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CLUSTER: TOWARDS A HISTORY OF RUSSIAN COLONIALISM

The Misadventures of a Dagestani Merchant: Empire and Muslim Mobility in Central Asia

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Abstract

In 1877, Russian authorities in Turkestan arrested an Ottoman mullah who was reportedly spreading anti-tsarist propaganda in the Kazakh steppe. Upon closer inspection, the man turned out to be neither an Ottoman subject nor a Muslim religious leader. This article follows the travels of Hajji Ahmed, a young merchant from Dagestan who was at different times accused of being a Russian spy and an Ottoman spy. His three petitions and tsarist investigative reports reveal that he had traded throughout the Khanate of Khoqand, the Emirate of Bukhara, and tsarist Turkestan in the 1870s. This microhistory of a Muslim peddler offers a glimpse into tsarist anxieties about Muslim mobility and local fears of Russian imperialism in Central Asia. It demonstrates that Russia's colonial expansion provided new opportunities for tsarist Muslim subjects but also destabilized Central Asian societies and institutions, making the conditions of travel perilous. Tsarist paranoia about Ottoman emissaries, Tatar missionaries, and prospects of an anticolonial uprising led to Russia's restrictions on transregional Muslim mobility.

Keywords: Central Asia; Caucasus; Russian empire; trade; Islam

In March 1877, the Russian military governor of Semirechye oblast (now in southeastern Kazakhstan and northeastern Kyrgyzstan), ordered the arrest of a suspicious foreigner. The authorities were tipped off that one Hajji Ahmed, a Turk and a religious figure, was traveling in the steppe and spreading anti-tsarist propaganda. He allegedly told some Kazakh nomads to "always be prepared" and have good horses ready.[1] Russia was on the brink of another war with the Ottoman empire, and tsarist authorities feared that the Ottoman government might be conspiring to foment uprisings in Russia's Muslim territories. The rumors of an Ottoman subject, preparing the ground for a Kazakh rebellion in a far corner of the Russian empire, near the border with China, alarmed Russian authorities. Tsarist gendarmes scoured the area in search of the Ottoman emissary.

As new intelligence came in, the authorities learned that Hajji Ahmed had come into wealth in the steppe. He claimed to be a "resident of Mecca" and a "protector of Muslims" and was traveling with three companions: a Kazakh (*kirgiz*), a Kyrgyz (*karakirgiz*), and a *sart*

[1] O'zbekiston Milliy Arxivi (National Archive of Uzbekistan; hereafter O'MA) fond (f.) I-1, opis' (op.) 19, delo (d.) 245 (O poimke "turka" nazyvaiushchego sebia Khodzhi-Akhmetom), list (l.) 1 (April 9, 1877 [Julian], or April 21, 1877 [Gregorian]). Henceforth, all dates are given in the Julian calendar.

(outsiders' term for the sedentary population in Central Asia).[2] This quartet visited many Kazakh villages, where Hajji Ahmed performed funeral prayers and solicited charity, which grateful villagers and nomads gave him in cattle and bread.[3] Tsarist gendarmes found and arrested Hajji Ahmed on April 2, 1877. He had with him five horses and 230 sheep. He had left the rest of his gifted herd in the custody of local residents. Thus, one village safeguarded 500 sheep for Hajji Ahmed; a notable in another village kept twenty horses and two camels for him. Upon his arrest, Hajji Ahmed carried 170 bales of silk, "Asian medicines," five copies of "holy Muslim books," and a revolver with three bullets.[4] Over the next few weeks, Russian authorities kept investigating which locals had been giving Hajji Ahmed gifts, for what reason, and where the rest of his wealth was hidden.[5]

Hajji Ahmed surprised the authorities, who likely expected to find a foreign man of a respectable age, proficient in Islamic teachings, and probably antagonistic to Russian rule. Hajji Ahmed was about 22–23 years of age, did not flee the arrest, and, on the contrary, seemed to welcome Russian gendarmes.[6] When taken into custody, he gave a detailed testimony, which challenged the Russian authorities' perception of who he was and what crimes he might have committed. Hajji Ahmed admitted that much about his public identity was false. Ahmed was not his real name. Nor was he a *hajji*, or someone who completed a pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. Nor was he a Turk, and he had never stepped foot in the Ottoman empire. He was a native of Dagestan and, therefore, a Russian-born subject. Hajji Ahmed presented himself to Russian authorities as a law-abiding merchant, who had long been trading in Bukhara, Khoqand, Margilan, and Andijan (now all in Uzbekistan), and who had been wronged and sought justice with the help of the Russian administration in the empire's sprawling Turkestan territories.[7]

This article retraces the journey of Hajji Ahmed from Dagestan, through Bukharan and Khoqandi territories, to the Kazakh steppe, as we are guided by his three written testimonies and investigative reports by tsarist authorities. Through the microhistory of this entrepreneurial Dagestani merchant, who was at different times accused of being an Ottoman spy and a Russian spy, this article explores tsarist anxieties about Muslim mobility and local fears of Russian imperialism amid tsarist expansion in Central Asia in the 1870s.

I tell two stories. First, Russia's Muslim subjects, like Dagestani Hajji Ahmed, gained new opportunities for travel and commerce in Central Asia because of Russia's imperial expansion. Many headed to the tsarist frontier to make their fortunes. Some of them thrived, and others did not. Russia's colonial wars, which facilitated frontier mobility and business, also destabilized Central Asian societies and institutions, making the conditions of travel perilous. Hajji Ahmed was first arrested in the Ferghana valley in 1875, when he fell under suspicion of being a Russian spy. His status as a tsarist subject aided his transregional trade but also endangered him amid a civil war in the Khanate of Khoqand. The focus on a Dagestani protagonist complicates the traditional dichotomy in modern Central Asian

[2] For debates over the *sart* identity, see Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 1998), 199–209; Sergei Abashin, *Natsionalizmy v Srednei Azii: V poiskakh identichnosti* (St. Petersburg, 2007), 95–176.

[3] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, l. 12–12ob (April 26, 1877).

[4] Ibid., ll. 1ob (April 9, 1877), 11 (April 19, 1877).

[5] Ibid., l. 14–14ob (April 26, 1877).

[6] Ibid., l. 2 (April 9, 1877).

[7] Ibid., ll. 25–29 (Hajji Ahmed's first petition, in Turki), 19–24ob (in Russian translation) (Vernyi [Almaty], May 11, 1877).

history between the Russian military and settlers on the one hand and indigenous Central Asians on the other.[8]

This article offers a glimpse into how small-scale merchants operated in late-nineteenth-century Central Asia. Muslim merchants, while often overlooked, had been an integral part of Russia's trade. Tatar and Bukharan entrepreneurial families benefited from, and indirectly facilitated, Russia's push into the Kazakh steppe, the Urals, and Siberia.[9] This study, by not focusing on major commercial actors, explores how ordinary bazaar merchants navigated the shifting borders and scales of supply and demand in urban, rural, and steppe markets of Central Asia.

Second, this article shows that Russia's rapid expansion heightened tsarist officials' anxieties about Muslim mobility in their new Turkestani territories. While the tsarist state had a long history of managing Islam and Muslim populations, by the late nineteenth century colonial officials were paranoid about many things: espionage by Ottoman emissaries, non-native Muslims proselytizing in the steppe, and prospects of an anticolonial Muslim uprising.[10] The insecurity of colonial rule in Turkestan prompted officials to police transregional Muslim mobility, which they increasingly associated with pro-Ottoman and anti-Russian propaganda. The aspirations of mobile individuals were often dashed by the intensifying tsarist surveillance regime. Hajji Ahmed was arrested by Russian authorities in the Kazakh steppe under suspicion of being an Ottoman spy in 1877. His actual identity as a Dagestani Muslim only further marked him as a suspect amid an anticolonial uprising in Dagestan during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78.

The journey of Hajji Ahmed contributes to histories of mobility between the Caucasus and Central Asia. Intriguingly, we know more about migrations between the Caucasus and the Ottoman empire and between Central Asia and the Ottoman Empire.[11] Mobility between the two large Muslim-majority regions that Russia had annexed in the nineteenth century attracted less scholarly attention. These regions were long traversed by merchants, pilgrims, and scholars, whose itineraries and legal statuses transformed during tsarist conquest and incorporation into the empire.

The three petitions, written by Hajji Ahmed and preserved in Uzbekistan's national archive, are a unique source for the study of Central Asia and the Russian empire. First-person narratives by nineteenth-century Muslim merchants, North Caucasian migrants, and prisoners in Turkestan are rare. Hajji Ahmed's petitions are problematic evidence, as he composed them during his imprisonment in Vernyi (Almaty), Tashkent, and Chimkent

[8] See also for Central Asian histories of foreign merchants: Scott C. Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and Its Trade, 1550–1900* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2002), and of enslaved foreigners: Jeff Eden, *Slavery and Empire in Central Asia* (Cambridge, Eng., 2018).

[9] Danielle Ross, *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia* (Bloomington, IN., 2020); Erika L. Monahan, *The Merchants of Siberia: Trade in Early Modern Eurasia* (Ithaca, 2016).

[10] On Russia's governance of Islam, see Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Agnès Nilüfer Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy* (Ithaca, 2014); Elena I. Campbell, *The Muslim Question and Russian Imperial Governance* (Bloomington, IN., 2015); Mustafa Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire, and European Modernity, 1788–1914* (Cambridge, Eng., 2015); Allen J. Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia: The Islamic World of Novouzensk District and the Kazakh Inner Horde, 1780–1910* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2001).

[11] On mobility between the Caucasus and the Ottoman empire, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State* (Stanford, 2024); Will Smiley, *From Slaves to Prisoners of War: The Ottoman Empire, Russia, and International Law* (Oxford, 2018); on pilgrimage from Central Asia to the Ottoman empire, see Lâle Can, *Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the End of Empire* (Stanford, 2020); Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca, 2015); and on mobility within the Turkic world, see Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 1998); James H. Meyer, *Turks Across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856–1914* (New York, 2014).

(Shymkent, Kazakhstan). He sought to elicit, especially with his first autobiographical petition, maximum sympathy from colonial officials, likely with awareness that the content of his statement will be scrutinized and that his freedom hinged on it. By writing three times to different Russian authorities, Hajji Ahmed got to articulate his identity, craft the narrative of his journey, and adjust the pitch for his release. Hajji Ahmed's petitions, when contextualized within Central Asia's turbulent 1870s and juxtaposed with tsarist notes about the prisoner, unlock a fascinating microhistory of an adventurous Dagestani merchant.[12]

Hajji Ahmed: a Dagestani Merchant in Central Asia

Hajji Ahmed was born Mahmud in the town of Gazikumukh (now Kumukh), in central Dagestan. His father, Hajji Yusuf, was a prominent religious figure, a merchant, and chief of the neighboring village of Khanar. After Imam Shamil (r. 1834–59), the last ruler of the Caucasus Imamate (1828–59), raided that village sometime in the 1840s, its inhabitants scattered, and Mahmud's family found refuge in Gazikumukh.[13] In his first petition, submitted to the military governor of Semirechye oblast shortly after his arrest, in order to ingratiate himself with tsarist authorities Hajji Ahmed skillfully presented his family and kin as victims of Imam Shamil, whose guerrilla warfare during the Caucasus War (1817–64) had been the largest obstacle in the history of Russia's expansion in the Muslim world. (Figure 1).

Mahmud's family likely belonged to the Lak community, one of several dozen ethnic groups in Dagestan. His hometown of Gazikumukh had a cherished Islamic past. Its Friday Mosque, built in 778, was one of the oldest places of Muslim worship in the Russian empire, as the area was among the first in the Caucasus to accept Islam under early Abbasid rule. Jamal al-Din al-Ghazi-Ghumuqi (1788–1869), a shaykh of the Naqshbandi order and a spiritual mentor to both Ghazi Muhammad (r. 1828–32), the founder of the Caucasus Imamate, and Shamil, hailed from Gazikumukh.[14] The town, once the center of the Gazikumukh Khanate (1642–1860), suffered during the conquest by the Iranian Nadir Shah in 1740 and the Russian expedition of General Ermolov in 1820, but remained a regional trade hub for the North and South Caucasus.[15] Growing up with a merchant father in Gazikumukh, Mahmud gained early appreciation for trade, perhaps sensing new commercial opportunities that Russian imperial expansion had provided.

When about eighteen years of age, Mahmud persuaded his father to let him travel to Astrakhan to conduct trade by capitalizing on his family's existing contacts. Unbeknownst to his father, he borrowed goods to the value of 200 rubles. In 1872, he arrived in Astrakhan. This city in the Volga Delta near the Caspian Sea served as a critical commercial gateway, connecting interior Russia with the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Iran. The entrepreneurial young man must have spoken to Astrakhan merchants and recognized that a peddler like himself could hardly make a profit in a city where goods from neighboring Dagestan were plentiful. Mahmud could, however, sell his merchandise—likely textiles or daggers, for which Gazikumukh was famous—at a premium farther east, in the Kazakh steppe and cities

[12] On microhistory through archival research, context, and storytelling, see Natalie Zemon Davis's ever so inspiring *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); on microhistory as a method for writing global history, see John-Paul A. Ghobrial, ed., "Global History and Microhistory," special issue, *Past & Present* 242, supplement 14 (November 2019); and for a brilliant microhistory in Russian imperial and Eurasian history, see Michael Khodarkovsky, *Bitter Choices: Loyalty and Betrayal in the Russian Conquest of the North Caucasus* (Ithaca, 2011).

[13] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, ll. 19–19ob, 25 (May 11, 1877).

[14] On Jamal al-Din al-Ghazi al-Ghumuqi, see Michael Kemper, "Khālidiyya Networks in Daghestan and the Question of Jihād," *Die Welt des Islams* 42, no. 1 (2002): 41–71; and on the Caucasus Imamate, see Michael Reynolds, "Muslim Mobilization in Imperial Russia's Caucasus," in *Islam and the European Empires*, ed. David Motadel (Oxford, 2014): 187–212.

[15] Khodarkovsky, *Bitter Choices*, 58.

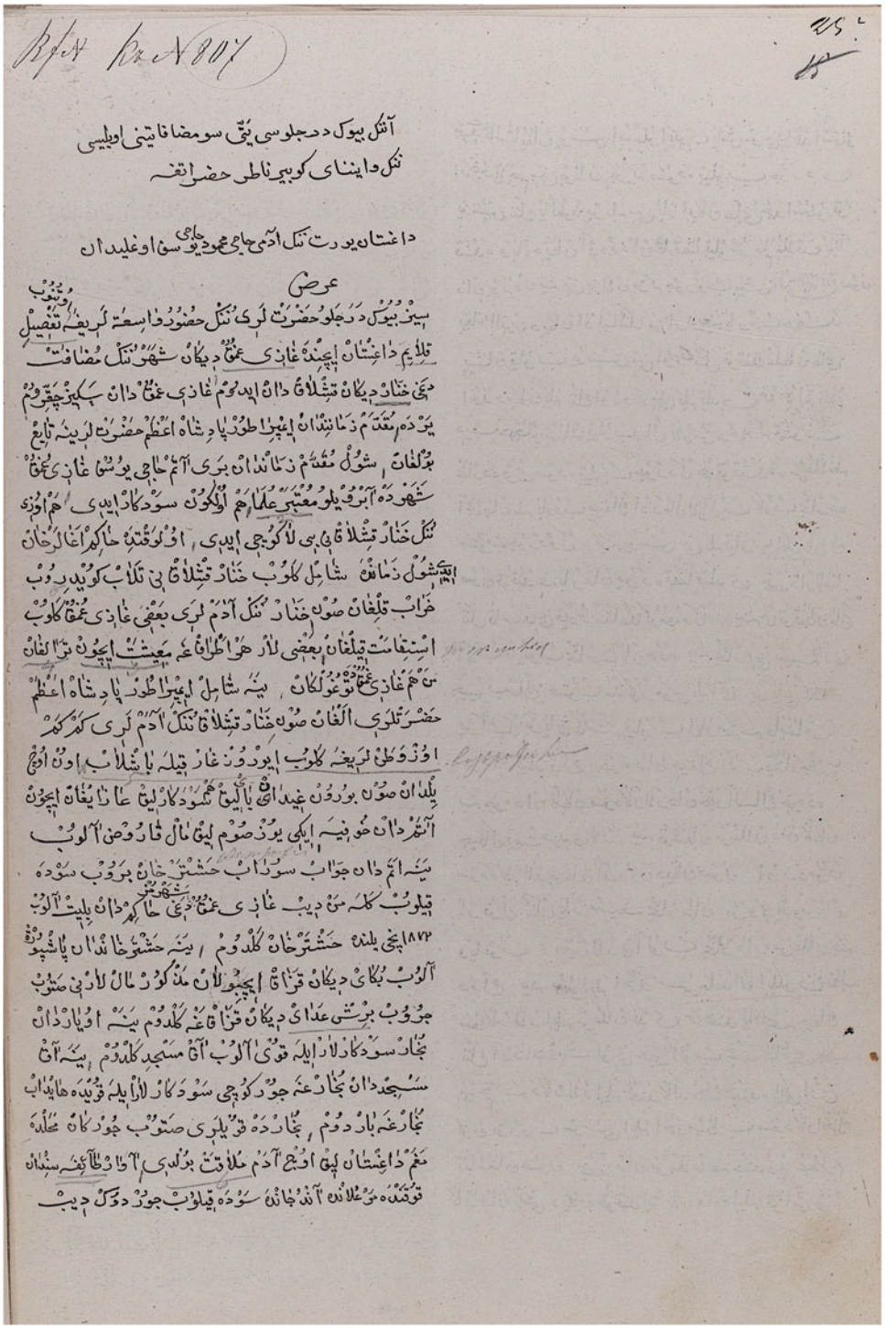

Figure 1. First Petition of Hajji Ahmed.
Source: O'MA f. 1-1, op. 19, d. 245, l. 25 (May 11, 1877).

of Transoxiana. Central Asia's agricultural and pastoral economies were intricately tied with mercantile networks in Xinjiang, Afghanistan, Iran, India, and Russia's Siberia, Urals, and Volga regions. Without railway connections, trade in this vast region depended on long overland journeys.[16] Mahmud managed to obtain a travel document from Russian authorities and joined a caravan going east.[17] The young Dagestani merchant was not going back to the Caucasus.

Mahmud successfully bartered his Dagestani goods to Kazakh nomads living in a steppe between the Caspian and Aral Seas. In exchange, he received a massive herd of sheep. He then joined another eastward Bukharan caravan. Traveling in large groups was the best security guarantee. Merchants, pilgrims, and state officials often banded together in armed caravans for long-distance travel across the steppe.[18] He safely reached the town of Akmechet′ (now Qyzylorda, Kazakhstan) and then continued to Bukhara, the capital city of the eponymous emirate. Bukhara "the Noble" was known for its Islamic learning—it had more madrasas than Istanbul—and its rich marketplaces, overflowing with Afghan, Iranian, Russian, and Central Asian goods.[19] Mahmud sold his sheep and finally had some capital to make new investments. In Bukhara, he had a fateful meeting with three Avar merchants from his native Dagestan: the elder, Yunus, and two young men, Musa and Ahmed. Yunus took Mahmud under his protection. Together, the four Dagestanis set off east, to the towns of Khoqand, Margilan, and Andijan in the Ferghana valley.[20]

The 1870s, when the events of this article take place, were a critical decade in the making of modern Central Asia. By the mid-nineteenth century, Russia conquered much of the Kazakh steppe, absorbing the Lesser, Middle, and Great Hordes into the administrative structures of the empire.[21] After finalizing the conquest of the North Caucasus in 1864, Russia turned its attention to areas east of the Caspian Sea and south of the Kazakh steppe. There, it came up against three sovereign states: the Emirate of Bukhara, the Khanate of Khiva, and the Khanate of Khoqand.[22] All three were ruled by Uzbek dynasties—Manghit, Qongrat, and Ming—since the eighteenth century. In 1865, Russian troops occupied Tashkent, a frontier Khoqandi city, turning it into a tsarist stronghold and a launching pad for further invasion. In 1867, Russian authorities established the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan, with the capital in Tashkent, which over the next half-century would absorb new tsarist territories in Central Asia.[23]

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[16] See Scott C. Levi, "India, Russia, and the Eighteenth-Century Transformation of the Central Asian Caravan Trade," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42, no. 4 (January 1999): 519–48.

[17] O′MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, ll. 19ob, 25 (May 11, 1877).

[18] See Jeff Eden, "Anatomy of a Caravan Raid: Peril and Possibility in the Kazakh Steppe, 1800–1860," *Journal of Central Asian History* 2 (June 2023): 1–32.

[19] James Pickett, *Polymaths of Islam: Power and Networks of Knowledge in Central Asia* (Ithaca, 2020), 50.

[20] O′MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, ll. 19–20, 25 (May 11, 1877).

[21] See Ian W. Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire: Kazakh Intermediaries and Russian Rule on the Steppe, 1731–1917* (Ithaca, 2017).

[22] On histories of Khoqand, see Scott C. Levi, *The Rise and Fall of Khoqand, 1709–1876: Central Asia in the Global Age* (Pittsburgh, 2017); Levi, "The Ferghana Valley at the Crossroads of World History: The Rise of Khoqand, 1709–1822," *Journal of Global History* 2, no. 2 (July 2007): 213–32; Bakhtiiar Miraimovich Babadzhanov, *Kokandskoe khanstvo: vlast′, politika, religiia* (Tokyo and Tashkent, 2010); of Bukhara, see Scott C. Levi, *The Bukharan Crisis: A Connected History of 18th Century Central Asia* (Pittsburgh, 2020); of Khiva, see Paolo Sartori and Ulfat Abdurasulov, *Seeking Justice at the Court of the Khans of Khiva (19th-Early 20th Centuries)* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2020); and all three, see Yuri Bregel, "The New Uzbek States: Bukhara, Khiva and Khoqand: c. 1750–1886," in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia: The Chinggisid Age*, eds. Nicola di Cosmo, Allen J. Frank, and Peter B. Golden (Cambridge, Eng., 2009), 392–411.

[23] On the history of tsarist Turkestan, see Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814–1914* (Cambridge, Eng., 2021); Sergei Nikolaevich Abashin, Dmitrii Iur′evich Arapov, and Nailia Ermukhanovna Bekmakhanova, *Tsentral′naia Aziia v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moscow, 2008).

Turkestan authorities, under the leadership of Konstantin von Kaufman, the first Governor-General in 1867–82, kept pushing against the three Central Asian states. In 1868, Russia forced an unequal commercial treaty on Khoqand, requiring it to allow Russian merchants to trade anywhere in the khanate and set the duty for Russian imports at only 2.5 percent of their value. In 1868, Russia also defeated the Emirate of Bukhara and forced a peace treaty, obliging Bukhara to pay the indemnity of 500,000 rubles, cede several towns, and allow Russian merchants to trade freely throughout the emirate, setting the duty of Russian imports at 2.5 percent of their value, similar to that in Khoqand. In 1873, Russian troops took Khiva, forcing an even harsher peace treaty, allowing Russian subjects duty-free trade and transit of goods through the khanate and mandating the indemnity of 2.2 million rubles. Russia turned the three sovereign states into protectorates. It ended their economic independence by bursting their markets open to cheap Russian manufactured goods and enabling the flow of Russian capital to purchase raw products for export.[24] Tsarist aggressive politics further exacerbated local struggles for power and anti-tsarist sentiments in the three states.[25]

Between 1873 and 1875, the four Dagestanis lived in Khoqand. These merchants, unrelated to each other by blood, became each other's chosen family. Mahmud claimed to have been adopted by Yunus when they were visiting a mazar (mausoleum of a saint) in Aulie-Ata (now Taraz, Kazakhstan). Young Mahmud became a substitute son for Yunus in his old age. The relationship between Yunus and our protagonist is vaguely reminiscent of the *atalyk* custom, a type of fosterage in the Caucasus, when a child was given to a family of an unrelated *atalyk*, or foster father, and would return to his or her biological parents years later, ensuring an enduring bond with another family. Yunus was not Mahmud's *atalyk*, but so strong was their bond that Yunus blessed him with the new name, Hajji Ahmed, in memory of Yunus's late son, who had died of cholera in years prior.[26] In the meantime, Hajji Ahmed (formerly Mahmud), Musa, and Ahmed likely became *kunak* to each other, a custom in the Caucasus, wherein men from different families or communities pledged to help and protect one another, akin to blood brothers.[27]

The four Dagestanis were also business partners, as they pooled their capital to maximize their purchasing power. Their business strategy was triangular and involved crossing the rapidly shifting borders in Central Asia, aided by their status as Russian subjects. They would buy sheep from Kazakh nomads living in the steppe in the north of the Russian empire's Governor-Generalship of Turkestan. They sold sheep in the densely populated and primarily agricultural Ferghana valley, within the Khanate of Khoqand. There, in the markets of Andijan, Margilan, and Khoqand, they purchased silk scarves, which they then took farther west, to the Emirate of Bukhara and perhaps the Khanate of Khiva, where they would acquire local goods for resale to Kazakh nomads. The four Dagestanis were by no means significant players on any market. Their story is not that of Russian, Tatar, or Bukharan merchant millionaires, who annually moved hundreds of camels carrying goods across the steppe and facilitated the expansion of global networks of capital to Central Asia.[28] Nor

[24] Morrison, *Russian Conquest of Central Asia*, 300, 360–62. On Russian protectorates, see Seymour Becker, *Russia's Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1865–1924* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968); Ul'fat Abdurasulov and Paolo Sartori, "Neopredelennost' kak politika: Razmyshliaia o prirode rossiiskogo protektorata v Srednei Azii," *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2016): 118–64.

[25] James Pickett, "Written into Submission: Reassessing Sovereignty through a Forgotten Eurasian Dynasty," *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 3 (June 2018): 817–45; Ul'fat Abdurasulov, "'Tainy khivinskogo dvora': Politicheskaia bor'ba v Khive v period rossiiskogo protektorata," *Vostok svyshe* 3 (2015): 38–56.

[26] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, ll. 19ob, 25ob (May 11, 1877).

[27] Khodarkovsky, *Bitter Choices*, 16–17, 30–32 (on *atalyk*), and 16, 43 (on *kunak*).

[28] On trade and capital in nineteenth-century Central Asia, see Maks Isakovich Veksel'man, *Rossiiskii monopolisticheskii i inostrannyi kapital v Srednei Azii (konets XIX–nachalo XX v.)* (Tashkent, 1987); G. A. Mikhaleva, *Torgovye*

Figure 2. Silk Merchant in the Ferghana Valley. *Source*: Albumen print, "Melochnaia torgovlia. Prodazha shelka," in Aleksei L. Kun, *Turkestanskii al'bom* (Tashkent, 1872). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, LC-DIG-ppmsca-09953-00121 (digital file from Part 2, vol. 2, pl. 125, no. 382).

were they part of any powerful merchant diaspora, described in scholarship as "trade diasporas" or "portfolio capitalists," successfully operating across Eurasia.[29] These Dagestani merchants could not easily tap into existing mercantile networks rooted in kinship. (Figures 2 and 3).

Hajji Ahmed adjusted to his life as a merchant. He got on well with nomads, farmers, and urban folk, and felt comfortable alternating between a high-paced life at a marketplace and slow caravan journeys. He spoke multiple languages, as was common for learned Dagestanis and trans-Eurasian merchants. In addition to his native Lak, he might have known Avar and Dargin, as Gazikumukh lay between the lands of those two large Dagestani communities. He almost certainly knew some Arabic, as he admitted to being able to recite the Qurʾan. To trade in the Kazakh steppe and the Ferghana valley, he must have become sufficiently conversational in Kazakh and Uzbek, and might have picked up some Persian (Tajik) and Russian in the markets of Bukhara and Aulie-Ata. He also learned Turki, the lingua franca of Russia's Turkic Muslims, in which he would petition Russian authorities. Hajji Ahmed made impressive efforts to demonstrate to tsarist officials his familiarity with Central Asian Turki and local language norms. For example, he used suffixes from Chaghatay, rather than Kumyk, the dominant Turkic language in the North Caucasus, and referred to his Dagestani

i posol'skie sviazi Rossii so sredneaziatskimi khanstvami cherez Orenburg (vtoraia polovina XVIII–pervaia polovina XIX v.) (Tashkent, 1982). For a travel account, delving into Central Asian trade and finances, see Eugene Schuyler, *Turkistan: Notes of a Journey in Russian Turkistan, Khokand, Bukhara, and Kuldja* (London, 1876).

[29] See Abner Cohen, "Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas," in *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa. Studies Presented and Discussed at the Tenth International African Seminar at Fourah Bay College, Freetown, December 1969,* ed. Claude Meillassoux (London, 1971), 266–81; Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, Eng., 1984); Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Christopher Alan Bayly, "Portfolio Capitalists and the Political Economy of Early Modern India," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 25, no. 4 (December 1988): 40–24.

Figure 3. Textile Merchant in Samarkand. *Source*: Photograph by Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii, "Torgovets materiiami," between 1905 and 1915. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, LC-P87-8001A.

village as a *qishlaq*, not *aul*. Yet he understandably lacked the proficiency of skilled petitioners: he consistently misspelled the names of most Central Asian cities and vocalized the Arabic script (see Figure 1), adding diacritics for short vowels, which was unusual for documentation of the time and likely helped Hajji Ahmed when he was writing.[30]

Around 1875, Hajji Ahmed's adopted father, Yunus, passed away. Hajji Ahmed and his two adopted brothers buried their mentor at a cemetery by the Khujand gates of Khoqand.[31] They now had to forge their own path. The three young Dagestani merchants, reeling from the loss of Yunus, decided to go back to their native Dagestan. They dreamed of returning as successful merchants, with sufficient capital to support their extended families. They planned to start their long westward journey by first traveling to Bukhara to collect debts from other merchants and to sell their remaining merchandise. They would then continue onto Khiva, where they would purchase silk to sell in Dagestan for a fabulous profit. However, upon reaching Bukhara, where they joined a trading company, they learned from fellow merchants that silk was too expensive in Khiva and that they could buy it for less in Margilan or Khoqand. Determined to maximize their profits, the three men purchased

[30] I thank Paolo Sartori for these insights.
[31] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, ll. 20, 26 (May 11, 1877).

gemstones—pearls, corals, and rubies—in Bukhara and headed back to the Ferghana valley to resell them and acquire the precious silk. They journeyed together until Samarkand (now in Uzbekistan), where they split up. Hajji Ahmed remained in Samarkand, likely to recover from an illness, while Musa and Ahmed took off to Margilan to collect information about silk prices before they would retrace their steps to Khujand (now in Tajikistan), where Hajji Ahmed planned to catch up with them. When Hajji Ahmed finally arrived in Khujand, Musa and Ahmed were not there. He waited for them for three days before joining a Khoqandi caravan leaving for Margilan, hoping to reunite with them there.[32]

Hajji Ahmed as a Russian Spy: Tsarist Imperialism in Central Asia

Hajji Ahmed and his chosen brothers picked a turbulent time to return to the Ferghana valley. The Khanate of Khoqand had come under intense pressure from St. Petersburg. The Khoqandi state had been doing better earlier in the century. Under Madali Khan (r. 1822–42), the khanate reached its greatest territorial extent, expanding north and east into the Kazakh steppe and south into Badakhshan and the Pamir Mountains.[33] The khanate's territory had eclipsed those of the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva. In the following decades, Russian troops captured major towns of the khanate, such as Akmechet' in 1853, Chimkent in 1864, and Tashkent in 1865. The khan of Khoqand, Khudayar Khan (r. 1844–58, 1862–63, 1865–76, see Figure 4), was forced to open the famed markets of the Ferghana valley to Russian merchants in 1868. Hajji Ahmed and his chosen family, who were Russian subjects, could trade in Khoqand freely because of that treaty.

To increase revenue, Khudayar Khan imposed new taxes on his subjects, which was a highly unpopular policy at a time when many already saw him as a Russian puppet. In 1875, an uprising broke out against the khan's authority and Russian influence. One of its leaders was Mulla Ishaq, a Kyrgyz religious leader, who had studied in madrasas in Margilan and Khoqand and served as imam in Andijan; he assumed the name of Fulat Beg. The khan's heir, Nasruddin Beg (see Figure 5), joined the uprising. The rebels, having declared *gazavat* (holy war) against Russia and its local collaborators, hoped to ignite an anti-Russian uprising far beyond Khoqand, into Bukhara and even Afghanistan, seeking "the eviction of Russian forces from Central Asia."[34] Under the military leadership of Fulat Beg, the rebels took Osh (now in Kyrgyzstan), Namangan, Margilan, and the capital city of Khoqand. Khudayar Khan fled to Khujand, under the protection of Russian troops, and the rebels declared Nasruddin Beg a new khan. The rebels then marched toward Khujand. The Russian troops defeated the rebel army and pressed onto Khoqand. The new khan, Nasruddin Khan (r. 1875), signed a peace treaty, preserving his throne but giving up Namangan and northern parts of the Ferghana valley to Russia. Meanwhile, many rebels, unhappy with the khanate's continued subservience to Russia, turned against Nasruddin Khan and proclaimed warlord Fulat Beg a new khan, with the cities of Andijan and Margilan under his authority.[35]

It was at this time, sometime in late 1875, that Hajji Ahmed was heading back to the Ferghana valley. He had lived there before and knew local markets and merchants, which likely allayed his concerns about his safety. Hajji Ahmed was traveling with a Khoqandi caravan and stayed behind in one of the villages to "have tea with the local *aksakal* [village elder]."[36] He then rode after the caravan, hoping to catch up with his traveling companions, who were carrying some of his merchandise. But he got lost and found himself in

[32] Ibid., ll. 20ob–21, 26 (May 11, 1877).

[33] Levi, *Rise and Fall of Khoqand*, 127–58.

[34] Ibid., 206.

[35] On the events of 1875–76, see Levi, *Rise and Fall of Khoqand*, 205–8; see also Sergei Abashin, "The 'Fierce Fight' at Oshoba: A Microhistory of the Conquest of the Khoqand Khanate," *Central Asian Survey* 33, no. 2 (May 2014): 215–31.

[36] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, ll. 21, 26 (May 11, 1877).

Figure 4. Khudayar Khan, Khan of Khoqand (1844–58, 1862–63, 1865–76).
Source: Albumen print, "Kokanskii Khan," in Kun, *Turkestanskii al'bom* (1872). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, LC-DIG-ppmsca-09951-00032 (digital file from Part 2, vol. 1, pl. 11, no. 32).

Figure 5. Nasruddin Beg, Khan of Khoqand (1875).
Source: Albumen print, "Seid Mukhamed Nasretdin Bek," in Kun, *Turkestanskii al' bom* (1872). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, LC-DIG-ppmsca-09951-00031 (digital file from Part 2, vol. 1, pl. 11, no. 31).

another qishlaq, where a gang of young men captured and robbed him. According to Hajji Ahmed, they took his horse, 2,000 Bukharan *tilla* in credit notes, and gemstones to the value of another 2,000 Bukharan *tilla*.[37] The loss was an impressive sum, equivalent to about 12–16 annual salaries of a zemstvo doctor in Russia.[38] The robbers brought him, with his hands bound, to a local notable, who then delivered him to the newly appointed khan in Margilan, Fulat Beg, as a Russian spy. This was not how Hajji Ahmed hoped to enter the city. He was thrown in jail, where he learned from fellow inmates that Fulat Beg had earlier arrested and executed two other men accused of spying for Russia. Those men were Hajji Ahmed's chosen brothers, Musa and Ahmed.[39]

The charge of espionage against Hajji Ahmed must have seemed credible enough in rebel Margilan, as he was likely recognized as a North Caucasian and therefore a tsarist subject. Fulat Beg rode a wave of public discontent against tsarist encroachment, and the imprisonment and execution of Russian-subject merchants were an easy populist score. Because of the commercial treaty of 1868, Russian merchants gained privileges in the Khanate of Khoqand. It was not lost on the locals that the entry of new players, backed by capital and superior logistics from Kazan, Orenburg, or Tashkent, would dramatically change local markets, disadvantage native merchants, and cause the outflow of capital to Russia. Musa and Ahmed became collateral damage amid an anticolonial uprising and civil war in Khoqand.

In early 1876, Russian troops entered Khoqand. The khanate was abolished, and its territory became part of the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan. Fulat Khan had fled into the mountains but was then captured and hanged in Margilan.[40] Hajji Ahmed was released from jail sometime after Russia's takeover of Margilan. He sought to reclaim his stolen goods and hoped that the new Russian administration would help him in that endeavor. Hajji Ahmed made way to Mahram (now in Tajikistan), a former Khoqandi fortress, which was briefly the rebels' stronghold and was taken by Russia in 1875. He went to the chief of the Russian administration, lieutenant colonel Rozenko, to whom the Khoqandi caravan had delivered his possessions. Hajji Ahmed submitted a written complaint about his robbery and subsequent arrest by a rebel khan in Margilan. According to Hajji Ahmed, lieutenant colonel Rozenko returned his travel bags and graciously offered his administration's help in tracking down his assailants. Hajji Ahmed identified one of them, named Tash-Pansat, and the Russian authorities, by then in full control of the region, summoned the man for questioning. Tash-Pansat confessed to robbing Hajji Ahmed and pledged to return 100 Bukharan *tilla*, which he alleged to have been his share of the loot.

Lieutenant colonel Rozenko allegedly gave Hajji Ahmed an "open sheet" (*otkrytyi list*) for the arrest of the remaining robbers, with an instruction for local authorities to disarm and deliver them for interrogation in Mahram. Equipped with these documents, Hajji Ahmed traveled to neighboring Khoqandi qishlaqs in search of the men who had wronged him. While the main perpetrators had fled the area and evaded justice, he tracked down several robbers. Hajji Ahmed reported that, when threatened with the Russian judicial system, they voluntarily returned 600 rubles, or their share of the loot, "taking an oath from me not to ask further restitution from them and not to tell anyone about this."[41] We only know about Hajji Ahmed's considerable financial loss and minimal restitution from his words. He might have been fully transparent, but it would have also been beneficial for him to inflate his

[37] One Bukharan *tilla* was worth 3.75 Russian rubles in 1870; see John Mowbray Trotter, *Western Turkestan: An Account of the Statistics, Topography, and Tribes of the Russian Territory and Independent Native States in Western Turkestan* (Calcutta, 1882), 45.

[38] Nancy Mandelker Frieden, *Russian Physicians in an Era of Reform and Revolution, 1856–1905* (Princeton, 1981), 48.

[39] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, ll. 21–21ob, 27 (May 11, 1877).

[40] Levi, *Rise and Fall of Khoqand*, 208.

[41] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, ll. 21ob–22, 27 (May 11, 1877).

Figure 6. Map of Hajji Ahmed's Journey, 1872–78.

losses to the nameless Khoqandi bandits when petitioning the imperial authorities as an aggrieved Russian subject. (Figure 6)

Hajji Ahmed then requested assistance in his case from the Russian military governor of the newly established Fergana oblast. He traveled to Khujand and then Khoqand, where, as he recounted to the same military governor several years later, "mistaking me for a *sart*, you returned my petition to me without reading it, saying that during the war you do not deal with other matters."[42] Nevertheless, Hajji Ahmed claimed to have submitted a statement to the Khoqand magistrate and, in quiet confidence that the wheels of Russian justice were turning, decided to continue his trading business while waiting for a word from the magistrate.[43] He set aside his plans of returning to Dagestan until he recouped his losses. He spent the 600 rubles that he had reclaimed from the robbers on purchasing satin, prayer rugs, and scarves, and headed to Aulie-Ata.[44]

Hajji Ahmed heard from fellow merchants that his new merchandise might yield a good profit in the region of Semirechye, or Jetisu. He claimed that he had tried to introduce himself to the military governor of Semirechye oblast and formally request the right to trade there. He traveled to Vernyi and then Karakol (now in Kyrgyzstan) but kept missing the military governor. He alleged that two Kazakh chieftains then invited him to their communities "as a guest, and also to trade and, because I am a mullah, to recite the Qurʾan for the dead."[45] Hajji Ahmed might have referred to himself as a mullah because he received some religious training from his father, who was a religious leader and a merchant in Dagestan. He followed that very model, combining trade and Islamic instruction, in his new life in Central

[42] Ibid., l. 22–22ob (May 11, 1877).

[43] On Russia's transformation of the legal system in Central Asia and the Kazakh steppe, see Paolo Sartori, *Visions of Justice: Sharīʿa and Cultural Change in Russian Central Asia* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2017); Paolo Sartori and Pavel Shablei, *Eksperimenty imperii: Adat, shariat i proizvodstvo znanii v Kazakhskoi stepi* (Moscow, 2019).

[44] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, l. 22ob (May 11, 1877).

[45] Ibid., l. 23 (May 11, 1877).

Asia.[46] Educated travelers across Muslim Eurasia commonly took up those two occupations, as they provided different sources of income that an outsider could make on their journey. Selling medications—for "Asian medicines" were found in Hajji Ahmed's possession—was yet another way to supplement itinerant income. It was when he was leaving his generous hosts and came at a stop at Sarytokum *volost'* (subdistrict) of Vernyi *uezd* (district), that he was apprehended by Russian gendarmes. According to Hajji Ahmed, upon his arrest, he had five horses, 230 sheep, 600 rubles worth of merchandise, six books, and a revolver with six bullets.[47] He listed slightly more possessions than described in the official report, which might indicate theft by the arresting authorities.

Hajji Ahmed as an Ottoman Spy: Russian Fears of Muslim Mobility

Hajji Ahmed finished his petition, written in jail in Vernyi, by pleading his innocence to the military governor of Semirechye oblast. He admitted his mistakes in not disclosing his birth name upon his arrest and misrepresenting how long he had lived in Central Asia. He said that he had introduced himself as Hajji Ahmed, which was how everyone knew him, but that he should have given gendarmes his real name, Hajji Mahmud, son of Hajji Yusuf, of Gazikumukh. He also regretted reporting during his initial interrogations that he had been present in Central Asia for 13–14 years, explaining, unconvincingly, that he added his 4–5 years of travels to the nine years that his adopted father Yunus had spent in the region prior to their meeting.[48] He asked for forgiveness and release, as his only fault was unintentional misrepresentation; after all, he "had not killed subjects of the Emperor, had not robbed the treasury, and ... had not evaded taxes." He asked the government to return him the profits from the sale of his confiscated horses and other possessions and the unsold merchandise and animals and to send him to Dagestan, offering to cover his own travel expenses.[49]

Tsarist authorities must have been relieved that Hajji Ahmed was not an Ottoman subject. He spent considerable effort listing the names of elected officials in Gazikumukh from when he had left in the early 1870s, to persuade Russian officials that he was indeed a Dagestani.[50] Yet his story had conspicuous gaps. Hajji Ahmed's petition, carefully curated to solicit the government's favor, obfuscated what had happened in the last two years. He provided little detail on what he was doing between his imprisonment in Margilan in late 1875 and his arrest in the Jetisu region in the spring of 1877. Why did he leave the Ferghana valley if his restitution case was pending with the Russian administration there? The military governor of Semirechye oblast believed that Hajji Ahmed could not formalize his right of residence in Khoqand, and hence he "sneaked into ... Semirechye to register somewhere here."[51] During those two missing years, Hajji Ahmed had reinvented himself as a traveling preacher. The Russian authorities were perplexed as to how this young Dagestani merchant had been so successful as a mullah that he had received entire herds of animals as gifts, including from an elected subdistrict chief (*volostnoi*), who hosted him in his yurt and gifted him a foal.[52]

[46] Hajji Ahmed's religious guidance was likely limited and fell below the standards of Islamic knowledge in many Kazakh communities; see Allen J. Frank, "A Month among the Qazaqs in the Emirate of Bukhara: Observations on Islamic Knowledge in a Nomadic Environment," in *Explorations in the Social History of Modern Central Asia (19th—Early 20th Century)*, ed. Paolo Sartori (Leiden, Netherlands, 2013): 247–66.

[47] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, l. 23ob (May 11, 1877).

[48] Ibid., l. 24 (May 11, 1877).

[49] Ibid., ll. 23ob–24, 28–29 (May 11, 1877).

[50] Ibid., ll. 14ob, 29 (May 11, 1877).

[51] Ibid., l. 2 (April 9, 1877).

[52] Ibid., l. 12ob (April 26, 1877).

Loyalty to the empire emerged as a key category in Russia's governance of its Muslim provinces in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Tsarist authorities questioned whether Russia's Sunni Muslim subjects could ever be fully loyal to the tsar when the Ottoman sultan-caliph claimed spiritual authority over all Sunni Muslims.[53] The Turkestan authorities' chief concern, permeating their scant correspondence, was establishing where Hajji Ahmed's loyalty lay. Why would a loyal subject of the Russian emperor pretend to be a Turk, or consent to being called a Turk and a resident of Mecca? The intelligence that the authorities received about him and the disarming persona that he presented did not align. Tsarist officials in Vernyi had to grapple with the damning allegation that Hajji Ahmed, when touring the steppe, was heard to chide his hosts, saying that Kazakhs "are cowards and have no good weaponry, as otherwise they would have easily dealt with the Russians."[54] Did he instigate a rebellion in the Kazakh steppe, or was he just a run-of-the-mill charlatan, falsely accused of disloyalty?

Hajji Ahmed was not the first Dagestani to make a living in the Kazakh steppe. In previous decades, North Caucasians traveled to areas beyond the Caspian Sea for work. Some of them attracted the attention of tsarist authorities for panhandling in Kazakh villages and collecting sheep as alms.[55] In 1869, the Caucasus Viceroy, at the request of the Orenburg governor, instructed local authorities "not to allow natives (*tuzemtsy*) to travel to the Kazakh steppe for wage work or other business" in a bid to disrupt Muslim migrations between the Caucasus and Central Asia.[56] Nevertheless, in the following years, men from Gazikumukh *okrug* (district), where Hajji Ahmed was from, received permission from local authorities to travel to Orenburg guberniia for work as craftsmen or common laborers, which invited displeasure from Orenburg officials.[57] This seasonal labor migration generated the knowledge of travel routes and survival in the steppe. Hajji Ahmed might have found success among Kazakh nomads thanks to not only what he learned as a merchant in the Ferghana valley but also what he heard growing up in Gazikumukh, drawing on local memories of transregional mobility.

Hajji Ahmed's journey and identity fit neatly into two narratives about Islam and Muslims among Russian officialdom, neither of which was positive. First, tsarist authorities routinely infantilized Kazakh nomads as simple and naïve Muslims, as opposed to the more learned but also "fanatical" settled Muslims, especially Tatars. By the late nineteenth century, the government was anxious about Tatar proselytism in the steppe. Tsarist officials' assessment of Tatar "missionaries" was contradictory: on the one hand, they intentionally disseminated a more militant version of Islam, imbued with pro-Ottoman and anti-Russian sentiments; on the other hand, they were unlearned fraudsters who swindled gullible nomads of money and cattle by selling them religious trinkets and ineffective medicines.[58] The story of Hajji Ahmed, a "Turk" merchant-preacher who received hundreds of gifted animals from Kazakh nomads, fit into both of these Orientalist narratives. The arrival of outsiders in the Kazakh religious space, ironically, was facilitated by Russia's policies. In 1868, the Russian government removed the Kazakh steppe from the purview of the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, a state-controlled religious administration over Muslim affairs

[53] On Muslim loyalty as part of the "Muslim question" in imperial Russia, see Campbell, *Muslim Question*, 21–32.

[54] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, l. 12ob (April 26, 1877).

[55] Sakartvelos sakhelmtsipo saistorio arkivi (National Historical Archive of Georgia; hereafter SSSA) f. 545, op. 1, d. 446, l. 1–1ob (July 13, 1869). I thank Sergey Salushchev for sharing this document with me.

[56] Ibid., l. 4 (December 21, 1869).

[57] Ibid., ll. 4ob (December 21, 1869), 10ob (June 30, 1873).

[58] Paul W. Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia's Volga-Kama Region, 1827–1905* (Ithaca, 2002), 179–82, 190–92; Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, 223–26; Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire*, 50–52, 70, 73. On Tatar ʿulama, see Rozaliya Garipova, "The Transformation of the Ulama and the Shariʿa in the Volga-Ural Muslim Community under Russian Imperial Rule" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2013).

that was established in 1788. That was done, in part, to remove the influence of Tatar and Bashkir ʿulama (religious authorities), appointed by the Orenburg Assembly. The Assembly could no longer appoint imams for the Kazakhs, creating a greater demand for religious guidance in the steppe.[59] This niche was occasionally filled by Muslim religious figures who arrived, without state authorization, from other parts of the empire.[60]

Second, Hajji Ahmed's assumed identity as a Turk reinforced an old trope that Ottoman emissaries visited Russia's Muslim provinces and encouraged local Muslims to resist Russia or emigrate to the Ottoman Empire. During the Caucasus War and its immediate aftermath, tsarist authorities routinely blamed Ottoman emissaries for spreading anti-Russian propaganda.[61] Hajji Ahmed's actual identity as a Dagestani likely invited further scrutiny. Tsarist authorities had been keeping a close eye on the Northeast Caucasus. In April 1877, after Russia's declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire, an uprising against tsarist rule broke out in Dagestan and Chechnya. Several Dagestani ʿulama declared a *jihād* (holy war) against Russia, urging their followers to resist tsarist occupation.[62] The authorities suppressed the uprising, which had spread to 394 villages in Dagestan, and deported many of its participants and their families to remote parts of Russia.[63] The uprising marked Dagestanis as disloyal subjects in imperial administrative circles.

The mention of Hajji Ahmed's three companions might have also served to stoke colonial anxieties over unsanctioned Muslim mobility in the steppe. Several weeks after Hajji Ahmed's arrest, the chief of Qapal uezd submitted a report to the Russian military governor of Semirechye oblast. He laid out that he had "reliably" learned from unnamed sources that a Kazakh from Vernyi uezd, a Kyrgyz, and a sart from Tashkent had been traveling with Hajji Ahmed.[64] The district chief must have been embarrassed that many residents in his district were found to give gifts to Hajji Ahmed, and his report intentionally painted a story of seditious activity, carried out by several outsiders. Did the three companions even exist? They were not present during Hajji Ahmed's capture and did not appear in other Russian reports. This motley Central Asian trio might have been based on a rumor, or was an outright invention, to add weight to the threat that Hajji Ahmed allegedly posed. Their brief appearance in a report subtly hinted at Pan-Turkic solidarity and risks of a multiethnic revolt in Turkestan.

[59] Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, 221, 226. On the 1868 Provisional Statute (Steppe Statute), see Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire*, 53–62. On the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, see Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, 50–91; Crews, "Empire and the Confessional State: Islam and Religious Politics in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 1 (February 2003): 50–83; Campbell, *Muslim Question*, 107–12. On Islamic religious institutions in the Kazakh steppe, see Nurlan Kabdylkhak, "Muslim Institutions and Religious Patronage on the Kazakh Steppe under the Russian Tsars, 1820s–1920s" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2025).

[60] Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, 337–39; Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire*, 79.

[61] SSSA f. 11, d. 3239 (O znachitel'nykh pereseleniiakh v Turtsiiu iz Zakavkazskogo kraia musul'man), l. 12 (1859); f. 416, op. 3, d. 1115 (Kopiia s proklamatsii turetskogo pravitel'stva, obrashchennaia k cherkesam, 1864); Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF, State Archive of the Russian Federation) f. P5235, op. 4, d. 504 (Spravka o turetskom shpionazhe v Kabarde, 1903–18).

[62] See Timur Magomedovich Aitberov, Iusup Usmanovich Dadaev, and Kh. A. Omarov, eds., *Vosstaniia dagestantsev i chechentsev v posleshamilevskuiu epokhu i imamat 1877 goda* (Makhachkala, 2001); Zeinab Mallaevna Amirova, *Uchastie narodov Severnogo Kavkaza v russko-turetskoi voine 1877–1878 gg.* (Makhachkala, 2005).

[63] Magomed Magomedovich Gasanov, *Dagestan v sostave Rossii (vtoraia polovina XIX veka)* (Makhachkala, 1999), 147; Austin Jersild, "Imperial Russification: Dagestani Mountaineers in Russian Exile, 1877–83," *Central Asian Survey* 19, no. 1 (2000): 5–16.

[64] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, ll. 12–14ob (April 26, 1877).

Rumors and insinuations held disproportionate weight in colonial policing because imperial bureaucracy had limited presence in the Kazakh steppe and Turkestani countryside and, amid information scarcity, paid particular attention to allegations by native informants.[65]

Since the early nineteenth century, Russian officials policed unsanctioned Muslim travel, especially involving the spread of Sufism and other unregulated Islamic practices, in the steppe. Already in 1848, authorities of the Governor-Generalship of West Siberia and then Orenburg guberniia issued orders to expel suspicious mullahs and Muslim teachers, especially foreigners, from the Kazakh steppe.[66] In the 1850s, Russian authorities were investigating the case of Muhammad Sharif Mansurov, who was apprehended in the Kazakh steppe and faced accusations of being a "false prophet," preaching Sufism, and having visited Ottoman domains. His identity came under question, as he variously claimed to be a Kazakh, a Kazan Tatar, or a native of Bukhara, Khoqand, or Tashkent.[67] In another parallel to Hajji Ahmed, he was also a merchant, inviting further scrutiny to a relationship between trade and Islamic missionary activity. Muslim travelers like that defied tsarist categorizations. Having mullahs trade sheep and merchants perform funeral rites blended occupational categories and confused a bureaucrat. The imperial bureaucracy lacked a legal taxonomy to make sense of many kinds of mobility. Appraising mundane activities through the binary of loyalty or disloyalty to the empire inevitably led to a greater surveillance and policing of Muslim colonial subjects. In 1868, Russian authorities banned Tatars from being appointed as mullahs and Central Asian Sufi shaykhs and Tatar madrasa students from residing among Kazakh nomads in much of the steppe.[68]

Hajji Ahmed's first petition did not achieve a desirable effect. He remained in jail. Russian officials did not have incontrovertible evidence that he broke the law, but they also had little reason to release a self-proclaimed Dagestani mullah, who was accused of presenting himself as a Turk and spreading anti-tsarist propaganda in Central Asia, when Russia was fighting a war against the Ottoman empire and put down a pro-Ottoman rebellion in Dagestan. Hajji Ahmed's case set off too many alarms.[69] He was moved from a jail in Vernyi to one in Tashkent.

In September 1877, Hajji Ahmed wrote his second petition, while imprisoned in Tashkent, addressing it to the higher authority: Governor-General of Turkestan Konstantin von Kaufman. Hajji Ahmed did not reiterate his full story but instead detailed the minutiae of his 1875 plea to Russian authorities to find his robbers in the Ferghana valley. He mentioned the names of all Russian military and civil officials with whom he had spoken and where those conversations took place, and identified a Circassian in service of General Mikhail Skobelev, the first military governor of Fergana oblast, to whom he had given power of attorney on his pending restitution case. By then, Hajji Ahmed must have realized that tsarist officials had doubts about his loyalty, and he needed to provide evidence that Turkestan authorities had already met him as a lawful Russian subject and a victim of a crime, not a perpetrator. For greater effect, he stressed the paradox of his predicament:

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[65] Paolo Sartori and Pavel Shablei, "Delo Mukhammada Sharifa Mansurova: Rossiiskaia imperiia i sufizm v Kazakhskoi stepi v seredine XIX veka," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 64, no. 3–4 (2023): 573, 591.

[66] Pavel Shablei and Paolo Sartori, *Delo Mansurova: Imperiia i sufizm v Kazakhskoi stepi* (Moscow, 2025), 57.

[67] Mansurov was apprehended in Qapal, the same uezd where Russian authorities would search for Hajji Ahmed over thirty years later; Shablei and Sartori, *Delo Mansurova*, 8, 73–74, 85.

[68] Shablei and Sartori, *Delo Mansurova*, 141–42; Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions*, 311; Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire*, 50.

[69] On the arrest of an itinerant Kazakh in the 1860s, with a similar outcome, see Danielle Ross, "Falling through the Cracks of Empire: The Plight of Ḥābbī Khwājā Niyāzov," *ÖAW Study of Islam in Central Eurasia Blog*, at https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/falling-through-the-cracks-of-empire-the-plight-of-habbi-khwaja-niyazov (accessed October 28, 2025).

> An amazing thing happened. Fulat Beg, a thief, arrested me as a Russian spy, after which I resorted to the protection of the just Russian government. I [then] went on business to Almaty (sic), where I was arrested [and put] in jail as a Turkish spy, without [their] knowing that I was a subject of His Imperial Majesty.[70]

He also clarified that Kazakhs in Almaty identified him to Russian authorities as an Ottoman spy. His testimony subtly implied that local merchants might have seized a chance to eliminate competition by launching a false accusation against him.[71] In his second petition, he appealed for his release, permanently or on bail, in the custody of the "reliable people of Tashkent," and for the continued search for his stolen merchandise.

Hajji Ahmed was learning that colonial power was fickle and that his Russian subjecthood, previously an advantage in trade and border-crossing, could hardly aid him when he was suspected of disloyalty, a tsarist subject's ultimate crime. His story parallels that of Jewish merchant Cohen, who lived under French colonial rule in Morocco and became a subject of Clifford Geertz's fieldwork. Cohen initially enjoyed the support of French officials in his revenge raid on Berbers but raised colonial suspicions when he unexpectedly succeeded and was then arrested by the French as a Berber spy.[72] Colonial officials could question one's fealty at any point and grant and revoke favors at will.

We do not know if Kaufman ever received Hajji Ahmed's petition or, if he had, what he thought of it. However, we have on record Kaufman's opinion, several years later, about the presence of North Caucasians, especially Dagestanis, in Turkestan. In 1881, the new Russian emperor, Alexander III, inquired as to whether Dagestani deportees could be relocated from northwestern Russia to Central Asia. Kaufman vociferously protested the idea, calling the settlement of Dagestanis in Turkestan "undesirable" due to the alleged characteristics of the Russian empire's different Muslim populations:

> The inhabitants of the region [Turkestan] are related [to North Caucasians] by religion but differ significantly from them in character. Neither the Uzbeks, nor the Tajiks, nor the Kazakhs (*kirgiz*), who form the topographical composition of the region, have that militancy that has long been shown by the Caucasians, or that hostility toward everything alien to them by religion. Nevertheless, they are extremely receptive to any propaganda, and I fear that, if they come into contact with energetic Caucasians, they might fraternize with them, thanks to the common religion, and succumb to their influence.[73]

Kaufman's response captures the aforementioned tropes in tsarist officialdom's thinking of Dagestanis as unreliable and of Central Asians as docile and impressionable. It suggests the hardening perception of Dagestanis after the uprising of 1877 as a detrimental influence on the empire's other Muslim subjects.[74]

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[70] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, ll. 61–61ob (Hajji Ahmed's second petition, in Turki), 59–60ob (in Russian translation) (Tashkent, September 9, 1877).

[71] Ibid., l. 61 (September 9, 1877). For a case of a Kazakh exploiting Russian colonial anxieties about Islam for self-interest, see Alexander Morrison, "Sufism, Pan-Islamism and Information Panic: Nil Sergeevich Lykoshin and the Aftermath of the Andijan Uprising," *Past & Present* 214, no. 1 (2012): 266–83.

[72] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 7–9.

[73] O'MA f. I-1, op. 16, d. 2401 (O vodvorenii v Turkestanskom krae miatezhnykh kavkazskikh gortsev), ll. 3–4 (September 30, 1881). On Kaufman's response, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, "Tracing Dagestani Deportees from Opochka to Tashkent: Notes on Transnational Archival Research and Decolonization," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2024): 783–92.

[74] See also Daniel R. Brower, "Islam and Ethnicity: Russian Colonial Policy in Turkestan," in *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917*, Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini, eds. (Bloomington, IN, 1997), 115–37.

Tsarist officialdom, as Hajji Ahmed learned, was also spread thin. Turkestan officials in Mahram and Khoqand might have indeed known him, but those in Vernyi and Tashkent were meeting him for the first time, and institutional knowledge was unreliable amid war and across distance. Hajji Ahmed had been crossing multiple administrative boundaries in the 1870s: Dagestan oblast and Terek oblast within the Caucasus Viceroyalty, Astrakhan guberniia, Uralsk oblast within Orenburg guberniia, Syr-Darya oblast, Semirechye oblast, and Fergana oblast within the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan, the Emirate of Bukhara, and the Khanate of Khoqand. Such a journey garbled one's paper trail, not to mention that Hajji Ahmed appeared under at least two names. We do not have evidence that the officials in Vernyi or Tashkent ever received confirmation from their peers in Fergana oblast about Hajji Ahmed's restitution case. Shortly after his second petition, the Turkestan authorities decided to send him to Dagestan, not as a free man but as a prisoner. They likely accepted his identity as a Dagestani and considered his story of false imprisonment in Margilan credible, but still questioned his activity in the Kazakh steppe and regarded his presence in Turkestan undesirable. By sending him to Dagestan, they deferred the adjudication of his case to their counterparts in the Caucasus Viceroyalty.

In November 1877, Hajji Ahmed sent his third petition, to the military commander of Chimkent, a garrison town on the southern edge of the Kazakh steppe. At this point, he was in transit from a jail in Tashkent to, according to his knowledge, his hometown of Gazikumukh.[75] Weeks earlier, the Russian government had ordered the cessation of the transit of prisoners (*etapnoe dvizhenie*).[76] Hajji Ahmed was temporarily placed in military detention (*gauptvakhta*) in Chimkent. There, he grew increasingly anxious about his fate. In his short petition, he asked the military commander to send a telegram to Governor-General of Turkestan to inquire as to whether he could be released on bail in the custody of one Abdulla Khanafiev, a Tatar resident of Tashkent and likely a fellow merchant. This time, defeated and disillusioned, he did not reiterate his case and his innocence, or ask for the return of his goods or compensation. He signed the Russian-language petition, written on his behalf, with his name in the Arabic script: Hajji Mahmud Yusuf oglu.[77]

That is the last time we hear directly from our adventurous protagonist. In February 1878, shortly after his third petition, the head of chancellery of the Governor-General of Turkestan notified the military governor of Fergana oblast that the investigation into the robbery of Khadzhi-Makhmut-Iusufov, a native of the Caucasus, is terminated and "left without any consequences."[78] That was the bureaucratic language for shelving cold cases. With no more documents in his case file, we do not know what happened to Hajji Ahmed. Did he ever leave military detention in Chimkent? Did he die there, of neglect or epidemic disease, or did he perish while being transported to the Caucasus across the expanse of Russia's new colonial territories, or in another jail in Dagestan?

The ending to Hajji Ahmed's story remains unknown and, therefore, open. I prefer to imagine that Hajji Ahmed returned to Gazikumukh, was eventually released, and got to embrace his parents who had been worried sick about him. He was no older than twenty-four when he set off from Tashkent to Dagestan under military convoy. He might have had a long life ahead of him with a family of his own if he so wished. Now that he knew the trade routes and needs of different markets, he might have engaged in long-distance trade between the tsarist Caucasus and Turkestan. And, one day, at an old age, he might have returned to the Ferghana valley to visit places where he came of age and where he, his

[75] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, l. 42–42ob (Hajji Ahmed's third petition, in Russian) (Chimkent [Shymkent], November 23, 1877).

[76] O'MA, f. I-36, op. 1, d. 1492 (Ob otpravlenii na rodinu turetskikh emigrantov), l. 10 (October 7, 1878).

[77] O'MA f. I-1, op. 19, d. 245, l. 42–42ob (November 23, 1877).

[78] Ibid., l. 55 (February 22, 1878).

chosen brothers, Musa and Ahmed, and his adopted father, Yunus, had once traded sheep, satin, and rubies.

Hajji Ahmed's story provides a snapshot of a formative decade in Russia's conquest of Central Asia. It is reminiscent of travels in the early modern Muslim world for how easily this young merchant crossed boundaries and negotiated identities in Khoqand and Turkestan.[79] Yet Hajji Ahmed was also a harbinger of a new political and economic order in Central Asia. Following the dissolution of the Khanate of Khoqand in 1876, Russia expanded into the Turkmen desert in the 1880s and the Pamir Mountains in 1893–95. The government started building railways to tie its new Turkestani territories closer to the rest of the empire. By 1888, the Transcaspian Railway reached Samarkand via Bukhara; it was extended to Tashkent and Andijan by 1898. The railway led to Krasnovodsk (now Türkmenbaşy, Turkmenistan) on the Caspian coast, and eventually by ferry to Baku. In 1906, the Trans-Aral Railway linked Tashkent to Orenburg, connecting the Transcaspian Railway to Russian and European railway grids and drastically increasing the volume of exports out of Turkestan.[80] The railway facilitated greater mobility between Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Russia, enabling perhaps new generations of entrepreneurial Hajji Ahmeds. It also, however, accelerated the penetration of Russian and European capital and peripheralized Central Asia as a supplier of raw materials. Economically, Turkestan became Russia's largest colony.[81]

Tsarist fears of an indigenous uprising in Central Asia, which featured prominently in the arrest of Hajji Ahmed, increased in subsequent decades. In 1898, about 1,500 Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, led by a Naqshbandi Sufi shaykh, made a surprise attack on a Russian battalion in Andijan.[82] Following the Andijan Uprising, Turkestan officials' paranoia about Muslim mobility and Islam coalesced under the umbrella of Pan-Islamism, or Pan-Islam, a movement advocating for the unity of global Muslims and an alleged threat to Russia's colonial enterprise.[83] In 1916, the conscription of Muslims into the Russian army led to a major uprising, which again started in the Ferghana valley, in Khujand, and then spread to Semirechye oblast.[84] Alongside the uprising in Dagestan and Chechnya in 1877, those were the largest anticolonial uprisings in the final half-century of Romanov rule.

Hajji Ahmed was a minor figure in global and Central Asian history and even at most markets where he traded. His story, recorded in scant correspondence and preserved in a Soviet cardboard folder in the national archive of Uzbekistan, reveals the bureaucratic machinery of colonial policing in Turkestan. It also expands our vision of Muslim mobility in tsarist borderlands, some of which persisted despite tsarist conquest, and some of which

[79] See, for example, Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (London, 2007); travel accounts in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, Eng., 2007).

[80] Jennifer Keating, *On Arid Ground: Political Ecologies of Empire in Russian Central Asia* (Oxford, 2022), 32–3, 35–7.

[81] On the coloniality of Russian rule in Central Asia, see Adeeb Khalid, "Turkestan's Place in the Russian Empire" in "Russian Colonialism, Women, and Politics in Central Asia," ed. Bakhodir Pasilov, special issue, *Oriente Moderno* 102 no. 2 (2022): 192–207; Alexander Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand, 1868–1910: A Comparison with British India* (Oxford, 2008); Svetlana Gorshenina and Sergei Abashin, eds., *Le Turkestan Russe: Une colonie comme les autres?* (Tashkent and Paris, 2009).

[82] On the Andijan uprising of 1898, see Bakhtiiar Babadzhanov, "Andizhanskoe vosstanie 1898 goda i 'musul'manskii vopros' v Turkestane (vzgliady 'kolonizatorov' i 'kolonizirovannykh,'" *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2009): 155–200.

[83] On Pan-Islamism as a phantom threat, see Morrison, "Sufism, Pan-Islamism and Information Panic"; Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, "Letters from the Ottoman Empire: Migration from the Caucasus and Russia's Pan-Islamic Panic," *Slavic Review* 82, no. 2 (Summer 2023): 311–33; Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims*, 199–203.

[84] On the Central Asian revolt of 1916, see Aminat Chokobaeva, Cloé Drieu, and Alexander Morrison, eds., *The Central Asian Revolt of 1916: A Collapsing Empire in the Age of War and Revolution* (Manchester, 2020); Alexander Morrison and Gul'nara Amanovna Aitpaeva, eds., *Izuchenie 1916 goda: Depolitizatsiia i gumanizatsiia znanii o vosstanii v Tsentral'noi Azii* (Bishkek, 2020).

was enabled by it. Histories of the Caucasus and Central Asia, which are so often told separately, had been intricately tied through the lives of many people traversing inner Eurasia in the late imperial age. The adventurous Dagestani merchant Hajji Ahmed was one of them.

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