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Colonial Mediation in the Biographical Discourse of Kazakh Steppe Elites (mid-19th to early 20th Century)

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Abstract. The subject of the author's research is the representation in the discourse of biographies of Kazakh titled nobles of the Russian intelligentsia's ideas about the integration of the indigenous population of Central Asia into the system of social communication on the outskirts of the empire. The imperial power delegated to its experts – public figures, officials, scientists – the right of paternalistic tutelage over the new subjects to form a community of colonial mediators and to fulfil the tasks of empire-building in the situation of ethno-cultural diversity characteristic of the peripheral regions. The aim of the study is to reveal the content of the discourse of personal biographies of representatives of the Kazakh steppe aristocracy, constructed in the memoirs of imperial experts and recording the inclusion of these figures in the process of colonial mediation in the Central Asian regions in the second half of the 19th – early 20th centuries. A discourse on the biographies of Ch. Valikhanov, I.A. Altynsarin, and G.B. Valikhanov as presented in the memoirs of the Russian Federation. Valikhanov in the memoirs of Russian intellectuals, mastered by the methods of metacriticism and deconstruction of texts, made it possible to shift the research 'optics' from the trivial perception of the actors of the Kazakh social movement as foreigners in the service of the Russian Empire to the reception of their complex, often dual identity, which manifested itself on the one hand in the adoption of behavioural conventions of the Russian society, on the other – in the preservation and subsequent strengthening of ethno-cultural features of their own people. In the course of the study of the discourse of biographies, it was established that the phenomenon of colonial mediation was determined by the specifics of the integration of the titled nobility into the administrative, educational and social structures of Russia in the Central Asian region. This process was carried out in accordance with the Eurocentric ideas of the educated circles of the Russian Empire, which were moulded into an understanding of the Asian periphery as 'Russia's own East' and the indigenous population as 'its own foreigners' in relation to whom a model of intellectual and moral guardianship should be implemented. Cultural regeneration by means of Russian education and upbringing had an external effect and created a situation of quasi-comfort for the prominent leaders of the steppe aristocracy. As biographers themselves had to admit in their memoirs, within the line of personal and socio-political biography of prominent Kazakhs, there was a clear tendency to strengthen the national-cultural component of identity, which was expressed in the revision of attitudes and life values formed as a result of Russian influence.

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Keywords: mediation; colonization; nobility; discourse; biographies; identity; intelligentsia; Empire; Asia; “foreigners”

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Феномен колониального посредничества в дискурсе биографий элит Казахской степи второй половины XIX – начале XX вв.

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Аннотация. Предметом исследования авторов является репрезентация в дискурсе биографий казахской титулованной знати представлений российской интеллигенции об интеграции коренного населения Центральной Азии в систему социальной коммуникации на окраинах империи. Имперская власть делегировала своим экспертам – общественным деятелям, чиновникам, учёным – право патерналистской опеки над новыми подданными с целью формирования сообщества колониальных посредников и выполнения задач империостроительства в ситуации этнокультурного разнообразия, характерного для периферийных регионов. Цель исследования заключается в раскрытии содержания дискурса личных биографий представителей казахской степной аристократии, конструируемых в воспоминаниях имперских экспертов и фиксировавших включённость этих фигур в процесс колониального посредничества в центрально-азиатских регионах во второй половине XIX – начале XX вв. Дискурс биографий Ч.Ч. Валиханова, И.А. Алтынсарина, Г.Б. Валиханова в воспоминаниях российских интеллектуалов, осваиваемый методами метакритики и деконструкции текстов, дал возможность переместить исследовательскую «оптику» от тривиального восприятия акторов казахского общественного движения как инородцев на службе Российской империи к рецепции их сложной, часто дуальной идентичности, что проявлялось, с одной стороны, в принятии поведенческих конвенций русского социума, с другой – в сохранении и последующем укреплении этнокультурных признаков собственного народа. В ходе исследования дискурса биографий было установлено, что феномен колониального посредничества определялся спецификой интеграции титулованной знати в административную, образовательную и общественную структуры России в центрально-азиатском регионе. Данный процесс осуществлялся в соответствии с европоцентристскими представлениями образованных кругов Российской империи, которые отливались в понимание азиатской периферии как «собственного Востока России», а коренного населения – как «своих инородцев», по отношению к которым должна реализовываться модель интеллектуальной и моральной опеки. Культуртрегерство средствами русского образования и воспитания влекло за собой внешний эффект и создавало ситуацию квазикомфорта для выдающихся лидеров степной аристократии. Как вынуждены были признать сами биографы в своих воспоминаниях, в рамках линии личной и общественно-политической биографии выдающихся казахов наблюдалась

отчётливая тенденция к усилению национально-культурной компоненты идентичности, что находило выражение в пересмотре сложившихся в результате русского влияния установок и жизненных ценностей.
Ключевые слова: посредничество; колонизация; знать; дискурс; биографии; идентичность; интеллигенция; империя; Азия; «инородцы»

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XIX ғасырдың екінші жартысы – XX ғасырдың басындағы Қазақ даласының элита өмірбаянындағы дискурстың отаршылдық делдалдық феномені

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Аңдатпа. Ресейлік зиялы қауымның Орталық Азияның байырғы тұрғындарын империяның шетіндегі әлеуметтік коммуникация жүйесіне интеграциялау туралы Қазақ атақты дворяндарының өмірбаяндарының дискурстағы өкілдігі автордың зерттеу пәні болып табылады. Империялық билік өзінің сарапшыларына – қоғам қайраткерлеріне, шенеуніктерге, ғалымдарға отаршыл делдалдар қауымдастығын құру және перифериялық аймақтарға тән этномәдени әртүрлілік жағдайында империялық құрылыс міндеттерін орындау мақсатында жаңа субъектілерге патерналистік қамқоршылық құқығын берді. Зерттеудің мақсаты – XIX ғасырдың екінші жартысы мен XX ғасырдың басында Орталық Азия аймақтарындағы отаршылдық делдалдық процесіне осы тұлғалардың енгізілуін тіркеген империялық сарапшылардың естеліктерінде құрылған қазақ дала ақсүйектері өкілдерінің жеке өмірбаяндары дискурсының мазмұнын ашу. Ш.Ш. Уәлиханов, Ы.А.Алтынсарин, Г.Б. Уәлихановтың өмірбаяндарының мета-критика және мәтіндерді деконструкциялау әдістерімен игерілген орыс зиялыларының естеліктеріндегі дискурсы зерттеу «оптикасын» қазақ қоғамдық қозғалысы актерлерінің Ресей империясының қызметіндегі бөтен адамдар ретінде тривиальды қабылдауынан олардың күрделі, жиі дуальды сәйкестігін қабылдауға, орыс қоғамының мінез-құлық конвенцияларын қабылдауға мүмкіндік берді. Бұл бір жағынан Ресей империясының қызметінде көрінді, екінші жағынан-өз халқының этномәдени белгілерін сақтау және кейіннен нығайтуында байқалды. Өмірбаяндар дискурсын зерттеу барысында отаршылдық Медиация феномені Орталық Азия аймағындағы Ресейдің әкімшілік, Білім беру және қоғамдық құрылымдарына титулды дворяндардың интеграциясының ерекшелігімен анықталғаны расталды. Бұл процесс Ресей империясының білімді топтарының еуроцентристік идеяларына сәйкес жүзеге асырылды, олар азиялық перифериияны «Ресейдің өзіндік шығысы», ал байырғы тұрғындарды «өздерінің шетелдіктері» ретінде түсінуге мүмкіндік берді, оларға қатысты зияткерлік және моральдық қамқоршылық моделі жүзеге асырылуы керек. Орыс білімі мен тәрбиесі арқылы мәдениеттану сыртқы әсерге алып келді

және дала ақсүйектерінің көрнекті көшбасшылары үшін квази-жайлылық жағдайын тудырды. Өмірбаяндардың өздері өз естеліктерінде мойындауға мәжбүр болғандай, көрнекті қазақтардың жеке және қоғамдық-саяси өмірбаяны аясында ұлттық-мәдени бірегейлік компоненттерін күшейтудің айқын тенденциясы байқалды, бұл орыс ықпалының нәтижесінде қалыптасқан көзқарастар мен өмірлік құндылықтарды қайта қарауда көрініс тапты.
Түйін сөздер: делдалдық; отарлау; дворяндар; дискурс; өмірбаян; бірегейлік; зиялылар; империя; Азия; «шетелдіктер»

Introduction

The implementation of Russia's imperial projects in Central Asia took various forms, with colonial mediation playing a significant role. This process involved the integration of local representatives, primarily from aristocratic families, into the administrative, socio-economic, and cultural initiatives of the Russian Empire in peripheral regions. It is essential to recognize that knowledge production in these ethnic peripheries was not solely the domain of Russian administrators. The effectiveness of imperial governance, particularly in the early stages of colonization, depended on the ability to establish relationships, negotiate, and make diplomatic concessions.

In its efforts to modernize Central Asia, Russia relied heavily on the support of local elites, who gradually assumed key roles as translators, military personnel, and officials. Unlike ordinary nomadic tribesmen, steppe aristocrats possessed higher levels of education, military training, financial resources, and a broader worldview. These attributes positioned them as intermediaries between the colonial administration and nomadic communities, compelling the imperial bureaucracy to acknowledge them as knowledge bearers – even if their expertise was considered "native" (Sartori, Chablay 2019: 38-39). At the same time, their engagement with the imperial government, participation in the Russian education system, and involvement in secular and military training were counterbalanced by a strong commitment to preserving their national identity.

An appeal to personal biographies and the construction of life trajectories of key figures within national elites in socio-political discourse, in our view, offers valuable insights into the phenomenon of colonial mediation in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – an issue that this study seeks to explore. This approach is productive not only in examining the contributions of aristocratic community leaders to Russian imperial expansion and the factors behind their involvement in administrative and educational initiatives in the empire's eastern peripheries, but also in analyzing how imperial experts perceived this group and how steppe aristocrats constructed their self-identity within the context of cultural exchange. This perspective allows them to be understood as a consolidated community of the national intelligentsia.

Materials and methods

The source base of this article consists of published memoirs of Russian scholars, public figures, and politicians who reflected on their intellectual interactions with the leaders of

the steppe aristocracy over an extended chronological period (including N.M. Yadrintsev, G.N. Potanin, N.I. Ilminsky, N.I. Veselovsky, and others). The identification of key figures in biographies – prominent representatives of the Kazakh intelligentsia – was conducted based on two fundamental principles: first, that the subject of a biographical work is a product of their time, acting in accordance with its norms and rules; and second, that the biographer is also influenced by the conventions of their era, shaping their portrayal through the lens of contemporary institutions.

Adhering to these principles allowed us to shift the analytical focus from the purely event-driven nature of the sources to uncovering the emotional and intellectual dimensions of the biographies of iconic figures in Kazakh society – Ch.Ch. Valikhanov, I.A. Altynsarin, and G.B. Valikhanov. This approach helped clarify the circumstances surrounding their personal development, inner world, and behavioral practices, thereby defining their functional role as colonial intermediaries between imperial structures and ethnic communities in Central Asia during the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Methodologically, this article is positioned at the intersection of modern historical approaches, including new biographical history and new cultural and intellectual histories. This framework necessitated the use of both the biographical method and the method of discourse deconstruction. The biographical method, developed by sociologists and widely applied in contemporary historical source studies (Pavlova 1995; Repina 2010), enabled an in-depth exploration of the "inner world" of biographical subjects. It facilitated the reconstruction of their engagement in historical processes and intellectual exchanges – both within their own group and with representatives of other communities. Additionally, this method allowed for a comparative analysis of perspectives from all "witnesses", who collectively contributed to shaping the biographical narratives of these figures.

The method of discourse deconstruction allowed for an analysis of the biographies of Kazakh intellectuals through the lens of metacriticism (Rusakova 2001: 47). This approach, based on the principle of reading as an experiential process, shifts the research focus from merely reconstructing historical events to assessing various states – personal experiences of the text's authors, the socio-cultural background of the era, and the subjectivity of biographical narrative figures.

Results

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Russia not only firmly pursued the imperial organization of its political and socio-cultural space ¬– implementing practices of domination and coercion over its subjects – but also sought to engage with the intellectual challenges of the Enlightenment, a movement that had unfolded across Western Europe. Within the Russian public sphere, this educational project materialized in the formation of a thinking class – the intelligentsia – which, by the 1830s-1840s, actively participated in the pan-European discourse on civilized and uncivilized peoples. An integral part of this discourse was a distinctly national segment: reflections on Russia's past, present, and future, its place and role in global and European contexts, and the mechanisms of cultural interaction amid the ethnic and religious diversity of territories undergoing internal colonization within the broader imperial framework.

During the era of Catherine II and her successors, a segment of Russia's political elite began

to identify itself as European, a worldview closely tied to the autocratic government's vision of Russia as a colonial empire. Since the formation of the centralized Moscow state, Russian sovereigns and the ruling class had been preoccupied with legitimizing their authority. In this context, the annexation of vast Central Asian territories – strategically positioned within Russia's geopolitical interests – served two key purposes. First, territorial expansion placed the Russian Empire on par with the European colonial powers. Second, the sheer scale of imperial expansion, first under the Moscow sovereigns and later the Russian emperors, provided a level of control over subjects that, to a significant extent, compensated for the autocracy's lack of legitimacy.

Within this framework, Russia – perceived by Western European intellectuals as part of the uncivilized world – sought to bridge this gap by constructing, in V. Tolz's terms, its "own East" (Tolz 2013), the possession of which functioned as a kind of passport to the civilized world. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the Russian Empire's military expansion into Central Asia in the 1860s-1870s, specifically into the Steppe Region and Turkestan, was not a spontaneous endeavor. It required clearly formulated strategies for the administrative governance of newly acquired territories and, more significantly, projects for the cultural integration of the numerically dominant indigenous population into the broader imperial framework.

It should be noted that scenarios and projects for the imperial colonization of the peripheries, particularly Central Asia, were developed and refined within Russian socio-political discourse. This discourse was shaped by Oriental scholars, bureaucrats at various levels, publicists, writers, and other intellectuals. Notably, since the 1840s, Russia's Asian periphery – conceived as an organically connected "own East" – became a central element of these discursive practices. The vision of Russia's role in shaping relations with this region was articulated by the orientalist and government official V.V. Grigoriev, who wrote: "...Can there be on earth a higher, nobler vocation for Russia than to preserve, organize, and enlighten the tribes of Asia… to elevate them, assimilate them, and merge them into one great, holy family?" (Grigoriev 1840: 7-8). As an advocate of orientalist ideology, Grigoriev believed that Russia's future depended on its people as bearers of knowledge who would "teach the rude children of forests and steppes to recognize the benefits of law, to value citizenship above the lures of self-willed freedom" (Grigoriev 1840: 7).

In the 1870s, the confidence of orientalist theorists in the Russian people's civilizing mission in the empire's eastern peripheries, including Central Asia – then at the center of the Russian Empire's colonial expansion – was reinforced by the widespread ideology of the "little motherland" and the theory of "small deeds" in Russian educated society. These concepts became integral to the cultural identity of the advanced nobility, though they remained somewhat incongruous elements within the broader imperial framework. The ideology of the "little motherland," in the context of territorial expansion through colonization, aimed to foster a sense of local territorial and national identity among the populations of remote regions, which was expected to later serve as the foundation of imperial identity. Meanwhile, the theory of "small deeds," which gained traction among the educated elite, promoted active engagement in studying the ethnography, lifestyles, cultural habits, economic structures, and legal systems of the diverse peoples inhabiting the Russian Empire.

Although Russia's political program in Central Asia was broad and largely unformalized, three fundamental principles clearly shaped the logic of its colonization efforts in ethnoregions.

These included: establishing an administrative and political system adapted to local conditions; integrating economic practices with a dominant focus on agriculture, which inherently involved initiating the sedentarization of the nomadic population; and erasing cultural differences to create a "greater Russian nation" through educational policies and economic-cultural management (Katkov 2009). Achieving this set of interrelated objectives in Central Asia required the creation of multiple channels of communication with the large indigenous population. The relationship between imperial authorities and local communities could not rely solely on direct violence and legal restrictions but necessitated more complex mechanisms of interaction and negotiation.

The central figures of this article are prominent military, state, and public figures of the Russian Empire – representatives of the aristocratic communities of the Kazakh Steppe: Chokan Valikhanov (1835-1865), Ibrai Altynsarin (1841-1889), and Gabdulkhai Valikhanov (1842-1903). A unifying characteristic of their identity was their belonging to the privileged stratum of Kazakh society and the emerging national aristocracy, whose formation took place during the 1860s-1870s. This period marked a rapid transformation in the status of the Kazakh Steppe within the Russian Empire, as it was increasingly integrated into the imperial system of governance and control.

Thus, the personal, professional, and socio-cultural identities of these future leaders of the steppe aristocracy were shaped within the context of a new imperial reality, which P. Sartori and P. Shabley define as a frontier space. This frontier status significantly influenced the dynamics between the indigenous population – numerically dominant in the region – and the imperial authorities, as well as the evolving society formed through migration.

It is possible to speak of the emergence of a Europeanized Kazakh intelligentsia that sought the most viable forms of coexistence between Kazakhs and other peoples of the steppe. On the one hand, they recognized the inevitability of imperial dominance over their people; on the other, they aspired to guide them through Russian culture toward the achievements of European civilization. This dual understanding drove the intelligentsia to explore forms of interaction between Kazakh and Russian social spheres that would promote enlightenment while preserving Kazakh cultural identity within the empire. It is important to note that this emerging elite embodied a fusion of traditional worldviews with European education (Mazhitova 2015: 32)

One of the defining characteristics of the socio-cultural landscape in frontier zones, including the Steppe Region, was the active involvement of the Russian central and regional intelligentsia in the imperial government's population policies. Orientalists, public figures, writers, publicists, secular bureaucrats, and church ministers – seeing themselves as "civilizers of the East" in line with the prevailing ideology – viewed their primary task as erasing cultural differences between the colonialists, whom they regarded as bearers of knowledge, and the indigenous peoples, to whom this knowledge was intended. The prominent orientalist and educator N.I. Ilminsky, who developed a system of education for indigenous peoples in their native languages, wrote: "It is necessary to start from the beginning with foreigners, and to look at the mass of foreigners as children who have gathered to study and to whom the teacher must teach elementary knowledge, develop their minds, and educate their religious feelings" (Ilminsky 1875: 6-7). Similarly, the Siberian liberal and regionalist N.M. Yadrintsev, who referred to the indigenous Asian population of Russia as "younger brothers", argued that "if they show their abilities, then universal human rights and the benefits of higher human existence cannot be denied to them" (Yadrintsev 2000: 8). The common thread among the Europeanized Russian intelligentsia in

their perception of so-called uncivilized peoples was the belief in "raising their own foreigners" – a process aimed at transforming and civilizing them while preserving their national and cultural identity (Gerasi 2013: 101).

For the biographers of our central figures, the ideal of "one's own foreigner" was shaped through direct interaction with a mentor – an educator and Kulturträger responsible for guiding their protégé's intellectual and cultural "maturation". N.I. Veselovsky, in a note preceding the publication of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov's articles and his friends' memoirs, compared Valikhanov to a brilliant meteor that briefly illuminated the field of Oriental studies. He also emphasized the pivotal role of Governor-General G.H. Gasfort, whose patronage served as a gateway for the young Kazakh into the Russian world (Veselovsky 1904: I). Recollections of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov's close friends, G.N. Potanin and N.M. Yadrintsev, convey deep admiration for his exceptional abilities, yet also reflect a patronizing attitude, portraying him as a "maturing" foreigner initially constrained in his freedom of choice. Yadrintsev, for instance, recalled: "Chokan was brought to Omsk in the autumn of 1847 and did not know a word of Russian" (Yadrintsev 1904: VI). Similarly, Potanin noted that in his early years at the Siberian Cadet Corps, Chokan's command of Russian remained weak, but he spoke eloquently about Kyrgyz life, prompting Potanin to begin keeping his own ethnographic notes (Potanin 1968: 543). The construction of the "other" in Potanin's memoirs is particularly evident in his account of Valikhanov's early graduation from the Cadet Corps – a year ahead of his peers. Potanin reports this as a matter-of-fact event, without apparent recognition of its discriminatory nature: "Chokan graduated a year early because the final-year curriculum included specialized military sciences – tactics, fortification, artillery – and the government deemed it dangerous to introduce these subjects to foreigners" (Potanin 1968: 544).

In N.I. Ilminsky's memoirs, the story of Ibragim Altynsarin, grandson of Balgodzhi biy, provides a detailed account of the communicative environment that shaped the personal development of the young graduate of the Russian-foreign school, who began his service in 1859 as a junior interpreter for the Regional Administration. Notably, Altynsarin came under the patronage of the prominent Russian orientalist V.V. Grigoriev. As a translator in Grigoriev's service, he was introduced to the educated community, where he befriended N.I. Ilminsky and his circle, including Ilminsky's family. It was within this household environment that elements of exoticism and paternalism toward the "other" – perceived as progressing toward civilization—became most evident: "From morning until lunch, the ladies engaged in needlework while Altynsarin read works of fiction aloud to them. When he mispronounced a word or encountered an unfamiliar term, the listeners corrected and explained it to him, and the reading was constantly interrupted by conversation. Over time, Altynsarin became so accustomed to our company and so close to us that he accepted our invitation to stay for dinner, despite his extreme shyness and conscientiousness" (Ilminsky 1891: 21–22). Russian intellectuals generally portrayed the "maturation" of Kazakh aristocrats in their memoirs as a positive phenomenon. However, excessive guardianship often had negative emotional consequences for those introduced to an unfamiliar culture. For instance, when Altynsarin sought to meet with N.I. Ilminsky, he took leave from his duties under V.V. Grigoriev, citing the need to drink koumiss at the headquarters of Chulak Aybasov, fearing his patron's disapproval. During their meeting, he attempted to enact a humorous "recognition" scene, squatting in his caravan according to Kyrgyz custom. However, upon seeing Ilminsky, "...he became so agitated that he burst into shouting and screaming"

(Ilminsky 1891: 29). An essay on Ilminsky and Altynsarin's relationship, published in the Orthodox Evangelist in 1894, reflects the broader perception of Russian intellectuals regarding their role in shaping Kazakh elites. The editor of a series of articles on the topic wrote: "After their very first meeting, thanks to his unparalleled ability to win people's hearts, N.I. completely endeared himself to this young and handsome Kyrgyz, bringing him under his spiritual influence. Gradually, he educated and molded him into a remarkable figure in the field of Kyrgyz education in the Russian direction" (Episode from Enlightenment Activities 1894: 26).

The article by P.V. Bykov (Bykov 1891) provides a brief biographical account of the life and professional career of Russian military officer Gazi Bulatovich Valikhanov, a full member of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society and grandson of Sultan Gubaidulla, the last khan of the Great and Middle Kirghiz-Kaysak (Kazakh) hordes. His biography suggests a familiar pattern in which a steppe aristocrat was integrated into Russian society through guardianship and patronage from the empire's highest official bureaucracy. Notably, the patronage extended by senior regional officials to the descendants of the titled nobility served different objectives. G. Valikhanov's grandfather, Sultan Gubaidulla, had a contentious relationship with Russian authorities, openly resisting the imperial administration by refusing to accept gifts. As a result, he was exiled to Berezov in the Tobolsk province. In contrast, his son Bulat accepted gifts, obtained the rank of major, and, like many other steppe aristocrats, was encouraged by the West Siberian Governor-General G.H. Gasfort to have his son, Gazi, receive a Russian education at the Siberian Cadet Corps. It can be assumed that Gasfort's patronage was driven not only by benevolence but also by pragmatic concerns – specifically, mitigating the influence and authority of Gubaidulla's descendants within Kazakh society. The paternalistic approach to integrating aristocratic representatives followed a well-established model: offering them a Russian education with a shortened course in military sciences, assigning them to service in major Siberian cities, and, in G. Valikhanov's case, securing his continued work in St. Petersburg. Once their loyalty to the Russian government was confirmed, they were entrusted with more complex responsibilities, including personal assignments from the governor related to mediation in foreign environments. Unlike Ch. Valikhanov and I. Altynsarin, who were more inclined toward civil service, G. Valikhanov built his professional career in the military, which significantly shaped his social circle. While Ch.Ch. Valikhanov and I. Altynsarin received patronage primarily from Siberian regionalists focused on education and enlightenment, G. Valikhanov's connections were predominantly within the conservative military establishment. However, in the later years of his life, his social circle in St. Petersburg expanded to include politically engaged intellectuals such as Mambetali Seidalin, an economist and lawyer educated at St. Petersburg University, Aidarkhan Turlybaev, a graduate of the university's Law Faculty, and Shaimerden Kosshygulov. All three were later classified as politically unreliable due to their involvement in the Alash movement (Nurkina 2023: 235).

The Russian intelligentsia's interaction with prominent representatives of ethnic elites was expected by their patrons to result in the formation of a consolidated community of colonial intermediaries – educated in the European model, loyal to imperial power, yet maintaining ties with their native communities. These figures, embodying a hybrid identity, were intended to serve as cultural and political bridges. However, in reality, these interactions led to far more complex consequences.

Firstly, in the harmonious monologue of memoirists recounting the achievements of steppe aristocrats – whose successes were attributed to the support of Russian public and political

figures – the voices of subalterns gradually emerged. Over time, these figures developed sufficient professional competence to emancipate themselves from their mentors, formulate their own perspectives, and make independent decisions. It is evident that the historical and genealogical memory of the descendants of Kazakh steppe rulers significantly reshaped the imposed narratives of Russian imperial models for organizing the ethnocultural space of the Kazakh steppe. A close reading of memoirs by Russian authors, as well as articles, notes, and scholarly writings by Ch.Ch. Valikhanov, I.A. Altynsarin, and G.B. Valikhanov, reveals a broad and nuanced perspective among Kazakh intellectuals regarding cultural interaction within the ethnically diverse Central Asian region. For instance, N.I. Ilminsky recounts an incident from Altynsarin's tenure as a junior interpreter: when instructed to translate a short directive into the Horde, he rendered it in Kyrgyz. This provoked the senior translator's anger, leading him to cross out Altynsarin's translation and replace it with a version in Tatar, an event that Altynsarin later recounted to Ilminsky "with great chagrin" (Ilminsky 1891: 22). A. Mozokhin, a teacher at the Aktobe Russian-Kazakh school, described Altynsarin – not just as an inspector of public schools but as a universally respected figure – highlighting his professional openness: "Ibrahim Altynsarin was not only a superior to teachers, but a father, a sincere and kind friend… When talking to him, I almost always forgot that I was speaking to a Kyrgyz Mohammedan" (Altynsarin 1975: 327). Similarly, G.N. Potanin, in his memoirs about Ch. Valikhanov, recounted a statement in which Valikhanov explained why he could not marry a Russian woman: "He said he wanted to serve his Kyrgyz people, and for this, he must remain a Muslim… In fact, he was a rationalist in religious matters" (Potanin 1904: XXXIII). Contemporary accounts and scholarly research suggest that G.B. Valikhanov's worldview and identity did not conform to the conventional model of an educated foreigner in the service of the Russian state. As the first Kazakh to attain the rank of colonel in active military service, Valikhanov was apparently critical of the empire's cultural policies, which prioritized the Kazakh nomadic population while sidelining other indigenous groups in Central Asia. In a notable speech at a gathering marking the 300th anniversary of Siberia's incorporation into Russia, he advocated for the integration of Siberia's diverse populations: "All the foreign elements of Siberia must be united with the Russian element". He further underscored the feasibility of cultural interaction, observing: "The Kyrgyz people have already partly adopted the Russian language, and many Western Siberians speak Kyrgyz, and vice versa" (Celebration in St. Petersburg and Moscow 1882: 8).

Secondly, over time, the Russian intelligentsia's perception of the steppe aristocracy evolved, shifting from a paternalistic model of guardianship and mentorship to one of professional relationships and collaboration. Biographers of the selected figures, analyzing their professional integration, repeatedly noted the strong national and cultural self-awareness characteristic of this group – an identity that, in moments of crisis, often outweighed their emerging affiliation with the Russian military, public sphere, and academic community. According to G.N. Potanin, Ch. Valikhanov was deeply distressed by "the atrocities of the Russian troops against Chokan's co-religionists during the capture of Pishpek by M. Chernyaev's army" (Potanin 1904: XXIX–XXX). The shock was so profound that Valikhanov severed ties with Chernyaev, left for Verny in an attempt to rebuild his personal life, but died shortly thereafter (Potanin 1904: XXIX–XXX). Commenting on the rift between Valikhanov and Chernyaev, N.M. Yadrintsev suggested that "... Valikhanov shuddered, and a feeling of protest arose in him, in anticipation of the upcoming struggle in Central Asia" (Yadrintsev 1904: XXXXVIII). Yadrintsev's assessment of Ch.Ch.

Valikhanov in the final phase of his life is particularly striking: "In a moment of disillusionment, he retreats, like Pushkin's Aleko, to a nomadic yurt, where morals are simpler and purer... After the seductions of capitals and the bright lights... the gifted Kyrgyz returns to his hearth before his death, surrounded once more by the solemn silence of the steppe" (Yadrintsev 1904: XXXXVIII–XXXX). N.I. Ilminsky, in his correspondence with senior Russian officials – including the head of the Office of the Holy Synod, V.K. Sabler – emphasized the independence and high professional competence of I.A. Altynsarin. He highlighted Altynsarin's dedication to education, particularly his work as an inspector of Kyrgyz schools in the Turgai region, describing his contributions as "extremely beneficial for the regional school system, as he enjoyed the unwavering trust of both local Kyrgyz and Tatars, as well as Russians, whom he invited to teaching positions without distinction" (Letter from N.I. Ilminsky 1975: 300). According to Ilminsky, Altynsarin's perseverance, deep love for his people, and commitment to understanding their ethnographic and linguistic history played a crucial role in introducing and promoting the Kazakh alphabet based on Russian script. In practical terms, this initiative contributed to the rapprochement of the Russian and Kazakh peoples (Bibliographic News 1975: 301-305).

G.B. Valikhanov's contemporaries, primarily his military colleagues, observed that he maintained a strong sense of connection to his fellow tribesmen. His service in the Russian Empire did not erase his awareness of his noble lineage, which was reflected in his actions. After witnessing M. Chernyaev's brutal treatment of the Kazakh population during the capture of Pishpek, G. Valikhanov, in solidarity with his relative Ch. Valikhanov, resigned from service. As a result, he came under suspicion of harboring separatist sentiments. Major Popov, head of the Borokhodzir detachment, reported his encounters with G. Valikhanov to his superiors, citing his statements as follows: "Previously, these steppes were the homeland of great men—Tamerlane, Genghis Khan, Batu, and others—who once struck fear into Russia and even enslaved it..." In Popov's report, Valikhanov's words appeared to challenge "the power and significance of Russia" (Satenova 2013: 68).

Discussions

In both foreign and domestic historiography, several research strands on the phenomenon of colonial mediation in Central Asia can be identified from a long-term historical perspective.

Firstly, Western historiography has extensively explored the administrative, political, and socio-cultural integration of non-Russian peoples within the context of Russian colonization, with particular attention to the role of ethnic elites in this process (Kappeler 2000; Toltz 2013; Gerasi 2013; Khodarkovsky 2019; Sartori & Chablay 2019; Remnev & Suvorova 2013; Churkin 2023).

Secondly, in the research perspective of post-Soviet historians, the personal and political biographies of prominent representatives of the Kazakh intelligentsia, viewed as key actors in the anti-colonial movement in Central Asia, occupy a significant place. The biographies of figures from the socio-political and national movements, such as Ch. Valikhanov, I. Altynsarin, A. Baitursynov, M. Dulatov, A. Bukeikhanov, and G. Valikhanov, have been and continue to be the subject of extensive scholarly research (Asylbekov 2003; Abuev 2005; Aitmukhambetov 2010; Mazhitova 2015; Absattarova, Mazhitova 2024).

Thirdly, with the anthropological and linguistic "turns" of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a historiographical perspective emerged that embraced a non-linear

approach to studying the biographies of iconic historical figures. This shift led historians to conceptualize biographical narratives as discourse – texts shaped by specific historical contexts – while examining societal perceptions of the uniqueness and cyclicality of the life trajectories of individuals who played secondary roles in history (Dmitriev 2013; Ermekbai 2016; Churkin 2020). This approach opens up new possibilities for further exploring the phenomenon of colonial mediation in world history, including through the biographies of prominent representatives of the Central Asian national intelligentsia.

Conclusions

The Russian imperial administration, in its search for additional resources to organize the administrative-territorial structure and manage the cultural heterogeneity of the colonized regions of Central Asia, sought to involve representatives of local communities in governance. Engaging with these figures was intended to facilitate the development of new territories and implement population policies in ethnically and religiously diverse regions. This work was carried out by imperial experts – scientists, publicists, and officials – who played key roles in the socio-political and socio-cultural life of the Asian periphery and had direct contact with members of the Kazakh titled nobility. In their memoirs, these imperial experts, constructing the biographies of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov, I.A. Altynsarin, and G.B. Valikhanov, framed them through Eurocentric and orientalist lenses as "their own foreigners" – figures of exceptional talent and potential who could serve as colonial intermediaries between the imperial government and the vast indigenous population of Central Asia. The memoir discourse reflects Russian intellectuals' expectations regarding the maturation of high-ranking Kazakhs through Russian educational institutions and the imposition of continuous guardianship by a "man of power and culture". However, their later interactions with these figures challenged the standard assumption that socialization within the Russian system would inevitably lead to the erasure of cultural differences and the emergence of "new Russians" – assimilated officials fully aligned with imperial structures while operating within their native ethno-cultural environment. At the same time, the hopes of the Kazakh elites to develop a hybrid identity – an organic synthesis of Russian and Kazakh cultural elements – were also unfulfilled. Ultimately, while Kazakh aristocrats functioned as colonial intermediaries in the military, administrative, and educational spheres, by the final years of their lives, many experienced profound disillusionment with their chosen professional trajectory. Confronted with an identity crisis, they increasingly turned back to their cultural roots.

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