under Soviet legislation.

In practice, however, the land settlement campaign often provoked misunderstandings and strong resistance among non-Kazakh settlers, especially Russians and Ukrainians. Instead of reducing conflict, the reforms frequently intensified ethnic divisions and social dissatisfaction. The uneven development of agricultural systems, differences in technical levels, and the impact of internal resettlement led to the emergence of varying norms and sequences in land allocation.

The Soviet Party's practical tasks regarding the land question were directly connected with the necessity of eliminating the disorder and disorganization that had remained from Tsarist colonial land-use practices.

These tasks were defined in three main directions:

1. Regulating land relations among different national groups;
2. Resolving contradictions between different types and systems of farming;
3. Implementing the principles of labor-based land use among the Kazakh population.

Without addressing these issues, it was impossible to ensure stable land use, especially given the disparities in the productive forces of agriculture. To meet these challenges, decrees of the Central Executive Committee on May 10, 1923, and April 17, 1924, initiated the organization of land settlement processes for semi-nomadic and nomadic (sedentary) populations (F.141. O.1. D.742. L.15).

The regulation of interethnic land relations was based on the following provisions:

1. To suspend the influx of unauthorized settlers into the Kazakh ASSR until the completion of the mass land settlement campaign;
2. To declare all lands in continuous settlement areas — including unoccupied plots granted during the Tsarist and Soviet periods, the lands occupied by Cossacks, and available state lands — as part of the Kazakh land settlement fund (F.14. Op.1. D.742. L. 15).

To ensure fair land distribution, a strict sequence of land settlement was established:

1. First priority was given to the Kazakh population;
2. Second priority went to those who had settled before 1918 and were engaged in agriculture (Russians, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Tatars, and others);
3. Third priority was assigned to settlers who had voluntarily arrived in the Kazakh ASSR before August 31, 1922;
4. Fourth priority included settlers who had arrived between August 31, 1922, and August 7, 1924 (F.141. Op.1. D.742 L.17).

As evident, the prioritization of Kazakhs in land allocation created significant resentment among other ethnic groups. To mitigate potential escalation into land disputes, the Soviet authorities attempted to regulate interethnic land relations through both regular and extraordinary measures.

The regular method involved implementing the planned land settlement program for 1925–1935, during which the majority of land issues were expected to be resolved through inter-village redistribution. The extraordinary method entailed carrying out land redistribution outside the established plan, applied in areas where land disputes and interethnic tensions were most acute — such as the 10-kilometer strip along the Irtysh, Shubar-Bogoslovka, and other localities. These conflicts often stemmed from colonial legacies, population density, and the consequences of land reforms.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the ethnic composition of Kazakhstan played a significant role in shaping land relations and policies. According to archival records, alongside the indigenous Kazakh population, other ethnic minorities could be divided into two major groups:

1. Russians, Russian Cossacks, Ukrainians, Germans, and Tatars;
2. Uzbeks, Dungans, Taranchis, Kashgarians, Uighurs, and others.

The first group — European minorities and Tatars — was spread across all regions of Kazakhstan and was considered to have a higher level of cultural development compared to other minority groups. The second group — Eastern minorities (except Tatars) — resided mainly in the south of Kazakhstan (the Karakalpak Autonomous Region, Syr-Darya, and Zhetysu provinces, especially the latter) and was regarded at the time as the most culturally “backward” part of the population (F.141. O.1. D.742. L.137).

One of the main sources of interethnic conflict during the land reform process was the redistribution of land and the accompanying misunderstandings. Many Russian peasants were convinced that the reforms were being conducted unfairly. Archival testimonies provide clear evidence of such dissatisfaction. For example, during a meeting in the village of Irtysh in Pavlodar district, the poor peasant Morozov stated: “We are not satisfied with the land; the best plots have been given to the Kazakhs. The Party should pay attention to this, as the conflict carries political significance.” Another villager, Michnev, argued: “The Kyrgyz/[Kazakhs] must stop raising livestock and be forced into farming. They want to eat bread produced by Russians but do not want to plow the land. We demand equal land distribution with neighboring villages.” Vasilevsky complained: “Why should we remain silent? Russians no longer have pastures, and the land we cultivated was given to the Kyrgyz.” Ishuin added: “We are not the ones stirring ethnic hatred — the blame lies with district and provincial authorities.” (F.141. Op.1. D.757 L. 374).

Similar discontent was voiced in Bukhtarma district, Shyngystau volost, village No. 9, where a poor peasant, Bogomolov, exclaimed: “Damn it! They want to drive us out of the Kyrgyz lands. The Soviet government has turned everything upside down with this land reform.” In another statement, he warned: “The Soviet government is making a huge mistake in land settlement. Look — this year crop areas are reduced, livestock numbers will decline, and soon we will live in poverty like in central Russia.” (F.141. Op.1. D.757. L.374).

Resistance, however, was not limited to poor peasants; wealthy farmers also expressed opposition. In the village of Pechi in the same volost, a prosperous farmer, Berdyugin, declared: “I will no longer engage in farming, I will live only from beekeeping, which is enough for me. The government is wrong to reduce our land.” (F.141. Op.1. D.757. L.374). During another meeting in Pavlodar, the kulak Kurtsov openly threatened local authorities: “If I had been provided with suitable land, I would have paid 110 rubles in taxes to the state, but now this money stays in my pocket. Last year, we here paid 14,000 rubles to the state – even Moscow confirmed this. Yet the local authorities humiliate us, forcing us to beg for land. I will not stop until I go to Moscow and defend my rights.” (F.141 Op.1 D.757 L. 378).

Archival records reveal that Soviet land policy not only intensified class and ethnic contradictions but also undermined faith in the ideals of the Revolution. Many peasants, who had expected a fair redistribution of land, came to realize that their interests were being marginalized. This led to fears of landlessness, with some preparing to migrate elsewhere. For example, in the village of Gorno-Ulbin in Ust-Kamenogorsk district, Alexander Gutov remarked to his fellow villagers: “It is clear that in the end we will scatter in all directions, because after land settlement nothing



will remain for us to survive on.” In the village of Sogornoye in Katon-Karagai volost, Bukhtarma district, the poor peasant Selyutin Ivan complained: “In the Revolution, Russians won, but the land was given to the Kyrgyz \[Kazakhs].” The wealthier villager Digilev confirmed this statement, adding: “Yes, this will lead Russians to leave Kyrgyz lands of their own accord.” The assembled peasants agreed with him (F.141 Op.1 D.757. L.374).

Similar sentiments appeared in Pavlodar district. At a meeting in the village of Irtysh, a poor peasant named Kondrotenko declared: “We, Russians, shed blood for the Revolution and for freedom. We liberated the Kyrgyz from centuries of oppression. Yet the best lands went to them. If you refuse to give us land, then transfer us to Omsk district,” — a proposal supported by the other poor peasants present. In Sogornoye, Katon-Karagai volost, archival evidence notes that many villagers, deprived of their former plots, began preparing to move elsewhere. One resident, Prirodkin N. (poor), told Voinov Ivan (poor): “We and eight other families will move to the Far East, because life there will be somewhat freer.” (F.141 Op.1 D.757. L. 376).

For Russian peasants, Soviet land policy came to be perceived as both unjust and ineffective. Rather than resolving contradictions, it deepened social tensions, encouraged migration, and contributed to the dissolution of rural communities. A middle peasant, Serebrennikov, from the village of Chernovoye in Katon-Karagai volost, stated: “After land settlement, we will end up with even less land than before. The best plots will go to the Kazakhs, who will not even plow them, and we will have to rent from them.” (F.141 Op.1 D.757 L.376).

In the village of Pechi, a representative of the middle peasants, Konovalov, argued: “The state is wasting money on land settlement. They are taking our surplus lands and giving them to the Kazakhs, but the Kazakhs will abandon them, and the land will remain unused.” (F.141 Op.1 D.757. L. 378). At another meeting in Pavlodar, Fedul Dyukarev, a former merchant, angrily declared: “Does the inscription on the Red Banner — ‘Land to those who cultivate it’ — have any legal force? The provincial land administration has trampled this slogan underfoot by giving land not to those who worked it for 30 years, but to those who never labored (the Kazakhs). Now we are being forced to move elsewhere.” (F.141 Op.1 D.757. L. 378).

In many parts of the Irtysh region, Russian peasants openly resisted the redistribution of land to Kazakhs, refusing to surrender their plots and even expressing readiness to fight for them. Poor peasants, former Red partisans, and even members of local agricultural committees rejected what they saw as illegitimate interference in their property. In Mariinskoye village, Ulan volost, Ust-Kamenogorsk district, during discussions on allocating land to the landless, Fedor Bugan exclaimed: “The Soviet authorities have no right to decide on giving land to the poor. If they try to take land from me, I will not give it up, even if I have to kill. I have been imprisoned before, and I will go again if necessary, but I will not allow it.” (F.141 Op.1 D.757. L. 375).

These testimonies highlight how Soviet land reforms eroded the trust of Russian peasants in the state, fueling hostility, resistance, and readiness to migrate or even to engage in violent defense of their land. Instead of uniting rural communities under revolutionary ideals, the policies deepened divisions and turned land into a source of confrontation. During the land settlement campaign, many peasants viewed the

resettlement of Kazakhs with suspicion and even fear. For instance, in Katon-Karagai volost, 36 households were supposed to be resettled according to the plan. Only one of them was wealthy, while the rest were poor, and they refused to move, citing lack of financial resources. This sparked resentment. The poor peasant Proskuryakov declared: "These are not land surveyors, but destroyers of Soviet power. If war begins, we will show the Kyrgyz/[Kazakhs]." Similarly, the poor peasant Teterin stated: "I do not understand why they are giving land to the Kyrgyz. They will not cultivate it anyway, it will just remain idle." (F.141 Op.1 D.757. L. 375).

Another source of hostility was the damage caused by Kazakh livestock to Russian peasants' hayfields and crops. Archival evidence from Katon-Karagai shows that Kazakhs drove their herds into village meadows, trampling the harvest of Russian peasants: poor peasants Nikishin Alexei and Panteleev Andrei lost 10 cartloads of hay, while the middle peasant Krasikov Filipp lost about 5 cartloads (F.141 Op.1 D.754. L. 52).

One major reason local peasants failed to understand why priority was given to Kazakhs in Soviet land policy was their widespread belief that Kazakhstan's territory was not historically Kazakh land. At one meeting, comrade Girichev argued: "Who here are the so-called indigenous people, and why are the rest called newcomers? In 1854 the government issued a decree to settle this region. People were sent here by lot to occupy the empty lands. Three hundred years ago, the Chinese lived here, followed by the Kalmyks. Later the Kyrgyz came, but they were plundered by Kalmyks and Uzbeks. The Kyrgyz accepted Russian rule. The Russians began to farm and built canals. The Kyrgyz, too, are newcomers here. Before the Revolution people were wiser and lived peacefully. Now people are divided. Land should be given only to those who work it. By law, collectives and communes are to be given preference, but here the land is being given to the Kyrgyz instead." (F.141 Op.1 D.754. L:52). This statement illustrates the refusal among some settlers to recognize Kazakhs as rightful landowners.

The escalation of interethnic tensions was also fueled by the direct involvement of local Soviet officials. Instead of resolving disputes fairly, representatives of the lower-level Soviet apparatus often sided with particular ethnic or social groups, further aggravating conflicts. Reports from Syr-Darya province, Shymkent district, note that when Russian residents attempted to complain about unlawful actions by Kazakhs, they were met with strong resistance from local council leaders. According to one document: "If you don't like it, you can return to Russia. We will do as we please, because the land and power belong to us." (F.141 Op.1 D.683. L: 29).

Archival evidence also shows that distrust and resentment toward European settlers persisted among the Kazakh population. In some areas, tensions escalated into near-violent conflict. For instance, in the village of Kholmy and the surrounding settlements, the placement of Russian settlers was seen as a clear example of Tsarist colonial policy. According to local peasants, this settlement was located in the very heart of traditional Kazakh lands. Russian settlers, who had previously enjoyed privileges and exploited local Kazakhs, were now forced under Soviet power to relinquish lakes, hayfields, and arable land they had once seized. This loss of privilege fueled hostility between Russians and Kazakhs, while among Kazakhs a form of defensive nationalism against settlers grew stronger (F.141 Op.1 D.683. L:29).

The Semey Provincial Committee of the VKP(b) noted: “There remains among Russians, especially among the Cossacks, a tendency to treat the Kyrgyz \[Kazakhs] as draft animals — to use them for economic needs and, if necessary, to beat them. They are considered unworthy of equal rights with Russians and, more importantly, incapable of governing us.” (F.141 Op.1 D.683. L: 29).

Similar disputes occurred in other areas of Semey province. In Timofeev volost, a major conflict arose between peasants of Varvarinsk village and those of Village No. 2 in Altai-Kurshim volost. In 1923, Varvarinsk peasants requested an additional 40 desyatinas of land, which was granted and paid for. However, the Provincial Land Commission later ruled that the land should be returned to Kazakh use, sparking a major dispute that risked theft and mutual hostility. The case was ultimately referred to Moscow (F.141 Op.1 D.683. L: 30).

Another factor intensifying interethnic relations was livestock theft, which Russian peasants claimed primarily involved Kazakhs. The Blagodarin Village Council, in response to horse thefts, decreed: “Heard: the issue of thefts committed by Kyrgyz in the village. Decided: all Kyrgyz residents of the village must be searched once a week, and those engaged in meat trading should be expelled from the village as suspects.” (F.141 Op.1 D.683. L: 31).

Archival reports also recorded violent incidents. In the village of Nikolskoye, for example: “Two armed Kazakhs attacked a peasant woman, her brother, and her son three kilometers outside the village. They beat them, broke the boy’s head, stole two horses, and fled. In the village of Kendirlik, seven head of livestock belonging to a peasant were stolen. Villagers pursued the thieves for 15–20 kilometers and recovered three head of cattle in a winter hut. The thieves were caught with militia help, but were released a month later.” (F.141 Op.1 D.683. L: 31).

Relations between Kazakhs and Russian Cossacks were even more strained. In the Irtysh region, disputes over land allocation were especially sharp. Cossacks complained: “Land settlement was conducted unfairly — more priority was given to Kazakhs than to Cossacks. We (Russian Cossacks) always pay our taxes, yet our lands are being cut away. Previously, Governor-General Schmidt ordered that 200 desyatinas of Kazakh land be allocated to the Cossacks in Kendirlik. Now these lands are being handed back to the Kyrgyz \[Kazakhs].” (F.141 Op.1 D. 683. L: 31).

Some Cossacks even attempted to appeal directly to Moscow. In Semey province, they declared: “Even if we must reach Kalinin, we will achieve our goal,” and sent delegates to Moscow to demand the restoration of their privileges. Similar developments were noted in Zhetysu province.

Although class-based hostility existed among Cossacks, settlers, and Russian peasants regarding land relations, when the issue of allocating land to Kazakhs arose these groups often expressed a unified position. Archival survey materials from June–July 1925 across 15 volosts of Semey province recorded the following sentiment: “Former settlers and Cossacks believe: we fought with blood to achieve statehood, while they (the Kazakhs) now reap the fruits of what we achieved with our hands.” (F.141 Op.1 D.683. L: 33).

Disputes also arose over land along the left bank of the Ural River, which Cossacks demanded be returned to them. In this context, Cossacks voiced resentment against the

formation of national units: “The land was taken away and given to the Kazakhs, but it is we and our children who serve!” (Chernyavskiy village). Similarly, in Lebyazhye village: “We pay the same taxes, even more, but it is we and our brothers and sons who perform the service.” These grievances grew into fear that Kazakhs could eventually turn against them: “They (the Kazakhs) might one day fight us and drive us out!” (F.141 Op.1 D.683. L: 33).

In nearly every discussion, the land issue remained central. Archival notes stress: “Land settlement was not conducted properly. Compared to Kazakhs, the Cossacks have far more grievances.” This became a foundation for growing ethnic hostility. Outwardly, Cossacks appeared to maintain cooperative relations with Kazakhs, but in reality this was driven by necessity — they often had to rent land, buy hay, or acquire livestock from Kazakh villages. At the same time, there was an underlying fear expressed as: “We live in the USSR, after all.”

Semey province research materials also highlight that the Cossacks represented one of the most literate layers of the Russian population: many had secondary or even higher education, and in some villages the percentage of illiterate men was virtually zero (F.141 Op.1 D.683. L:43). This relative literacy and organization partly explain why Cossacks were so active in defending their rights regarding land.

In Lebyazhye village, for example, even after land settlement had formally been completed, the Cossacks collectively protested: “We continue to pay taxes, but our lands are being cut, we have no arable fields at all, and most of our hay must be bought from nearby Kazakh villages. We also have no access to irrigation.” Their discontent escalated into political mobilization: without notifying authorities, they convened a community assembly that demanded a district-level congress on land issues.

Representatives were dispatched to neighboring volosts to rally support. The matter was then taken to the volost executive committee, where demands were made for an extraordinary volost congress. Ultimately, a resolution was passed calling for a full uyezd congress, since, as they declared, “the entire Irtysh region feels aggrieved.” At a meeting of the volost executive committee on June 15, 1925, they stated: “We will reach Kalinin himself if necessary, and we will achieve our goal.” To support the delegates’ journey, 130 rubles were collected in Lebyazhye village (F.141 Op.1. D.683. L: 42).

## **Conclusion**

The interethnic relations and land settlement processes in the Irtysh region between 1920 and 1940 clearly demonstrate the contradictory nature of Soviet agrarian reforms. On the one hand, these policies sought to eliminate the heavy legacy of Tsarist colonization and restore the rights of the indigenous Kazakh population. On the other hand, they generated new tensions, exacerbated social instability, and revealed the limitations of Soviet modernization in achieving fairness and cohesion. Archival evidence shows that giving priority to Kazakhs in land allocation was officially framed as a step toward historical justice, yet in practice it provoked strong resentment among settlers, Russian peasants, and Cossacks. Mismanagement of redistribution, unequal allocation of resources, the failure of local Soviet institutions to remain neutral, and

decisions that undermined the economic interests of certain groups all intensified distrust and fueled open conflict.

Traditional Kazakh nomadic pastoralism collapsed under the pressures of sedentarization and collectivization, fundamentally altering the socio-economic fabric of Kazakh society. At the same time, Russian peasants and Cossack communities faced a deepening sense of land scarcity and injustice, which spurred them to organized resistance. Appeals to Moscow, the dispatch of delegates, and demands for extraordinary congresses reveal that land disputes were not confined to the local level but had escalated into province-wide and central political issues.

Interethnic tensions were further aggravated by disputes over pasture and arable lands, livestock theft, and inequitable resource distribution. In some cases, peasants openly declared their willingness to resist by force, reflecting a profound gap between Soviet slogans and actual practice. This demonstrates that land reform, far from resolving contradictions, often became a direct cause of social fragmentation and violent confrontation. The Cossacks' relatively high levels of literacy and organizational strength made them particularly active in defending their perceived rights. They positioned themselves as significant actors in the political process, lobbying provincial and central authorities. Among Kazakhs, defensive nationalism also grew stronger, fueling mistrust and complicating relations further.

Ultimately, the main contradiction of Soviet land policy in the Irtysh region was its dual outcome: while seeking to restore the rights of one ethnic group, it simultaneously alienated others, threatening social cohesion and stability. The historical experience of the Irtysh region offers important lessons for the present. It underscores the necessity of fairness, transparency, and equality in managing land and resources. Land disputes influence not only economic development but also political stability and national unity. For any state, ensuring justice and inclusivity in land policy remains a fundamental condition for long-term sustainable development and social harmony.

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### **Кеңестік жер реформасы және оның 1920–1940 жылдардағы Ертіс өңіріндегі ұлтаралық қатынастарға әсері**

**Аннотация.** Бұл мақалада 1920-1940 жылдардағы Прииртыш өңіріндегі жер даулары және олардың ұлтаралық қатынастарға әсері мұрағаттық деректер негізінде қарастырылады. Зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты – жер дауларының ерекшеліктерін, олардың этносаралық өзара әрекеттестіктерге ықпалын және бұл үдерістегі мемлекеттік саясаттың рөлін талдау. Зерттеу барысында әртүрлі этностар арасында шиеленіс тудырған негізгі әлеуметтік-экономикалық және саяси факторлар анықталып, жер дауларын реттеудегі жергілікті билік пен қоғамдық институттардың рөлі қарастырылады.

Зерттеу Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің архивы мен Орталық мемлекеттік архив материалдарына сүйеніп, ғылыми айналымға бұрын қолданылмаған деректерді енгізеді. Арнайы назар ұжымдастырудың, қоныстандыру саясатының және жер заңнамасындағы өзгерістердің салдарына аударылады. 1926 жылы Бүкілодақтық қоныс аудару комитетінің құрылуы Прииртыш өңірін «артық жер қорларын» пайдалану үшін негізгі нысандардың біріне айналдырды, бұл аймақтағы қазақтар, орыстар, украиндар, казактар және басқа да қауымдастықтар арасында көптеген қақтығыстарға алып келді.

Мұрағаттық құжаттарды пайдалану бұл қақтығыстардың динамикасын тереңірек түсінуге, ұлтаралық қатынастарды қалыптастырудағы экономикалық, әлеуметтік және мәдени факторлардың шешуші рөлін айқындауға, сондай-ақ жер дауларын реттеудегі мемлекеттік және жергілікті шаралардың тиімділігін бағалауға мүмкіндік берді.

**Кілт сөздер:** жер және су реформасы, ұлттық-аумақтық автономиялар, аграрлық саясат, жаңғырту, қоныстандыру саясаты, Кеңес үкіметі, большевиктер, жерге орналастыру, Қазақ АКСР-і.

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### **Советская земельная реформа и её влияние на межэтнические отношения в Прииртышском регионе (1920–1940 гг.)**

**Аннотация.** В данной статье рассматриваются земельные споры и их влияние на межэтнические отношения в Прииртышском регионе в 1920–1940-е годы на основе архивных источников. Основная цель заключается в анализе специфики земельных конфликтов, их влияния на межэтнические взаимодействия, а также роли государственной политики в этом процессе. В исследовании выявляются ключевые социально-экономические и политические

факторы, вызвавшие напряжённость среди различных этнических групп, и исследуется роль местных властей и общественных институтов в урегулировании этих споров.

Исследование опирается на материалы Президентского архива Республики Казахстан и Центрального государственного архива, вводя в научный оборот ранее не использовавшиеся данные. Особое внимание уделяется последствиям коллективизации, переселенческой политики и изменениям в земельном законодательстве. Создание Всесоюзного переселенческого комитета в 1926 году превратило Прииртышский регион в одну из основных целей для использования «избыточных земельных ресурсов», что привело к многочисленным конфликтам между казахами, русскими, украинцами, казаками и другими сообществами, проживавшими в регионе.

Использование архивных документов позволило глубже понять динамику этих конфликтов, подчеркнуть решающую роль экономических, социальных и культурных факторов в формировании межэтнических отношений и оценить эффективность государственных и местных мер по урегулированию земельных споров.

**Ключевые слова:** земельно-водная реформа, национально-территориальные автономии, аграрная политика, модернизация, переселенческая политика, Советское правительство, большевики, землеустройство, Казахская АССР.

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