
From Frontier to Borderland: Border Actors in Orenburg Province, 1735-1775¹

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Abstract:

This article examines the rise of borderland actors in Russia's Orenburg province in the mid-eighteenth century. Established in the 1730s and the 1740s, the fortified line along the Iaik River became a hard border separating Russian-controlled Bashkiria and the Kazakh-Kalmyk steppes to the south. Using numerous case studies culled from the State Archive of the Orenburg Region, it considers the multi-national borderland communities (Tatar, Russian, Bashkir, Kalmyk, Kazakh, and Zunghar) that populated both sides of the Orenburg Line. Despite Russia's attempts to control movement and monitor identities, border actors displayed considerable agency throughout this period, as their migrations, escapes, and crossings helped determine the transnational character of Russia's southeastern region.

Keywords:

Orenburg, borderlands, Orenburg Expedition, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Tatars, Zunghars, Stavropol on the Volga

It is well known that Russia's conquest of Bashkiria and the Volga-Ural region in the 1730s advanced the south-eastern limits of the empire deep into the heart of the Inner Asian steppes. With the founding of the Orenburg governorate in 1744,² the new border spanned the Iaik River (now Ural) from the southern Ural Mountains to the Caspian Sea and partitioned the core lands of the old Kipchak Khanate into a tsarist-controlled zone north and west of the Iaik and the Kazakh-Kalmyk steppes lying to the south. In ensuing decades, tsarist officials worked to integrate the region into the administrative and fiscal structures of the empire. "I have often thought about what makes this province so different from the others and what it takes to govern it," the new vice-governor D. V. Volkov wrote to Catherine II in May 1763. Exiled to Orenburg after the overthrow of Tsar Peter III, he pointed to the huge number of non-Orthodox peoples (*inovertsy*) on both sides of the border and concluded they needed "gentle, kind [...] and judicious" leadership to accustom them to Russian governance. Gone were the days of laying waste to whole peoples, as did Chinggis Khan in Central Asia and the Spaniards in the Americas. The Russians, he claimed, could achieve their ends using slower, more gentle methods.³

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² For the Senate decree ordering the creation of Orenburg province, see *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia II otdeleniia sobstvennoi ego imperatorskago velichestva kantseliarii, 1830) [hereafter *PSZ*], XII: 51 (No. 8901).

³ "Donoshenie orenburgskogo vitse-gubernatora D. V. Volkova imp. Ekaterine II ob osnovnykh upravleniia Orenburgskoi guberniei," in *Materialy po istorii Bashkirskoi ASSR: Ekonomicheskie i sotsial'nye otnosheniia v Bashkirii. Upravlenie orenburgskim kraem v 50-70-kh godakh XVIII v.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1956), t. IV, *chast'* 2: 446-47.

Setting aside the parlance of Russia's imperial civilizing mission, Volkov's assessment reflected the region's rocky transition from frontier to borderland. Although the terms are closely linked, frontiers connote a more indeterminate relationship between core and periphery. Prior to the founding of Orenburg in 1734-35, Russia's south-eastern steppe exemplified all the forces and features of Inner Asian frontiers. Devoid of the markers of permanent Russian sovereignty, it constituted a volatile contact zone whose inhabitants valued their "right to remain unrecorded" over the hierarchy and servility of the Russian center.⁴ Writing in *Orenburg Topography*, the local administrator Petr Rychkov maintained that "the Iaik from antiquity has separated the Bashkirs from the Kirghiz-Kazakhs."⁵ However, the reality on the ground was far more fluid. To both tsarist officials and border patrols, the nomadic peoples of the region seemed "wild" and "simpleminded," but their frustration revealed the limits of Russia's power over its nomadic tributaries. During the Orenburg Expedition of 1735-40,⁶ for instance, Khan Abulkhair of the Kazakh Little Horde tried to absorb the Bashkirs under his rule despite swearing an oath of loyalty to the Russians in 1731. Meanwhile, the Bashkir pretender Karasakal made a similarly audacious bid to forge an independent khanate from his hideouts on the southern side of the Iaik.

Unlike frontier zones, borderlands were spaces claimed but not fully controlled by modern states. Marked by fortified lines, customs houses, outposts, and mobile patrol units, they represented overt displays of state power in hostile and foreign environments.⁷ And in fact, the formal reorganization of Orenburg set in motion an unprecedented process of territorial consolidation. After 1744, the new governorate was subdivided into four units (the provinces of Isetsk, Ufa, Orenburg, and the Christian Kalmyk district of Stavropol on the Volga), bounded in the south by the Orenburg line. Secure behind their fortifications, officials imposed the administrative, fiscal, and social structures of the Russian core, steadily chipping away at the privileges that had defined local communities for centuries and integrating non-Russian social groups into the imperial social estate system.⁸ They used the same methods of population control and identity verification that they had applied to other border zones across the southern frontiers. The fact that the new territory was named after the fortress-town of Orenburg, so reviled by Bashkirs, Iaitsk Cossacks, and Kazakhs, signalled the state's commitment to controlling the region and transforming its service population into loyal subjects.

Yet even after the completion of the Orenburg line, the south-eastern borderland remained a fluid and contested space. The Iaik served less as a barrier to movement than a "discriminatory device of passage"⁹ for communities on both sides of its banks. All along the river, Kazakhs, Kalmyks, Bashkirs, and Cossacks continued competing for scarce resources. They rarely allowed it to impede their freedom of movement or prevent them from seeing

⁴ Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800* (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 2002), 7-8; Brian J. Boeck, *Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 28.

⁵ P. I. Rychkov, *Topografiia orenburgskaia*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Pri Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk, 1762), 1: 224.

⁶ For the standard work on the founding of Orenburg, see Alton Donnelly, *The Russian Conquest of Bashkiria, 1552-1740: A Case Study in Imperialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

⁷ Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," *Journal of American History*, 98: 2 (September 2011), 347-8, 352.

⁸ John P. LeDonne, *Forging a Unitary State: Russia's Management of the Eurasian Space, 1650-1850* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 10, 403, 438.

⁹ The phrase comes from Grégory Delaplane, "A Slightly Complicated Door: The Ethnography and Conceptualization of North Asian Borders," in *Frontier Encounters: Knowledge and Practice at the Russian, Chinese, and Mongolian Border*, eds. Franck Billé, Grégory Delaplane, and Caroline Humphrey (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012), 12.

themselves as part of wider communities with multiple ties to peoples and places across the continent. It was especially common for Inner Asian tribes to forge fragile, shifting diplomatic alliances with each other and to have two sovereigns at once.¹⁰ In his pioneering study of the North Caucasus, Thomas Barrett has shown how the Cossacks of the Terek River continued living “between the cracks” of officialdom despite the government’s efforts to incorporate them into the structures of the state.¹¹ Peoples of the Volga-Ural region displayed similar agency, and the line stood out as a particularly dynamic arena for the assertion and negotiation of new statuses and identities.

The Orenburg line’s significance extends beyond the regional history of the southern Urals. In a series of influential works, Mark Bassin once contended that the declaration of the Russian Empire in 1721 inspired the geographers Vasilii Tatishchev and Philip von Strahlenberg to pinpoint the physical boundary separating Russia’s “European” and “Asian” holdings and to draw that line down the Ural-mountain chain to the Caspian Sea.¹² The discovery of the Urals as Russia’s Europe-Asia divide, so the argument goes, was a grand feat of geopolitical imagination, designed to elevate Russia’s status on the world stage and include it in the club of Western European nation-empires. Conspicuously missing from Bassin’s thesis are the lived experiences of the Ural region’s diverse local communities and border actors. As the following pages will argue, it was the uneasy mixture of Russian territorial claims and continuous frontier mobility that made the Orenburg governorate a civilizational borderland. Its spaces were delineated by a broad range of rebels, refugees, fugitives, kidnappees, and merchants—people whose movements carried them across multiple inner Asian contact zones from the Volga and Kama Rivers to Zungharia and the khanates of central Asia.¹³ Their paths suggest that the idea of the southern Urals as the Europe-Asia divide was not just a meta-geographical construct, but the cumulative result of accommodations between the Russian state and the border actors who inhabited it.

Border Actors and the Orenburg Expedition

Orenburg’s founders assumed that the city’s first location (modern-day Orsk) lay beyond Bashkir territory. Approved by Empress Anna in 1734, it was intended to serve as Russia’s chief trading entrepôt with central Asia and a fortress for Khan Abulkhair of the Kazakh Junior Horde, nominally taken under Russian protection in 1731.¹⁴ When Ivan Kirilov, first director

¹⁰ Gregory Afinogenev, “Languages of Hegemony on the Eighteenth-Century Kazakh Steppe,” *The International History Review*, 41:5 (2018), 3, 4, 13.

¹¹ Thomas M. Barrett, *At the Edge of Empire: The Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus Frontier, 1700-1860* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999), 44.

¹² Mark Bassin, “Geographies of Imperial Identity,” in *Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. Dominic Lieven (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2: 46-8; *idem*, “Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space,” *Slavic Review*, 50, 1 (1991), 5. For Tatishchev’s writings on the Ural divide, see “Obshchee geograficheskoe opisaniie vseia Sibiri,” and “Vvedenie k gistoricheskomu i geografichskomu opisaniiu Velikorossiiskoi imperii,” in *Izbrannye trudy po geografii Rossii* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo geograficheskoi literatury, 1950), 49-51, 156.

¹³ The term “contact zone” comes from Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 8, who defines it as “the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”

¹⁴ On the origins of Russia’s protectorate over the Junior Horde, see Gulnar T. Kendirbai, *Russian Practices of Governance in Eurasia: Frontier Power Dynamics, Sixteenth Century to Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2020), chapter five; Afinogenev, “Languages of Hegemony on the Eighteenth-Century Kazakh Steppe,” *op. cit.*, 1-8; Khodarkovsky, *Russia’s Steppe Frontier, 150-80*; Alan Bodger, “Abulkhair, Khan of the Kazakhs of the Little Horde, and His Oath of Allegiance to Russia of October 1731,” *Slavonic and East European Review*, 58: 1 (January

of the Orenburg Expedition, reached the confluence of the Or and Iaik Rivers in August 1735, all he found were ancient earthen ramparts and Nogai burial mounds.¹⁵ The Senate's 41-point instruction to Kirilov from May 18, 1734 alluded to the Bashkirs in passing, as if the expedition could move through their lands effortlessly. Upon finishing the fortress, Kirilov was to lure merchants there with tax exemptions, interest-free loans, and the promise of Russian military protection for their business dealings with the Kazakhs and central Asian merchants. He fine-tuned the details of these arrangements in the "Orenburg Privilege," approved by Anna on June 7, 1734 and disseminated across the region after 1735.¹⁶

The rebellion of the Bashkirs in summer 1735 forced the expedition to backtrack on these plans. Writing to the Cabinet on August 16, Kirilov urged the construction of new fortified lines encircling the Bashkirs "from all sides," so that if they rose up again, "the brigands, their wives, children, personal possessions, horses, cattle, and homes will all be destroyed." The Bashkirs, he predicted, were destined to go the way of Chuvashes and Mordvins, who, in ancient times, had also pillaged defenseless Russians but soon succumbed to Muscovy's regular soldiers: "Thus the Bashkirs, fighting with their lances and bows, and not having a leader from themselves, can also become subjects of the same people they terrorize today."¹⁷ By December 1735, he was visualizing the Iaik as a hard border separating what he called the "Bukhara side" from the "Bashkir side." In a detailed plan co-authored with Alexander Rumiantsev, the newly appointed director of the Bashkir Commission, Kirilov argued that Orenburg would cut off all avenues of escape for the Bashkirs—to the Kazakhs, Zunghars, or Nogai Tatars of the Kuban steppe. "[To] pacify the Bashkirs," they concluded, "Orenburg is necessary, which is located beyond [their] lands and which, together with the places adjacent to it, will enclose the Bashkirs like a wall."¹⁸

The first fortresses went up in April 1736 around Lake Chebarkul (the future Chebarkul'sk), located near the headwaters of the Iaik in the southern Urals and site of the most intense battles between Russian troops and Bashkir forces. Others soon followed at Chelyabinsk, which later served as the link between the farming villages of Isetsk province and Orenburg.¹⁹ Fortress construction also commenced further west along the Samara River. This was vintage "wild field"—flat and unbroken steppe, claimed by Bashkirs and Kalmyks alike for a century. By August 1736, the foundations were laid for Krasnosamarsk and Borsk, the first major points marking the Moscow Road connecting Orenburg to the Volga.²⁰ In the meantime, Kirilov reconnoitered the core lands of Bashkiria for other fortress locations, selecting two sites to remind the Bashkirs of the futility of further resistance: Tabynsk, built on the ancestral lands of Kil'miak, the most notorious Bashkir rebel; and Nagaibak, which later became a stronghold

1980), 40-57.

¹⁵ *Orenburgskaia ekspeditsiia i bashkirskie vosstaniia 30-kh godov XVIII v.* [Materialy po istorii Bashkortostana, t. 6), avtor-sost. N. F. Demidova (Ufa: Kitap, 2002), 84.

¹⁶ A. I. Dobrosmyslov, "Istoricheskii ocherk. Svedeniia o narodnostiakh, naseliavshikh nyneshniuiu Turgaiskuiu oblast' do prisoedineniia kirgiz Maloi ordy k Rossii," *Izvestiia Orenburgskogo otdela Imperatorskogo russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*, vyp. 15 (1900), 13-16. The full text of the Orenburg Privilege appears in *PSZ*, IX: 344-49 (No. 6584); and in P. I. Rychkov, *Istoriia orenburgskaia, 1730-1750*, ed. N. M. Gut'iar (Orenburg: Orenburgskii Gub. Stat. komitet, 1896), 10-14.

¹⁷ *Orenburgskaia ekspeditsiia i bashkirskie vosstaniia*, 101-2; A. Dobrosmyslov, "Bashkirskii bunt v 1735, 1736 i 1737 gg.," *Trudy Orenburgskogo uchennogo arkhivnogo komissii*, vyp. VIII (1900), 23-8.

¹⁸ *Orenburgskaia ekspeditsiia i bashkirskie vosstaniia*, 103.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154, 189, 251, 253.

²⁰ Iu. N. Smirnov, *Orenburgskaia ekspeditsiia (komissii) i prisoedinenie zavolzh'ia k Rossii v 30-40-e gg. XVIII veka* (Samara: Izdatel'stvo "Samarskii universitet", 1997), 37, 40.

staffed by Christian Tatar Cossacks. By October 1736, 21 fortresses had sprouted up along the Samara and Iaik Rivers, separated by average intervals of 50 kilometers.²¹

For the moment, most of these fortresses and towns existed only on paper, and it would take many years to settle and provision them.²² The porousness of the line allowed for waves of border crossings by Bashkirs and Kazakhs alike and raised rebel hopes of forging an alliance with the Kazakhs against the Russians. In 1737, one rebel embassy travelled to Sultan Barak of the Middle Horde and pleaded with him to install his son Shemiak as the Bashkir khan. “Our sovereign has abandoned us Bashkirs,” the delegation lamented. “She has honored neither our Qur’an nor our fathers and grandfathers; now [the Russians] rule over our *votchina* [Rus. “inherited estate”], encircle us with fortresses, and cut down their innocent slaves.”²³ For the next year, Bashkirs and Kazakhs shuttled back and forth across the Iaik, fueling rumors of a great nomadic alliance and emboldening rebels who now believed they were fighting for a Muslim khanate. At one battle with loyalist Bashkirs, Chuvashes, and Meshcheriaks, one rebel detachment roared out to their enemies:

Behold our khan. If you don’t behold our khan, then we will drive you from this land with fire and deny you water to drink, and in three weeks we will destroy those of you who serve as slaves of the Russian sovereign. We say to all of you—if you behold our khan, and you become free like us, then you will see free days. Our khan is called Shemiak.²⁴

That same month, the Simbirsk chancellery reported that the Kazakhs and Karakalpaks were threatening to launch a war on Orenburg and the fortresses of Ozernyi and Sakmarsk, and, “once having taken these towns, against Samara and other towns.”²⁵

These exaggerated threats reflected broad opposition among Bashkirs and Kazakhs to the emerging militarized border. After dawdling on the sidelines during the early years of the Bashkir revolt, Khan Abulkhair intervened in early 1738 when he took a Bashkir woman as his wife.²⁶ Rebel leaders saw it as the first step toward establishing a protectorate over them. On March 15, a group of 53 Bashkir elders announced to Vasilii Tatishchev, the new director of the Orenburg Commission, that they intended “to live the way the Kazakhs do.”²⁷ By the end of April, Bashkirs inhabiting lands adjacent to the Kazakh steppe were in open revolt once again, hunting down loyalists and spreading news of Abulkhair’s intervention on their behalf.²⁸ Tatishchev initially believed the khan was fraternizing with the Bashkirs in order to wring more concessions with the Russian government.²⁹ By April, however, he learned that rebel leaders had assembled at Abulkhair’s grazing lands south of the Iaik, addressing him as

²¹ *Orenburgskaia ekspeditsiia i bashkirskie vosstaniia*, 214, 281; V. N. Vitevskii, *I. I. Nepliev i Orenburgskii krai v prezhnem ego sostave do 1758 g.*, 4 vols. (Kazan: Tipolitografiia V. M. Kliuchnikova, 1897), 1: 149-50; F.M. Starikov, *Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk Orenburgskogo kazach’ego voiska* (Orenburg: Tip. B.A. Breslina, 1890), 38.

²² D. A. Safonov, *Nachalo orenburgskoi istorii* (Orenburg: Izdatel’stvo Orenburgskaia guberniia, 2003), 44. See also Smirnov, *Orenburgskaia ekspeditsiia*, 127-30; R. G. Bukanova, *Goroda-kreposti iugo-vostoka Rossii v XVIII veke* (Ufa: “KITAP”, 1997), 185.

²³ *Materialy po istorii Bashkirskoi ASSR* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1936), *chast’ I*, 315.

²⁴ On Bashkir attempts to recruit Kazakhs in summer 1737, *Orenburgskaia ekspeditsiia i bashkirskie vosstaniia*, 417, 425, 441.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 443.

²⁶ N. V. Ustiugov, *Bashkirskoe vosstanie 1737-1739 gg.* (Moscow-Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1950), 96.

²⁷ *Orenburgskaia ekspeditsiia i bashkirskie vosstaniia*, 544; *Materialy po istorii Bashkirskoi ASSR*, *chast’ I*: 368-9.

²⁸ Ustiugov, *Bashkirskoe vosstanie 1737-1739 gg.*, 101-4.

²⁹ *Orenburgskaia ekspeditsiia i bashkirskie vosstaniia*, 543.

"tsar" and referring to themselves as his "faithful slaves." They further implored him to "show your true strength," adding "if you do not come to our defense, then we have no hope." Most alarmingly, Abulkhair agreed to name his son Kuzia-Akhmet as their new khan and ordered the leading rebels to meet him in Orenburg, "the city that was built for me." Soon he was commanding all Bashkirs to pay tribute to him and threatened to behead tsarist loyalists who refused.³⁰

Soon the Iaik was rife with rumors that Abulkhair had joined the rebels and was planning to destroy Orenburg altogether. Exasperated with the chronic state of chaos along the south-eastern border, the Cabinet rebuked Tatishchev for his flaccid response to the unrest and on June 22 commanded him to stop "this fire from spreading any further." Tatishchev was further ordered to meet the Kazakh khan in Orenburg immediately and bring him back into the Russian fold.³¹ The anxiously awaited summit finally took place on August 3, 1738. Suspecting that Abulkhair had forgotten the oath he took in 1731, he first treated the khan to a military parade, hitherto unseen on the Iaik, featuring grenadiers, cavalry, dragoons, and an artillery salute. He then had the khan retake his pledge before the audience. Speaking in Tatar, Abulkhair likened Empress Anna to the sun in the sky whose rays illuminate the world and are transmitted to the furthest reaches of the empire through trusted officials. Later, while sharing a table with Tatishchev, the khan rose to declare himself a "true, loyal, and eternal slave" of Anna, promising to fulfill all her decrees and kissing the Qur'an as a sign of his sincerity. Afterwards, 150 of his elders also took the oath. Satisfied with Abulkhair's pledge, Tatishchev showered the khan and his elders with 2,000 rubles worth of presents before his guests returned to the steppe.³²

While this show of tsarist power laid to rest Abulkhair's ambitions in Bashkiria, it did little to erase Bashkir dreams of an epic nomadic invasion from the southern side of the Iaik. With the Kazakh khan out of the picture, surviving rebel leaders threw their weight behind the project for a Bashkir khanate. It was an improbable scenario. Not only had the Bashkirs never had an independent sovereign of their own, but they lacked the legitimizing ties to the royal lineages of the steppe. Like Russian peasants in the empire's border areas, however, some of their communities living along the Iaik proved receptive to the message of pretenderism. In early 1740, just as Bashkiria appeared pacified,³³ reports surfaced of a "Sultan Girei" appearing amongst the Middle Horde. The self-proclaimed sultan said he came from the Kuban steppe to liberate the Bashkirs and wreak vengeance on loyalists, Meshcheriaks, and tsarist officials. Supposedly accompanied by an army of more than 10,000 Nogai Tatars, Kalmyks, and Kazakhs, he boasted of having 80,000 reserves camped out on the Syr Daria and threatened "a great war" against the Russians and their agents as soon as the snows melted.³⁴

The purpose of the Orenburg line was precisely to deter insurgencies fomented by independent border actors like Sultan Girei. After five years of fighting the Bashkirs, tsarist authorities had a burgeoning system of fortresses, outposts, and intelligence networks for defusing such wild disinformation campaigns before they spun out of control. It took several months to work up a profile of the interloper. He was of "blackish" appearance with an "average black beard," a slashed and broken nose, a missing little finger, and a "great wart on his right cheek sprouting hairs like a feather." Some informants said that he dressed like a

³⁰ Ibid., 559, 561-62; Ustiugov, *Bashkirskoe vosstanie 1737-1739 gg.*, 106-7.

³¹ *Orenburgskaia ekspeditsiia i bashkirskie vosstaniia*, 572-73; I. Erofeeva, *Khan Abulkhair: Polkovodets, Pravitel' i Politik* (Almaty: "Sanat", 1999), 225-26.

³² Rychkov, *Istoriia orenburgskaia*, 37-9.

³³ In late 1739, General-Major L. Ia. Soimonov, the director of the Bashkir Commission, reported to the Cabinet that, "with the help of almighty God, all is secure." See *Materialy po istorii Bashkirskoi ASSR, chast' I*, 376.

³⁴ Ibid., 378, 379, 382, 384.

“typical Bashkir,” wearing a white leather caftan and a headdress made of red fox pelt.³⁵ Others struggled to find words to describe him. One Russian translator who spent time with him in 1742 wrote that “he did not look like a Bashkir, but more like a Kalmyk in his dark complexion, and, although not like a Kalmyk (*kalmykovat*) in most things, he could speak the Kalmyk language well enough.”³⁶ Abulkhair said he went by the name Karasakal, or “Blackbeard.” According to the Kazakh khan, he was a charismatic drifter who claimed to be an exile from the Zunghar royal house and now sought to return home and retake the throne from his usurper-brother. When he showed up at the Junior Horde asking for Kazakh support against the Zunghars, the khan was skeptical at first,³⁷ but deigned to listen to the pretender’s implausible backstory:

I was a pagan [...] but then learned the truth and became a Muslim. The great Allah and his Prophet led me to visit Mecca and Medina, and they will help to remove my evil brother [from the throne] and return me to the Zunghar nation, which by right belongs to me. When I become khan, truth will shine and the names of Allah and his Prophet will be glorified. In Zungharia they call me a pretender, but this is only out of fear of my brother. But when I appear there with my host, they will be saying something else. I can always count on their devotion to me, and above all to my father, whose memory brings glory to the people. I can count on the help of a Zunghar host of at least 20,000 strong.³⁸

Prince V. A. Urusov, the new director of the Orenburg Commission, plucked a more plausible history from his network of informants. He learned that the pretender was a Bashkir commoner named Mindegul who had fought in the first two years of the rebellion.³⁹ Always eluding capture, he kept a low profile until 1739-40 when he assumed the name of “Khan Sultan Girei.” He issued his first manifesto on March 18, 1740. Addressed to the Bashkirs, it announced that the “Muslim sword has now been raised” and extended greetings to leading rebels in the Siberian districts of Bashkiria.⁴⁰ Within two weeks, he had crossed the Iaik into Russian territory, 160 kilometers from Orenburg, inciting his supporters to attack Russian positions. For the next three months, tsarist and Bashkir loyalist troops put him to the chase. Karasakal belted north-east toward the foothills of the Urals, staying on the left bank of the Iaik and directing his followers from afar. The rebels limited their offensive operations to raids on their fellow Bashkirs, seizing hostages, cattle, and household goods before melting back into their hideouts.⁴¹ The size of his host fluctuated between 1,000 and 3,000 men, well below the 82,000 soldiers he promised his followers.⁴²

Reports from loyal Bashkirs offer a rare window on the political aspirations of the rebel forces and their commander. To inspire his troops, Karasakal claimed Orenburg was built on his father’s *votchina* (so much for his Zunghar pedigree!), pledging to burn it to the ground. After that, he would raze the remaining tsarist forts, liberating Bashkiria as far as Kazan and restoring the pre-Russian borders of the khanates of Kazan, Astrakhan, and Siberia, with

³⁵ Ibid., 383, 393, 424.

³⁶ Ibid., 480.

³⁷ R. G. Ignat’ev, “Karasakal, Lzhe-khan Bashkirii (epizod iz istorii Orenburgskogo kraia XIII v.),” *Trudy nauchnogo obshchestva po izucheniiu byta, istorii, i kul’tury bashkir*, vypusk II (1922), 43.

³⁸ Ibid., 41-2.

³⁹ Ibid., 47, 51, 54-5; *Materialy po istorii Bashkirskoi ASSR, chast’ I*, 398.

⁴⁰ *Materialy po istorii Bashkirskoi ASSR, chast’ I*, 377.

⁴¹ Ibid., 404.

⁴² Ibid., 429.

himself as khan.⁴³ His geographical imaginary registered with the nomadic Bashkirs of the Iaik and Siberian regions. One supporter told his interrogators: "we thought that a new, present-day insurrection of all the Bashkirs of these *volosts* [Rus. "communities consisting of several villages or hamlets"] would not be forbidden if there was a khan or a ruler from the Kuban coming here and inviting us, and so we were ready to go to war and enter into subjecthood to him."⁴⁴ If the plan failed, they had the option of disappearing into the Kazakh steppe with Karasakal, or, in the worst case, fighting to the death. The rebel leader Mandar claimed that "it is best for us to live and die together, to start a new *bunt* [Rus. "uprising"] and revolt."⁴⁵

Karasakal's war lasted barely four months. As news spread that he was just another Bashkir, desertions shrank his entourage to a small band of diehards who conscripted local bystanders to throw into the fight.⁴⁶ In the meantime, L. Ia. Soimonov, director of the Bashkir Commission, applied the same counter-insurgency tactics used during the earlier rebellions. He circulated universals instructing rebels to surrender while unleashing Russian dragoons and Bashkir loyalists against them.⁴⁷ At least 2,500 Bashkirs perished at their hands, including many women and children.⁴⁸ As Soimonov wrote on July 11, 1740, "the rest of the thieves, seeing that they had reached their final ruin, were forced to fling themselves before the Verkhneiatsk fortress and beg Her Imperial Majesty for her kind forgiveness for their crimes."⁴⁹ Karasakal himself managed to escape after his final battle with tsarist forces at the Tobol River, deep in Kazakh territory. He tried fleeing to the Karakalpaks, but there were rumors that he had been captured by the Middle Horde. On May 29, 1742 he sent his last message to the Russians. Addressed to Soimonov, he apologized for his crimes against Empress Anna, but refused to turn himself in. By that time, he was calling himself "Sunabatyr Kontaishin" and scheming to "retake" the throne from Khan Galdan Tseren. He was never seen again.⁵⁰

Karasakal tapped into nostalgia for the days when steppe warlords had built khanates through sheer force of their charisma and personal achievements. The fifteenth-century Nogai chieftain Edigu had also used the Iaik as a base for raids against his rivals in Siberia and the Volga region. Edigu's life later provided grist for local legends that claimed he descended from Abu Bakr, the first caliph and closest companion to Muhammad.⁵¹ Yet Karasakal turned out to be little more than an agent of chaos. At most, his movement attested to the mutability of personal identities on the open steppe. He embodied what Aleksei Tevkelev, the tsarist agent who negotiated Abulkhair's pact with the Russians in 1731, called the "windiness" or "frivolity" (Rus. *vetrennost'*) of nomads, people who changed identities, loyalties, and family histories to fit the needs of the moment.⁵² The fact that he went by four different names and

⁴³ Ibid., 423, 428.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 397.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 398.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 430.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 427.

⁴⁸ See extracts of field reports in *ibid.*, 420, 423, 426, 429, 430, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 444, 446, 447.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 447.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 478; Vitevskii, *I. I. Nepliuev i orenburgskii krai*, 1: 173-4.

⁵¹ Allen J. Frank, "The Western Steppe: Volga-Ural Region, Siberia, and the Crimea," in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia: The Chinggisid Age*, eds. Nicola di Cosmo, Allen J. Frank, and Peter B. Golden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 241-42; Devin De Weese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 411-42.

⁵² *Kazakhsko-russkie otnosheniia v XVI-XVIII vekakh (sbornik dokumentov i materialov)* (Alma-Ata: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk Kazakhskoi SSR, 1961), 90, 98, 99-100.

could blend into Kalmyk, Bashkir, and Kazakh communities compounded the difficulties in attaching a fixed identity to him. It underscored the challenges for the new Russian administration in monitoring and controlling the conquered borderland.

Border Crossings

Imperial Russian defenses in the Volga-Ural region, known collectively as the Orenburg Line, consisted of more than 100 fortresses, outposts, and redoubts along the right banks of the Iaik and Samara Rivers. With the central Iaik as the core, they measured 1,600 kilometers from Gur'ev on the Caspian Sea to Verkhneiatsk at the source of the Iaik, 160 kilometers to the east of Troitsk, the first fortress on the Siberian line. Additional fortifications sprang up along the Samara River for 400 kilometers, beginning in the provincial capital of Orenburg (from 1743 located at the confluence of the Iaik and Sakmar Rivers) and leading to Krasnosamarskaia on the great bend of the Volga.⁵³ The river's physical geography determined the pattern of fortress construction and settlement. The wooded steppes from Chelyabinsk to Orsk featured some of the most fertile plowland in the province and required robust defenses. It was no coincidence the Bashkir rebellions of the 1730s were most intense here and that Russian peasant colonists soon overran it once the line was finished. In the mid-section, from Orsk to Iaitsk, agriculture steadily gave way to stock raising as woodlands shaded off into steppe. Orenburg city was the prime tsarist stronghold on this section, serving as the line's administrative center and meeting point for Kazakh herders and Russian and Tatar merchants. Along the southernmost distance, from Iaitsk to Gur'ev, steppe faded into the deserts of the Caspian depression. Fortresses were scarce along this section of the river, 700 kilometers in length. Cossacks from Iaitsk manned dozens of rickety outposts spaced 20-30 kilometers apart and linked by a system of lighthouses activated by brush fires.⁵⁴ Inhabitants here engaged in fishing, hunting, and stock-raising, as the Iaik Cossacks did, or nomadic pastoralism, like the Kalmyks and Junior Horde.⁵⁵

⁵³ By the late 1750s, there were 24 fortresses along the Iaik and seven fortresses along the Samara River. Five additional fortresses in the trans-Ural east (from Troitsk to Zveringolovskaia) rounded out the defenses and connected with the Siberian line. See Rychkov, *Topografiia orenburgskaia*, 2: 8-28, 30, 80-2, 93-100, 118-30, 141-46, 146-56. If redoubts and outposts are included, the total number of fortified positions reaches 114. See P. E. Matvievskii, *Ocherki istorii Orenburgskoi kraia XVIII-XIX vekov* (Orenburg: Izdatel'stvo 'Orenburgskaia kniga,' 2005), 46-7.

⁵⁴ I. G. Rozner, *Iaik pered burei* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Mysl'," 1966), 44-6.

⁵⁵ On the physical geography of the Iaik, see A. M. Dubovikov, *Ural'skoe kazachestvo v sisteme rossiiskoi gosudarstvennosti: XVIII-nachalo XX vv.* (Tol'iatti: Izdatel'stvo Tol'iattinskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta servisa, 2009), 92-5.



Fig. 1 The Volga-Ural region in the mid-eighteenth century

Historians have characterized conditions on the Orenburg Line as chronic, low-grade warfare.⁵⁶ In performing their everyday routines, Cossack and regular patrols employed martialized vocabulary to delineate Russian-claimed territory from the left bank of the Iaik. Kazakhs especially were branded with exclusionary labels imputing to them inferior status on civilization's ladder: "simple-minded," "willful," and "wild."⁵⁷ Skirmishes between Russians and *inovertsy* were dangerous and frequent. The most combustible confrontations occurred on the lower Iaik, where tensions between Kalmyks, Kazakhs, and Iaitsk Cossacks had always run high. In 1748, Nepliev required that the Cossacks maintain a nomad-free corridor 20 kilometers wide on each side of the river to prevent unauthorized crossings.⁵⁸ Yet not even this measure could stem the general westward tide of Kazakh movement into Cossack and Kalmyk territory, particularly during the winter months, when forage was most scarce. In these cases, Kazakhs were granted permission to cross the river so long as they refrained from "dirty tricks."⁵⁹ Kazakhs easily pierced the defenses to raid Kalmyk grazing lands and Cossack settlements, seizing livestock and people and driving them back to the steppe.⁶⁰ Low-intensity incidents like this were common. Tsarist officials managed them by taking Kazakh hostages and subsidizing the Junior Horde with textiles, presents, furs, and luxury items.⁶¹

Inevitably, the competition for grazing land dragged Kalmyks, Cossacks, and Kazakhs into open conflict. The winter of 1759 was a particularly bad time. In January of that year, a band

⁵⁶ Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*, 160-62; Janet Hartley, *Russia, 1762-1825: Military Power, the State, and the People* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 156-8.

⁵⁷ Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Orenburgskoi Oblasti [hereafter GAOO], fond 3, opis' 1, delo 47 (Secret Expedition of the Orenburg Chancellery), l. 40, ll. 120-21, l. 254ob; d. 50, l. 60, ll. 106-06ob, 161-61ob, 172-72ob, ll. 506-7, ll. 529-29ob, ll. 535-36. See also Ian W. Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire: Kazak Intermediaries and Russian Rule on the Steppe, 1731-1917* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 18-19.

⁵⁸ "Zapiski I. I. Neplievova ob ustroistve Iaitskago (nyne Ural'sago) kazach'iago voiska, v tsarstvovanie Elizavety Petrovny," *Russkii arkhiv*, kn. II (1878), 22.

⁵⁹ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 47, 174-74ob, 239-39ob; f. 3, op. 1, d. 72 (Russian-Kazakh relations for 1764), ll. 36-36ob.

⁶⁰ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 44 (Russian relations with Bashkirs and Kazakhs, 1757), ll. 119-20ob; f. 3, op. 1, d. 47, ll. 59-60ob, ll. 120-21, d. 72, l. 78, ll. 83-4, l. 109.

⁶¹ Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*, 29.

of Kalmyks attacked a group of Kazakhs near Iaitsk, killing one person and stealing 23 horses. The situation required some sensitivity—it was the Kazakhs who provoked the fight by crossing the Iaik illegally. Local authorities restored the peace by paying 50 rubles in blood money to the Kazakhs.⁶² As soon as that feud was averted, another broke out, this one sparked by the brutal murder of a ten-year old Kazakh by a local Cossack. In retaliation, the boy's father led a raid on the local outpost, seizing vast numbers of cattle and demanding justice. Although the government quickly compensated the father and punished the perpetrator, the grisly details of the killing prompted masses of Kazakhs to start crossing the river at Sundaev outpost, 125 kilometers south of Iaitsk.⁶³ By March, the line was on high alert as Kazakhs moved across the river at nearly every point, bringing the lower Iaik to the brink of war. The Kazakhs brought their families with them, a sign that they would not allow the line to impede their migrations.⁶⁴

Elsewhere, along the middle and upper reaches of the Iaik, Bashkirs continued crossing the border as they had in the past. For them, the left bank had long been fair game for cattle raids and illicit grazing, but in the mid-eighteenth century it promised much more. With the building of the line, the steppe side came to represent sanctuary, a place where they could disappear with their herds and kinsmen. After 1740, as they became steadily exposed to Russia's integrationist policies, it continued serving as an escape valve. During the Bashkir uprising of 1755, the rebel leader and mullah Batyrsha Aliev struck a deal with Ablai Sultan of the Middle Horde, who pledged to provide safe haven for Bashkir insurrectionists on his lands.⁶⁵ Their plan was to coordinate simultaneous attacks on fortresses, cities, and factories, after which the insurgents would escape to the Middle Horde and mount a massive invasion of Orenburg province with their Kazakh allies.⁶⁶ In his manifesto of May 1755, Batyrsha further summoned all Muslims of the region to join the battle, invoking the glories of ancient Bulghar, the pre-Mongol Islamic kingdom that had battled the Rus' for control of the Volga. He extended the invitation to the Kazakhs, warning them that the Russians intended to expand beyond the Iaik, taking their crusade across the Kazakh steppe all the way to the borders of Bukhara and Tashkent.⁶⁷

Batyrsha never developed his spatial vision beyond vague outlines of a revived Muslim polity embracing the former khanates of Kazan, Siberia, and Nogai. At any rate, poor planning on his part and shrewd maneuvering by Russian government officials in Orenburg spelled disaster for the movement. As Batyrsha went into hiding,⁶⁸ thousands of Bashkirs, including many women and children, crossed the Iaik and sought refuge with the Middle Horde.⁶⁹ Nepliev did not block the exodus—the line was too long and porous to check the migration. Once he ascertained the full extent of cooperation between the Bashkirs and the Middle Horde, he opted, as he later recalled, “[to turn] my attention to uprooting any hopes the Bashkirs had for [friendship] with the Kazakhs.”⁷⁰ He exhorted the sultans of the Junior Horde

⁶² GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 50 (Secret Expedition of the Orenburg Chancellery), ll. 41-2.

⁶³ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 50, ll. 59-61.

⁶⁴ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 50, l. 133ob, l. 135, l. 135ob.

⁶⁵ A. P. Chuloshnikov, *Vosstanie 1755 g. v Bashkirii* (Moscow-Leningrad: Nauka, 1940), 57; Vitevskii, *I. I. Nepliev i Orenburgskii krai*, 3: 852.

⁶⁶ Chuloshnikov, *Vosstanie 1755 g. v Bashkirii*, 69.

⁶⁷ *Materialy po istorii Bashkortostana* (Ufa: Poligrafizain, 2019), t. 2: 45.

⁶⁸ *Pis'mo Batyrshi imperatritse Elizavete Petrovne*, editor and translator G.B. Khusainova (Ufa: Ufimskii nauchnyi tsentr RAN, Institut istorii, 1993), 101.

⁶⁹ Estimates of the numbers of Bashkirs who fled across the Iaik vary widely. Rychkov (*Topografiia Orenburgskaia*, 2: 39) gives the low number of 10,000. Vitevskii's study (*I. I. Nepliev i orenburgskii krai*, 3: 872) claims 50,000 Bashkirs crossed the river.

⁷⁰ *Zapiski Ivana Ivanovicha Neplieva (1693-1773)* (St. Petersburg: Izdanie A.S. Suvorina, 1893), 155.

to raid the Middle Horde for Bashkir fugitives, encouraging them to capture women and children and allow the men to slip back into Russian territory. Injured and aggrieved, throngs of Bashkir returnees in turn begged Nepliuev to let them back into the steppe and exact vengeance. The Orenburg governor's intrigues produced the intended chaos, as Kazakhs from the Junior Horde and Bashkirs declared open season on each other. In his memoirs, Nepliuev shrugged off his cynical handling of the crisis as a necessary tactic in the cutthroat politics of the steppe: "[This] event caused so much animosity between their peoples that Russia will always be safe from an alliance between them."⁷¹

In the wake of the uprising, the Iaik became more of an operative border, further tying the Bashkirs to Orenburg province and the Kazakhs to the left bank. To be sure, Bashkirs still engaged in numerous activities deemed criminal by the local officials of the Russian Empire. Just as Kazakhs crossed the lower Iaik to attack the Kalmyks, so did Bashkirs mount raids on Kazakh lands as if the steppe had never been closed by Russia's conquest of the region. Occasionally the perpetrators acted alone,⁷² but more often the raids were committed by bands of 20-30 men, sometimes much larger.⁷³ Horse thieves acted in defiance of multiple government decrees and despite the brutal corporal punishments meted out to offenders. Most incidents took place between Orsk and Troitsk, near the Middle Horde's summer grazing grounds, although some of the more ambitious attacks reached as far south as the lands of the Junior Horde.⁷⁴ The raids placed provincial authorities in an awkward bind. Horse rustling was so embedded in Bashkir and Kazakh societies as to be ineradicable. The best government officials could do was minimize the thievery and work closely with Bashkir elders until the Crown's nomadic subjects adapted to what imperial Russians called an "orderly" life.⁷⁵

Other border crossings were carried out with the approval and encouragement of the provincial authorities. Bashkir hunting expeditions typically received official permission, so long as their artels carried passports and did not disrupt the Kazakhs.⁷⁶ In the late 1750s, just as Orenburg province's metallurgical industry was taking off, local factory owners and prominent noble families also began organizing large prospecting expeditions for copper ore. Bashkirs capitalized on these opportunities, hiring themselves out to factory owners at fortresses between Orenburg and Orsk. Given that most of the ore fields lay on the left bank of the Iaik,⁷⁷ officials of the Orenburg Chancellery closely monitored their activities, exhorting the artels not to cause trouble lest they provoke Kazakh attacks on the line.⁷⁸ Bashkir prospecting trips across the river soon became routine events, and Petr Rychkov took them as proof of Orenburg's success in civilizing the native inhabitants of the region. "If the [Kazakhs] seem to be a danger," he wrote, "then we should take as an example the Bashkirs, who, prior to the Orenburg Expedition, did not have any kind of mining factories inside their borders and did not even ask about them; but now, it has gotten to the point that they are searching for ores on their own lands."⁷⁹

⁷¹ Ibid., 163, 161.

⁷² GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 47, l. 40, l. 189; d. 50, ll. 499-500.

⁷³ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 47, l. 288; d. 50, ll. 147-48, ll. 322-230b.

⁷⁴ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 50, ll. 317-18.

⁷⁵ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 50, ll. 511-110b.

⁷⁶ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 186 (Protocols of Orenburg Chancellery, 1779), ll. 84-840b, ll. 87-870b, ll. 111-12.

⁷⁷ Rychkov, *Topografiia orenburgskaia*, 2: 240.

⁷⁸ See, for example, the instructions given to the factory owners Iakov Tverdyshev and Ivan Miasnikov in GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 50, ll. 126-260b.

⁷⁹ Rychkov, *Topografiia orenburgskaia*, 2: 231-32.

The Tatar merchants of Kargala (also known as Seitov) also capitalized on the fluid power relations of Russia's south-eastern border to carve out their own zones of autonomy and mobility. During the Orenburg Expedition, Kirilov expected that the tax and service exemptions enshrined in its privilege of 1734 would attract Russian merchants to the new city, but the enormous distances and the hazards of crossing Bashkiria, deterred them from relocating there.⁸⁰ Tatars from the central Volga region filled the void. Their resettlement was first suggested by Seit Aitovsyn Khaialin, a Kazan merchant who detected an opportunity for building a business community on both sides of the Orenburg Line. After negotiations with Nepliuev, he founded a new town specially reserved for 200 Tatar families, nineteen kilometers north of Orenburg, on the Sakmar River. Chartered in 1745, its residents were classified as state peasants, which required them to pay the annual soul tax. Granted religious freedom and exemptions from military service and property taxes, they pledged to develop Russia's commercial ties with the Central Asian khanates.⁸¹

At the time, Muslim communities of Kazan were being targeted for Christian conversion by the Agency for New Convert Affairs, and the pressure spurred many hundreds of them to migrate to the Iaik. Kazan's loss became Orenburg's gain, and the Kargala Tatars became fixtures in the borderland elite. Within one year, 173 families had made the move to Kargala from Kazan. By the early 1750s, Mametshi Shamametov and Baba Khodzha, two prominent mullahs from Bukhara and Tashkent respectively, had also settled there, establishing a beachhead for future immigrants from Central Asia.⁸² Once there, Shamametov married into several prominent merchant families in Kargala and Astrakhan, further cementing his business ties across the southern borderlands. Soon after, five Khivan merchants had also married into the Kargala community.⁸³ The city continued growing as a Muslim business and religious center, attracting waves of migrants from the central Volga region who melted into their new environment. Its 300 households far exceeded the legal limit set by Nepliuev in 1745, compelling the central government to issue a decree to Governor A. A. Putianin, in May 1767, ordering him to increase the tax and service obligations on them.⁸⁴

Kazakh raids on trade caravans made crossing the steppe an especially dangerous enterprise for Muslim merchants. For the Kargala Tatars, sharing linguistic and religious ties with the Kazakhs greatly reduced that risk. The steady growth of caravan traffic between Orenburg province and the khanates of Bukhara and Khiva revived religious and cultural networks that had been lying dormant for centuries. The story of the Kazan merchant Ismagil Bikmukhamedov offered an early preview of the kind of transnational journeys that became commonplace in the nineteenth century. In 1751, he assembled a modest caravan carrying 5,000 rubles worth of goods bound for the Amu Darya River. Until 1752, his journey was uneventful—he experienced none of the raids typical of this period. After wintering in Bukhara, he hoped to outfit another caravan for his return journey. At that point, Bikmukhamedov received orders from the Russian government to continue to India and establish formal trade ties with the Great Mughal in Delhi.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Vitevskii, I. I. *Nepliuev i Orenburgskii krai*, 3-4: 675, 728.

⁸¹ D. N. Denisov, *Istoriia zaseleniia i etnokul'turnoe razvitie tatar Orenburgskogo kraia (XVIII-nachalo XX vv.)* (Orenburg: Izdatel'skii tsentr OGAU, 2006), 73; P. Sh. Iskandarov, "Rol' seitovoi slobody v ustanovlenii torgovykh i diplomaticheskikh otnosheniakh mezhdru Rossiei i gosudarstvami srednei Azii v period 1745-1845 gg.," in *Iz istorii tatar Orenburzh'ia (260 let Tatarskoi Kargale)* (Orenburg: Izdatel'skii tsentr OGAU, 2005), 19-21; Danielle Ross, *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia* (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 2020), 33-8.

⁸² On Shamametov and Khodzha, see GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 25 (On Bukharan and Tashkentian mullahs), l. 2, 8-9.

⁸³ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 25, ll. 250b-26.

⁸⁴ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 82 (Decrees and materials from 1760s), ll. 179-80, ll. 1830b-184.

⁸⁵ Ismagil Bikmukhamedov, *Putevye zapisi (seiakhetname)* (Orenburg: Izdatel'skii tsentr OGAU, 2005), 4.

Bikmukhamedov failed as a diplomat—his travelogue makes no mention of meetings with Indian dignitaries of any kind. But his travels across the Islamic world call to mind those of the fourteenth-century Moroccan Ibn Battuta and covered much of the same territory. First, he passed through the mountains and deserts of Afghanistan and Baluchistan on his way to the Arabian Sea. From there he and his party sailed to Gujrat, eluding pirates with the help of British warships that guided them to the port of Surat. The next leg of his journey took him through the Indian subcontinent—Hyderabad in the Deccan, Bandar on the Bay of Bengal, and the length of the Ganges River. He then spent nine months in Delhi, surviving the brutal Afghan invasion of the city, before finding his way back to Surat, where he found space on a boat bound for Arabia. The trip across the Indian Ocean nearly ended in disaster when his vessel capsized in a violent storm. After three gruelling months, they finally arrived in the Hejaz region of Arabia. Like Ibn Battuta, he dutifully undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca, Medina, and other sacred sites, spending several years in Arabia before travelling north to Damascus, where he survived a massive earthquake and even a cholera epidemic. There he befriended a Crimean Tatar merchant, who made room for him on his northbound caravan. When he finally returned to Kazan in 1776, he had spent 25 years on the road.⁸⁶

Because borderlines cut across so many pre-existing communities, they can lead to unexpected and contradictory outcomes. Although the Orenburg Line split the lands of Tatar into binary “Russian” and “Kazakh” sectors, it also facilitated the emergence of a transnational Islamic community across Inner Asia. The Tatars of Kargala continued the longstanding trend for those peoples of the Volga region categorized as *inovertsy*, both Muslims and animists, to settle in Bashkiria. Under the cover of the Orenburg privilege, and with the assistance of a cadre of Tatar officials working in the provincial government chancellery,⁸⁷ these individuals tapped their business and religious connections to build the kind of robust Islamic community from Kazan to Central Asia (and beyond) that Batyrsha could achieve only in his dreams.

In the meantime, as local government officials monitored and controlled the traffic of *inovertsy* back and forth across the border, the laik, hitherto a fluid and negotiable border between Bashkirs and Kazakhs, hardened into a notional boundary separating “European Russia” from “Asia.” Vasilii Tatishchev, the one-time director of the Orenburg Commission who also studied the history of the Volga-Ural region, thought it possible for *inovertsy* to acquire, under the tutelage of Russian authorities, the traits he identified with European “civilization”: farming, commerce, writing, and monotheism.⁸⁸ Tatishchev’s protégé, Rychkov, who spent almost 25 years managing the Orenburg Chancellery, made this the leitmotif of *Orenburg Topography*, arguing that tsarist control of the south-eastern steppes had transformed the vanquished peoples of Tatar into loyal subjects of the Russian Empire. The lifepaths of these border actors all converged on the Orenburg Line. And some of the most compelling ones came from the Asian side.

Outcasts of the Zunghar Collapse

Beyond establishing a border between Russian-controlled territory and the Kazakhs, the Orenburg Line controlled human migrations across the region. Like its famous seventeenth-century predecessor, the Belgorod Line, it was designed to deter tsarist subjects from fleeing

⁸⁶ Ibid., 5-24.

⁸⁷ G. S. Sultangalieva, “Tatar Officials in the Orenburg Governorate’s Chancellery: Their Activities on the Kazakh Steppe (Second Half of the Eighteenth Century),” *Russian Studies in History*, 59: 4 (2020), 310-29.

⁸⁸ V. N. Tatishchev, “Razgovor dvou[kh] priiatelei o pol’ze nauki i uchilishchakh,” in *Izbrannye trudy*, ed. A.B. Kamenskii (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010), 117-18.

the empire,⁸⁹ even though most of those subjects were now Bashkirs, not ethnic Russians. But it was the influx of people from the steppe that made it such a vibrant contact zone. From 1749 to 1752 alone, a total of 1,024 individuals washed up along the Orenburg Line's fortresses and checkpoints from the Kazakh steppe. By 1759, 2,253 Russian subjects kidnapped by the Kazakhs had been returned and an additional 1,427 refugees sought baptism.⁹⁰ Many identified themselves as former Bashkir rebels who had fled to the steppe and now sought amnesty. Others were Iranians, Bukharans, Arabs, and Karakalpaks who had escaped the Kazakhs and sought asylum within the borders of Russia.⁹¹

Processing and turning away this roving mass became one of the main occupations for border officials.⁹² Many came to the line with stories of improbable kidnappings and getaways after years in captivity. Tatiana Ignat'eva, a Cossack woman from Iaitsk, reported that she had strayed too far from the Iaik when a band of Kazakhs abducted her in 1745. More than a decade later, now a grown woman, she fled to an outpost on the lower Iaik when her captors moved their herds too close to the line.⁹³ Simeon Nikiforov, a Russian teenager from Kazan, was seized by local Tatars in 1739 while fishing and then brought to Khiva, where he was sold into slavery. After five years in Khiva, he made his first escape, only to be snatched up by the Kazakhs, who held him for 20 more years. He finally appeared in Gur'ev in 1764, requesting asylum after 25 years as a slave across Inner Asia.⁹⁴ One of the most dramatic breaks for the line took place in 1758. A 30-year-old "non-Christian" named Ismail Osipov from Bashkiria claimed to have been captured by the Kazakhs in 1735, at the time of the Orenburg Expedition. After 23 years, he stole a horse and fled for the border with his captors fast on his heels. The chase went on for three days until he finally reached the fortress at Verkhnyi Ozernyi.⁹⁵

While former tsarist subjects viewed the Orenburg Line as a port of re-entry into Imperial Russia, some foreign nationals tried using it to secure safe passage back to their home countries. News travelled fast across the steppe, including reports of non-Christians securing Russian passports if they converted to Orthodoxy.⁹⁶ One Bukharan merchant by the name of Menlik had been robbed of all his horses and trade goods near Kashgar in 1749. Stranded far from home, he hitched a ride with the Middle Horde, hoping to reach Tashkent and then Bukhara. For five years he travelled with the Kazakhs until 1755, when he appeared at Verkhnyi Irtysh on the Siberian Line requesting asylum and baptism. Menlik's petition came with an unusual offer: if Russian officials in Orenburg issued him a passport and provided free transport back to Bukhara, he would work to convert the Muslims of his homeland to Orthodoxy.⁹⁷ The proposal piqued Nepliev's interest, but it is unclear if the governor followed up on it. It was doubtful that Bukharan authorities would permit Christian

⁸⁹ Brian J. Boeck, "Containment vs. Colonization: Muscovite approaches to settling the steppe," in *Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland Colonization in Eurasian History*, eds. Nicholas Breyfogle, Abby Shrader, and Willard Sunderland (London: Routledge, 2007), 44-5.

⁹⁰ "Iz istorii Kazakhstana XVIII v.," *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 87: 2 (1938), 167-8; *Kazakhsko-russkie otnoshenie v XVI-XVIII vekakh*, 573.

⁹¹ S. U. Taimasov, "Vykhodtsy iz Azii v Orenburgskoi gubernii," in *Orenburg, vchera, segodnia, zavtra: istoricheskii i sotsiokul'turnyi opyt'* (Orenburg: Pechatnyi dom 'Dimur', 2003), 79.

⁹² On the processing of escaped slaves, see Jeffrey Eden, *Slavery and Empire in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 144-62. For a similar discussion of the laws for returning fugitives on the Russian Empire's western borders, see Alison Smith, "'The Freedom to Choose a Way of Life': Fugitives, Borders, and Imperial Amnesties in Russia," *The Journal of Modern History*, 83:2 (June 2011), 248-52.

⁹³ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 47, ll. 293-930b.

⁹⁴ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 72 (Russian-Kazakh relations), ll. 54-540b.

⁹⁵ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 47, ll. 320-200b.

⁹⁶ Eden, *Slavery and Empire in Central Asia*, 145.

⁹⁷ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 36 (Orenburg Chancellery reports, 1755), ll. 156-57.

proselytization in their city. And while the Imperial Russian government encouraged baptism for Asian refugees, the law required all "new Christians" from the Kazakh side to be resettled in colonies specifically designated for them.

The largest number of immigrants came from the Zunghar Confederation, whose defeat at the hands of the Qing dynasty in the 1750s triggered a forced migration into the Russian Empire. It was a defining moment for the south-eastern borderlands, as local administrators grappled with the daunting task of settling and integrating them into the subject population. For five years, thousands of Zunghars inundated the Orenburg and Siberian lines. They all came with complex personal histories, none more intriguing, perhaps, than one Tsering Fal, a fallen scion of the Zunghar nobility. His case illustrates the randomness marking the lives of Eurasian refugees overwhelmed by geopolitical forces beyond their control. As microhistory, it also highlights the mechanisms of cultural and political assimilation that operated along the Orenburg and Siberian lines and the Russian Empire more generally.⁹⁸ And while Tsering Fal's lifepath shows how even the unluckiest of refugees could skilfully work the levers of the political system to become Russianized and achieve upward mobility, it also suggests that he never abandoned his native Zunghar identity. As we shall see, his motivation was to preserve some measure of nomadic mobility and autonomy at a time when pastoral ways of life were being erased by the expansion of both Russia and China.

Tsering Fal's life unfolded against the backdrop of the Zunghar khanate's calamitous disintegration. In 1755, after 15 years of uneasy peace between China and the Zunghars, the Zunghar Khan Amursana turned on his former backers in the Qing dynasty. Hardliners in the Middle Kingdom urged the Qianlong Emperor to retaliate with a massive display of force in spring 1756.⁹⁹ For the next five years, Qing armies hunted down Amursana's supporters, driving them eastward into Chinese territory, where they had the men executed and the women and children divvied up amongst soldiers. Simultaneous raids by the Middle Horde swelled the number of Zunghar slaves in Kazakh hands. Others escaped Kazakh captivity and took their chances in Qing-occupied Zungharia.¹⁰⁰ Amursana himself toggled between the Siberian fortress of Semipalatinsk and the Middle Horde, torn over petitioning the Russians for subjecthood or trying a last-ditch alliance with the Kazakhs against the Qing. When Sultan Ablai of the Middle Horde threatened to turn him over to the Chinese, Amursana sought asylum in Siberia instead. The Russians put him up in Tobolsk, where he succumbed to smallpox in September 1757.¹⁰¹

According to one recent headcount, a total of 14,691 Zunghars arrived at the Russian border between 1755 and 1760.¹⁰² Officials allowed refugees to amass near Siberian fortresses but did not know how to begin handling them. Even Nepluev, so adroit and proactive in managing the Batyrsha uprising, was flummoxed. As he told the College of Foreign Affairs in December

⁹⁸ For microhistorical case studies of non-Russian assimilation into the Muscovite, imperial, and Soviet systems, see Stephen M. Norris and Willard Sunderland, eds., *Russia's People of Empire: Life Stories from Eurasia, 1500 to the Present* (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 2012).

⁹⁹ V. A. Moiseev, *Rossiiia i Dzhungarskoe khanstvo v XVIII veke (oчерk vneshnepoliticheskikh otnoshenii)* (Barnaul: Altaiskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1998), 150-54.

¹⁰⁰ On the massacres of Zunghars by the Qing army and the Kazakhs, see Benjamin Levey, *Jungar Refugees and the Making of Empire on Qing China's Kazakh Frontier, 1759-1773* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2013), 30-45.

¹⁰¹ Moiseev, *Rossiiia i Dzhungarskoe khanstvo v XVIII veke*, 157-66.

¹⁰² I. A. Shishkina, "Problema bezhentsev iz Dzhungarii v Russko-Kitaiskikh otnosheniakh (konets 50-kh nachalo 60-kh gg. XVIII v.)," *Istoricheskie, filosofskie, politicheskie, i iuridicheskie nauki, kul'turologiia i iskusstvovedenie. Voprosy teorii i praktiki*, 8: 46, chast' II (Tambov: Gramota, 2014), 209. K.P. Shovunov, *Kalmyki v sostave Rossiiskogo kazachestva (vtoraia polovina XVII-XIX vv.)* (Elista: Kalmytskii institute obshchestvennykh nauk, 1992), 135, has estimated that 25,000 Zunghars arrived in Siberia in 1756-57.

1755: “I do not know where to place them or how to support them.”¹⁰³ The College of Foreign Affairs initially permitted them to graze their herds close to their Altai homeland, provided they surrendered hostages to local fortresses.¹⁰⁴ Yet as the number of refugees kept skyrocketing, the government finally resolved on July 23, 1758 to admit all who accepted baptism and send them to the Christian Kalmyks of Stavropol on the mid-Volga in the Orenburg governorate.¹⁰⁵ Between 1757 and 1759 a total of 2,012 newly baptized Zunghars arrived in the colony.¹⁰⁶ The vast majority who declined baptism were to be sent to the Kalmyks of the lower Volga. Escorting the refugees demanded convoys, provisions, clothing, horses, and money, all of which took months to muster. Not surprisingly, the long marches were devastating for the refugees. One of the largest convoys left Ust-Kamenogorsk in June 1757, bound for the Volga. Consisting of 3,989 people and 410 wagons, it lost almost 1,700 people to starvation, smallpox, and exposure. By the time it arrived in Troitsk on the Orenburg line in July 1758, its numbers had dropped to 2,303.¹⁰⁷

Most Zunghars fled to Russia in clans and extended families. Others arrived alone, either as escapees from Kazakh bands or slaves sold to Russians. Tsering Fal belonged to the latter group. The little we know of him comes from a file preserved in the State Archive of the Orenburg Region.¹⁰⁸ Dated July 9, 1767, it opens with a memo addressed to Orenburg governor Putianin from K. A. Golitsyn summarizing Tsering Fal’s personal history and alerting the governor of the latter’s impending arrival in Orenburg. Following Golitsyn’s summary, the file includes fragments of depositions outlining Tsering Fal’s previous life in Zungharia, his time in Kazakh captivity, and his experiences in Russia. It closes with miscellaneous papers dating back to 1758 detailing the commercial transactions that propelled Tsering Fal’s migration to Siberia, Moscow, Orenburg, and finally Stavropol.

The file presents enough details to allow a reconstruction of Tsering Fal’s life prior to crossing the line. According to his deposition, he was born around 1739, in the Altai region near the Irtysh River. Now known as the Zunghar Gate, it was the most traversable pass running through the Altai Mountains and marked the natural boundary between the east and west Asian steppes.¹⁰⁹ It was also the heartland of the Zunghar khanate. While still a teenager, he inherited 2,000 geldings and noble status (*noyan* in Mongolian) from his father, whose name is transcribed in the file as “Tserian Gonba.”¹¹⁰ Tsering Fal never had the chance to revel in his noble status. In that same year, the Zunghars, as he said, “went to war” against the Kazakhs of the Middle Horde. Captured by his foes, he travelled with them for several years across the steppe. During that time, he heard reports of slaves and prisoners escaping to the Orenburg and Siberian lines. There were rumors of young ones going to school, women being sent to Orenburg or Siberia, and able-bodied men serving in the Russian military in the Baltic.

¹⁰³ V. A. Moiseev, “Priem iuzhnykh altaitsev v rossiiskoe poddanstvo i vopros ob ikh rasselenii (1755-1757 gg.),” in *Gornyi Atai i Rossiia. 240 let* (Gorno-Altai: Gorno-Altaiiskii institut gumanitarnykh issledovanii, 1996), 73.

¹⁰⁴ *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia v Tsentral’noi Azii. XVII-XVIII vv. Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), kn. II: 29.

¹⁰⁵ Shishkina, “Problema bezhentsev iz Dzhungaii,” 208-9.

¹⁰⁶ S. V. Dzhundzhusov, *Kalmyki v srednem povolzh’e i na iuzhnom urale: imperskie mekhanizmy akkul’turatsii i problema sokhraneniia etnicheskoi identichnosti (seredina 30-kh godov XVIII-pervaia chetvert’ XX veka)* (Orenburg: Izdatel’skii tsentr OGAU, 2014), 108.

¹⁰⁷ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 47, ll. 229-32; Moiseev, “Priem iuzhnykh altaitsev v rossiiskoe poddanstvo,” *op. cit.* 75.

¹⁰⁸ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 191-99.

¹⁰⁹ Evgenij Chernykh, *Nomadic Cultures in the Megastructure of the Eurasian World*, translated by Irina Savinetskaya and Peter N. Hommel (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017), 39.

¹¹⁰ The name bears some likeness to Tsering Dondub, the Zunghar general whose campaign in 1717 against the Qing dynasty’s puppet state in Tibet made him famous across Inner Asia. See Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 234.

In March 1758, Tsering Fal decided to see for himself, making a run for Semipalatinsk fortress, where he was baptized and christened.¹¹¹

Tsering Fal's testimony lines up with details we have encountered in stories of other escapees from the Kazakhs: a period of captivity; a dramatic dash for the Russian line; and the acceptance of Christianity. Yet it also conflicts with another account inserted at the end of the file, by one Aleksei Grigorii Bachmeister, a dragoon officer stationed in Siberia. In his version, Bachmeister claimed he bought Tsering Fal on March 13, 1758 for eight arshins (six meters) of Chinese silk and an unspecified amount of liquor. He had met the Kazakhs at the Irtys River to complete the deal and made the arrangements to have Tsering Fal baptized and given the new name of Aleksei. The transaction was legal and above board, as demonstrated by the bill of sale filed away in the Semipalatinsk customs house.¹¹²

If Tsering Fal were in fact a baptized escapee from the Kazakhs, he should have been resettled in Stavropol. Because of an obscure manifesto from 21 years earlier, however, his life was ushered in a radically different direction. Issued on November 16, 1737, it was intended to crack down on peasants evading the poll tax but included an exemption for "newly baptized foreigners" (*inozemtsy*).¹¹³ When announced, it applied mainly to thousands of Torghut Kalmyks from the Volga, who had converted to Orthodoxy after 1725. As more Kalmyk children were sold by their impoverished parents to Russian nobles and merchants as "dependents" (*izhdiventsy*), the law came to apply to them as well. At the time, few Russians made the journey to the south-eastern borderlands to make such purchases. But as multitudes of Zunghars fled to the Siberian and Orenburg lines after 1755, the Orenburg Chancellery adapted the old law to the new situation, declaring on September 12, 1756 that "it is permitted for staff, chief-officers, and nobles of various ranks, to purchase through merchants, or to trade for commodities, Zunghar Kalmyks who have been brought in by Kirghiz-Kazakhs."¹¹⁴

Between September 1756 and September 1757, 186 Zunghars, many of them young children, were put up for sale, mostly near Troitsk. After 1757, sales tapered off, making Bachmeister one of the last purchasers of enslaved Zunghar Kalmyks. Many members of Orenburg's ruling elite owned Zunghars, including the ataman of the Orenburg Cossacks V. I. Mogutuv, customs inspector Ivan Timashev, Petr Rychkov, and Nepliev himself, who bought two girls and two boys.¹¹⁵ The fate of these outcasts, mostly young children, remains unknown—neither Nepliev nor Rychkov mention any Kalmyk "dependents" in their memoirs. Tsering Fal presents an exception to this rule. After purchasing the former Zunghar *noyan*, Bachmeister made his way to Moscow to purchase ammunition for his regiment, with his new slave in tow. Once there, Tsering Fal—now named Aleksei—passed through several hands. Bachmeister first sold him to a merchant named Aleksei Plavialshchskov, with whom he lived for seven years. He was then resold to one College Counsellor Umskii.¹¹⁶ Additional details of his life in Moscow are murky. The file states that he married a Russian woman who worked in the household of Lt. Colonel Buturlin. At her own request, Buturlin permitted her to live with Aleksei in Umskii's residence after their marriage. The file alludes to children but does not specify how many.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 82, l. 1930b-194, 196.

¹¹² GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 82, 1970b-198.

¹¹³ PSZ, X: 351-52 (No. 7438).

¹¹⁴ Vitevskii, *I. I. Nepliev i Orenburgskii krai*, 3-4: 736.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 738-39.

¹¹⁶ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 82, 1960b-197.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Tsering Fal's border crossing thus diverted his life-path in the most abasing and capricious way. Driven from his native land and robbed of his name and identity, he now inhabited the liminal space of "social death" experienced by enslaved peoples nearly everywhere.¹¹⁸ But would he have been better off had he crossed into Russia with most other refugees? The fate of the Torghut Kalmyks suggests otherwise. Thousands of Zunghars had chosen to join their distant cousins on the southern Volga steppes, where they retained their Buddhist religion and found the space and freedom to nomadize. In 1771, many of them followed the Torghuts in the latter's desperate escape from Russia back to Zungharia and into the subjecthood of the Son of Heaven. One of them, also named Tsering and a member of the Zunghar *noyan* class, completed the enormous Inner Asian circuit from the Zunghar Gate to the Volga and back again, within a fifteen-year period. Once back in Zungharia, now firmly under the control of the Qing dynasty, he repented for supporting Amursana and was allocated grazing land by the Chinese authorities. He and his followers were among the lucky ones to survive the disastrous flight across the Kazakh steppe. From January and June 1771, approximately 100,000 people died from hunger, exposure, and attacks by the Middle Horde.¹¹⁹

Alternatively, had Tsering Fal been sold as a child, like most other Zunghar "dependents," memories of his *noyan* heritage would probably have slipped into oblivion as he became Russianized and absorbed into the city's population of household serfs.¹²⁰ Rychkov discerned similar assimilationist forces at work among the young Kalmyks of Stavropol.¹²¹ But for the newly-baptized Aleksei, burying the memories of his illustrious lineage was out of the question. His circumstances call to mind the Crimean elite after 1783, when a similarly formidable khanate was absorbed by Russia. In the latter case, the Heraldry Office had a clear process for reviewing Tatar noble credentials and assigning the new Imperial Russian subjects placement in the service hierarchy equivalent to their former ranks and titles.¹²² Yet unlike most Crimean Tatars, Aleksei had no documentation to support his assertions, just his word. Indeed, the extant paperwork backed Bachmeister's story, which held that the former Zunghar *noyan* had been bought from the Kazakhs for some silk and alcohol.

But Aleksei did spend nearly ten years in Moscow, time enough to adjust to the language and norms of eighteenth-century Russian society. He moreover learned, perhaps with his wife's help, how to navigate the Russian bureaucracy on his own behalf. As his deposition states, in July 1763, Empress Catherine II decreed that all fugitives from the Kazakhs were to be freed and distributed amongst court peasants.¹²³ Upon hearing of this decree, he set to work petitioning the Senate to free him "from slavery" (*iz kholopstva*) and to compensate his owner Umskii for the loss of property. He added that he "wanted nothing more than to enter Catherine II's service."¹²⁴ The Senate not only ruled in his favor, but also found his claims to *noyan* status convincing enough to let him bypass the taxed population and redirect him to the Christian Kalmyks of Stavropol.

¹¹⁸ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 38-62.

¹¹⁹ Levey, *Jungar Refugees*, 213, 222-24, 248.

¹²⁰ Population statistics for Moscow in the mid-eighteenth century are notoriously spotty and inaccurate. The first reliable study from 1805 revealed that 58,871 people out of 216,953 were classified as house serfs. See Alexander M. Martin, *Enlightened Metropolis: Constructing Imperial Moscow, 1762-1855* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 85.

¹²¹ Rychkov, *Topografiia orenburgskaia*, 1: 123.

¹²² Kelly O'Neill, "Rethinking Elite Integration: The Crimean Murzas and the Evolution of Russian Nobility," *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 51, 2/3 (2010), 397-417.

¹²³ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 82, l. 195.

¹²⁴ GAOO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 82, l. 196ob.

Aleksei's file says nothing about his later life, but we can surmise the most likely future that lay in store for him. In 1757-58, when the main convoy of baptized Zunghars arrived in Stavropol, Nepliuev took pains to show special "Christian favor and deference" to the *noyans*. Referring to them as "authentic and notable property owners," he hoped they would set an example both for the commoners who accompanied them to Stavropol and the Torghut Kalmyks of the lower Volga. The governor of Orenburg strove to institute the hierarchies of the center, guaranteeing *noyans* hefty stipends, generous land allotments, and leadership positions in the three Cossack regiments created out of the refugees.¹²⁵ Attached to the Orenburg Cossack host, they now performed annual service on the line from the Russian side, manning and maintaining its fortresses and redoubts, chasing after Kazakh bandits and Bashkir horse thieves, and, fittingly enough, convoying other refugees who washed up on the border. Given Aleksei's *noyan* background and wealth prior to the Zunghar collapse, he may very well have been incorporated into this salaried elite, earning between ten and 30 rubles per year.¹²⁶ His proficiency in Russian, moreover, would have made him useful as an intermediary between tsarist officials and his fellow Zunghars and an effective tool of Zunghar integration into the fabric of the empire.

At a time when the Bashkirs and Iaitsk Cossacks were rebelling over the loss of privileges, leaping "up from slavery" over the masses of serfs and state peasants into the Cossack service population was an impressive achievement. Most Russians cringed at the idea of resettlement in Orenburg, renowned for its fugitives, criminal exiles, insurrectionists, and so-called "Asiatics." By contrast, Aleksei saw it as a way of serving his new sovereign. It was also his ticket out of personal bondage and a chance to reclaim some of the freedom, mobility, and dignity he had once taken for granted in Zungharia.

Conclusion

The completion of the Orenburg Line in the mid-eighteenth century gave rise to a complex web of human relationships that rendered the Volga-Ural region one of Russia's most unpredictable borderlands. Despite frequent unrest from local non-Russian subjects, tsarist officials tried taking a long view, holding that agriculture, industry, and commerce, driven by settlement from the interior, would hasten the integration of the province and its peoples into the empire. The fortresses built along the Iaik formed an integral part of their policy, as practical mechanisms of defense and control, barriers to movement, and declarative symbols of Russia's self-proclaimed civilizing mission.

The line also bifurcated the region into distinct Russian and non-Russian zones. For the peoples under Russian control, the Kazakh side became linked with mobility and mutability, symbolized by Karasakal, the doomed throwback to the glory days of the Nogai Horde. Meanwhile, when Kalmyks and Kazakhs of the steppe side considered the fate of Bashkirs and "New Christians" on the Russian side, they saw the drudgery of farming, sedentism, and the end of their way of life. One result of Russia's partition of the steppe was the emergence of transnational border actors—Cossacks, Russians, Tatars, Bashkirs, Kalmyks, and Zunghars—people whose backgrounds and skills enabled them to navigate the new spaces and political circumstances of the post-nomadic world. They were a heterogeneous lot: some, like the Kargala Tatars, promoted tsarist economic interests across Inner Asia, while others, notably baptized Zunghars, slowly became absorbed into the service population by defending the line.

¹²⁵ A. S. Riazhev, ed., *Volzhskie stavropol'skoe kalmyki: seredina 30-kh gg. XVIII v.—pervaia polovina XIX v. Dokumenty i materialy*, vol. 1 (Rostov-on-the-Don: Izdatel'stvo Iuzhnogo nauchnogo tsentra RAN, 2011), 221-23.

¹²⁶ Dzhundzhusov, *Kalmyki v srednem povolzh'e i na iuzhnom urale*, 107-9.

The Torghut Kalmyks, the last of the steppe peoples to practice dual subjecthood, spurned Russian subjecthood for China's embrace. Their decision to flee the Volga in 1771, along with the Orenburg administration's failure to overtake them, showed the readiness of some peoples to switch sovereigns in desperate situations.

Given the porousness of Russia's defenses, it is remarkable that the Orenburg Line stayed intact during the Pugachev uprising. As rebel forces seized control over its strong points in 1773-74, they now assumed responsibility for defending the province from Kazakh incursions, a sign of the waning of frontier thinking and the emergence of modern border consciousness. Nor did rebels consider fleeing to the left bank of the Iaik once the insurrection began—the *Pugachevshchina* remained a regional civil war, confined largely to the Orenburg governorate. Meanwhile, appeals for aid to Kazakh leaders from both rebel and governmental forces mostly fell on deaf ears, yet another indication of Russia's limited control over its tributaries south and east of the Iaik. And while the upsurge of Kazakh attacks on Russian settlements in 1774 triggered fears of a "general insurrection" across the southeast,¹²⁷ the raiders always returned to their side of the Iaik. After nearly four decades of tsarist occupation and countless subaltern border crossings, the right bank of the Iaik had become the eastern flank of what geographers later called "European Russia," a civilizational boundary whose full impact and significance would not be seen until the nineteenth century.

¹²⁷ See Orenburg governor Ivan Reinsdorp's report to the Senate from 7 July 1774 in *Krest'ianskaia voina 1773-1775 gg. na territorii Bashkirii* (Ufa: Bashkirskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1975), 204.