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**RUSSIA, KHOQAND, AND THE SEARCH FOR A
“NATURAL” FRONTIER, 1863–1865***

“la plus grande difficulté consiste à savoir s’arrêter,”
Prince A. M. Gorchakov, 1864

The Russian conquest of Central Asia in the nineteenth century was seen by most onlookers as the act of an aggressive imperial power, hungry for territory, prestige, and the opportunity to threaten its British rivals in India, or – in what became the canonical interpretation in the Soviet period – for captive markets and sources of raw materials. Russia’s own statesmen were more inclined to present it as a process that got out of control, as the immediate need to pacify troublesome tribes on the frontier combined with the actions of ambitious “men on the spot” to draw the empire into conquest after conquest, without any grand plan or strategy. The classic statement of this “reluctant imperialist” idea came from the Russian foreign minister Prince A. M. Gorchakov (1798–1883) in a minute circulated to the Foreign Ministries of all the European powers, in which, after comparing Russian expansion with that of other colonial powers, he remarked rather peevisly

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that “the greatest difficulty consists in knowing how to stop.”¹ This disavowal of all expansionist ambitions and abdication of responsibility looks wholly hypocritical in hindsight, and was viewed so at the time by the British, who were its principal intended audience. However, there is reason to believe that Gorchakov’s sentiments were sincerely felt. The Central Asian frontier had been a persistent headache for the Foreign Ministry since at least the 1830s, and most of the territory acquired there since that date was of very dubious strategic and economic value. Later historians have echoed the judgement that Russia’s “men on the spot” got out of control, and that many key episodes, most notably the capture of Tashkent by General M. G. Cherniaev (1828–1898) in June 1865, were indeed a product of “not knowing how to stop.”² However, a reexamination of contemporary debates and correspondence reveals that this is an oversimplification. St. Petersburg did have a plan for expansion in Central Asia in the early 1860s, and ministers and frontline officers shared numerous assumptions about Russia’s role in Central Asia, the form its frontier there should take, and, above all, how a suitable, *natural* limit to Russian expansion could be identified. In principle, at least, new techniques of surveying, statistics, and military topography would make this possible, and in this, Russia shared in a wider European imperial military episteme and the formation of what James Hevia has called a “military techno-elite,” which emerged from the 1860s onward.³ As David Rich has noted in his study of the Russian General Staff, the group of officers who created and identified with this spirit of scientific military professionalism (which was still in its infancy in the 1860s): “Statistical knowledge empowered Russian state servants to act wilfully, yet from motives at once more self-serving and bureaucratically defensible than traditional arbitrariness (*proizvol*).” However, Rich goes on to argue that “Rogue Generals carved out new territories in Central Asia, either in the absence of unified national policy or oblivious to St. Petersburg’s commands to the contrary,”⁴ thus reproducing the conventional “disobedience” thesis. In fact it was the incommensurability between

¹ “Circular dispatch addressed by Prince Gortchakow to Russian Representatives abroad.” November 21, 1864 // Parliamentary Papers. Central Asia. No. 2 (1873) [Correspondence Respecting Central Asia, C. 704:]. P. 70 (French original) – the contemporary English translation (P. 73) has “knowing when to stop,” but I think my rendering is more accurate.

² David Mackenzie. *Expansion in Central Asia: St. Petersburg vs. The Turkestan Generals (1863–1866)* // Canadian Slavic Studies. 1969. Vol. 3. No. 2. Pp. 286-311.

³ James Hevia. *The Imperial Security State. British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-Building in Asia*. Cambridge, 2012. Pp. 34-52.

⁴ David Alan Rich. *The Tsar’s Colonels. Professionalism, Strategy, and Subversion in Late Imperial Russia*. Cambridge, MA., 1998. Pp. 6, 91.

the Russian military-bureaucratic episteme he identifies and the facts of human and physical geography in Central Asia itself that allowed seemingly uncontrolled expansion, and help to explain Gorchakov’s disclaimer. This article argues that the “man on the spot” – in this case preeminently Cherniaev – played an important role in determining the timing of the Russian advance, but not its overall form and direction. This was governed instead by the search for a “natural” frontier in the region.

I

On August 1, 1863, Gorchakov and the War Minister Dmitri Miliutin (1816–1912) jointly presented Tsar Alexander II with a proposal for the uniting of the Orenburg and Western Siberian lines of fortresses through the southern part of the Asian steppe between Fort Vernoe in the Trans-Ili region and Fort Perovskii on the Syr-Darya. This was the product of over four years of argument and wrangling between different ministries in St. Petersburg, and between the separate military commands of Orenburg and Omsk. Much of the debate had concerned the fate of the city of Tashkent, whose annexation had been urged by A. P. Bezak (1800–1868), the governor of Orenburg, and opposed by his opposite number in Western Siberia, A. O. Duhamel (1801–1880).⁵ For now though, at least, Tashkent had been left out of the official plans for the year ahead. Miliutin himself probably harbored long-term ambitions of anchoring the planned new Russian frontier on that city, a major trading entrepot and the center of a rich agricultural district, and there is no doubt that it continued to exercise a fascination for many “men on the spot” in the Russian military. However, the line of the Russian advance was to be determined by a process of objective verification based on the natural and human geography of the region. As Miliutin explained to Bezak a week later, after the tsar had approved the plan:

In uniting the line, and with the establishment of our frontier on the summit of the Qara-Tau, we are not broadening our frontiers, but on the contrary restricting their extent, and coming closer to the fertile regions of Central Asia.⁶

⁵ On this debate, see Alexander Morrison. “Nechto Eroticheskoe”? “Courir après l’ombre”? Logistical Imperatives and the Fall of Tashkent, 1859–1865 // *Central Asian Survey*. 2014. Vol. 33. No. 2. Pp. 153-169.

⁶ Miliutin to Bezak, August 12, 1863 // Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (TsGARKaz). F. 382. Op. 1. D. 47 (“O budushchikh deistviikh nashikh v Srednei Azii”). L. 33ob-34ob.

Miliutin’s confident assertion that the new Russian frontier could sit comfortably on the summit of the Qara-Tau (a mountain range that he had never seen, and about whose location and characteristics the Russians, as we shall see, had little accurate knowledge) was entirely characteristic of Russian thinking regarding frontiers in Central Asia in this period, and reflected wider European attitudes. As Alexei Postnikov and Svetlana Gorshenina have shown, rather than acknowledging that frontiers were something imposed on the landscape according to the dictates of political expediency and raw military power, officials and statesmen preferred to believe that they were something that could and should be determined according to objective criteria that could be identified in the landscape.⁷ These included prominent geographical features such as rivers and watersheds, and also notional human “civilizational” boundaries, such as those between the steppe and the sown in Central Asia. In 1864 Gorchakov wrote:

[N]omad tribes, which can neither be seized nor punished nor effectually kept in order, are our most inconvenient neighbors; while, on the other hand, agricultural and commercial populations attached to the soil, and possessing a more advanced social organization, offer us every chance of gaining neighbors with whom there is a possibility of entering into relations. Consequently, our frontier line ought to swallow up the former, and stop short at the limit of the latter. These ... principles supply a clear, natural, and logical explanation of our last military operations in Central Asia.⁸

Existing political arrangements, such as the Khoqand khanate’s control of a large swathe of the southern steppe from its agricultural base in the Ferghana Valley, or the ambitions of the ruler of Bukhara, Amir Sayyid Muzaffar, to control Tashkent himself, were either ignored or seen as inherently illegitimate. Instead, the science of military geography would allow the Russians to establish a “frontier” that emerged from the landscape and would allow them to “obtain a firm state border” (*poluchit’ tverduiu gosudarstvennuiu granitsu*, in the words of G. K. Gasfort, governor of Western Siberia in 1859)⁹ in the apparently boundless (and boundary-less)

Central Asian steppe. Unlike the later creation of the Russian boundary with Afghanistan, (which was equally driven by the idea of identifying a “natural” frontier that could be scientifically fixed),¹⁰ there would be no European partner to this early Russian attempt at boundary making in Central Asia – and the Russians did not admit the legitimacy of any Central Asian participation in this enterprise.

By the late 1850s, Russian surveyors – notably A. G. Vlangali, M. M. Khomentov, and, most famously, P. P. Semenov Tian-Shanskii and Choqan Valikhanov, had surveyed and mapped much of the Ili Valley and parts of the Tian Shan range in Southern Semirechie.¹¹ However, the region between Fort Vernoe and the Qara-Tau range remained terra incognita as the leadership in St. Petersburg began to consider renewing the Russian advance in Central Asia in the early 1860s. In 1859 the military geographer Mikhail Veniukov (1832–1901) carried out a crucial survey of what the Russians called the “Khoqand military line” – a string of fortresses built by the khanate in the valley of the River Chu (Toqmaq, Pishpek, Aq-Su, Merke, It-kichu, Aulie-Ata, Chulaq-Qurghan, and Suzaq). These he interpreted as designed to defend a frontier “that the Khoqandis evidently consider to be the River Chu.”¹² Veniukov was the leading Russian military geographer of his day, and a strong proponent of the idea of the “natural frontier.” His description here of a frontier defined by a river, and by the summits of the Qzykurt, Buraldai, Qara-Tau, and Ala-Tau mountains, would prove highly influential in determining the pattern of the Russian advance, and the natural features on which statesmen in St. Petersburg would try to anchor the Russians’ own “New Khoqand Line” in the mid-1860s.¹³ In his later published works, Veniukov noted that, with the exception of agreements with China, over the previous 300 years the Russians had never concluded any treaties in Asia that established firm boundaries; this was despite the fact, so he claimed, that the “state border” (*gosudarstvennaia granitsa*) had been extended far to the south by the submission of the Qazaqs of the Junior

¹⁰ Hevia. *Imperial Security State*. Pp. 92-105.

¹¹ Postnikov. *Stanovlenie rubezhei*. Pp. 228-234; P. P. Semenov. *Travels in the Tian’-Shan’ 1856–1857* / Ed. and trans. Colin Thomas, Liudmila Gilmour, and Marcus Wheeler. London, 1998.

¹² *Kokandskaia voennaia liniia na r. Chu 15/07/1860* // RGVIA. F.1449. Op. 1. D. 7. L. 2; see further Janet Kilian. *Allies & Adversaries: The Russian Conquest of the Kazakh Steppe* / Ph.D. Dissertation; George Washington University, 2013. Pp. 287-289.

¹³ He published a version of his report the following year: Mikhail Veniukov. *Ocherki Zailiiskogo kraia i Prichuiskoi strany* // *Izvestiia Imperatorskogo Russkogo Geograficheskogo Obshchestva*. 1861. No. 4. Pp. 79-116. See further Rich. *The Tsar’s Colonels*. P. 62.

⁷ Svetlana Gorshenina. *Asie Centrale. L’invention des frontières et l’héritage russo-soviétique*. Paris, 2012. Pp. 37-93; A. V. Postnikov. *Stanovlenie rubezhei Rossii v Tsentral’noi i Srednei Azii (XVIII–XIXvv)*. Moscow, 2007.

⁸ Circular dispatch addressed by Prince Gortchakov. P. 74.

⁹ *Zapiska Komandira Otdel’nogo Sibirskogo Korpusa i General-Gubernatora Zapadnoi Sibiri o neobkhodimosti zaniatiia verkhov’ev r. Chu i predvaritel’nykh k tomu rasporiazheniyam 21/01/1859* // Russian State Military Historic Archive (RGVIA). F. 483. Op. 1. D. 51. L. 4-5ob.

and Middle *Zhuzes* to Russia in 1732 (an interpretation that would become canonical in the Soviet period), even though in many respects (such as the customs boundary) it remained a foreign (*zagranichnyi*) territory until the 1860s.¹⁴ He considered this situation to be anomalous, unacceptable, and ripe for revision.

The main culprit in the creation of this zone of uncertainty in the steppe was the Khoqand Khanate, an aggressive, ambitious, expansionist rival to Russia in what its own historians referred to as the *Dasht-i Qipchaq*. Between 1808, when Tashkent fell to Khoqandi forces, and 1834, when a Chitrali mercenary named Lashkar Qushbegi established the fortress of Aq Masjid on the lower Syr-Darya, Khoqand expanded to become a major steppe power, collecting *zakat*¹⁵ from Qazaq nomads over whom Russia claimed sovereignty and, so the Russians claimed, disrupting caravan routes and generally disturbing the peace.¹⁶ Most frustrating of all was the fact that Khoqand did not appear to the Russians to have a clearly defined northern frontier, although there is some evidence to suggest that the Khanate’s own leaders thought otherwise. In 1854, in the aftermath of the fall of Aq Masjid to the Russians and its renaming as “Fort Perovskii,” a Khoqandi ambassador to the East India Company stated that “The boundary between Kokan and Russia was previously Kizzilpir – now it is Ak-musjid” although he added that “I do not know whether Kizzilpir is on the East or West bank of the Sir [Darya].”¹⁷ While this suggests a territorial understanding of sovereignty, this particular account has been mediated through British eyes: as we shall see, evidence from other Khoqandi sources suggests that the khanate’s elites thought primarily in terms of control over people rather than territory: at the very least, though, Khoqand claimed sovereignty over the Qazaqs of

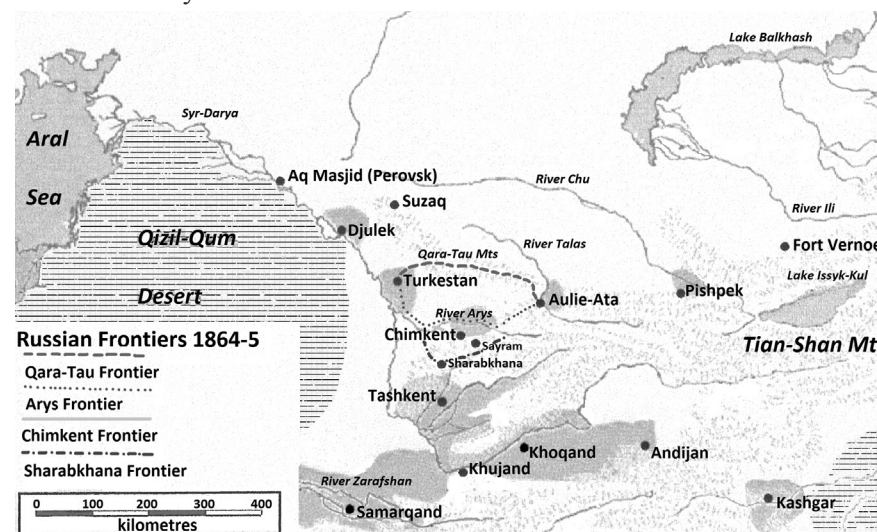
¹⁴ Mikhail Veniukov. *Opyt voennogo obozreniia russkikh granits v Azii*. St. Petersburg, 1873. Pp. 6, 10.

¹⁵ The tax on commerce under Islamic law, usually equivalent to 1/40th of the value of the goods.

¹⁶ Scott Levi. *The Ferghana Valley at the Crossroads of World History: The Rise of Khoqand 1709–1822* // *Journal of Global History*. 2007. Vol. 2. No. 2. Pp. 213–232; T. K. Beisembiev. *Vysshiaia administratsiia Tashkenta i iuga Kazakhstana v period Khoqandskogo Khanstva: 1809–1865* // *Istoriko-kul’turnye vzaimosviazi Irana i Dagestana v XIII–XVIII vv.* Almaty, 2004. Pp. 291–313; B. M. Babadzhonov. *Khoqand Khanstvo: vlast’, politika, religiia*. Tokyo and Tashkent, 2010.

¹⁷ Deposition of Moollah Yar Mahomed, servant of the Padshah or Khan of Kokan, made to Major Edwardes at Peshawur 18th August 1854 // *National Archives of India. Foreign/S.C./24th November 1854/Nos. 1–22 Account of the Khanate of Khoqand*. P. 11.

the Senior *zhuz*,¹⁸ whose grazing grounds stretched far to the north of the line defined by Veniukov.¹⁹



II

Before Russian troops began to advance west from Vernoe and south from Perovsk in 1863, a notional, “natural” frontier that would finally set limits to the empire’s expansion in Central Asia had been indicated in the orders issued to their commanders. Shortly before he set out on a reconnaissance mission toward the small Khoqandi fortress of Suzaq early in 1863, Cherniaev wrote that to properly secure the left flank of the Russian frontier, the following would be necessary: “The taking of Turkestan and

¹⁸ Usually translated as “horde,” although literally it means “hundred” – one of the three political divisions that had emerged among the Qazaqs by the mid-seventeenth century. The others were the Middle and Junior Zhuzes.

¹⁹ In this article, I use a Khoqandi account of the Russian conquest as a counterpoint to Russian sources: Timur Beisembiev. *The Life of ‘Alimqul. A Native Chronicle of Nineteenth-Century Central Asia*. London, 2003, a magnificent edition of Mullah Muhammad Yunus Jarrahghavul Tashkandi’s *Ta’rikh-i ‘Aliquli Amir-i Lashkar* (ca. 1901–6, hereafter cited as *TS*). All quotations are from Beisembiev’s English translation. Another important text is Nikolai Pantusov. *Ta’rikh Shakhrokhii. Istoriia Vladetelei Fergany*. Kazan’, 1885), an obsolete nineteenth-century edition of Mullah Niyaz Khoqandi *Ta’rikh-i Shahrakhi* (1871, hereafter cited as *TS*), which needs to be read in conjunction with T. K. Beisembiev. *Tarikh Shahrakhi kak istoricheskii istochnik*. Alma-Ata, 1982). See further T. K. Beisembiev. *Annotated Indices to the Khoqand Chronicles*. Tokyo, 2008.

the continuation of the line along the Ala-Tau mountains to be united with the Siberian frontier, and the introduction of military settlements along the Syr."²⁰ Cherniaev made the first step toward this shortly afterward by capturing Suzaq almost without a fight, a success that, retrospectively authorized by the War Ministry, finally persuaded the more cautious Gorchakov to accept Miliutin's argument that the uniting of the lines and the creation of a new frontier should take place without further delay.²¹ A note from Miliutin to the Foreign Ministry in January 1864 laid out the objectives in Central Asia for the coming year. Chief among these was

the uniting of the forward Siberian and Orenburg lines, on the basis proposed by General-Adjutant Bezak, that is, from Djulek along the Syr-Darya, through Suzaq, to Aulie-Ata and further along the summit of the Qara-Tau mountains, having taken Suzaq with the forces of the Orenburg corps and Aulie-Ata with those of the Siberian corps, in order to then transfer the border to the [River] Arys, taking it from Aulie-Ata through Chimkent.²²

This combination of urban and natural landmarks that would define the new frontier was reproduced verbatim in the orders issued in March by General Duhamel to Cherniaev, who had been reassigned from the Orenburg to the Siberian command personally by Miliutin a few days later.²³ From the beginning, however, these orders contained a significant ambiguity – there was to be an initial “natural” frontier between Suzaq and Aulie-Ata along the summit of the Qara-Tau, but as Bezak wrote to Duhamel in Omsk

²⁰ M. G. Cherniaev. O vodvorenii spokoistviia v nashikh granitsakh. Napisano do 63g. // Russian State Historical Museum. Division of Written Sources (RGIMOPI). F. 208. Op. 1. D. 4. L. 70.

²¹ Ivanov's suggestion that this approval was owing to a desire to punish the British for their interference in the Polish revolt that year seems to be entirely without foundation – the correspondence reveals that Miliutin's overwhelming concern was for a sustainable and defensible frontier in Central Asia: V. A. Ivanov. *Rossii i Turkestan v kontekste Bol'shoi Igry // Rossiia–Sredniaia Aziia*. 2011. Vol. 1. P. 105. See Morrison. “Nechto Eroticheskoe”. Pp. 164-165. See also Kilian. *Allies & Adversaries*. Pp. 331-332, though she gives too much credence to Khalfin's argument that this was motivated by commercial considerations (N. A. Khalfin. *Politika Rossii v Srednei Azii (1857–1868)*. Moscow, 1960. Pp. 161-163.

²² Miliutin to Reutern, January 9, 1864 // A. G. Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik Materialov dlia istorii ego zavoevaniia*. Tashkent, 1914. Vol. 17 (1864 g.). Part 1. Doc. 45. Pp. 81-82; M. A. Terent'ev. *Istoriia Zavoevaniia Srednei Azii*. St. Petersburg, 1906. Vol. 1. P. 276.

²³ Miliutin to Duhamel, January 12, 1864; Duhamel to Cherniaev, March 3, 1864 // Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik*. Vol. 17 (1864 g.). Part. 1. Doc. 2 & 6. Pp. 4, 7-8.

“the War Minister, agreeing entirely with my opinion on the uselessness of dispatching any expedition against the Khoqandis without a defined goal, especially in winter, and on the necessity of the rapid uniting of our forward lines, considers the line through Suzaq and Aulie-Ata only temporary.”²⁴ It would be “transferred” (an interesting euphemism for an action that would require the conquest of significant further territory) at some unspecified later date to a supposedly equally “natural” frontier along the River Arys. As we shall see, this ambiguity, combined with the fact that these orders related to a landscape that none of the men concerned had actually seen, would in practice allow Cherniaev considerable latitude to interpret his orders as he saw fit, in the assurance that (as in the past) as long as they were victorious, his actions would be retrospectively endorsed.

In the discussions as to where the Siberian section of the new line should run, natural landmarks did not play a prominent role, but human and natural environmental conditions did. G. A. Kolpakovskii, the *Pristav* of the Ala-Tau region (and soon to be governor of the new province of Semirechie) emphasized the need for fortified points at Merke, Toqmaq, and Pishpek in order to defend caravan traffic and prevent *baramta* (livestock raiding), noting also that these regions were suitable for settlement and asking that 200 families of Cossacks be sent there. The main concern, here as in the earlier debates over the desirability of seizing Tashkent, was the importance of having a frontier line that ran through a region with a sedentary population, and thus good supplies of grain and timber. He argued that the supply road for the frontier should run along the Kastek valley because it had good grazing for baggage animals even at the end of summer.²⁵ On the Orenburg side of the debate, the considerations were more abstract, but Bezak was consistently hawkish, and advocated seizing the sacred town of Turkestan, site of the mausoleum of Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi,²⁶ at the earliest possible opportunity. He claimed that:

Not that long ago the expanse dividing the Orenburg line from the Siberian was entirely unknown to us, and our information beyond Fort

²⁴ Bezak to Duhamel, January 12, 1864 // Ibid. Doc. 5. P. 7.

²⁵ Kolpakovskii to Duhamel, February 22, 1864 // Ibid. Doc. 14. Pp. 25-27.

²⁶ A twelfth-century saint, founder of the Yasawiyya Sufi *tariqa*. In the nineteenth century, his mausoleum in Turkestan remained an important center of pilgrimage, and a focus for numerous sacred lineages. See Devin DeWeese. *The Masha'ikh-i Turk and the Khojagan // Journal of Islamic Studies*. 1996. Vol. 7. No. 2. Pp. 180-207; Idem. *The Politics of Sacred Lineages in 19th Century Central Asia // International Journal of Middle-East Studies*. 1999. Vol. 31. No. 4. Pp. 507-530.

Perovskii was limited to a radius of no more than 100 versts. Now we, with a sufficient knowledge of the area, are progressing quickly toward the goal laid out by His Imperial Majesty Nikolai Pavlovich, that is, to the uniting there of our frontier. ... controlling Turkestan is beneficial to us in the highest degree, as the central spot for the administration once the Orenburg and Siberian Lines are united ... we will be throwing the Khoqandis back across the River Arys.²⁷

As we shall see, Bezak's claims for the improvement of Russian geographical knowledge of the region turned out to be misplaced, but his representations had their effect, resulting in a further set of ambiguous instructions, this time to be passed on to the commander of the Orenburg forces in the region, Colonel Verevkin. After consulting with the tsar, N. P. Ignat'ev, the new head of the Asian section of the Foreign Ministry, wrote that "Colonel Verevkin is permitted to make use of favorable circumstances for the taking of Turkestan, without losing sight of the main aim of this military action – the factual uniting of the Orenburg and Siberian forward lines."²⁸ Milutin passed this message on in slightly different, but no less ambiguous terms:

I am permitted on the Highest authority to reply, that the plan of action that was resolved upon this summer should not be altered; ... the advance toward Turkestan can be undertaken only when a real and easy opportunity presents itself for seizing this point with a permanent garrison. A simple demonstration toward or bombardment of this city would be more dangerous than useful.²⁹

The decision over when to take a crucial further step into Central Asia was effectively left to the discretion of the "man on the spot," but with tacit authorization from the very highest levels of government.

In April 1864, Miliutin once again reminded Bezak that "The new frontier line, which will initially run along the Qara-Tau summit, will then, when the time is favorable, be moved, as your Excellency knows, to the Arys, from Aulie-Ata to Chimkent and Turkestan, and then to Suzaq."³⁰ There was no indication of how it would be decided when the time was "favorable," but the 2,500 troops, 800 horses, and 4,000 camels of Cherniaev's Trans-Chu force set out from Fort Vernoe on their campaign ten

days later on May 1.³¹ Cherniaev's forces encountered no opposition at Merke, Toqmaq, or Pishpek; they reached Aulie-Ata on June 2, and after a brief siege stormed the fortified town on the fourth. Cherniaev wrote to his father on the sixth that "before you receive this letter you will no doubt have heard from the newspapers of my capture of Aulie-Ata, *which is the final goal proposed for the force's activities this year*... the capture of the fortress hardly cost us any losses, thanks to the constant rain, which prevented the Khoqandis from using their matchlocks" (emphasis added).³² Apart from offering further evidence of the advantages in military technology enjoyed by the Russians during the conquest of Central Asia, this letter suggests that at this stage, at least, Cherniaev understood his orders to have been fulfilled – the further "transfer" of the frontier to the Arys was not to happen that year. On June 12, Verevkin's forces captured Turkestan. The new Russian frontier had ostensibly been created as planned, however, barely a month later Cherniaev would be advancing on Chimkent. This would appear to offer confirmation of Mackenzie's "disobedience" thesis in explaining this phase of the Russian advance into Central Asia, but other factors were also at work.³³ Terent'ev explained it in the following terms: "a closer acquaintance with the projected frontier revealed that the Qara-Tau range, which served as the actual frontier, in no way facilitated things, as communications between the forces and their furnishing with supplies were extremely difficult, and the northern slopes of the range, on top of this, were very short of water."³⁴ Communications across the Qara-Tau range would certainly not have been easy, and the Russians seem to have underestimated the obstacle it represented. The region between Aulie-Ata and Turkestan was not covered in Veniukov's survey, and instead the Russians found themselves reliant on information from local sources.³⁵ In all probability the sum total

³¹ Terent'ev. *Istoriia Zavoevaniia*. Pp. 268-269.

³² M. G. Cherniaev to Grigorii Nikitich Cherniaev, June 27, 1864 Aulie-Ata // International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam: Archief M. G. Cherniaev Folder 17; Kilian notes that Cherniaev sent back over 200 Khoqandi prisoners to Vernoe, most of whom were apparently over the age of 60. Kilian. *Allies & Adversaries*. P. 340.

³³ David Mackenzie. *The Lion of Tashkent. The Career of General M. G. Cherniaev*. Athens, GA, 1974. P. 38.

³⁴ Terent'ev. *Istoriia Zavoevaniia*. Vol. I. P. 278.

³⁵ This offers strong parallels with the British use of indigenous networks and forms of information during their conquest of India, although, at least within the subcontinent, their ability to tap these seems to have been greater than that of the Russians in Central Asia. See C. A. Bayly. *Empire and Information. Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*. Cambridge, 1996. Pp. 56-96.

²⁷ Bezak to Miliutin, April 4, 1864 // Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik*. Vol. 17 (1864 g.). Part. 1. Doc. 53. Pp. 95, 97.

²⁸ Ignat'ev to Miliutin, April 4, 1864 // *Ibid.* Doc. 59. P. 105.

²⁹ Resolution by D. A. Miliutin n.d. // *Ibid.* Doc. 53. P. 98.

³⁰ Miliutin to Bezak, April 19, 1864 // *Ibid.* Doc. 62. P. 107.

of Cherniaev's knowledge of the landscape comprised a rough sketch-map drawn up by a Qazaq *lazutchik* (scout) for Kolpakovskii at the beginning of 1864, which only gave brief descriptions of routes and distances, and the barest outline of the landscape and rivers.³⁶ What this map did indicate, however, was that the only road linking Aulie-Ata and Turkestan ran through Chimkent, which was still controlled by Khoqand. In his later memoirs, Miliutin gave this as the key reason for Cherniaev's decision to advance on Chimkent, and approved his reasoning.³⁷ When Cherniaev received intelligence (which turned out to be correct) that a large Khoqandi force was massing at Chimkent that would sever communications between him and Verevkin, he made the decision to capture the city, and wrote to Verevkin for assistance. This resulted in a famously ill-tempered response from the latter, which Cherniaev would later reproduce (in somewhat altered form) in one of the many self-justifying publications of his retirement:³⁸

If the purpose of your proposed advance to Chimkent is simply a reconnaissance of the Khoqandi forces, then it seems that this aim is already fulfilling itself. If you propose to capture Chimkent, with the purpose of its permanent occupation, then, without denying the ease and usefulness of such an enterprise, I must insist that not only the actual siege but also the creation and supply of a garrison there must fall solely on the Siberian, and in no way on the Orenburg forces. As Chimkent lies forty versts to the East of the left bank of the Arys, it does not enter at all into our proposed frontier and lies entirely outside the Syr-Darya region.³⁹

Verevkin also wrote to Bezak a few days later to insist on the same point.⁴⁰ Verevkin's assertion that Chimkent did *not* fall into Russian plans for the frontier might be taken as confirmation that Cherniaev was acting entirely on his own initiative in attacking it, but this was not entirely true: after all, Chimkent had been mentioned by Miliutin as the anchoring-point of the new frontier in the original orders he issued in January 1864. A few days after Cherniaev set out toward Chimkent, this would be reconfirmed

by Colonel V. A. Poltoratskii of the Asiatic section of the General Staff (a personal friend of Cherniaev), who wrote that the purpose of the campaigns was: "To create from the fortresses of Perovskii, Djulek, Turkestan, Chimkent, Aulie-ata, Merke, and Toqmaq a new forward Khoqand Line, the center of administration of which, depending on local circumstances, should be Aulie-Ata or Chimkent."⁴¹ On July 17, Miliutin appointed Cherniaev commander of this "New Khoqand Line," subordinating Verevkin to his authority on the grounds of seniority, although neither officer was yet aware of this. Instead the Chimkent campaign brought into stark relief the dangers of a divided command on the new frontier. Despite his abrupt dismissal of Cherniaev's proposal to attack Chimkent, Verevkin shortly afterward dispatched a small force of two companies of infantry, a *sotnia* of Cossacks, twenty Kazakh auxiliaries, three guns, and a rocket battery under Staff-Captain Meyer from Turkestan across the Arys. Whether, as Cherniaev (and later Terent'ev) would allege, this was with the explicit aim of gaining the glory of capturing Chimkent for Orenburg before the Siberian troops could reach it, or it was simply intended to secure communications between the forces and Meyer exceeded his orders, he advanced directly toward Chimkent without alerting Cherniaev to his presence, and managed to get himself cut off and surrounded in the valley of Aq Bulaq by a much larger Khoqandi force led by Mullah 'Alimqul himself.⁴² In Terent'ev's account, Meyer only managed to extricate himself at the price of a deceitful and humiliating promise to return Turkestan to the Khoqandis, which was then, of course, reneged upon when Cherniaev appeared with reinforcements and scattered the Khoqandi troops.⁴³ Curiously, none of the available Khoqandi sources mentions this offer, although 'Alimqul appears to refer to it in an undated letter preserved by Serebrennikov in Russian translation.⁴⁴ Mullah Muhammad Yunus describes negotiations between the Khoqandis and the Russians beginning only *after* Meyer and his men had been relieved by the arrival of Cherniaev and his men from Aulie-Ata. His account of the conversation with the Russian envoy (the naturalist N. A. Severtsov, who had

³⁶ Map by 'Abd al-Vali Qarabai oghli, January 19, 1864 // TsGARKaz. F.3. Op.1. D.167. Ll.114ob-115.

³⁷ D. A. Miliutin. *Vospominaniia 1863-4* / Ed. L. G. Zakharova. Moscow, 2003. P. 515.

³⁸ M. G. Cherniaev. *Sultany Kenesary i Sadyk* // *Russkii Vestnik*. 1889. No. 8. Pp. 27-39; Terent'ev. *Istoriia Zavoevaniia*. Vol. I. P. 283.

³⁹ Verevkin to Cherniaev, June 2, 1864; July 2, 1864 // Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik*. Vol. 17 (1864 g.). Part. 1. Docs. 88, 121. Pp. 144, 203.

⁴⁰ Verevkin to Bezak, July 8, 1864 // *Ibid.* Doc. 131. P. 217.

⁴¹ *Zapiska polkovnika Poltoratskogo ob obrazovanii peredovoi Kokandskoi Linii*, July 9, 1864 // *Ibid.* Doc. 132. P. 220.

⁴² Terent'ev. *Istoriia Zavoevaniia*. Vol. I. P. 284; Ta'rikh-i 'Aliquli Amir-i Lashkar/ trans. P. 65, text 71b-72a.

⁴³ *Ibid.* Pp. 288-289.

⁴⁴ Beisembiev. *Tarikhii Shakhrukhi*. P.127; Ta'rikh-i Shahrukhi. P. 269; Bartol'd. *Tuzemets o Russkom zavoevanii*. P. 344; 'Alimqul to Cherniaev 1864 // Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik*. Vol. 17 (1864 g.). Part. 2. Docs. 406 & 407. Pp. 295-296.

spent a month as a prisoner of the Khoqandi Bek of Turkestan in 1858),⁴⁵ offers some insight into Khoqandi thinking on the question of frontiers:

If his Majesty the Emperor orders: “Leave Aq Masjid”, I shall even restore the destroyed walls of Aq Masjid and deliver it to you. But if he says: “Let that side of Arys belong to the Muslims and this [side] to the Russians”, we will act in accordance with this [order]. This proposal was very good and favourable [for us]. But the late Amir-i Lashkar thought: In the event that the town of Turkistan’s side of the Arys passes to the Russians, the tribe Besh-Tamghalik will slip out of our hands. Therefore such a favourable opportunity was missed.⁴⁶

In other words, ‘Alimqul was reasoning not in terms of territory, but of people: with the benefit of hindsight Mullah Muhammad Yunus saw this as a missed opportunity to keep the Russians on the other side of the Arys, and thus perhaps preserve Tashkent and Khoqand’s core territories in Ferghana, which by the time he was writing had been under Russian rule for almost thirty years. Terent’ev’s account instead has Cherniaev stating that he did not have authority to negotiate terms, and that all he could do was halt military operations while the Khoqandis dispatched an embassy to Russia, while Severtsev was given the delicate task of explaining that Meyer’s offer of Turkestan had been a “misunderstanding.”⁴⁷ Even assuming that Mullah Muhammad Yunus’s memory of the conversation is accurate, it is unlikely that any such agreement would have been kept by the Russians, who were about to discover that the Arys was most unsatisfactory as a “natural” frontier.

III

After relieving Meyer and his men Cherniaev had made a “reconnaissance” (actually an attempted demonstration of force) before the citadel of Chimkent on July 19–22, during which his troops easily beat off another frontal assault, killing the Khoqandi commander Ming Bai Parvanachi, but did not attempt to take the citadel.⁴⁸ Although Cherniaev was probably not to blame for the debacle at Aq Bulaq and before Chimkent, it seems that it was at this point that he began to lose the confidence of his superiors in St. Petersburg, Orenburg, and Omsk. In his memoirs Miliutin blamed Cherniaev

for not advancing more quickly to assist Meyer, and gave no credence to the idea that the latter had advanced without informing the Siberian forces in order to have the glory of taking Chimkent for himself.⁴⁹ In his private papers, Cherniaev kept a copy of a resolution from Miliutin complaining of Cherniaev’s insolence in writing a letter to his friend Poltoratskii claiming that his achievement in capturing Aulie-Ata had been insufficiently recognized. Miliutin was clearly very put out at Cherniaev’s (entirely characteristic) self-importance and self-pity. In the same letter he went on to express apprehension at Cherniaev’s apparent intention of seizing Chimkent, stating that “such an expansion of our frontiers never entered into our plans; it entirely stretches our line and demands a significant increase in forces,” but regretting that communications were so slow that it was unlikely any countermanning order would reach Cherniaev in time.⁵⁰ While Cherniaev had not received explicit orders to take Chimkent, Miliutin was being a little selective here: in fact, as we have seen, Chimkent *was* envisaged as a key point on the “New Khoqand Line” – something stated in the orders Miliutin had issued in January 1864, which had been passed on to Cherniaev in March.⁵¹ Cherniaev was guilty not of “expanding the frontier” per se, but of doing so to an accelerated timetable: he took advantage of the vagueness and ambiguity of St. Petersburg’s vision of where the frontier should run, no doubt encouraged by the fact that the last time he had done this, when capturing Suzaq in 1863, he had been heartily congratulated on his initiative, which had helped Miliutin stir the Foreign Ministry into action.

If Miliutin was now turning against him, Cherniaev still had support from his immediate superior, Duhamel, who accepted his argument that Chimkent’s garrison posed an unacceptable threat to Russian communications. The next document in the sequence of Cherniaev’s private papers (which were clearly collected both as a record of his numerous vendettas and as an exercise in personal exoneration) was a series of notes excerpted from a letter from Duhamel to Miliutin on the necessity of taking Chimkent to prevent the Khoqandis from rupturing communications between Aulie-Ata and Turkestan, evidently intended as proof that his conduct was both

⁴⁵ Account of Jukulbai Andeev, April 27, 1858 // TsGARKaz. F. 383. Op. 1. D. 87 (“Perepiska o zakhvate v plen magistra zoologii Severtseva”). L.1-2; N. A. Severtsev. *Mesiats Plena u Kokantsev*. St. Petersburg, 1860.

⁴⁶ Ta’rikh-i ‘Aliquli Amir-i Lashkar / Trans. P. 66, text ff.73a-b.

⁴⁷ Terent’ev. *Istoriia Zavoevaniia*. Vol. 1. P. 289.

⁴⁸ Ta’rikh-i Shahrukhi. P. 270; Bartol’d. *Tuzemets o russkom zavoevanii*. P. 345.

⁴⁹ Miliutin. *Vospominaniia 1863–4*. P. 516.

⁵⁰ Kopia s rezoliutsii Voennogo Ministra na pis’mo General-Maiora Cherniaeva, prislanno Polkovniku Poltoratskomu 18 Avgusta 1864g // RGIM OPI. F. 208. Op. 1. D. 6. L.10-ob.

⁵¹ This point has also been noted by Matthew Jamison. *Weakness, Expansion and “Disobedience”: The Beginnings of Russian Expansion into the Heart of Central Asia, 1864–1865* / PhD thesis; University of Oxford, 2007. P. 139.

justified and authorized.⁵² As Miliutin had predicted, by the time Duhamel wrote, Russian forces would have captured Chimkent in any case. The city fell on September 21, after a two-day siege, with Cherniaev himself leading a storming-party through a watercourse beneath the walls, according to Russian accounts, although the *Ta'rikh-i 'Aliquli* attributed the victory to a clever bluff that had persuaded the Khoqandi garrison to pursue what they thought was a retreating enemy and abandon the protection of their walls.⁵³ His confidence that his actions would be retrospectively endorsed was not misplaced: Duhamel supported him, writing that, "As far as the rewards to General Cherniaev are concerned, his achievements stand out from the range of our recent steppe expeditions," while the tsar himself annotated the letter "A Glorious Affair" (*Slavnoe Delo*).⁵⁴ Cherniaev was congratulated and received the orders of St. George 3rd Class, and St. Stanislaus 1st class: even Miliutin grudgingly accepted that Cherniaev had acted correctly in not leaving Chimkent in Khoqandi hands, because of the threat it posed to communications on the new Russian frontier line.⁵⁵ Only the Foreign Ministry was unhappy, but Gorchakov inadvertently revealed the degree to which Russian geographical ignorance and the attempt to use "natural" landmarks to fix the frontier had allowed Cherniaev to exploit the contradictions and ambiguities in his orders: "Chimkent was made a point on the Arys line only because at that time we thought that this town lay on the right (our) side of the river."⁵⁶ Unfortunately for him, it was already much too late to reverse this.

In response to Cherniaev's conquests, and their consequently improved knowledge of the geography and resources of the region, the War Ministry drew up a new project to define the Central Asian frontier, with four possible variations:

1. A line from the Syr-Darya through Suzaq, Chulaq-Qurghan, and along the Qara-Tau summit to Aulie-ata and Vernoe. This was dismissed because it would run largely through the steppe, and have the same supply problems as the current Syr-Darya Line.

⁵² Duhamel to Miliutin, September 23, 1864 // RGIM OPI. F. 208. Op. 1. D. 6. L. 11-12.

⁵³ Terent'ev. *Istoriia zavoevaniia*. Vol. 1. Pp. 293-294; K. K. Abaza. *Zavoevanie Turkestana*. St. Petersburg, 1902. Pp. 83-84; Mackenzie. *Lion of Tashkent*. Pp. 42-43; *Ta'rikh-i 'Aliquli Amir-i Lashkar* / Trans. P. 68 text ff75b-76a.

⁵⁴ Duhamel to Miliutin, October 31, 1864 // Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik*. Vol. 18 (1864 g.). Part. 2. Doc. 270. P. 139.

⁵⁵ Miliutin. *Vospominaniia 1863-4*. Pp. 517-518.

⁵⁶ Memorandum by Gorchakov, October 31, 1864 // Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik*. Vol. 18 (1864 g.). Part. 2. Doc. 270. P. 170.

2. A line along the Syr-Darya to the junction with the River Arys, up the course of this river to Aulie-Ata and along the northern face of the Ala-Tau to Kastek and Vernoe. This was considered better, not least because the Russians still believed the Arys was navigable. The renunciation of Chimkent and the failure to include Lake Issyk-Qul were considered serious drawbacks.

3. To permanently annex Chimkent, and make Tashkent a client state under Russian protection. This was thought to carry too many risks of sucking Russia deep into Central Asia, and leaving its position in the region unclear.

4. To permanently annex Tashkent. This would solve supply problems and bring trade benefits, but would be a complex undertaking in the region "the Russification (*obrusenie*) of the region and its civil administration would be, if not completely impossible, extremely difficult."⁵⁷

Miliutin's response to this was illuminating in more ways than one, revealing both the continued belief that a "natural" limit could be placed on Russian expansion in the region, and an acknowledgment that this process could not be controlled from St. Petersburg:

I approve the attached note. I would propose to make just one alteration: the River Arys cannot itself serve as a *border*, as beyond it lies Chimkent, already taken by our forces and constituting a forward point that is very beneficial for the enclosing of the whole expanse behind it.

Because of this it seems to me, that the River Arys can serve only as an indication (*ukazanie*) of the direction of our forward *line*, and, in particular, of the communications of the Syr-Darya with Aulie-Ata ... The *border* line (*pogranichnaia liniia*) will have to be drawn beyond Chimkent. It is possible that we will find between Chimkent and Tashkent some sort of mountain spur (*otrog gor*) or watershed (*vodorazdel'*) that will always be better as a border than the course of a river, particularly such an insignificant river as the Arys. Such a river cannot serve as a *border*, because we are obliged to control both its banks; without this we would not be able to preserve communications along the valley of the Arys with Aulie-Ata.

Where, specifically, we can place the border between Chimkent and Tashkent, cannot be decided from here; it would be better to leave this decision to Major-General Cherniaev himself on the spot. (emphasis in original)⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Proekt soedineniia Orenburgskoi i Sibiriskoi Linii. October 31, 1864 // Ibid. Doc. 296. Pp. 170-171.

⁵⁸ *Zapiska Voennago Ministra*. November 9, 1864 // Ibid. Doc. 307. Pp. 182-183.

Miliutin had (perhaps unwittingly) put his finger on the absurdity of using rivers as supposedly "natural" frontiers, though one might have added to his purely military observations the fact that river valleys tend to be economic and cultural units, whose division along the watercourse that gives them life is bound to create anomalies. However, he had not, of course, abandoned the hope that a "natural" frontier in the form of a hill or watershed would somehow present itself naturally from the landscape – his acknowledgment that Cherniaev himself would have to identify the necessary natural features again left substantial latitude to the man on the spot. In any case, events on the frontier had once again moved more rapidly than Miliutin had envisaged: two weeks before he wrote this note, and only a week after Chimkent had fallen on September 27, Cherniaev had set out with 1,500 men on a "reconnaissance" toward Tashkent. This could be tenuously justified with reference to the long-standing Russian intention of separating the city from Khoqand and turning it into a vassal khanate, and rumors that the Amir of Bukhara was also planning to march on the city. In the longer term, Miliutin also seems to have thought that Tashkent presented the best long-term solution to the perennial supply problems suffered by Russian garrisons in the steppe, but he had clearly had some difficulty in persuading the Foreign Ministry to accept Cherniaev's *fait accompli* at Chimkent, and did not want any further annexations that year.⁵⁹ Once again, it was not the fact, but the timing that was objectionable, and this time Cherniaev did not have the defense of a successful action and new military laurels to fall back on – his attack was beaten off with heavy losses (by the standards of Russia's Central Asia campaigns) of sixteen dead and sixty-two wounded. Terent'ev attributed this to the failure to carry out a proper reconnaissance of the walls beforehand, which meant that the Russians were misled by an intervening hillock into thinking that their bombardment had breached the walls, when in fact it had only damaged the upper levels.⁶⁰

Cherniaev finally lost the confidence of his superiors with this first, failed assault on Tashkent. He preserved a letter of rebuke from Duhamel that had clearly wounded him, in which the latter wrote that Cherniaev appeared to have suppressed news of the attack, in which one of his best officers, Obukh, had been killed, and another, Lerkhe, seriously wounded. Cherniaev's reports of October 11, 13, and 17, had not mentioned the assault, and Duhamel had found out about it from private letters that had reached Semipalatinsk at the beginning of November.

⁵⁹ Mackenzie. *Lion of Tashkent*. Pp. 45-46.

⁶⁰ Terent'ev. *Istoriia zavoevaniia*. Pp. 296-297.

Your lengthy silence on the subject of these sad events could have very undesirable consequences, and cause me some considerable difficulties. It would be easy for news of these events to have reached St. Petersburg through Orenburg earlier than they reached me, and that the War Minister could think that I am hiding from him the true state of affairs.⁶¹

He wrote that Cherniaev had originally presented it to him as a reconnaissance expedition, and had no authority to attack the city "How a simple reconnaissance changed into the storm of a city with a population of 100,000 is entirely incomprehensible to me." As usual, Cherniaev had preserved his response together with this letter, in which he claimed that he had not sought new laurels, but that he was trying to drive out the Khoqandi garrison from Tashkent to prevent them from regrouping and gathering a force that he estimated at 15,000 horsemen against his 1½ *sotnias* of Cossacks. He also claimed to have informed Duhamel of his unsuccessful assault in a dispatch of October 11.⁶²

This controversy would never be entirely settled, although Mackenzie concludes, probably rightly, that Cherniaev deliberately dragged his feet somewhat when filing his reports of the debacle, and feared that he would be dismissed as a result.⁶³ Meanwhile, Miliutin's memoirs, written forty years later, reveal that his irritation at Cherniaev's unauthorized attack on Tashkent had not diminished with the passing of time, although he also made a robust defense of the need to allow local initiative to officers on a frontier so far removed from Russian center of power, and added the following, highly revealing passage: "This reverse was especially deplorable because in Asia we are supported not so much through material strength, owing to the small numbers of our troops, as through moral authority."⁶⁴ In other words, Cherniaev's principal crime was not so much the assault itself, as the fact that it had been unsuccessful, and here Miliutin tacitly admitted that a further victory would be needed to wipe out this impression of weakness from the minds of "Asiatics." This was the same logic that had led to the launch of V. A. Perovskii's expedition to Khiva thirty years earlier, and had also prevented the Russians from retreating from their unsustainable

⁶¹ Duhamel to Cherniaev November 12, 1864 // RGIM OPI. F. 208. Op. 1. D. 5. L. 27ob.

⁶² Cherniaev to Duhamel December 17, 1864 // RGIM OPI. F. 208. Op. 1. D. 5. L. 29-30.

⁶³ Mackenzie. *Lion of Tashkent*. Pp. 45-47; Jamison disagrees, seeing the week's delay in drawing up the report as entirely understandable: Jamison. *Weakness, Expansion and "Disobedience"*. Pp. 142-144.

⁶⁴ Miliutin. *Vospominaniia 1863-4*. P. 518.

position on the Syr-Darya in the late 1850s.⁶⁵ The need to maintain prestige, and the fear of appearing weak before both their Asian opponents and their European rivals would always be the deciding argument when the Russians were debating whether or not to advance in Central Asia.

IV

After the famous “Iqan affair” of December 3–5, 1864, during which a single *sotnia* of Ural Cossacks under Esaul Serov held off a much larger Khoqandi force (the Russians estimated it at 10,000) under ‘Alimqul’s command,⁶⁶ Russian campaigning came to a halt, awaiting better weather. While Cherniaev complained of boredom, the Khoqandis seem to have interpreted this lull somewhat differently, and they once again opened negotiations with the Russians to try to fix a new frontier. This episode is not mentioned in Terent’ev or in Serebrennikov’s collection of documents, but as Mullah Muhammad Yunus described it the suggestion came from him, and at a guess the negotiations must have taken place in late December, perhaps two weeks or so after the Iqan affair. He first opened correspondence with Cherniaev, and then sent two merchants called Mullah ‘Abd as-Sa‘id Hajji and Muhammad Karim Bek to Cherniaev, who was initially annoyed because he believed that the Khoqandis had been blocking trade between Chimkent and Tashkent. Tashkandi replied that this was because Cherniaev had failed to allow the Qazaqs of the Jappas clan, who acted as carriers for the Tashkent merchants, from coming to Tashkent. This misunderstanding underscored the need to normalize relations along the impromptu frontier:

Finally, after neighbourly and friendly relations had sprung up between us by means of our correspondence, I wrote: “If thanks to us peace is concluded between two padishahs, it will be of benefit and profit for all the creatures of Allah. It would be good if at first the frontier was established and demarcated.” Cherniaev replied: “If you wish by establishing the frontier to get Chimkent back, it will never

happen, because I took Chimkent with great difficulty and reported its conquest to his Majesty the Emperor. It is impossible to draw the border through this place. Let the frontier be at Sharabkhana.⁶⁷

Sharabkhana (literally “alcohol house” or pub) was a caravanserai half-way between Tashkent and Chimkent, which was marked on the sketch map drawn up for Kolpakovskii in 1864 at a junction between two roads, but with no river, “mountain spur” or other “natural feature” that might make it a suitable frontier. Like those that had followed the affair at Aq Bulaq, these negotiations also fell through: in a passage that (like many of those in his history) is redolent with a melancholy awareness of the further defeats and losses that awaited Khoqand at Russian hands, Mullah Muhammad Yunus recorded ‘Alimqul’s supposed response: “This peace agreement is of course a benefit for Allah’s creatures, [and would mean] tranquillity for the yurt, and the flowering of religion and faith. But the people of Turkistan and Fergana are extremely ignorant, stupid and warlike, with rude temperament, and are unable to tell harm from benefit.”⁶⁸ If they agreed to it, he added, then he and Mullah Muhammad Yunus would be accused of thinking only of their own benefit, and leaving many Muslims in the hands of the Russians. Mullah Muhammad Yunus’s bitter regret at this outcome (assuming his account is reliable), was probably misplaced, as there is every reason to doubt Cherniaev’s sincerity in these negotiations. He had not accepted his reverse before Tashkent in October 1864, and toward the end of January wrote to his old friend, Poltoratskii, urging the latter to come to Turkestan:

[W]hen you arrive here, then you will be able to confirm on the spot that the attack on Tashkent was not so senseless, as all my friends sought to present it in St. Petersburg. If there had not been instructions [to the contrary], then I would now drive out the Khoqandis from this small town with its 200,000 population [*sic*], in response to ‘Alimqul’s attack on the outskirts of Turkestan.⁶⁹

Miliutin meanwhile gave Cherniaev orders not to undertake anything against Tashkent until he received reinforcements, but to sustain relations

⁶⁵ Alexander Morrison. *Twin Imperial Disasters. The Invasions of Khiva and Afghanistan in the Russian and British Official Mind, 1839–1842* // *Modern Asian Studies*. 2014. Vol. 48. No. 1. Pp. 282-286; Morrison. “Nechto Eroticheskoe”.

⁶⁶ Cherniaev to Miliutin, December 27, 1864 // Serebrennikov. *Sbornik* (1864 g.). Part 2. Doc. 396. Pp. 279-283; K. *Delo Ural’tsev pod Turkestanom* // *Voennyi Sbornik*. 1865. No. 4. Pp. 115-124; Mikhail Khoroshkhin. *Geroiskii podvig Ural’tsev. Delo pod Ikanom* 4, 5 i 6 dekabria 1864 goda. Ural’sk, 1895; Terent’ev. *Istoriia zavoevaniia*. Pp. 298-305; Abaza. *Zavoevanie Turkestana*. Pp. 85-89; Mackenzie. *Lion of Tashkent*. Pp. 49-50.

⁶⁷ Ta’rikh-i ‘Aliquli Amir-i Lashkar / Trans. P. 72, text ff. 72b-73a.

⁶⁸ Ta’rikh-i ‘Aliquli Amir-i Lashkar / Trans. Pp. 73-74, text ff. 85b-86a; this calls into question Jamison’s suggestion that ‘Alimqul was “fanatical” and simply unwilling to make peace and give up so many subjects and so much territory, although Mullah Muhammad Yunus’s account was written much later with a good deal of hindsight. Jamison. *Weakness, Expansion and “Disobedience”*. P. 164.

⁶⁹ Cherniaev to Poltoratskii, January 22, 1865; Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik* (1865 g.). Part. 1. Doc. 25. P. 33.

with its inhabitants.⁷⁰ This maintained a certain ambiguity in the messages making their way slowly from Orenburg to Cherniaev in Chimkent, hinting that the capture of Tashkent did fall into future plans for the new frontier, and also that Cherniaev should continue to try to draw the city out of Khoqand's orbit.

Meanwhile, on January 25, yet another special committee had met in St. Petersburg to decide the question of the administration and frontiers of "the Orenburg region and Asiatic Russia" and resolved to unite the territory "from the western limit of Issyk-Qul to the Aral Sea" into a new Turkestan Oblast.⁷¹ On February 12, 1865, a *Prikaz* from the War Ministry confirmed the tsar's agreement to this. The new oblast comprised almost all the territory conquered by the Russians in Central Asia since 1847; Cherniaev was to administer it, but was still subordinate to Orenburg, where from February 9, N. A. Kryzhanovskii replaced A. P. Bezak as the new governor.⁷² Among the first instructions Kryzhanovskii received was a lengthy memorandum from Gorchakov, setting out the Foreign Ministry's views on Russia's position in Central Asia. This once again reiterated the need for a "firm, fixed state border" (*prochnoi, nepodvizhnoi gosudarstvennoi granitsy*) in Central Asia, but also noted:

It is essential to add a few specific considerations regarding Tashkent, as our closest neighbor, which will doubtless play a significant role for us in political and trade relations. We have decided not to include this town within the empire, because we consider it incomparably more beneficial to limit ourselves to indirect influence over it, which is very real thanks to the proximity of our military forces. However, it would be much more advantageous for us if Tashkent succeeded in separating itself from Khoqand and constituted itself once more as an independent realm ... with the restoration of its previous independence, this town would serve as an excellent tool in the event of a necessity to act against Khoqand, and in part against Bukhara.⁷³

On February 25, Kryzhanovskii sent Cherniaev a summary of this document in the form of a list of requests and instructions whose faintly patronizing tone can hardly have failed to rile the latter, and noted that he intended to visit Turkestan himself before the end of August (he asked

Cherniaev to arrange a meeting for him with the Khan of Khoqand and the Amir of Bukhara, unintentionally revealing his lack of understanding of the situation on the frontier). His letter concluded, however, with a significant injunction regarding Tashkent, passing on the instructions of the Foreign Ministry:

As for Tashkent, I beg your Excellency vigilantly and closely to observe everything that occurs in this town, and to assist the moral party that wishes to separate from hostile Khoqand and through your actions to direct the formation from Tashkent of a polity, independent from Khoqand and Bukhara, but a vassal of Russia.⁷⁴

David Mackenzie has noted the ambiguity of these instructions, which did not explicitly forbid an attack on Tashkent, and Matthew Jamison has argued that this order constituted an open invitation, or at the very least an excuse, for Cherniaev to attack Tashkent once he felt his forces were strong enough.⁷⁵ It is certainly hard to see how he could have been expected to bring the city within the Russian sphere of influence, or create an independent Khanate out of it without first attacking the city and expelling its Khoqandi garrison. Cherniaev continued to send reports saying that the "Russian party" in Tashkent was prepared to give up the city if the Russians approached with a military force, although Mullah 'Alimqul had strictly forbidden communications, and there was another group that favoured Bukhara.⁷⁶ On April 23, he replied to Kryzhanovskii's message from two months previously in rather bitter language:

Regarding the permanent state ~~frontier~~ (*postoiannoi gosudarstvennoi granitsy*) with Khoqand, I have the honor to submit that, in our current relations with this khanate, the carrying out of a provisional ~~frontier~~ is clearly impossible, and the existence of such a ~~frontier~~ in the future would not give us any guarantee that the Khoqandis would not breach it during their raids. In order to repel the latter it is essential that peace and order be introduced into the khanate, and this in turn will be possible only with the establishment of our solid influence in the khanate itself. As far as the actual border is concerned, I cannot give any indications on this subject, as the map of Khoqand is entirely

⁷⁰ Miliutin to Bezak, February 2, 1865 // Ibid. Doc. 38. P. 49.

⁷¹ Zhurnal Komiteta, rassmatrivavshago vopros ob ustroistve Orenb. kraia i Aziatskoi Rossii, January 25, 1865 // Ibid. Doc. 30. P. 37.

⁷² Prikaz Voennogo Ministra, February 2, 1865 // Ibid. Doc. 47. P. 59.

⁷³ Gorchakov to Kryzhanovskii, February, 23, 1865 // Ibid. Doc. 60. P. 83.

⁷⁴ Kryzhanovskii to Cherniaev, February 25, 1865 // Ibid. Doc. 63. P. 88.

⁷⁵ Mackenzie. *Lion of Tashkent*. P. 54; Jamison. *Weakness, Expansion and "Disobedience"*. Pp. 171-174, 176-178.

⁷⁶ Military Commander of the Orenburg Region to the Military Commander of Western Siberia, March 17, 1865 // Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik (1865 g.)*. Part 1. Doc. 79. P. 107.

unknown to us, and any suggestions in this case would be founded solely on speculations, which very often differ from reality.⁷⁷

This last phrase might be taken as emblematic of all Russian attempts to fix their frontier in Central Asia during these turbulent few years. Cherniaev's irritation was palpable, but what he did not acknowledge was how much freedom of action this ignorance and ambiguity had given him. Within less than a week of dispatching this letter, Cherniaev had set off toward Tashkent with 9 ½ companies of infantry and 12 guns, ostensibly on another reconnaissance, but in fact with a clear intention of capturing the city once and for all. Various sources attest that Kryzhanovskii's request not to make any move before his proposed arrival in Turkestan in the summer helped to prompt this, as Cherniaev did not wish to share his glory with anyone else.⁷⁸ The next time he wrote to his nominal superior, on May 2, Cherniaev was at Niyazbek, where he had cut off Tashkent's water supply from the River Chirchik.⁷⁹ The Russian frontier was about to move forward once again, and once again on Cherniaev's initiative: it would be wrong, however, to suppose that had it not been for his ambition, Tashkent might have escaped Russian rule altogether. Frustration with supposed Khoqandi insolence, the official aim of creating a vassal khanate from the city, and Kryzhanovskii's own ambitions for military glory would, sooner or later, have ensured a Russian assault. Cherniaev determined the timetable, but not the general direction of Russian policy.

V

Clearly, the belief that a "natural" boundary would present itself between Aulie-Ata and Turkestan, combined with Russian ignorance of the geography of the region, played directly into Cherniaev's hands. He could quite legitimately argue that the orders he had received, which simultaneously told him to capture Chimkent and not to advance beyond the line of the River Arys, were wholly contradictory, and thus exploit them as he saw fit. It is also clear that Miliutin accepted the geographical logic of Cherniaev's decision to advance beyond the Arys – namely, that it was too shallow to constitute a "natural" frontier, and that, in any case, military security demanded that the Russians control both banks. Furthermore, Russian negotiations with

the Khoqandis were not conducted in good faith; there were opportunities in 1864 to draw up a peace treaty that might have been recognized by both sides, but these were rebuffed because Russian decisions in Orenburg and St. Petersburg were made without reference to Khoqand, whose territorial and other claims were dismissed as inherently illegitimate. When Cherniaev was on the spot he entered into direct negotiations, partly perhaps to buy time for his forces to rest and resupply, but he was simultaneously urging on his superiors the danger posed first by Chimkent and then by Tashkent as long as they remained under Khoqandi control.

The fall of Tashkent did not provide the Russians with the "natural frontier" they desired either. While it solved their immediate supply problems on the Syr-Darya, it also helped to provoke the Amir of Bukhara into declaring war, once again impelled at least in part by religious agitation that the Russian advance had provoked among the *'ulama* and the wider population of the emirate.⁸⁰ By August 1865 Cherniaev had obtained grudging permission from A. M. Gorchakov to establish a Russian outpost south of Tashkent on the Syr-Darya at Chinaz, and after initial skepticism his superior, Kryzhanovskii, would agree that Tashkent itself could not live from its own resources.⁸¹ From there D. I. Romanovskii used similar arguments to justify the capture of Khujand in 1866. Ultimately, of course, the notion that the landscape itself would signal to the Russians the location of a "natural" frontier where they should halt their advance was a fallacy. Instead it would be determined by diplomatic factors, notably the Empire's relations with Britain, Iran, and Afghanistan, which in the 1880s and 1890s led to a final demarcation following the line of the Amu-Darya in the East, and a largely arbitrary, trigonometrically determined boundary in the West. Even then, many Russian officers would continue to hanker after the watershed of the Hindu Kush as the truly "natural" frontier to the Empire's expansion in Central Asia.

⁷⁷ Cherniaev to Kryzhanovskii, April 23, 1865 // *Ibid.* Doc. 98. Pp. 138-139.

⁷⁸ Terent'ev. *Istoriia zavoevaniia*. Pp. 307-308; Mackenzie. *Lion of Tashkent*. Pp. 54-55.

⁷⁹ Cherniaev to Kryzhanovskii, May 2, 1865 // Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik*. Part 1 (1865 g.). Doc. 102. P. 146.

⁸⁰ Jo-Ann Gross. *Historical Memory, Cultural Identity and Change: Mirza 'Abd al-'Aziz Sami's Representation of the Russian Conquest of Bukhara* // Daniel Brower & Edward Lazzarini (Eds.). *Russia's Orient. Imperial Borderlands and Peoples*. Bloomington, IN, 1997. Pp. 203-226; Azim Malikov. *The Russian Conquest of the Bukharan Emirate. Military and Diplomatic Aspects* // *Central Asian Survey*. 2014. Vol. 33. No. 2. Pp. 180-198.

⁸¹ Gorchakov to Miliutin 31/08/1865 // Serebrennikov. *Turkestanskii Krai: Sbornik*. Vol. 20 (1865 g.). Part 2. Doc. 215. Pp. 42-44; Kryzhanovskii to Dolgorukov 23/10/1865 // *Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AVPRI)*. F.133 (Kantselyariia Ministerstva Inostrannykh Del). Op. 469. D. 121 (1865, "Orenburg, Gen. Kryzhanovskii"). L. 4ob-5ob.

SUMMARY

Russian expansion into Central Asia in the 19th century is usually seen either as the product of lobbying by big capitalist interests in Moscow, or as a wholly unplanned process driven by 'men on the spot' who slipped beyond St Petersburg's control. This article is a micro-study of one of the campaigns which immediately preceded the fall of Tashkent in 1865, during which Russian forces under General M. G. Cherniaev united the Orenburg and Siberian 'lines' of fortification to create what was meant to be a permanent new frontier on the steppe. It demonstrates that neither of these explanations is satisfactory — economic calculations played a minor role in Russian decision-making, while there was an authorised plan for expansion in the region. However this plan rested on the premise that the Russians could identify a 'natural' frontier in the region, marked by a river, watershed or mountain range. The instructions given to Cherniaev and other 'men on the spot' reflected this, but a lack of detailed geographical knowledge meant that these orders were often contradictory or impossible to fulfil. It was this which allowed Cherniaev to determine the timetable (though not the direction) of Russian expansion, and would see the fall of Tashkent in June 1865.

РЕЗЮМЕ

Обычно российская экспансия в Среднюю Азию в XIX веке рассматривается как результат лоббирования крупных московских капиталистических кругов, либо как совершенно стихийный процесс, двигателями которого были местные деятели, ускользавшие из-под контроля Петербурга. Настоящая статья представляет собой микро-исследование одной из военных кампаний, непосредственно предшествовавших падению Ташкента в 1865 году. В ходе этой кампании российские силы под командованием генерала М. Г. Чернышева соединили Оренбургскую и Сибирскую оборонительные линии с целью создания постоянной степной границы. Исследование выявило неадекватность принятых объяснительных моделей: экономические соображения играли минимальную роль в решениях, принимавшихся российской стороной. В то же время, не существовало и никакого официально одобренного плана продвижения в регионе. Решения участников кампании основывались на представлении о наличии там "естественной границы", которая бы обозначалась рекой, неким водоразделом или горной цепью. Эти пред-

ставления обнаруживаются в инструкциях сверху Чернышеву и прочим "деятелям на местах". Однако, недостаток географических знаний о регионе предопределил противоречивость инструкций и даже их нереализуемость. Именно нечеткость поступавших сверху указаний стимулировала Чернышева к самостоятельному планированию графика наступления (но не его направления), в соответствии с которым в июне 1865 года пал Ташкент.