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SENTINELS OF THE STEPPE FRONTIER: DIPLOMACY, TRADE, AND POWER IN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE KHIVA KHANATE AND THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE UNDER MUHAMMAD RAHIMKHAN I (1806–1825)

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the political, economic, and diplomatic relations between the Khiva Khanate and the Russian Empire during the reign of Muhammad Rahimkhan I (1806–1825). Based on a critical analysis of Russian imperial archives, Central Asian chronicles, European travel accounts, and modern international scholarship, the study argues that Russo–Khivan relations in the early nineteenth century were shaped by pragmatic calculation rather than ideological confrontation. The article emphasizes the agency of the Khivan ruling elite, the role of informal trade networks, and the hybrid nature of diplomacy on the imperial periphery. It concludes that the period under study represents a transitional phase in which Khiva functioned not as a passive object of Russian expansion, but as an active political actor navigating competing imperial interests.*

**Key words:** *Khiva Khanate, Russian Empire, Muhammad Rahimkhan I, Central Asia, imperial frontiers.*

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Central Asia occupied a liminal position between expanding imperial powers and resilient local polities. The Khiva Khanate, located along the lower reaches of the Amu Darya, emerged as one of the key political actors in this frontier zone. During the reign of Muhammad Rahimkhan I (1806–1825), Khiva maintained sustained contact with the Russian Empire, whose southern frontier advanced steadily toward the Caspian and Central Asian steppes.

Unlike later periods of overt colonial domination, Russo–Khivan relations in the early nineteenth century were characterized by negotiation, mutual dependency, and strategic ambiguity. Russian policymakers viewed Khiva simultaneously as a commercial partner, a source of insecurity, and a gateway to broader Asian markets. For the Khivan elite, engagement with Russia offered economic benefits and diplomatic leverage, while also posing risks to political autonomy. This article explores how these competing interests shaped bilateral relations during Muhammad Rahimkhan I’s reign.

The study draws upon a diverse corpus of primary and secondary sources in Russian, Persian, Chagatai Turkic, English, and French. Russian archival materials include diplomatic correspondence, reports of frontier officials, and mission accounts preserved in imperial collections [1]. Central Asian narrative sources, most notably Firdaws al-Iqbal, provide insight into Khivan political culture and internal priorities [2]. European

travelogues and intelligence reports offer external perspectives shaped by imperial curiosity and strategic calculation [3].

Methodologically, the article combines diplomatic history with elements of economic and frontier studies. Particular attention is paid to discrepancies between Russian and Khivan representations of the same events, revealing how power, perception, and interest intersected in cross-cultural encounters.

Muhammad Rahimkhan I ascended the throne at a time when Khiva faced both internal fragmentation and external pressure. His reign was marked by efforts to strengthen central authority, regulate taxation, and assert control over tribal groups inhabiting the periphery of the oasis core. These internal reforms were closely linked to foreign policy: political stability was a prerequisite for maintaining Khiva's position within regional trade networks.

Khivan rulers perceived diplomacy not merely as interstate communication, but as a tool of survival in a competitive environment. Engagement with Russia was therefore cautious and selective. The khan sought to preserve sovereignty while extracting material and symbolic benefits from interaction with a powerful northern neighbor [4].

Russian interest in Khiva intensified in the early nineteenth century due to a combination of economic ambitions and security concerns. The Russian government aimed to expand trade routes linking the Volga region with Central Asia and beyond, while also addressing frontier instability caused by raids and caravan disruptions. Khiva occupied a strategic position within this calculus, serving both as a potential partner and a perceived source of disorder [5].

Diplomatic missions dispatched to Khiva during this period served multiple purposes. Officially framed as commercial or humanitarian initiatives, they also functioned as reconnaissance efforts designed to gather intelligence on political conditions, military capacity, and trade routes. Such dual-purpose diplomacy reflects the broader logic of imperial engagement on the Eurasian frontier.

Trade constituted the most consistent and mutually beneficial aspect of Russo–Khivan relations. Merchant networks connected Astrakhan, Orenburg, Khiva, and Bukhara, facilitating the exchange of textiles, metals, livestock, and luxury goods. These networks operated largely through informal mechanisms based on trust, kinship, and *посредники* (intermediaries), often bypassing official diplomatic channels [6].

The economic geography of the region—dominated by deserts, river corridors, and caravan routes—encouraged cooperation even during periods of political tension. Khiva's control over key transit points enhanced its bargaining position, allowing the khanate to negotiate from a position of relative strength despite its limited military capacity.

One of the most contentious issues in Russo–Khivan relations concerned the captivity of Russian subjects in Khiva. Russian officials framed the problem in moral and humanitarian terms, portraying captivity as evidence of frontier barbarity and insecurity. In contrast, Khivan sources treated captivity as an established socio-economic practice embedded in regional norms of warfare and labor [7].

The captivity issue periodically escalated diplomatic tensions and provided Russian authorities with a justification for increased involvement in Central Asian affairs. At the same time, negotiations over prisoners offered Khivan rulers an opportunity to extract concessions and assert diplomatic agency. Thus, humanitarian discourse functioned not only as a moral argument, but also as a political instrument.

Diplomatic interaction between Khiva and Russia followed patterns distinct from European interstate relations. Gift exchange, ritualized hospitality, personal guarantees, and symbolic gestures played a central role. Envoys operated in a culturally hybrid space, navigating linguistic barriers and differing conceptions of sovereignty and authority [8].

This form of diplomacy underscores the negotiated nature of power on the imperial periphery. Rather than a linear process of domination, Russo–Khivan relations involved continuous adaptation, miscommunication, and compromise.

Modern scholarship increasingly challenges earlier imperial narratives that depicted Khiva as a passive object of Russian expansion. Recent studies emphasize local agency, regional dynamics, and the contingent nature of imperial influence [9]. By integrating Central Asian sources and comparative perspectives, contemporary historians present a more nuanced picture of early nineteenth-century diplomacy.

This article contributes to this historiographical shift by foregrounding the strategic choices of the Khivan elite and highlighting the multiplicity of actors involved in shaping bilateral relations.

The reign of Muhammad Rahimkhan I represents a critical phase in the history of Russo–Central Asian relations. During this period, Khiva and Russia engaged in a pragmatic, situational partnership shaped by trade, diplomacy, and frontier security concerns. Russia had not yet established direct political control, while Khiva actively maneuvered to preserve autonomy and leverage its strategic position.

Understanding this period as one of negotiated interaction rather than inevitable imperial expansion allows for a more balanced interpretation of Central Asian history. The case of Khiva demonstrates that local polities retained significant agency even in the shadow of expanding empires, shaping outcomes through diplomacy, economic strategy, and political adaptation.

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