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Foreign Historiography of the Social History of Traditional Kazakh Society: Interpreting the Image of the Biy (18th-20th Centuries)

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Abstract. Based on materials from Western European and American historiography, the article highlights the main theoretical and methodological approaches to studying one of the key social institutions of traditional Kazakh society – the Biy Institute. For a long time, traditional institutions of nomadic societies have attracted the attention not only of Russian scholars representing various academic schools, but also of Western historians. The article briefly examines the development of various discourses concerning the southeastern periphery of the Russian Empire, which is a region that has consistently attracted the attention of travelers, merchants, scholars, and researchers of the Russian frontier. The expansion of imperial influence in the eastern borderlands sparked considerable interest in Central Asia among researchers. A brief analysis of foreign historiography reveals general trends characteristic of Euro-American scholarship. While certain thematic differences can certainly be observed, these studies nonetheless demonstrate a strong connection to the social history of the Kazakhs. Thus, throughout the historiography of socio-political developments in the distant past, scholars have consistently focused on the social structure of Kazakh society, often highlighting its most influential social groups. The authors focus on historiography from the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods. A distinctive feature of the pre-Soviet era was the perception of the Russian Empire as a multinational and multicultural state. During this period, two main historiographical discourses emerged regarding the empire's relations with its southeastern periphery. One emphasized Russia's "civilizing mission", while the other advanced arguments about the empire's "conquest-oriented policy" in the borderlands. In the more recent period, these approaches have been further developed, accompanied by a significant increase in criticism of the empire's policies toward its peripheries. The authors attempt to explain the reasons behind the consolidation of such a discourse. In our view, this is primarily due to the fact that the themes and content of Soviet scholarship were often reflected, albeit in a reversed form, in foreign historiography, where assessments and conclusions tended to be of an opposing nature. As a result, it is understandable that foreign historiography has been largely dominated by narratives emphasizing the failures of Kazakh-Russian relations, particularly regarding the empire's inability to establish stable relations with its peripheral peoples. At the same time, researchers have mainly focused on the aristocratic strata of nomadic society, who were seen as the primary forces of military resistance to imperial rule. The authors conclude that nomadic societies have long attracted sustained interest from both contemporary observers and researchers from the East and the West. Foreign historiography has made a significant contribution to the study of the social institutions of Kazakh society. It is characterized by unconventional approaches, original perspectives, and offers an opportunity to move beyond geographical limitations in addressing key issues of our history.

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Keywords: Kazakhstan; biy Institute; Western European historiography; American historiography; Sovietology; regional studies

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Зарубежная историография социальной истории традиционного казахского общества: интерпретация образа бия (XVIII-XX вв.)

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Аннотация. В статье на материалах западноевропейской и американской историографии выделяются основные теоретико-методологические подходы в изучении одного из главного социального института традиционного казахского общества – института биев. На протяжении длительного времени изучением традиционных институтов кочевников занимались не только отечественные исследователи, представляющие самые разные научные школы, но и западная историческая школа. В статье пунктирно исследованы вопросы формирования нескольких дискурсов в отношении юго-восточных окраин Российской империи, которые неизменно привлекали внимание путешественников, купцов, ученых и исследователей российской периферии. Расширение влияния империи на восточных окраинах вызвал огромный интерес к Центрально-Азиатскому региону со стороны исследователей. Краткий анализ зарубежной историографии позволил определить общие направления, характерные работам евро-американских исследователей. Можно определённо обнаружить определенные тематические различия, но при этом констатировать их прочную связь с социальной историей казахов. Таким образом, на протяжении всей истории изучения общественно-политических событий далекого прошлого исследователи и ученые постоянно обращали свое внимание на социальную структуру общества казахов, выделяя при этом самые авторитетные социальные группы. Основной акцент авторы сделали на историографию в досоветское и советское время. Характерной особенностью первого периода являлось то, что российская империя воспринималась как многонациональная и поликультурная империя. Именно в этот период в историографии складываются два основных дискурса в изучении истории взаимоотношений империи с юго-восточными окраинами: в одном из них укрепилась мысль о «цивилизаторской миссии России», в другом – поддерживались доводы о «завоевательной политике империи на окраинах». В новейший период обозначенные подходы получили дальнейшее развитие, при этом критика в адрес империи относительно ее политики на окраинах существенно усиливается. Авторы предприняли попытку объяснить причину закрепления такого дискурса. По нашему мнению, это связано, в первую очередь, с тем, что тематика и содержание работ советских ученых зеркальным образом отражались в зарубежной историографии, когда оценки и выводы имели противоположный характер.

Поэтому вполне объяснимо, что в зарубежной историографии господствовали в основном идеи о неудачных казахско-российских отношениях, связанных с неумением империи выстраивать отношения с народами окраин. При этом основное внимание ученых было обращено на аристократические слои кочевого общества, оказывавших военное сопротивление имперскому правлению. Авторы пришли к выводу, что на протяжении долгого времени кочевые общества неизменно привлекали внимание современников и исследователей как Востока, так и Запада. Зарубежная историография внесла огромный вклад в изучение социальных институтов казахского общества, она отличается нестандартным подходом, оригинальными мыслями и позволяет уйти от географической ограниченности в решении важных проблем нашей истории.
Ключевые слова: Казахстан; институт биев; западноевропейская историография; американская историография; советология; региональные исследования

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Дәстүрлі қазақ қоғамының әлеуметтік тарихы жөніндегі шетелдік тарихнама: бидің бейнесін талдау (XVIII-XX ғғ.)

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Андатпа. Бұл мақалада батысеуропалық және американдық тарихнама материалдары негізінде дәстүрлі қазақ қоғамындағы маңызды әлеуметтік институттардың бірі – билер институтын зерттеудегі негізгі теориялық-әдіснамалық тәсілдер қарастырылады. Ұзақ уақыт бойы көшпелілердің дәстүрлі институттарын тек қана отандық ғалымдар емес, сонымен қатар Батыс тарихнамасының өкілдері де әртүрлі ғылыми мектептердің шеңберінде зерделеген. Мақалада Ресей империясының оңтүстік-шығыс шеткері аймақтарына қатысты бірнеше дискурстың қалыптасу мәселелері нүктелі түрде қарастырылады. Бұл өңірлер әрдайым саяхатшылардың, көпестердің, ғалымдардың және Ресейдің шет аймақтарын зерттеушілердің назарын аударған. Империяның шығыс шекараларындағы ықпалының кеңеюі зерттеушілер тарапынан Орталық Азия аймағына деген зор қызығушылық туғызды. Шетелдік тарихнаманы қысқаша талдау еуро-американдық зерттеушілердің еңбектеріне тән жалпы бағыттарды айқындауға мүмкіндік берді. Тақырыптық айырмашылықтар анық байқалғанымен, олардың қазақтардың әлеуметтік тарихымен тығыз байланысы бар екендігі дәлелденеді. Осылайша, алыс өткеннің қоғамдық-саяси оқиғаларын зерттеу барысында зерттеушілер қазақ қоғамының әлеуметтік құрылымына ерекше назар аударып, оның ең беделді әлеуметтік топтарын атап көрсеткен. Мақала авторлары кеңестікке дейінгі және кеңестік кезеңдегі тарихнамалық зерттеулерге баса назар аударады. Бірінші кезеңнің ерекшелігі – Ресей империясының көпұлтты және полимәдени

құрылым ретінде қабылдануы еді. Дәл осы кезеңде империя мен оның оңтүстік-шығыс шеткері аймақтары арасындағы қарым-қатынастарды зерттеуде екі негізгі дискурс қалыптасты: оның бірінде Ресейдің «өркениеттік миссиясы» туралы көзқарас орнықса, екіншісінде империяның шеткері халықтарға қатысты «басқыншылық саясаты» сынға алынады. Жаңа кезеңде бұл көзқарастар әрі қарай дамып, әсіресе империяның шет аймақтардағы саясатына қатысты сындар күшейе түсті. Авторлар мұндай дискурстың орнығу себептерін түсіндіруге тырысқан. Біздің пікірімізше, бұл ең алдымен кеңестік ғалымдардың еңбектерінің мазмұны мен бағыт-бағдарына байланысты: сол тұстағы ғылыми тұжырымдар мен бағалар шетелдік тарихнамада жиі кері мағынада қарастырылған. Сондықтан да, шетелдік еңбектерде қазақ-орыс қарым-қатынастарының сәтсіздігі, империяның шет халықтармен байланыс орната алмауы жөніндегі пікірлер кеңінен таралды. Бұл еңбектерде зерттеушілердің назары, көбіне, империялық билікке қарсы әскери қарсылық көрсеткен көшпелі қоғамның аристократиялық топтарына бағытталған. Қорыта келгенде, авторлар ұзақ тарихи кезеңде көшпелі қоғамдардың Шығыс пен Батыс зерттеушілерінің назарын үнемі аударғанын атап көрсетеді. Шетелдік тарихнама қазақ қоғамындағы әлеуметтік институттарды зерттеуге зор үлес қосты, оның ерекшелігі – қалыптан тыс тәсілдер, тың ойлар мен біздің тарихи мәселелерімізді шешуде географиялық ауқымнан тыс ойлау қабілетінде.

Түйін сөздер: Қазақстан; билер институты; батыс еуропа тарихнамасы; американдық тарихнама; кеңес беру; аймақтық зерттеулер

Introduction

The social history of traditional Kazakh society has long attracted the attention of foreign researchers. Fragmentary oral accounts of the tribes inhabiting the ancient Kazakh lands had been known in Western Europe since antiquity. However, the systematic written documentation of information about the distant eastern lands emerged much later, specifically in the 13th century, when the English scholar Roger Bacon, in his Opus Majus (Great Work), described the lands of Desht-i Kipchak, where the distant ancestors of modern Kazakhs once roamed (Alekseev 2006; Esmagambetov 1976; Esmagambetov 1992).

The further expansion of Western European knowledge of Central Asia was closely linked to the era of great geographical discoveries, which "opened the doors" between East and West. Russia's conquest of the Kazan Khanate in 1552 and the Astrakhan Khanate in 1556 played a significant role in this process. These events facilitated the establishment of caravan routes to Western Siberia and the Kazakh steppes, routes that England sought to use in its efforts to develop trade relations with the Asian East. It is therefore no coincidence that, in 1558–1559 and again in 1562–1564, the English merchant and diplomat Anthony Jenkinson traveled to Central Asia as part of a trade caravan. The result of Jenkinson's journeys was a written account in which, alongside descriptions of the territories he traversed, he provided information about the Kazakhs, noting their self-designation ("Cassack") and offering valuable observations on the economy and daily life of the nomadic population (Dzhenkinson 2006).

In the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, Western European interest in the Central Asian region continued to grow. During this period, several notable figures visited the Kazakh steppe for various purposes, including John Elton (1735), a captain of the British Naval

Service; merchant John Castle (1736); trader Donald Gock (1741–1742); British diplomat Alexander Burnes (1833); and British intelligence agents such as James Abbott and Richmond Shakespear, among others. Engaged primarily in economic reconnaissance in the Aral Sea region, these travelers left varying degrees of detailed descriptions of what they observed. Their primary focus was on geography, natural landscapes, land use, and the region's mineral wealth and resources. Consequently, a distinctive feature of their accounts is the emphasis on these subjects, with limited attention paid to socio-political or broader social issues. In many cases, the pursuit of geostrategic objectives clearly shaped the content and purpose of their works.

The social history of traditional Kazakh society has long captivated the scholarly interest of foreign researchers, offering a complex field of inquiry at the intersection of ethnography, imperial historiography, and cross-cultural interpretation. The Kazakh steppe, with its rich oral traditions and distinctive nomadic institutions, has served as both a subject of fascination and a prism through which external observers have projected their own worldviews, ideologies, and political agendas.

Although fragmentary oral accounts of the tribes inhabiting the ancient Kazakh lands reached Western Europe in earlier centuries, substantive written documentation only began to take shape in the medieval period. One of the earliest scholarly references appears in the 13th century, when the English polymath Roger Bacon, in his Opus Majus ("Great Work"), briefly described the lands of Desht-i Kipchak–territories inhabited by the distant ancestors of the modern Kazakhs (Alekseev 2006; Esmagambetov 1976; Esmagambetov 1992). This marked the beginning of a gradual expansion of Western European knowledge about Central Asia, a development closely linked to the broader currents of intellectual, mercantile, and geopolitical transformation.

The Age of Exploration played a decisive role in bringing the East into sharper focus for European scholars and traders. Russia's conquest of the Kazan Khanate in 1552 and the Astrakhan Khanate in 1556 opened overland routes to Western Siberia and the Kazakh steppes, facilitating economic exchange and diplomatic encounters that included representatives from England. Notably, the English merchant and diplomat Anthony Jenkinson undertook two expeditions to Central Asia (1558–1559 and 1562–1564), producing detailed travelogues that offered early glimpses into the cultural life, self-identification ("Cassack"), and subsistence practices of the Kazakh nomads (Dzhenkinson 2006).

As the 18th and early 19th centuries unfolded, Western European engagement with the Kazakh steppe intensified, propelled by commercial interests, strategic concerns, and growing curiosity about Eastern civilizations. Prominent figures—such as John Elton (1735), John Castle (1736), Donald Gock (1741–1742), Alexander Burnes (1833), and British intelligence agents James Abbott and Richmond Shakespear—undertook exploratory missions that yielded varied descriptive accounts of the region. These works, while primarily focused on geography, mineral wealth, and land use, inadvertently preserved invaluable snapshots of Kazakh society, even if broader sociopolitical dynamics were only superficially addressed.

Relevance of the Study. In recent years, the historiography of nomadic societies has regained academic urgency amid global interest in decolonial studies, indigenous legal systems, and alternative models of governance. The biy, as a judicial and social figure in Kazakh society, exemplifies the functioning of customary law and grassroots legal authority in a non-Western context. Understanding how foreign scholars interpreted this figure–sometimes idealizing,

sometimes exoticizing, and at times undermining its legitimacy–sheds light not only on historical biases but also on evolving scholarly frameworks in anthropology and political theory.

Moreover, the enduring legacy of imperial knowledge production and its continued influence on contemporary scholarship and public memory necessitate a critical reappraisal of foreign historiography. How the Kazakh past has been narrated externally continues to shape national identity formation, heritage policies, and academic curricula in Kazakhstan and across Central Asia. This study, therefore, contributes to an important conversation about intellectual sovereignty and epistemological inclusivity.

Methods and materials

This article is based on the works of American and Western European scholars whose research has shaped pre-Soviet and Soviet discourses on traditional Kazakh society and its social institutions. The texts analyzed in the article have contributed to the development of a foreign scholarly discourse, enabling a retrospective analysis of the conceptual characteristics of these ideas.

The article follows the general scholarly principle of objectivity, which requires the consideration of all aspects of the research subject, regardless of the ethnocultural background or political views of the historian. This principle rests on the careful comparison of historical facts and phenomena in their entirety, ensuring a comprehensive approach to the study of the topic. In turn, this approach has allowed the authors to avoid bias in interpreting sources and to draw sound, generalizing conclusions.

In addition, the authors employed a comparative method, which made it possible to examine the historiography of the social history of Kazakh society in close connection with the socio-political and historical contexts in which it emerged and evolved. Through this method, the authors identified conceptual approaches to the study of the problem across different historical periods. Its application also enabled the comparison of poorly studied or previously unexplored historiographical material with sources already well-established in academic scholarship.

Results

Foreign historiography in pre-Soviet times

By the middle of the 19th century, two dominant narratives had emerged in the historiography of the Russian Empire, including its relations with the Kazakhs. One emphasized Russia's "messianic, civilizing mission", while the other focused on its "expansionist policy" in the southeastern peripheries. Within the framework of these two approaches, other aspects of Kazakh social and political life were also examined and interpreted.

Proponents of the first narrative argued that Russia fulfilled a "messianic" role as a European state on its southeastern frontiers, bringing European civilization to the "wild" and "ignorant" peoples of the region. This perspective is clearly reflected in the detailed work of Thomas Atkinson, who, together with his wife Lucy Atkinson, spent seven years traveling through the Kazakh steppe and produced valuable material on the Kazakh people. As noted earlier, in line with the conventions of historiography at the time, Atkinson's book offered a detailed description of the natural landscape of Kazakhstan, while also addressing the relationships

between local rulers and certain sultans with regional authorities, as well as the customs and rituals of the Kazakh people. The ethnographic value of Atkinson's work lies in the fact that much of the information was collected directly from elders and ordinary nomads. Moreover, through their extended stays in Kazakh villages, Thomas and Lucy Atkinson were able to observe daily life firsthand, allowing them to describe everyday scenes with vivid detail. One particularly noteworthy episode concerns barymta, a traditional practice of livestock raiding, which, from the perspective of a European observer, appeared as an act of "robbery with incredible arrogance and cruelty" (Atkinson 2006: 124).

Among the supporters of this approach were several German researchers who provided diverse and valuable information about the Kazakh lands. Many of them served in the Russian Empire and traveled to the southeastern peripheries on behalf of the Russian government. In the first half of the 19th century, the incorporation of most of Kazakhstan into the Russian Empire placed on the agenda the need for a more in-depth geographical, historical, and ethnographic study of these newly acquired territories. Scientific expeditions and diplomatic missions organized by the Russian authorities frequently included German scholars and travelers who made significant contributions to the study of the region. Notable among them were G.G. von Gens, G.P. Helmersen, T.F. Baziner, A.I. Schrenk, and others. Some of these researchers were invited to the region specifically as prominent specialists tasked with important assignments. For instance, in 1874, the Governor-General of Turkestan, Konstantin von Kaufmann, invited Franz von Schwarz, a native of Lower Bavaria, to Tashkent to serve as director of the astronomical and meteorological observatory. Over many years, von Schwarz participated in various expeditions throughout the Turkestan region, enabling him to collect significant historical and ethnographic material on the local populations. Alongside general descriptions of the region, von Schwarz paid particular attention to the legal traditions of the Kazakhs. In comparing Kazakh customary law with European legal systems, he considered it ancient and found similarities with "the legal concepts of the ancient Germans". However, he also regarded many existing norms of Kazakh customary law as "peculiar" and outdated, reflecting, according to his view, a low level of societal development, which he associated with "barbaric peoples." Nevertheless, von Schwarz was among the few researchers of his time to describe judicial proceedings in detail, highlighting the role of the biys (judges), whom he noted were "highly respected by both Russians and Kyrgyz (here referring to the Kazakhs –author's note)" (Shvarts 2006: 189).

French researchers have also made significant contributions to the study of the history of the peoples of Central Asia. In the 17th and 18th centuries, French members of the Jesuit Order residing in China played a prominent role in researching the history and culture of China and its neighboring Central Asian regions. Their long-term residence in China enabled them to master several Oriental languages, which allowed them to read and translate valuable manuscripts and other sources. Through their translations, Europe gained access to information about distant and exotic Eastern lands. Particularly noteworthy are the works of French Orientalist scholars such as Joseph de Guignes, Abraham Constantin d'Ohsson (1740–1807), Heinrich Julius Klaproth (1783–1835), and Charles-Eugène Dufrady de Mézèsda (1842–1904), among others. These scholars, working from the Eurocentric perspectives typical of their time, often adopted a methodological approach based on an economic dichotomy: categorizing peoples as either "civilized" (sedentary) or "uncivilized" (nomadic). Consequently, nomadic groups frequently appeared in their works as "barbarians" who brought destruction and decline to agricultural

societies. Despite this somewhat biased perspective, the historical and ethnographic material presented in their research retains its scholarly value to this day. For example, Heinrich Julius Klaproth's work includes a French-Kazakh dictionary, which is regarded as one of the earliest contributions to comparative linguistics in this field (Klaprot 2006).

In contrast to the first approach discussed, proponents of the second narrative generally viewed Russia's actions as driven by a deliberate desire to expand the empire's borders, often at the expense of its southeastern peripheries. As D. Towle notes, "Russia began its conquering activity at the end of the 16th century. Peter... conceived a vast plan of conquest, which included not only the Asian territories lying between the Caspian Sea and China, but also Constantinople and what is now Turkey" (Towle 1875: 71). Researchers have noted that the policies of Russian officials, such as "the chernyaevs," "the kaufmanns", and others, primarily served the interests of the empire, while the concerns and problems of the local population were largely ignored (Boulger 1879: 252–253).

For example, American researchers and travelers, diplomat Eugene Schuyler and journalist Januarius MacGahan, accompanied by Gubaidolla Chingis Khan, the son of Jangir Khan, departed from St. Petersburg for Turkestan in 1873. The result of that journey was a two-volume work in which Schuyler offered a critical assessment of the Russian administration's activities in the region, arguing that it showed little interest in the history, archaeology, or productive forces of Central Asia (Schyler 1876). A similar critical tone is found in the work of Krausse, who wrote: "Unjustified beatings and brutalities against the Central Asian peoples were carried out in order to cover themselves with glory and to receive rewards by staging large military operations" (Krausse 1899: 132, 133, 138). Unlike the "fans" of Russia's "civilizing mission", researchers in this field viewed the social structure of traditional Kazakh society as, to some extent, harmonious and well-adapted to local environmental conditions. For instance, Eugene Schuyler, when describing the local aristocracy, wrote: "The Kyrgyz people had great respect for their aristocracy" (Schyler 1876: 32). Therefore, in Schuyler's view, any external interference in the internal affairs of the nomads could lead to undesirable consequences for both sides. Researchers believed that it was precisely the Russian Empire's 19th-century policies aimed at altering the socio-political structure of Kazakh society that triggered the various anti-colonial uprisings among the Kazakhs.

However, it is important to note that this apparent "idealization" of Kazakh society by proponents of this approach was likely not rooted in genuine sympathy for nomadic life, but rather in the context of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia, which had intensified by the mid-19th century. During this period, the geostrategic and political interests of Russia and Britain clashed, particularly in regions such as Khiva. In this context, it is quite understandable that representatives of the British side sought to portray Russia in an unfavorable light, both to their domestic audience and to the broader international community.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a considerable body of knowledge about the peoples of Central Asia had accumulated in Europe and the United States. However, much of this material remained largely descriptive in nature, and the information it presented was often marked by partiality and bias.

The view of foreign Sovietologists on the social history of the Kazakhs

The study of the social structure of Kazakh society has continued into modern times. In this period, the pre-revolutionary history of the Kazakhs, along with that of other peoples of the Russian Empire, has been examined within the broader context of sustained interest in the imperial history of Russia during the 18th and 19th centuries, which later became a significant focus within Western Eurasian historiography. Research centers were established in the United States and Western Europe, and universities became important hubs for large-scale studies. These institutions laid the foundation for comprehensive research projects and helped define the main contours and directions of future scholarly inquiry (Devid-Foks 2000; Abdullin 2005; Byrbaeva 2005; Bolshakova 2013).

The aforementioned approaches continued to develop; however, during this period, criticism of the Russian Empire's policies in its conquered territories increased significantly. In our view, this shift can be explained by several factors. First, the frequent shifts in Soviet historiography regarding the incorporation of peripheral regions into the empire, ranging from portrayals of it as "absolute evil" to narratives of "voluntary accession" provoked considerable skepticism among foreign scholars regarding the objectivity of Soviet research. Many foreign researchers accused Soviet historians of opportunism, as such drastic ideological swings, often by the same authors, led them to doubt the credibility of Soviet scholarship. As a result, foreign historians tended to adopt the opposite position, viewing it as more independent and free from ideological constraints. It is evident that the themes and content of Soviet works were often reflected in foreign historiography, albeit with reversed assessments, what was portrayed positively in Soviet writings was framed negatively abroad, and vice versa. Second, and perhaps most importantly, the onset of the Cold War after 1945 further intensified this trend. One of the aims of the ideological struggle was to construct the image of an aggressive Soviet Union intent on spreading communist influence worldwide. It is no coincidence that many Western Sovietologists were tasked with tracing the origins of this "invader" image back to the history of the Russian Empire. Consequently, the noticeable rise in the number of supporters of the second narrative, whose research was frequently funded by both Western governments and private foundations, appears entirely natural in this context.

Prominent representatives of this approach include researchers such as L. Krader, O. Karou, E. Bacon, V. Ryazanovsky and others (Hudson 1938; Riazanovsky 1938; Bacon 1947; Dallin 1949; Caroe 1954; Pipes 1954; Carrere d'Encausse 1955; Hostler 1957; Carrere d'Encausse 1958; Carrere d'Encausse 1967; Zenkovsky 1960; Krader 1963; Winner 1963; Bacon 1965; Seton-Watson 1967; Olcott 1987). Kazakh-Russian relations were often portrayed as a series of failures stemming from the "short-sightedness" of the imperial government and its inability to establish stable relations with the peoples of the peripheries. This failure was depicted as inevitably leading to confrontation between the imperial center and the frontier regions. Historians focusing on this perspective typically concentrated on the upper strata of society, regional administrators, local leaders, and government institutions. As such, historiographical works in this field are often characterized by a "center-down" perspective, emphasizing the authoritarian nature of both the imperial and later Soviet regimes, which were seen as systematically suppressing the non-Russian populations of the empire and the Soviet Union. The priorities of these scholars become especially apparent in their treatment of the national liberation movements in the

Kazakh steppe, which, according to available materials, were of considerable interest to foreign researchers. In particular, they often portrayed uprisings led by Kazakh tribal leaders as "anti-Russian" acts of resistance by non-Russian peoples against the imperial center. Figures such as the biy Syrym Datuly, Jantore Nurmukhamedov, and Sultan Kenesary Kasymov were thus depicted as folk heroes who resisted the "constant and increasing intrusion of Russians into the lives of the Kazakh people" (Allworth 1967: 17). Most likely, this heightened interest in the theme of non-Russian resistance to imperial rule stems from a desire to contrast it with the Soviet Union's official narrative of the "eternal friendship of peoples." As the American researcher Paul V. Verth aptly noted, "the confrontation of peoples usually leaves more noticeable traces in the annals of history than their harmonious interaction" (Vert 2005: 49).

The problems of Kazakh customary law also became the object of research by scholars. One of the first publications specifically devoted to the analysis of the Kazakhs' adat is the article by V. Riazanovsky's "Customary Law of the Kyrgyz" (Riazanovsky 1937). Despite the value of this work, which was largely a translation of customary legal norms published earlier by the well-known Russian scholar D. Ya. Samokvasov, V. Ryazanovsky overlooked the historiographical analysis of the issue, presenting Kazakh legal norms as rigid and unchanging "laws." In reality, this was not the case, as local legal practices were continually shaped and modified by both external and internal factors. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the significance of Ryazanovsky's work, as it introduced foreign readers, arguably for the first time, to the legal systems of the empire's peripheral people. In this context, the work of the prominent Turkish scholar of Tatar origin, Sadri Maksudi Arsal, is of particular interest. In his major 1947 study on the history of Turkic law, Arsal devoted considerable attention to the adat (customary law) of the Kazakh nomads. He noted that despite the fact that "the Russians began to pursue an aggressive policy in Kazakhstan, ... and the Kazakhs were forced to submit," the traditional legal norms of the Kazakh people remained an important part of their social structure (Maksudi 2002: 142), they nevertheless retained their customs in both legal and public practice.

American and Western European researchers also devoted considerable attention to the social history of the Kazakhs. However, unlike Soviet historians, foreign scholars generally adopted an evolutionary rather than a class-based approach. They tended to present the historical development of nomadic societies as a natural, progressive process. In these studies, nomadic society was often depicted as relatively homogeneous, lacking pronounced class or other social divisions. For example, biys were described as "tribal leaders chosen by the people themselves and in close contact with them" (Bacon 1965: 96), or as "defenders of the people's interests" (Fox-Holmes 1957). The various forms of exploitation and subjugation that invariably and objectively arise in any developed society were mentioned in passing or completely hushed up.

However, it would be incorrect to characterize Western Sovietology as a homogeneous field focused solely on criticizing Russian imperial policy. Within the context of a decentralized academic system and the absence of direct political control, Western Sovietology encompassed a wide spectrum of perspectives that sought to critically examine and problematize the concept of imperial space in the history of the Russian Empire. Therefore, it is important to recognize those scholars who, while maintaining a critical stance toward pre-revolutionary Russia, also acknowledged certain government policies as attempts to transform traditional Kazakh society into a more "modern" social structure (Zenkovsky 1955; Pierce 1960; Becker 1968). Proponents of the concept of "modernization" argued that with the introduction of the Russian

administrative and legal system in the Kazakh steppe, with the opening of schools, institutions, the construction of railways, irrigation facilities, etc., the foundation of "well-being and order" was laid among the local peoples. Thus, a prominent representative of this trend, R. Pierce, wrote: "Despite all the difficulties, there were prospects for improving the situation of the local population" (Pierce 1960: 302), or: "Soviet historians continue to fiercely attack the Russian administration and this prevents them from more objectively describing the transformations carried out during the tsarist period. They provided the basis for the subsequent development of Central Asia under the Soviet regime" (Becker 1968). However, it should be noted that there are relatively few works in this area.

It is also possible to identify a line of research that, to some extent, served as a precursor to the approach of contemporary scholars, an approach grounded in the study of interethnic relations within a heterogeneous state (Strakhovsky 1941; Raeff 1956; Demko 1969; Raeff 1971; Starr 1978; Starr 1972). This approach covers a wide range of issues, which focus on the heterogeneity of the political and ethnic space of the empire, on government measures for the co-optation and integration of new lands in the formation of the imperial space. A prominent representative of this approach was Mark Raeff, who, among the measures taken by the Russian administration to involve the local elite in the service of the empire, names bribery, various channels of monetary financing, the provision of convenient land for grazing, etc. (Raeff 1956: 106). Such measures by the authorities became peaceful ways to include the region in the sphere of influence of the empire.

In general, it can be argued that in Western Sovietology, the pre-revolutionary past of the Kazakhs was mainly considered in the context of studying the colonial activities of tsarism on their national outskirts, while the emphasis was on the anti-Russian actions of local peoples as a protest against colonial rule.

Discussions

The analysis of foreign historiography concerning the social structure of Kazakh society and the figure of the biy reveals considerable methodological dynamism, shaped by political, ideological, and theoretical shifts spanning the 18th to the 20th centuries.

In the early stages (18th–19th centuries), the biy was typically portrayed through a Eurocentric lens, with scholars focusing primarily on external cultural expressions. Practices such as barymta (livestock raiding), clan-based power structures, and customary legal norms were often depicted as "exotic" or "archaic." Despite the evident bias of these portrayals, many of them captured valuable ethnographic details that would later serve as foundations for more nuanced academic inquiry.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, growing criticism of Russian imperial expansion intensified. Within the context of Anglo-Russian geopolitical rivalry, the figure of the biy acquired a more favorable tone – as a symbol of local autonomy and indigenous legal consciousness. Scholars began to reassess adat (customary law) and the biy's role not as vestiges of a bygone era, but as integral components of a complex societal structure uniquely adapted to the conditions of nomadic life.

Western Sovietology, particularly during the Cold War, interpreted the biy as part of the broader imperial conflict between center and periphery. Researchers emphasized the biy's

participation in anti-colonial resistance, elevating them to the status of national heroes. The deeply rooted traditions of self-governance and legal autonomy were increasingly viewed as expressions of opposition to centralized state power.

This discussion demonstrates that the image of the biy in foreign historiography has never been static but has undergone continual reevaluation. From "harsh steppe judge" to "defender of the people's interests," this evolving narrative reflects not only changing academic trends but also the ideological tensions of different eras. Foreign interpretations of the biy frequently mirror broader political and intellectual positions, revealing how the study of the "Other" often functions as a means of self-reflection or ideological projection.

The figure of the biy and the socio-legal structure of traditional Kazakh society offer promising directions for further research:

– Postcolonial studies: The biy can be viewed as a form of localized resistance to imperial rule and as a resilient institution that embodied alternative models of power and justice.

– Legal anthropology: There is significant potential for in-depth analysis of adat as a flexible legal system capable of adapting to both internal transformations and external pressures, including imperial legal frameworks.

– Historiographic evolution: Juxtaposing interpretations of the biy within imperial, Soviet, and Western academic systems helps reveal underlying epistemological assumptions and ideological filters.

– Historical biography and public history: The biy is increasingly featured in national mythmaking, serving as an object of memorialization and educational representation in modern Kazakhstan.

– Imperial integration: Scholarship is gradually shifting from the study of repression to a more nuanced understanding of incorporation mechanisms, such as elite co-optation, land policies, and legal hybridity.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that most scholars studying the transformation of the socio-cultural space of non-Russian peoples tend to agree that, in the process of empire-building and in their efforts to assimilate and subjugate "foreign" populations, imperial authorities often became hostages of the very processes they had initiated, processes that frequently unfolded beyond their full control. As some studies have demonstrated, non-Russian peoples themselves made significant contributions to these transformations, though always within a context that was inevitably shaped by the colonial nature of their subjugation (Vert 2005: 71).

A brief analysis of foreign historiography allows us to identify the general trends characteristic of Euro-American scholarship. While certain thematic differences can be confidently noted, these works nonetheless demonstrate an intrinsic connection with the social history of the peoples of Central Asia. In other words, both historically and today, within the broader context of interpreting socio-political events of the past, researchers have consistently focused on the structure of nomadic societies, highlighting key historical figures and social groups.

Naturally, as historical knowledge accumulated, earlier themes were reinterpreted through new historiographical sources and methodological approaches. However, it is important to recognize that a distinctive feature of foreign historiography lies in its ability to extract from

the broader narrative those issues that remain relevant and whose analysis has practical significance. Such topics include the study of forms of interaction and mutual influence within multiethnic states, state, society relations, and the incorporation of local customary law into imperial legal frameworks, often framed through dichotomies such as "law versus custom" or "tradition versus modernity".

Many of the conclusions reached by foreign scholars are marked by original perspectives, unconventional approaches, and insightful interpretations. At the same time, not all assertions made by foreign researchers regarding the history of the empire's peoples should be accepted uncritically. There is room for scholarly disagreement, and where there is solid source evidence, it is possible to challenge certain factual inaccuracies or superficial interpretations of the subject.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that modern historical scholarship can achieve meaningful progress only by productively engaging with the achievements of global academic research. In this regard, the contribution of foreign historiography is undeniable, as it enables a more comprehensive view of many historical processes, helps overcome geographical limitations, and keeps scholars attuned to new perspectives and evolving discourses in the study of traditional societies, including that of pre-revolutionary Kazakh society.

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